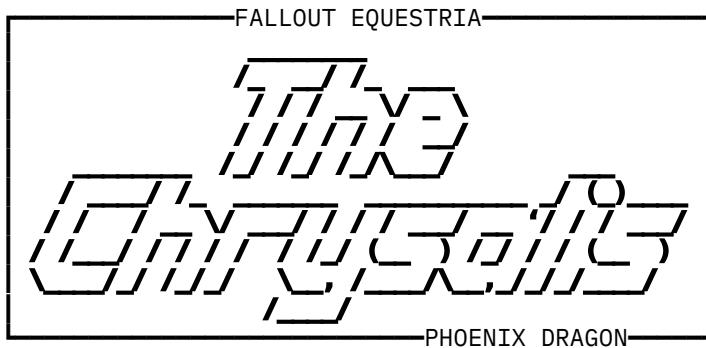




the-chrysalis



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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 difficulties 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, especially 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, steady 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.

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I remembered the end of the world.

I had been flying.

I left Appleloosa that morning. I had woken to an encrypted message 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.

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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, steady 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 bardings 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 particular 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 bardings. "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 *Snap Snap-Snap!*

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 bardings. 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 Baltimare. 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 patterning 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 unicorn 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.

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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 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 bluddeh node," I said, holding a hoof to the side of my snout to stem the bleeding. "Ahm okah."

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 opportunity. "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 bardings, 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 bardings, 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. “God-desses,” 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 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 no pony 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 abandoning 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 counterproductive 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 bardings 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 eying, 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*.<sup>1</sup>”

“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.

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“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. “Nopony’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

# Carrión

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 liked 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 Sickle?”

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 horror-show, 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 motorwagon 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 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 Sickle," 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. “No pony 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 satisfied 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 hor-

ror. 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 minuscule 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.

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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 bard 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 bardings, which would do little more than protect from scrapes, bruises, and the elements, or I could wear heavier bardings 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."

"Yyyyeah," 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 un-musical 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 overlook. "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 experimental 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 reasonable. 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 Sickle.

Sickle 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 reasonably certain that only Celestia would have stood taller, but even she wouldn't have come close to matching Sickle 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 Sickle 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.

Sickle 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 Sickle. "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."

Sickle 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. Sickle 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, Sickle 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.” Sickle 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 Sickle 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 Sickle, 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 Sickle and moving in."

We slid back on our bellies until we were behind the crest, then rose to trot down the slope. Sickle 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," Sickle 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 Sickle'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 Sickle'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 nopyony 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 Sickle'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 Sickle 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 Sickle 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; nopoly 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. Sickle 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.

Sickle 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," Sickle 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 Sickle 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 Sickle 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. Sickle 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 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. Sickle 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," Sickle 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 doorway 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 Sickle 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 Sickle 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."

Sickle'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,” Sickle 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 Sickle, 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. Sickle 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. Another 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 bellow 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 Sickle 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 Sickle 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 Sickle'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 Sickle 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 Sickle 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.” Sickle 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. Sickle'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 Sickle 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 Sickle 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 data-store.

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, ammunition, 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," Sickle 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 Sickle 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 Sickle 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 Sickle, 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, Sickle'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 Sickle 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. Sickle shoved her; the gesture looked completely casual on Sickle'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.

Sickle 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 Sickle 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 Sickle 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 Sickle, 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 Sickle, didn’t I?”

I gave a weak, momentary smile. “Maybe a little.”

Starlight threw back her head, groaning loudly. “Fuuuuuck.”

Dusty called out from the front of the restaurant. “What?”

“Nothing!” Starlight quickly replied. I’m pretty sure I heard Sickle 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', Sickle. 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 winces 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 Sickle 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,” Sickle 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 Sickle 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 Sickle’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, hoping 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 Sickle 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, Sickle 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. Sickle 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?" Sickle 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?"

Sickle 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 Sickle 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. Sickle 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. Sickle 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 dumb-ass 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 Sickle 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 Sickle 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 Sickle, 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, Sickle 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?" Sickle 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," Sickle 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 Sickle 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 Sickles'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," Sickles 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 Sickles. "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. “Uhh 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-ahhg,” Amber mumbled around the grip of her pistol. “Eh uh ehh-ah-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 forehooves. 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 Sickle. 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. Nopony 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. Sickle 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, Sickle 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?”

Sickle shrugged, metal plates clinking 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?” Sickle 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.”

Sickle 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 Sickle 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!"

Sickle 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!" Sickle 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 Sickle 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," Sickle 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 Sickle 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. Sickle 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 bardings. 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. Sickle, 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. Sickle 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 bardings 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, Sickle 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 Sickle 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 Sickle 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 sniffle 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 sniffls 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 Sickle. "So unless they mistake Sickle 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 Sickle for a raider?"

Sickle 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."

Sickle 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 bardings 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 shitting 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 Sickle 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, Sickle? Seriously?"

"What?" Sickle 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 Sickle turned around to follow Dusty. "And what about you, huh?" Starlight asked. "You ever rape a pony?"

"Naw," Sickle 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 Sickle 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 Sickle, 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 Sickle 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 Sickle, 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 Sickle 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 con-

tract: 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."

"Yyeah," 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 Sickle 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; nobody 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 Sickle'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," Sickle 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," Sickle 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 Sickle, go clean up. Right now somepony could shoot you by scent."

"Eat a dick," Sickle 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 bardings, 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 bardings, 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 Sickle, 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 nopoly 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 Sickle's flanks and sniffing again.

Sickle 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 Sickle 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 Sickle'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 Sickle 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 Sickle, what chance would I have?

That relief was diminished a moment later when Sickle 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,” Sickle 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 Sickle collapsed onto the rubble-strewn floor behind us.

As soon as she had, Dusty spoke again. “Sickle, 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 Sickle—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 rubbed, 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 bardings 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 bardings, 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 arcano-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, nopony 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 bardings. 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 a 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. Sickle, 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. Sickle, 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. Sickle 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. 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 clatter-

ing 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 sniffling. "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 upright. “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 Sickle, but there was certainly some positive emotion there.

"What?" Sickle 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 Sickle 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!"

Sickle 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 Sickle out of here."

"Hey, I can walk just fine," Sickle 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 Sickle."

"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 Sickle'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."

Sickle 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 Sickle 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. Sickle 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,” Sickle 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, scattered. 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, through her expression had faded by the time she finished chewing and swallowing her last bite. "And how does—"

"Oh, fuck yeah!" Sickle 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 Sickle 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," Sickle 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, Sickle."

"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,” Sickle muttered. “I’m sleeping.”

It was still several long seconds before Dusty finally turned away. “Fine. Star and I will make do.”

Sickle 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 Sickle?”

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 Sickle 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. Sickle 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 Sickle."

Sickle stepped up behind us. "You calling me fat, runt?"

"Yeah, Sickle," Starlight said with a roll of her eyes. "Those were the exact words I used."

Sickle responded by lifting up a forehoof and "lightly" pushing Starlight, which sent the much smaller pony sprawling. While Starlight grumbled and picked herself up, Sickle 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,” Sickle 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,” Sickle 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 Sickle, 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 Sickle’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 memo-

ries," 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 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.

"Ookay," 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 Baltimare.”

Starlight whistled.

“Baltimare,” 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 Baltimare."

"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 Baltimare. 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 bardings and gear hung loose around their bones. None

of the bones were broken. None of the bardings 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 Sickle 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. Sickle 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!” Sickle 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,” Sickle 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 clopping 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. “Ahhh... 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," Sickle 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 Ponymtown. 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. Sickle 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*!?" Sickles 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 Sickles 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. Sickle 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. Sickle 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.

Sickle 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 Sickle shoved him to the ground, snarling. "Give me that, you pussy ass bitch!" As Dusty picked himself up again, Sickle 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 Sickle broke out into a full-speed, loping gallop.

"Slow down!" Dusty shouted out.

"Fuck you!" Sickle 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 Sickle 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 Sickle 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 Sickle 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. “Balefire 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. "Damnit, 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 sprawled 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 suspi-

cious."

"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 Sickle'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. Sickle 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 Sickle."

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.

Sickle 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 Sickle'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." Sickle replied with another incoherent mumble.

Sitting beside Sickle, 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 Sickle 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, Sickle,” 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. “Sickle?” 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 Sickle’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 Sickle 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 Sickle 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. Nopony 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," Sickle 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 Sickle. 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," Sickle muttered at Starlight, as the hellhound held the lift stable and opened the gate. Then Sickle 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 townsponies 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 townsponies 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 Sickle in shock.

“Fuck yeah, with a hellhound,” Sickle 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?" Sickle 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.

Sickle 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 townsponies 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 townspies 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, Sickle 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 Sickle 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."

Sickle 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 bardings, 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 Waste-land 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. Sickle 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.

Sickle 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 Sickle'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," Sickle 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," Sickle 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 vigeneigh 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. Sickle 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 comfortingly 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 Sickle 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 Sickle'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 firefight 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, steadyng 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 PipBuck'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 Sickle

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 Sickle exchange a few words. Sickle 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 Sickle'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.

Sickle 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 swal-

lowed. "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 Sickle and weighing her down with their numbers. I know it's going to be hard, but we need you contributing to the fight."

Sickle 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, Sickle 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," Sickle 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 Sickle 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 Sickle'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. Sickle 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!" Sickle 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. Sickle was roaring out, and nearby I saw Starlight firing away. I didn't know where Dusty was, somewhere on the other side of Sickle. 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 mini-gun. 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 Sickle 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 Sickle 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. Sickle 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 Sickle.

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. Sickle 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 Sickle met the charge. I'm not sure how many I accounted for. Only a few were still standing after my second magazine, and Sickle 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.

Sickle 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 Sickle 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,” Sickle muttered.

Starlight responded by lashing out with a forehoof, connecting solidly with Sickle’s shoulder in a loud clop 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 Sickle. 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 Sickle 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.

Sickle 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 Sickle. 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.

Sickle 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 Sickle 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. Sickly 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 Sickle'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!"

Sickle 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, Sickle 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, Sickle 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, Sickle 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 Sickle 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.

Sickle 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 Sickle 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 skimming 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.

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*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 Manhattan 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 Canterbury 6916 has discovered a Four Stars work skywagon parked near the castle. Presence in Canterbury is unexplained. Vehicle abandoned, no occupants or cargo. Possible Zebra ties concerning. Asset Canterbury 6916 tasked with immediate investigation–BROKEN MASK. INFOP declaring all further Four Stars traffic as NIGHTFALL.*

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“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.”

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*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.*

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“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.”

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*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, Fillyadelphia, 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, Sickle 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,” Sickle 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 unbarriered 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 Sickle 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 discomforting. 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 whirred 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 down-cast 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."

## Chapter Eighteen

# Unloading

I am almost tempted to play up the symbolism of our departure from the hive. Almost, but not quite. I tend to scoff when others see symbolism in random events. Silently, of course; it seems unnecessarily rude to call others out on it, even if I know better than to believe it myself.

Still, I couldn't help but appreciate the surreal beauty as we stepped out of the darkened crevice that led into the hive, and out into the brilliant evening sunlight illuminating the badlands. The shock of heat was welcome after the chill down below.

I think we needed that change of scenery. We had been weary enough before, but after the four hundred foot climb to exit the hive under the heavy load of equipment we had salvaged from the armory, we were outright exhausted. Leaving the hive behind for the light and warmth of the outside world may have been just enough to keep us going, working our way along the precarious cliff-side path until we reached flat ground.

Our renewed energy was spent by then, and we collapsed beside a crumbling rocky pillar. There were groans and sighs of relief as we sprawled out on the warm rocks. As for myself, I simply flopped down on my belly, eyes closed.

Starlight groaned somewhere off to my side. "Ugh. My head feels like Sickle stepped on it, and my legs feel like I ran all the way here from Rust. How long is this going to last?"

It took me a second before I realized she had been speaking to me, and another couple of seconds for me to gather the energy to reply. "Don't know. Normally I'd say a few hours, or a day at worst, but I don't even know why it's this bad. I didn't use that much magic."

"That was a lot of fire," Starlight pointed out.

I would have shaken my head, but the rough rock it was lying on felt too comfortable under my cheek for me to move. "I had a good reserve going in, and I didn't use that much," I replied in a barely coherent mumble. "Either I should have more love, or you guys shouldn't be so drained. This was something else."

Sickle grumbled from somewhere off to my side, too worn down to put much vehemence behind her words. “I told you dumb cunts, that place was fucking with our heads.” There was a quiet rattle of metal as she sprawled out a little more, groaning softly. “Maybe it’s like... I don’t know, the changeling version of radiation?”

I murmured in reply. “Only megaspells produce magical radiation. We didn’t have any.”

“You said you guys stole some.”

“Maybe,” I said. “But even if we did, those would have been zebra magic, not changeling magic.”

Dusty cut in. “What about the ghouls?”

I wearily lifted my head to glance his way. He was lying nearby, his rifle set before him. When he saw my questioning look, he elaborated. “I know feral pony ghouls try to eat other ponies, for whatever reason, but these guys were originally changelings, so...”

I laid my head down again. “I was wondering about that, too. I don’t know. Maybe. Maybe not. I don’t have a clue how ghouls work.”

We were moving again just half an hour later, though we only made it a couple miles before Dusty called for a halt. My head was feeling a little better, though my legs were feeling sore once more. While everypony was tired from the walk, the crushing fatigue was already lifting, and hooves that had been lethargically dragging over the dusty rocks once again moved surely and swiftly.

I was careful, siphoning only the tiniest bit of energy from them, just enough to keep my dwindling reserves from falling any further. We had several long days of travel ahead of us. I could afford to let them regain their strength before tapping it for myself.

We settled in for the night. Dinner was, once again, a blank-can lottery. I got a can of concentrated soup for the third time in a row. Starlight got a can of pears in heavy syrup. We shared.

Then I made both Dusty and Starlight nearly choke on their food with a single question to Sickle.

“Why did you become a raider?”

While Starlight coughed around a half-chewed bite of pear and Dusty tensed, Sickle merely turned to stare at me, her metal muzzle dangling beside

her head as she slowly chewed a mouthful of canned greens. It made for several very uncomfortable seconds before she finally swallowed and spoke, baring her teeth. “The fuck do you care?”

I made a point of remaining still, not flinching away or squirming despite how much I wanted to. “Because I don’t get you,” I said. “Not entirely. Considering that my profession revolves around understanding how ponies think, I don’t like that.” I tilted my head slightly, trying to look more inquisitive. “I think I understand you a little more than I used to, especially after the hive, but there’s a lot I still don’t get, and I’m curious.”

She snorted derisively. “What’s to get? I like to fuck and kill ponies. So do raiders. Ain’t hard to figure that shit out.”

“But something changed.”

“Not really,” she said, tilting back the can to chew on a bit more of something that superficially resembled two hundred year old vegetables. With a full mouth, she added, “Just changed which ponies I fuck, and which ponies I kill.” She sneered. “Mostly.”

“Something led you to become a raider,” I said. “And something led you to stop being a raider.”

“And maybe ‘something’ is none of your fucking business.”

I held her gaze for a second before replying. “And would that ‘something’ explain why you were being relatively nice in there?”

She stopped chewing, fixing me with a silent glare.

“It wasn’t emotional suppression,” I said, refusing to look away even under that terrifying death-stare. “I could feel that you liked me.”

She bared her teeth again, growling. “Yeah? And does it feel like I like you now?”

I smiled, and didn’t even hide the smugness. “Yes, a little.”

Her snarl vanished, and a moment later she snorted and returned to her food. “Ain’t like I need to kick you when you’re wading through the bodies of your family. Too easy.”

I winced, and looked away. She grumbled something as she continued eating.

Dusty eyed her curiously, but wisely said nothing.



The trip back was long, and almost entirely uneventful. It was made all the longer by the amount of supplies we had requisitioned. Even if Sickle was carrying half of it herself, it was still a tremendous amount of weight.

We were all quite happy when we reached the wagon the next evening, and could finally offload all that weight. As we piled everything into the wagon, it highlighted just how much we had taken. The roughly two dozen weapons and tens of pounds of ammunition and spark packs was just the start. Dusty had insisted on taking a full set of suppressors for various calibers. I had apparently made quite the impression with my pyrotechnic display in the outskirts of Dodge City, so we also acquired a wide assortment of explosives, including a couple large demolition charges that Sickle had to carry for us. Then there was the personal gear. In addition to the flashlights, we now had a full set of four respirator masks, one each, with replacement lenses and filters, small air tanks, and detachable hoods. I wasn't sure if they'd be useful, but Starlight liked the idea of having them. Not only would it be good protection from "bad air", but there were apparently industrial sites that had noxious chemicals that were extremely unhealthy to breathe, not to mention the dangers that could come from inhaling particulates infused with magical radiation.

The wagon made much better progress descending from the rough terrain than it had climbing it. Sometimes, that progress was a little *too* fast, as Sickle and it slid down slopes with hardly any control. She snarled and cursed the whole way as her hooves skidded against the rocks and cut furrows through the dry earth, but each time she laughed once they had settled on more even terrain.

We continued on, towards the looming shadows of Equestria.

The line of ragged clouds cast a sharp contrast between the brightly lit badlands and the darkened lands we were hiking towards. It hadn't looked so dark under those clouds while we had been beneath them, but from where we stood, it looked dark and ominous.

Not that the land of sunlight was all that peaceful and ideal, and I don't just mean the state of my hive. Above those clouds, basking in the glow of the sun and in vivid colors that reminded me of Equestria at its height,

a battle raged.

We were too far to make out all the details, but I could see three Raptors weaving and circling in a deadly dance. Lances of light flashed between the clouds, and occasionally we could catch a glimpse of tiny black forms flying through the sky around them. They circled and closed, exchanging a fusillade of fire before withdrawing, the intensity of combat fading as they circled once more, like wrestlers looking for an opening.

The battle continued, off and on, for over an hour. Two of the Raptors hounded the third, which narrowly evaded their grasp time and again. Eventually the pair withdrew, with one of their Raptors smoking heavily. The two sides parted ways, disappearing behind the scattered clouds.

Eventually, we passed under the edge of the Enclave cloud cover. The heat of the sun faded as we returned to the softly lit grayness of Equestria.

After the events of our outbound journey, we avoided World's End, and while we passed through Pale Sands once more, we gave Ponytown a wide berth. The journey took several days, with little to see or do. We spotted another set of structures in Pale Sands, but we steered clear. It kept our progress uninterrupted, but it also made the whole trip blur into one long string of nothingness. As we trekked across the miles of empty desert, only one brief event stood out.



We had halted for a brief stop just north of Pale Sands when Sickle grew restless. She was standing not far from me when her tail started to flick in agitation, the tip of her intact ear swiveling back and forth as if searching for a sound.

Dusty had tensed up immediately, setting down the bottle of water and shifting his rifle on its sling.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Dunno," Sickle rumbled, her head turning one way, then the other, scanning the horizon. "Something ain't r—"

A black form smashed into the ground before us with a tremendous crash, sending me leaping back. It hit hard enough to rebound off the ground—and Sickle had already spun around, planting a powerful double-hoof buck that sent the black-armored pegasus pinwheeling into a nearby

boulder.

All of that happened before I had even finished my startled jump, and I froze as I landed, watching the black form crumple to the ground. With her lumbering bulk, it was easy to forget how terrifyingly quick Sickle could be.

“What the *fuck*?” Sickle snapped, spinning back around to face the very dead pegasus. Then her head snapped up, quickly searching the sky, and she took a step back.

I jerked back once more, and looked up just in time to see a magical energy rifle fall to the ground in front of Sickle, smashing itself on the hard ground.

“Shit,” Dusty grunted, ducking down beside the wagon and looking upwards. His rifle was up, searching for threats.

In the distance, I could see another armored pegasus, far from us and falling limply through the sky.

“What the hell is going on?” Starlight said, scurrying under the edge of the wagon.

Dusty watched the dead pegasus fall below a nearby rise, out of sight. “We must be under a battle.”

“What, the Enclave are killing themselves?” Starlight snorted. “Good riddance.”

“Yeah,” Dusty muttered. “Unless one of them lands on us.”

“Stop being such a bunch of pussies,” Sickle rumbled as she walked over to the fallen pegasus. While she did cast a glance upward, she appeared much more relaxed. “There ain’t any more falling at us.”

I kept a much more attentive eye on the sky above as I hurried over to examine the Enclave soldier.

She’d clearly been dead before hitting the ground. A ragged hole was burned through her side, deep and charred black. One side of the armor was dented and dirty from the impact with the ground. Even if she had survived that, I doubt she would have survived Sickle’s buck; her chest-plate was buckled in around a pair of deep dents, likely crushing her chest.

Once we were confident no more bodies were falling directly over us, Starlight hurried over to the fallen pegasus, eager to salvage the advanced armor. That enthusiasm quickly faded as she drew up close, her eyes lingering on the askew and broken-tooth jaw, the rich orange coat speckled

with dirt. Starlight slowly reached out, hesitated, and drew back. Finally, she reached out again, gingerly undoing the helmet clasp. The soldier's head lolled to the side at an unhealthy angle, her long red mane spilling out across her crumpled chest-plate.

Before her violent end, the mare had been quite beautiful.

Starlight shuddered a little, then reached over to the mare's shoulder, pulling her forward. "Help me get this off her," she quietly asked me, and I stepped forward to help roll the pegasus onto her belly, feeling a bit like a vulture.

As I did so, I gave her a concerned look. She glanced my way, and hastily looked away again. Her voice was quiet. "Power armor is valuable. A working suit is probably worth more than everything in that wagon, if we can find a buyer." She carefully searched around the edge of the back armor plate, looking for a way to release it. "Even if it can't be fixed, the parts and material would be worth something."

She glanced at me, still with my concerned look, and her ears pinned back. She muttered. "When I find things to take, their owner's usually been dead for centuries, not... minutes."

"Make it quick," Dusty called out, while Sickle lethargically slipped on the wagon's harness. "I don't want to be here if any of her buddies come looking for her."

"I'm trying," Starlight said, her hoof digging at the edge of the armor. Sickle was fully strapped in before Starlight finally found the release along one edge of the chest. It clicked open, and she found its twin on the other side, though it was deformed from the impact and jammed shut. Eventually, she had to take her prybar to the armor, wrenching on it until the other latch opened with a loud crack, and we peeled open the armor.

The effects of a magical energy weapon are not at all pretty. The mare's belly had been burned out, leaving nothing but a charred pit of flesh. The only consolation was that the wounds were cauterized; I felt queasy enough at the gruesome wound even without blood.

It took some doing, but we eventually got her free, leaving her crumpled on the ground as we loaded the broken remains of the armor into the wagon. We couldn't just leave her there, though. After a brief conversation, I bent my head beside the fallen pegasus, letting my magic wash over and consume

her body, finishing what the magical energy weapon had started.



Five days after leaving my hive, as afternoon turned to evening, we once again laid eyes on Gemstone. Still miles away, it was a strangely comforting piece of familiarity. It was a place I could actually look forward to being at. My legs were feeling almost as rubbery as my first few days in the Wasteland, and between Starlight's weary limp and Sickle's slow trudge, I imagine the rest of us were looking forward to a good bed for the night.

Dusty called a halt, motioning for us to join him behind the wagon.

Once we were there, he turned to me. "First off, I assume you'll want to change up before we hit town."

"Indeed," I said, and called up my magic. My companions had recovered well enough for me to start replenishing my magic, and the quick change drained fairly little of what I had accumulated. Green flame flashed over me, returning me to my earth pony guise.

Starlight's eyes widened. "Woah, wait a second!" she blurted, looking over me. "Did you just burn up that armor?"

I gave a smug smile. "Nope," I said as I rolled my shoulders, shifting my cloak and saddlebags slightly to better suit my current form. "Changeling armor is special. I'm not fully versed on how it's made, but we can hide it with our shapeshifting magic." I reached up, touching a hoof to the soft coat covering my chest. "It doesn't give any protection like this, but it's only a moment away, if I need it."

"Wow," Starlight said, a smile spreading across her face. "That is so cool!"

I chuckled, setting my hoof down. "And more importantly, it means it doesn't get in the way of my shapeshifting."

"Neat trick," Dusty said, nodding in approval. "Any other items you can do that with?"

I shook my head. "As I understand, it only works on simple devices. Something about the materials and magic involved. I know some changelings had made small blades that could be concealed in a similar fashion, but that's not as useful as it sounds, and anyway, I didn't see any in the armory."

He nodded, and changed topic. "Okay. I wanted to stop and discuss

future plans before we got into town. I figure some changeling stuff might come up, and I thought you might like to deal with that away from any curious ears."

"I appreciate it," I said with a nod.

He sat, and we all followed suit.

"Now then," Dusty said. "The first question is, where would we look for Whisper's hive?"

"We need to find C.L.T. facilities," I said.

"Except we have no idea where those are," Starlight said.

"Baltimare holds the Crystal Life Technologies regional headquarters. That should tell us where every facility in the region is located."

Dusty grimaced. "Yeah, I remember. That's still a hell of a long trip, and not an easy one."

"I'd never even heard of Crystal Life before Paradise Beach," Starlight said. "Scavengers tend to hear about places like that. There's definitely none around Dodge City, unless they were in the crater. Maybe some trader heard of something, but I dunno." She looked to Dusty. "We need something to go on."

He sighed, but nodded. "Yeah. We can ask in town, see if anyone's heard of anything. If not... yeah, okay, we can look into making a trip to Baltimare. I'm not even sure if it's feasible or not, but... we'll look into it."

I smiled, giving him a grateful nod. "Thank you."

"Second question," he said. "What do we do about Big Gun?"

He was answered with complete silence.

After a moment, he sighed again, and looked to me. "Whisper, how hard would it be to find some evidence that could be used to take him down?"

I frowned, considering the question for a moment before answering with one of my own. "Do you mean finding the evidence, or making sure that evidence actually takes him down?"

He quirked an eyebrow questioningly. "What do you mean?"

"He's been in power some time now, hasn't he?" When Dusty nodded, I continued. "He also has an independent group of mercenaries in his employ, and a lucrative industry that keeps him rich and well-armed. He's got political, economic, and military power. Even if we find enough support for that evidence to condemn him, we know he had some Rangers helping

those mercenaries that ambushed us. We'd need to be sure where the Militia would fall on this matter, especially if his mercenary forces have been replenished. If they fall on the wrong side, they would need to be dealt with before we could proceed."

Dusty was frowning deeply by the time I had finished. He was silent for several seconds, and eventually fished out a cigarette. He lit it, smoking in silence for a few more moments before asking, "How long would that take?"

"You're asking for an infiltration of multiple levels of government, such as it is, and two separate military organizations," I said. "Optimistically? Weeks, and that's if I am *incredibly* lucky and stumble into something big."

He slowly nodded, sighing out a long stream of smoke. "And pessimistically?"

"Months, inconclusive data, and possible loss of committed assets."

"Loss of—"

"I die."

He blinked, looking up with a questioning expression. "Do you think that's likely?"

"Infiltration is never without risk," I said. "No, I don't think it's likely, but it's possible. I'm confident in my abilities, and they lack many of the resources wartime Equestria had that might make Infiltration more difficult, but there's always a risk." I motioned a hoof toward him. "You seem to be an excellent soldier, but there's always the chance you could take a bullet to the head from some random, blind shot. We can minimize the risk, but it's always going to be there, and we can't always see it coming. The longer I'm poking around investigating dangerous individuals and organizations, the greater the risk."

Dusty considered that a moment, taking another slow puff before asking, "And if you... *took care* of him the other way? How well would that work?"

I looked off into space for a moment, considering several factors. Then I looked back at him. "I could be back by dawn."

His ears folded back, and he looked away to take a particularly long drag from his cigarette.

Starlight quietly murmured beside me. "You're kinda creepy when you talk shop."

I blinked, my own ears drooping a bit. "Sorry. I just... wanted to consider

things as factually as possible.”

“It’s okay,” she said, awkwardly looking around the ground near her hooves. “...It’s kinda cool, too.”

I raised an eyebrow, and she finally looked up to me. She hesitated a moment, then smiled a little. “...More cool than creepy, I guess. Our little superspy bug.”

I huffed out a soft laugh, though my amusement slowly faded as I considered the source of her concern. “I don’t want to kill ponies,” I said, and her faint smile faltered in surprise. “What he did to Silverline and Quicksilver makes it easier to deal with, but I’d prefer if there were a better solution. I just don’t think there is one, here.”

Off to the side, Sickle snorted and muttered. “Dumb cunts.”

Starlight looked to her with shocked surprise. Even Dusty looked up from his thoughts. Sickle looked around at our reactions, frowning. “What? Just kill the fucker already! Don’t just sit around whining and trying to come up with some pussy-ass reason for it. Those two little raider fucktoys should be reason enough for you dumbasses to stomp his fucking skull in.”

I spoke up. “There’s a lot more to consider.”

“No there isn’t,” she snapped back. “You like those two, for whatever fucking reason you’ve got. He hurt them, so you go back and hurt him worse. Simple.”

“Charming,” Starlight muttered, while I remained silent, eying Sickle.

Dusty broke the ensuing silence. “Okay.” He took another long drag on his cigarette, killing it in record time, and dropped it to the ground, grinding it into the dirt with a hoof. “Okay. Whisper will take out Big Gun.”

“And Wild Runner,” I said, my attention returning to him. “She seems every bit as bad as him, if not worse, and she’d just step into his horseshoes if he dies. With both of them removed, there’s no stable base. Things might get messy, especially if the Militia tries for a power grab, but it would be manageable.”

He nodded. “Her too.”

“I’ll also dig around for evidence while I’m there. Implicating him after the fact will be much easier, and I may be able to discover something that clears our names. Lethal force means more direct and expedient information gathering.”

Dusty hesitated, but nodded again.

"Okay," I said. "Should I get started on that?"

Dusty shook his head. "No. That was planning for later. Right now, we're all going into town, getting some comfortable rooms, and resting. At least one week R&R, then we can move on."

"A week?" I said, ears perking up sharply. "We don't need that long. I can take care of Big Gun and Wild Runner by morning, and I'm sure Emerald will have anything we need for the trip to Baltimare. If Sickle doesn't mind me taking a nap in the wagon when I get back, we could be on the way tomorrow."

Dusty shook his head. "No, Whisper. We're taking a good long break before we set out for Baltimare. We need some down time."

I stared at him in disbelief. Then I blinked. "No, I don't. I need to find the rest of my hive. That's more important than my own comfort."

"I'm not talking about comfort," Dusty said; though it was without anger, the words were sharp, and my ears pinned back. "I've been with you for, what, three weeks? Four? And in that time, we've been traveling almost constantly. We haven't had even a single full day to rest and recover." He touched a hoof to his chest, or more accurately, to the old barding he wore. "I've been a soldier most of my life. I've seen what happens when you keep a unit going for weeks or months without rest. Ponies start breaking down or making mistakes. Even the best can't keep going forever."

He gestured around with his hoof. "Every single one of us has been injured. Sickle's been shot more times than I can count. Star's limp has been getting worse. And Whisper, we were picking shards of bone out of you, not to mention the emotional trauma you've been through. We all need a break, but you need it most of all."

"I can handle it," I said, though my ears remained back; distantly, I recognized I was being defensive. "It's fine."

"You're not fine!" Dusty said. "Shit, Whisper. I've seen you go into a full breakdown at least three or four times. Every time I've woken you up these last few days, you jerked like you were being attacked. You've been crying in your sleep!"

My mouth shut on any further protests, staring back at him with wide eyes. Had I really? I remember being a little surprised when he woke me up,

but it couldn't be that bad, right?

I looked over to the others. Starlight looked down at the ground, as if unable to meet my gaze.

Sickle's lips pulled back in a smirk. "Crying like a little bitch."

While Starlight hit her on the shoulder, *hard*, and Sickle gave a firm shove in return, I looked back to Dusty. I was surprised to see him moving in close, and even more when he reached out, placing a hoof softly on my shoulder. I blinked.

"Whisper, I can't even imagine how hard all of this must be for you," he said, his voice surprisingly calming. "Shit, I don't know if I've met a pony that could handle something like this as well as you are, but even strong ponies need a break from time to time. You're not going to do your family any good if you push yourself past the breaking point."

"I... I can handle it," I said, my throat tightening. "I have to."

"No, you don't," he said, giving my shoulder a squeeze. "It's been two hundred years. How likely do you think it is that they would survive two hundred years, but not be able to survive two hundred years and seven days?"

I wanted to object, to contradict him, but I couldn't make any words come out. Every objection I tried to conjure reeked of self-deception.

"You have an objective," he continued on. "It's an important objective, but it's not a time critical one. If you keep pursuing it as if it was and drive yourself to death, you will *fail* that objective." I flinched. "The smart move is to step back, regain your strength, plan things out, and only set out again when you're at your strongest."

I deflated. The lump in my throat had swollen, my breathing growing hoarse. I think what finally did it for me was the tears building up in the corners of my eyes. I was on the verge of breaking down and crying just because someone was—rightly!—making me slow down.

I sniffled, blinking back tears, and nodded. With the matter concluded, Starlight stepped up to me, wrapping me in a firm, soft hug. I simply tucked my muzzle in against her neck, taking comfort in her soft coat and warm emotions.

Starlight gives good hugs.

After a minute, I drew back, wiping my eyes and swallowing down the last of the lump in my throat. "Okay," I said, finally looking up to Dusty

again. "One week."

"One week," he agreed. "We'll see from there."

I nodded.

He gave me another minute to gather myself up, and then we continued on toward Gemstone. The better part of an hour was spent crossing those last few miles, and while it might have been a lie to say I felt much better by the time we crossed the train tracks and started up the gentle slope toward the gate, I at least felt more stable.

The bell lazily rang in the tower as we approached, and atop the wall, I could see Dazzle resting against the center magical energy cannon.

Sickle rumbled. "So, what's this town like? It like Rust?"

"Better," Starlight said. "Much better."

Sickle snorted. "Wonderful." Then she started fishing around in her pack, downing a couple pills and a whole bottle of beer. Dusty muttered under his breath, too quiet for her to hear.

As we approached the walls, Dazzle gave a lazy wave, and called out once we were close enough. "Well, well! Welcome back, little Star. Come to break some more hearts?"

Starlight scowled up at Dazzle's grinning face. "Do you actually do anything other than lie around on that wall and heckle travelers?"

"Hey," she replied with a laugh. "Looking pretty is hard work, and somepony's got to hold this thing down." She patted the cannon with a hoof. "And hey, you've got a new buddy. You got enough armor, there, pal?"

I could practically hear Sickle's sneer. "How about you come down here and find out, bitch?"

"Oh-ho!" Dazzle replied, her ears perking up and her grin growing. "A rough and tough mare, huh? I like it." Her hoof tapped against the cannon again. "Just don't go starting *too* much trouble, you know? You ain't got enough armor for it."

Sickle rumbled, and I swear I heard a bit of a chuckle in there. "Eat me."

"Sorry, big stuff," Dazzle replied with a laugh and a wink. "I'm on duty, here." She looked back, waving a hoof, and the gate opened.

We entered Gemstone, with Dusty leading the way to Emerald's store and inn. Sickle kicked off the harness and followed us inside; she wore a distressingly predatory grin under that muzzle of hers.

Emerald was putting away a broom as we entered, already turning her bright smile our way. "Well, hello again! Glad to see you're all back and doing well. You even picked up a new friend, I see!"

Sickle's smile vanished, and I'm pretty sure I could see her eyes blinking in the shadows of her eye-slits. It suppose I shouldn't be surprised that she'd find the reaction unusual; I can't imagine many ponies are all that pleased to meet her.

Emerald continued on, seemingly oblivious to Sickle's reaction. She stepped up to the counter, crossing her forelegs over it and smiling at us. "So, what brings you all my way today?"

Dusty stepped up to the counter, meeting her smile with one of his own. "We're looking to unload and unwind after a long job. We figured you're about the best place to trade outside of Mareford."

She chuckled. "Well, I thank you for the compliment. As for unwinding, does that mean you'll be needing rooms for the night?"

"For the week," Dusty said. "Maybe a little longer."

Her smile grew. "Ah, good! Ponies like you, I bet you've got some fun stories to share, don't you?"

Dusty hesitated, casting a quick glance my way before replying. "I'm sure we've got a few we could share."

"I'll look forward to it! But for now, we should get you all set with a place to sleep. Are you wanting the regular rooms or a suite this time?"

"What's in the suite?" Dusty asked.

"A big front room, one large bedroom, a slightly smaller bedroom, and a whole bunch of cots in the back for everypony else. Great for caravans and other large groups, or ponies who just want a bit more room."

"That sounds good."

"Okay," she said with a nod, and gestured to the stairs at the back of the room. "Take either of the upstairs rooms. Pull that cart around to the back lot and I'll get it locked up safe and sound for you." Then she turned her smile to Starlight. "And while they take care of that, I've got something for you, hon."

"For me?" Starlight asked, tilting her head.

"For you," Emerald said. "I think you'll want to see this."

"Oh, um..." She glanced back my way. "I guess I'll catch up with you?"

"I'll only keep her a minute," Emerald assured me, and I nodded, hiding any hesitation I felt about this.

"I'll just browse for a bit," I said.

"Let me know if you find anything you like!" Emerald said. Then she motioned for Starlight to follow her, leading the way to the door at the back of the room.

I made a show of looking over the shelves, even after they disappeared and the door shut, but my ears were alert. It was perhaps a bit silly, being suspicious of Emerald only because she seemed too nice, but Infiltrators learn to be suspicious of everypony.

I didn't really expect that she was in any danger, or I would have insisted on accompanying her. Still, I wanted to stay nearby. To be honest, I wasn't really sure what else to do.

It was a couple minutes later when Starlight stepped through the doorway again. Her wide eyes were tearing up. I took a step towards her, my stomach lurching in alarm. But then, as she saw me, she smiled, wide and euphoric, her eyes practically dancing with light. She moved my way, and only then did I notice that her PipBuck wasn't bouncing at her chest.

It was clasped snugly on her leg, just above her hoof.

Starlight practically leaped upon me, gripping me in a crushing hug. A giggle quickly grew to unrestrained laughter of pure joy as she bounced, while in the doorway behind her, Emerald looked on with a proud smile.

She finally released me, looking around as she wiped a hoof across her cheek. "This is *amazing!*" she squeaked out between laughs, her eyes darting around at things I couldn't even see. She turned around a couple times, still laughing, until she finally staggered and fell to her haunches.

Starlight lifted her foreleg, staring down at the PipBuck and giggling. As she stroked a hoof along the device, Emerald finally left the doorway, stepping up beside her and producing a small set of tools tucked into a cloth wrap. She held out the thin bundle to Starlight, who looked up, blinking away tears.

After a few moments of incomprehension, Emerald wiggled the bundle, as if to say, "Take it."

Starlight blinked again, then reached out and took the tools. "Thank you so much." She cradled the tools against her and looked over her Pip-

Buck again, turning her leg to admire it. "Oh! Caps!" She turned to her saddlebags, lifting the flap to rummage around inside. "How much do you want?"

Emerald laughed, soft and pleasant. "No need for that, hon. It's not as if I have use for those tools, after all."

Starlight looked up from her bags, a pouch of caps dangling from her teeth. She let it drop back to speak. "But this is... I've got to give you *something!*"

"Then you can give me a smile," Emerald said, "and I'll consider myself well-paid."

Starlight stared back at her for a second, as if surprised, before a smile spread once more across her face.

Emerald smiled back. "There, see?"

Starlight was tearing up again, even as a hint of a blush spread across her cheeks. She stood and practically leaped onto Emerald, wrapping her in a tight hug. "Thank you!" she said, over and over.

"You're very welcome, dear," Emerald said, patting her softly on the back. "It always fills my heart to see a pony so happy. Something like that, it's worth all the caps in the world."

"If there's any way I can repay you, just tell me!" Starlight insisted. "I owe you, seriously."

Emerald chuckled and placed her hooves firmly on Starlight's shoulders, holding her back to look her in the eyes. "You don't owe me anything, hon. If you really want to pay me back, then just be a good pony, bring a bit of happiness to another pony's life. Generosity and Kindness, right?" She smiled, lifting a hoof to brush away some of the dampness from Starlight's cheeks. "Now why don't you go on? I don't want to keep you when you're probably dying to give that thing a spin."

Starlight broke out in a wide grin. She pushed past Emerald's hooves to give the older mare one last hug, then bounded my way. I had only a moment to brace before she practically tackled me, giving a firm hug and nuzzling affectionately at the side of my head. When she released her death grip, her PipBuck-clad leg remained around my shoulder, pulling me along as she guided me to the front door. "Come on, Whisper! I need to try this

thing out!"



Starlight was in heaven.

She trotted along with energetic, bouncing steps, pausing only to lift her leg and fiddle with her PipBuck. Her gaze danced this way and that, as if the world were a completely new and fascinating thing, but I knew what she was really looking at was something only she could see. Every now and then, if I was looking closely enough, I could catch a tiny glimpse of light dancing about her eyes, so subtle that you'd never notice it if you didn't know what to look for.

But mostly, I watched her smile. Her enthusiastic, unbridled joy was contagious, as if my own troubles were diminished by it.

Of course, Starlight being Starlight, we headed to Arclight's place. She had no problem finding him inside the cluttered building. "I can see his mark, right there," she had said, pointing at a wall, and guided us around until we found him, completely focused on his work. We greeted him, and moments later were on our way to his weapon range. Of all the features the PipBuck had that only functioned when worn, Starlight was most interested in trying out its targeting spell.

I have to admit, it was pretty effective. After a few warm-up tests to get familiar with its functionality, Starlight started to have fun with it, giggling as she slew cans, bottles, and wooden targets with her Recharger. We ended with some trick shots; she had me grab three bottles and throw them all together. Without her PipBuck's magic, she could reliably get one before they land, and occasionally a second.

After a few throws, it was time to give the spell a try. "Throw 'em," she said, her eyes looking eagerly in the air, her pistol floating in her magic, just below her gaze.

I reared back, three bottles clutched in my forehooves, and hurtled them into the air.

The pistol smoothly snapped up, and with three sharp pops, the broken and half-melted remains of the three bottles peppered the ground of the range.

She turned back to me with an almost manic grin. "This is amazing!"

I was smiling, too. “Again?”

“Just a sec,” she said, eyes darting off to some unseen indicator. A moment later she nodded. “Okay, do it!”

Three more times I threw. Three more times, she hit every bottle before they hit the ground. Even the time she missed a shot, the follow-up came so smoothly that it could have been mistaken for being planned; there was no hesitation, just an unbroken cadence of shots.

We eventually stopped when it started getting dark out, once Arclight pointed out that ponies would be going to bed soon.

Starlight was still bouncing as we made our way back to Emerald’s place, and immediately ran up to give the older mare another hug.

“I take it everything’s working well?” Emerald said with a chuckle.

“It’s perfect!” Starlight said, releasing her again. “And now I’m feeling like celebrating. Plus I’m hungry. You got any fancy food we could buy?”

Emerald chuckled. “If it were a few hours earlier, I’d point you to Pumpkin’s place. She and her husband make some amazing food. The fanciest I can offer is some old pre-made dinners. Got a couple of stir-fried veggies and one with cheesy pasta. I also have drinks, and some packages of cookies or snack cakes.”

Starlight’s ears perked up. “We’ll take one of each of the dinners, and all the snack cakes.”

“I’ve got five boxes of snack cakes, are you—”

“All the snack cakes!” Starlight said with a dramatic flourish of her hooves, which contrasted sharply with the fit of giggling that followed.

It made for a much better dinner than the mystery cans we’d been living off of for the previous couple of weeks. Emerald even heated the pre-packaged dinners for us. The veggies were limp and the cheesy pasta was rubbery and greasy, but it was still one of the better meals I’d had since waking up in the Wasteland. Even just the simple touch of warming the food, once such a normal and mundane thing, gave the meal a hint of luxury.

We finished off both dinners and almost a whole box of snack cakes before heading up to our room.

Dusty groaned softly from the side of the front room as we entered, wearily lifting his head to look our way. “Oh, it’s you,” he murmured, laying his head down again, and lifted a hoof to gesture vaguely off to the side.

“Sickle’s using the big room. You two can have the small one.”

We quietly made our way back, past the table and the assortment of chairs. The bedroom was still quite spacious, with a large bed, a pair of dressers, a couple footlockers, and a wash basin. A window overlooked the front of the town, its shutter standing open.

Starlight was still enthusiastic about her PipBuck, going on so much about it that she didn’t even spare a second thought as we slipped into the same bed. I noted it, of course, but was far too amused to bring it up and embarrass her.

“...And any locations the map has marked will show up as pointers,” she said as she slid under the covers. “I can just set a destination and it’ll show the way. It also spots ponies, even through walls, and knows if they’re dangerous or not. Plus it’s got some fancy medical system that will flash warnings if something bad happens, and it gives even more details in the menus. It’s pretty—”

She stopped abruptly, frowning. Then her hoof slipped out from under the blanket, casting a faint green glow around the room as she flipped through menus. She halted, staring at the screen for a couple seconds before speaking. “I have a broken leg?”

“What?”

“It says I have a broken leg,” she repeated. She tapped a button, reading the details it called up. “An ‘incomplete fracture of the right large metacarpal.’” She followed up by touching a hoof to her right leg. “I mean, sure, it’s been sore, but it’s not broken.”

“I think that means it’s cracked, but not broken all the way through?” I shifted my position, sitting up to look at her.

“I guess so,” she said, laying her hoof down again. “It sure doesn’t feel that bad. Guess I’d better go easy on it until it heals.”

I couldn’t help chuckling. “With how much you’ve been bouncing around, you might want another healing potion.” When she started to object, I added, “I’m sure Emerald has more we can buy, and it’s a lot better to take care of it now instead of breaking it entirely.”

She sighed. “Yeah. Would kinda suck all the fun out of the day if I break my leg from celebrating.”

She fished out a potion, downing it, then turned back to her PipBuck.

She watched for several seconds, a smile slowly spreading across her face once more as the medical summary rapidly shortened. “That is so cool.”

We settled in to sleep. After a few moments, she scooted up close to me, slipping a foreleg over me to give a soft hug. She nuzzled in against my cheek, murmuring. “This has been the best day ever.”

I smiled, lifting a hoof to gently stroke at her mane. “I’m glad.”

She held the hug for a couple more seconds before releasing and rolling onto her back. She also took most of the blankets with her, but a quick tug fixed that situation.

“...I ate way too much,” she said with a faint groan.

I chuckled.



We slept in late, well past sunrise. It was probably another half hour before the sound of hooves out in the main room finally convinced us to finally get up and join the rest of the world.

Starlight led the way out, and then froze immediately on the other side.

The hooves we had heard were Dazzle’s, who was standing in the middle of the room, her bardingslung across the back to reveal the blue starburst of her cutie mark. When she saw us, she paused, flashing a playful smile and brushing back her tousled mane with a hoof. “Morning.”

“Uh...” was all Starlight managed to say for a moment. “...What are you doing here?”

Dazzle chuckled softly, walking again. “I’d love to stay and chat, but I’ve got to go. I slept in too late.”

“But—”

“Sorry, gotta gallop. But hey, you want to talk, feel free to swing by the gate. I can always spare some time for a pretty mare.” She gave a wink, and then the door was swinging shut behind her.

“I’m not...” Starlight trailed off with the other mare’s disappearance, then sighed. “What the hell?”

A couple heavy thumps from within Sickle’s room caught our ears, and Starlight glanced that way. “Wait, was she with...”

Dawning realization slowly broke across her features, followed immediately by a deep grimace. “Ew. Ew!”

Starlight then proceeded to rub her hooves against her head, as if trying to ward off the mental images that had just come to mind, all the while making continued sounds of disgust.

The door opened again as Dusty returned, a small bundle clutched in his teeth. He spared a momentary raised eyebrow at Starlight's antics before speaking. "I see you two finally decided to join us in the world of the living."

He wasn't wearing his bardings, and I was suddenly struck by how unusual that seemed to me. Granted, he looked about as travel-worn as his bardings had, but it occurred to me that it was the first time I'd seen him completely naked, so long as I overlooked the holster still strapped to his shoulder. I leaned my head to the side, peering at his flank, with its image of a shield with what looked to be a rifle round emblazoned upon it. "Is this seriously the first time I've seen your cutie mark?"

He glanced back, looking a little confused for a moment, and shrugged. "I guess so."

"Huh."

"Anyway, I brought you all breakfast," Dusty said, setting the bundle on the table. A few boxes and packages of wartime food spilled out. "Nothing too fancy, but it beats canned goods."

"I think I already lost my appetite," Starlight said, but that didn't stop her from grabbing a seat at the table and snagging a box of crackers.

I got a package of shredded potatoes and another of snap peas that didn't quite live up to their name, but were still surprisingly delicious. I'm not sure how that kind of food could last for so long. I assume there's some sort of preservative magic involved.

We were about halfway through when the door to Sickle's room opened, and she slowly staggered out, bleary eyed. While it was a little odd seeing Dusty without his bardings, it was outright bizarre seeing Sickle without her armor, as if it were a sudden reminder that there really was a pony under all that metal. Not that she looked any less imposing, with her heavily scarred and battle-worn features. It was hard to find an inch of her body that didn't show some sign of past battles.

As she stumbled toward the table, muttering something profane under her breath, I couldn't help but feel there was something off about her. It wasn't until Starlight spoke that I realized what it was.

"Holy shit," Starlight said, her head drawing back in surprise as she eyed Sickle over. "Did you *bathe*?"

Sickle halted at the table, blinking at Starlight for a couple seconds before mumbling. "The fuck are you talking about?"

"You're—" Starlight stopped herself, mouth closing on the word she was about to say, and then continuing on with a slightly more accurate phrase. "...not filthy."

There were several seconds spent as that statement slowly processed in Sickle's mind, until the huge mare finally blinked. "Oh. Yeah, that." She sat on the floor with a deep thump that rattled the table, and rested her forelegs across it. Despite not using a chair, she loomed over her corner of the table. "That mare's weird, kept trying to clean me. Eh, I was high as fuck, anyway. Long as she kept eating me out, I don't give a fuck what else she's into."

She groaned softly, eyes half-closing. Her hoof came down on the bundle of food, scattering the remaining boxes and packages as she searched through them, and finally grunted. "What, no drinks?"

Dusty gave a dry chuckle. "Sorry, I didn't get any booze. Did you run out?"

"Nah," Sickle rumbled, resting her chin on the table as she slid over a package of sliced carrots. "But it's all in there," she said, indicating her room with a flick of a hoof, "and I'm in here." She stared at the package, as if willing it to open itself. "Fuck me. Hangovers suck."

"Alcohol dehydrates you," Dusty said. "Drink some water, you'll feel better. Anyway, Emerald's ready to trade. I figured you'd all want to be in on that, get whatever supplies you need. We're good on basics, but there might be some specialty items we want. Maybe more rifle ammo, if Whisper keeps shooting like she has been."

I gave a self-deprecating snicker. "Yeah, I have to work on that. You offered to teach me. Maybe we could do that afterwards?"

"This week is for relaxing and recovering," Dusty said. "Training can be almost as stressful as the real thing, if it's done right."

"I know some ponies go shooting for fun," I countered. A thought occurred to me, and I amended my statement. "At least, they did back before. I suppose that's not so common any more."

Dusty eyed me, frowning, as if I were trying to pull one over on him.

“There’s a big difference between popping off a few rounds at the range and serious training. Still, I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to have you run a few mags in a more relaxed setting. Getting used to firing a weapon can’t hurt.”

When we had all finished eating, and Sickle had gotten a drink to chase away the hangover—more beer, to our annoyance—we headed downstairs.

Emerald looked up from a clipboard, dropping a pencil atop it as she smiled at us. “Well, good morning, sleepyheads. I was starting to wonder if I’d see you fillies today. You must have needed the sleep.”

“That was the most comfortable bed I’ve slept in in weeks,” Starlight said. “Yeah, I needed that.”

“A good night’s sleep can do wonders,” Emerald said.

Sickle rumbled, plodding up behind us. “A good night’s fucking is even better.”

Emerald’s smile wavered for a moment. “Yes, well... that can certainly be a pleasant way to spend the night, at times.” She recovered quickly, switching topics. “So, you’re all looking to do some trading?”

We dug through our wagon, showing what we had that we’d be willing to trade, while Emerald made notes on her clipboard. Once we were done, she scanned over the list.

“Quite the impressive haul,” she said. “Why, it’d put most small caravans to shame. Quite a bit of high-end weaponry here, too, and all in good condition. Some impressive heavy ordinance. Three machine guns and a minigun? And a set of power armor? Where in the world did you come into all of this hardware?”

“An untouched, underground wartime facility,” I said. “We cleaned out the armory.”

While the first part was true, the second certainly wasn’t. The hive’s armory was intended to supply a variety of options for special operations, as well as to equip guards and militia in the case the hive was attacked. We took everything we could carry and hardly put a dent in it.

“Well you certainly struck it rich,” Emerald said with an approving nod. “Plenty of ammo, too, even five boxes of subsonics. Looks like you won’t be needing the box I snagged for a good long time.”

Maybe that whole Generosity thing was wearing off. “Actually, I’ll take it. I’ve only used a couple of them, but they saved all our lives, and I doubt

there will be many other buyers.”

Emerald smiled. “I’m glad they helped. What happened?”

Dusty and Starlight both glanced my way. Starlight looked particularly uneasy.

“We got attacked,” I said, and did what I had learned to do through years of training and experience: I told just enough of the truth to conceal the rest. “We got separated. Somehow, I ended up behind the ponies that were shooting at the rest of us. They didn’t know I was there, so I was able to do enough damage for us to come out on top. It was a narrow thing, though.”

She sighed. “It’s a grim business. Sad to say, sometimes it comes down to that.” She was quiet for a moment before looking me in the eyes. “Bad ponies?”

I nodded. “At best, they were working for bad ponies, but I’m pretty sure they knew what they were doing.”

She slowly nodded. “Sad it had to go that way, but I’m glad you came out on top. Sometimes bad ponies have to be stopped. Just so long as it’s for good reasons.”

“It was.”

Her smile returned. “Good to hear.” Then she gave a soft chuckle, as if to chase off the darker mood. Fetching her pencil to scribble a note on her clipboard, she added, “I’ll add the subsonics to the list.”

“We’ll buy all the five-five-six you have, too,” Dusty said.

Emerald raised an eyebrow at that. “Really? You’ve got three cans and change already. You looking to outfit an army?”

“Nope,” Dusty said, then pointed a hoof at me. “But I’m planning on teaching this one to shoot and fight, and I’m going to do it right, so at least one whole can is going down-range before we’re done.”

Emerald gave a low whistle before picking up her pencil and scribbling a few more notes. “Well, you’ve certainly got the caps for it. A bit of preparation can make all the difference in the world. Afraid my stock won’t make much of a dent in that. I’ve only got a little over two boxes of the stuff. I tend not to stock too much ammo when Mareford owns the market for kinetics.”

“Every bit helps,” Dusty said.

Looking over her list, Emerald slowly shook her head. “That’s a lot of

firepower. Are you wanting to sell all of it?"

Dusty looked my way. "Did you want to keep your pipe rifle?"

I hesitated. "My neck's a lot happier with the assault rifle," I said. With the new rifle, I'd been carrying more than twice the ammo for barely half the weight, which made quite the difference when I had been spending it as I had. Still, I couldn't deny some sentiment for the rifle that had saved my life in my first firefight. "Though we might want to keep it, so we have something that fires that kind of ammo. Seems raiders use the stuff a lot."

"And don't tend to have pipe guns of decent quality. Okay, we'll keep that and the heavy-barrel one, probably sell most of the ammo. Sell the shotguns and all their ammo. I think we'll keep one of the pistols as a spare, sell all the other handguns. Other than that..." He scanned over the piles of weapons, then looked back to Starlight. "Do you want any of the magical energy weapons?"

"Not much point," she replied, then raised her PipBuck-clad hoof. "Especially now."

"If we get in a close-in fight again, there might," Dusty said. "Your Recharger is good for brief encounters, but it recharges pretty slowly once it's spent. It started lagging at the end of those ghoul fights. That carbine there might be good for you if we end up in a longer close quarters fight."

For a single moment, I thought Starlight might argue the point, but she simply shrugged. "Eh, sure. Can keep it as a backup or something."

"Okay," Dusty said. "We'll keep that one, trade the others. I think we'll keep the two submachine guns to keep our options open. For the large-caliber rifles, we'll keep the bolt and the scoped semi-auto, sell the others. I'll put the smaller belt-fed as a 'maybe', but we're keeping the heavy. For the small calibers, we'll keep the long-barrel and the light machine gun, and two of the regular rifles, sell the others." He paused, looking over the sizable arsenal. "I think that covers it."

Emerald pointed with the pencil in her mouth. "The minigun?"

Dusty hummed a moment. "Tempted to keep that for emergencies. It was useful, until the ammo ran out. Don't suppose you carry any for it?"

"Afraid not," Emerald said with a laugh. "Not many ponies toting miniguns around, after all. Heck, I've seen more ponies using those rounds as spare change than as ammunition."

"Not surprised," Dusty said. "The thing basically just pisses caps. Still... I think we'll hold onto it, just in case."

"Suits me fine, hon. I doubt I'd be able to give you a good price on it, anyhow." She gestured to the set of Enclave armor. "That goes double for the power armor. It'd need a lot of repairs to sell as armor. Best I could do is part it out. I'm sure some of the internals would sell for a pretty pile of caps, but it wouldn't be anything near what it'd be worth if it were working right. If you want a good value, you'd need to get it fixed up. I don't know if there are any ponies this side of Trotsen that could do that. Maybe someone in Rust might be able to cobble something together."

"I think we'll hang onto it, then," Dusty said. "We've probably got more than enough to trade already."

"That you certainly do!" Emerald laughed softly as she looked over her list, then shook her head. "Thirty guns. Afraid I don't have nearly enough caps to give you a fair price on all of that, much less the ammo and anything else you want to offload. Got plenty to trade, though, if you're looking for any supplies."

"Always," Dusty said, smiling. "Especially medical supplies."

"And I've been thinking of getting some barding," Starlight said, flashing an awkward smile. "Would feel kinda weird being the only pony without. Plus, you know, getting shot really sucked."

"I do generally advise against it," Emerald said, "even with barding. Better with than without, though, and I've certainly got plenty. What'd you have in mind?"

"Something light," Starlight said. "I need to be able to run and jump and climb with it. Leather, I guess?"

Emerald chuckled. "Leather barding is pretty heavy for the protection it gives, hon. Hot and stiff, too. It's just cheap. It's a step up from strapping on road signs and clipboards. You want lightweight and mobile, you want something metal, or better yet, cloth reinforced with metal." She smiled. "Could even make you something custom-tailored, if you'd like. Might take a while for me to get that done, but it sounds like you're planning on sticking around for a while."

Starlight grinned. "That sounds great."

"Perfect!" Emerald said, giving her a pat on the shoulder, then looked

over to me. “So does that mean you’re looking for barding, too?”

“I’ve got something arranged,” I said, giving just enough of a sly smile to sell the tale.

“Oh-ho,” Emerald said, matching my smile. “Sounds like there’s an interesting story there. Don’t suppose it’s one you can share?”

“Sorry,” I said, though I held the smile. “But maybe later.”

“Gotcha,” Emerald said with a conspiratorial wink, and turned back to the rest of the group. “Okay, what else can I interest you in?”

I nearly jumped at Sickle’s rumble, having nearly forgotten she was there. “Got any chems or booze?”

“Ah,” Emerald said, with a good deal less enthusiasm. “Well, I’ve got some drinks, sure. I’m afraid I don’t stock combat drugs, so the only chems I have are painkillers.”

“Figures,” Sickle grumbled. “Whatever. I’ll take it all.”

Emerald raise an eyebrow, but nodded. “Sure thing. I’ve got probably a dozen bottles of various beers and one of—”

“I didn’t ask for a fucking inventory,” Sickle growled. “I said I’ll take it *all*.”

Starlight hissed. “Sickle...”

But Emerald simply smiled. “Well, you can certainly afford it. I’ll add it to the list.” She scribbled out a couple quick words, then looked up again. “Anything else?”

In the end, Dusty bought the three packs of cigarettes she had behind the counter, as well as most of the food and the few healing potions she had in stock. That brought us up to two healing potions each, with one spare. While we had found medical supplies within the hive, they were irradiated through centuries of low-level exposure. None of us were particularly excited to find out what magical radiation might do to potent healing magic.

Emerald had a short discussion with Starlight about barding, and eventually pulled out one of the sets for her to try on. It was a fairly light set that only covered the chest and abdomen, but it was made of some fancy black armor fabric that was highly resistant to bullets, and had internal pouches with metal plates to give extra protection to the chest. Emerald helped adjust it to fit Starlight’s lean frame, and I have to admit, it hugged her body quite nicely. The addition of a set of thick pads to protect her knees com-

pleted the look, and she turned and posed several different ways, admiring herself in the mirror Emerald had provided.

Even Emerald's repeated warnings that it was one of the more expensive sets of barding couldn't dissuade her. She bounced happily, enthused over how light it felt. "It's like it's not even there. I like it!"

She spent the rest of the time prancing about in her new barding while Dusty hashed out the final details of the trading. Even after the armor and all the other purchases, we walked away a few thousand caps richer.

Starlight was in the mood to celebrate again, not to mention strut around in her new barding, so she and I went to Pumpkin's place to see if the food was as good as Emerald said it was.

Pumpkin was a pleasant orange mare, who greeted us as warmly as Emerald had. We settled in at one of the tables, and she was soon grilling up a variety of veggies for us in the back while we sipped on glasses of lukewarm water.

We were just relaxing when Dazzle pulled out a chair and sat with us. "Heya, hot flanks," she said, grinning at Starlight. "I've got to say, that looks damn good on you."

Pumpkin called out from the grill at the back of the store. "Hey, Dazzle! Can I get you anything?"

"Nah, I'm just here to chat with my friends," she called back.

"Okay, then. Just don't go chasing off my customers, hmm?"

"I wouldn't dream of it!"

Starlight was rolling her eyes during their exchange, but was still smiling when Dazzle looked back to her. "Sorry, Dazzle. I'm in way too good of a mood to be bothered by your teasing."

"It's not teasing," Dazzle said with a laugh, then leaned forward with a sultry look in her eyes. "It's flirting."

"It isn't going to work," Starlight said, her tone amused. "First off, I'm not into mares—"

"So I and every stallion in town heard," Dazzle said, smirking, "but I don't quite buy it."

"—And second," Starlight continued, her smile slipping, "you slept with Sickle. Seriously, ew."

Dazzle's smile fizzled, her ears twitching back. "Ouch. Yeah, not my

finest moment, I suppose.” She gave a wry smile. “But, you know, beggars and choosers...”

Starlight blinked at the sudden change in tone, her mouth opening and then closing again while she tried to decide what to say. Myself, I remained quiet and outwardly neutral, but all my attention was locked on Dazzle.

Eventually, Starlight sighed and spoke. “Should I even ask what that means?”

“Desperate times,” Dazzle said, and gave a weak chuckle. “It means there ain’t exactly a lot of available mares around, so sometimes I have to go with what I can get. A year of watching delicious flanks walking in and out of that gate without a taste was a bit too long, so... yeah.”

“Yeah, okay. But still, *Sickle*? ”

Dazzle laughed, though awkwardly. “Yeah, yeah, I know. Only thing is, she’s available.” She smirked, eying Starlight again. “Because, trust me, other than being available, she ain’t my type.”

“Neither am I.”

Dazzle’s laugh was much more sincere, this time. “Are you kidding? A fine young mare like you? You’re lean, strong, and athletic. I really like your mane, the style just shouts ‘playful and energetic’. Your coat’s nice and clean and even, so you obviously know how to care for yourself. Emerald likes you, which means you’re a good pony, and I know you’ve seen action, so you know how to fight. You’re pleasant to be around. And now you’ve got some of the sexiest, curve-hugging bardings I’ve seen.” She leaned in, her eyes hungry. “Sweetie, you couldn’t be more my type if you were already sprawled out on my bed.”

Starlight’s face was bright red, her ears pinned back as she stared back.

Dazzle gave a playful smirk, resting her chin atop her hooves. “And you blush way too much at some flirting for somepony who isn’t into mares.”

Starlight swallowed. “Flattery isn’t going to change my mind.”

“Again, it isn’t flattery, it’s flirting.” Dazzle winked, then glanced my way. Then she scooted a little closer to Starlight, leaning over to say, “Though I have to admit, your friend here has a lot going for her, too.”

Starlight blinked, her expression turning to one of curiosity. “Oh?”

As for myself, I focused on retaining a natural, neutral reaction, rather than narrowing my eyes in disapproval. Perhaps I was reading too much

into Dazzle's behavior, what with my training in manipulating ponies, but it all seemed so very familiar to me.

"Oh yeah," Dazzle said, her eyes on me as she leaned in a little closer to Starlight, as if sharing a moment with her. "I mean, I may be more into the athletic look, myself, but look at her! Everything about her is sleek and graceful. Not a single imperfection, and each curve is more delicious than the last. Her coat is perfect! Smooth and clean, not a hair out of place, and the perfect healthy shine. And that tail and mane! I don't know how she grew them so full and long, but she obviously knows how to care for them. I mean, I'm envious! I wish I could grow my mane that long." She chuckled. "Heck, I'd love to take her home and brush her mane for a few hours, just to feel it. Maybe chat about mane-care, while we're at it, since she clearly knows a few things."

"You can save the flattery, *and* the flirting," I said, while Starlight was silently looking me over. "It's really not going to work on me."

"A pity. I was serious, though. You just came in from the desert, but you look immaculate." She smiled. "I like ponies who know how to take care of their appearance. Actually, that's part of why I came over here. Mostly it was to flirt with a couple of the hottest mares I've ever laid eyes on, but I thought I might be able to offer my services."

Starlight blinked, suddenly looking away from me and back to Dazzle. "What?"

Dazzle reached up, brushing a hoof along her sleek mane. "I've always taken pride in my appearance, and I've kind of made a side business out of it. I've got the closest thing to a salon you'll find this side of the war. There aren't enough pretty mares coming through to make it a full-time business, but it gets me some extra caps, and I love the work. Emerald's amazing at getting supplies, too."

"A convenient excuse to get your hooves all over some ponies," I softly noted.

"A purely innocent but very happy coincidence," Dazzle replied with a wink. "But seriously, I can keep it entirely professional if you prefer that. I just saw how weary you looked coming into town, so I thought you might like to relax and unwind with some pampering." She looked back to Starlight, who seemed to finally realize just how close Dazzle was sitting

to her. “I offer everything. Deep, full body cleaning, grooming, trimming, dying, treatments to care for your skin, coat, mane, and tail, hooficure, horn-care, full-body deep-tissue massage—*everything*. I even rigged a setup that makes for a passable sauna, and if you haven’t tried one before, you would not *believe* how wonderfully relaxing they can be.”

When she was met with our skeptical looks, she laughed softly and raised her hooves in surrender. “Honest! Ask Emerald, she’ll tell you.”

“Yeah,” Starlight said, her voice laced with skepticism. “I’ll do that.”

Dazzle lightly clopped her hooves against the table. “Good! So, I take that to mean you’re interested?”

Starlight chewed her lip. “Well... I mean, it sounds nice, but I dunno...”

“I think I’ll pass,” I said, eying Dazzle carefully.

“Aww, please?” Dazzle said, blinking in my direction. “You’ll love it, I promise.”

I frowned a little. “Do you pursue all potential customers this aggressively?”

She grinned. “Nope. But for a couple of the most beautiful mares in the Wasteland, and ones Emerald speaks well of? I think that’s worth the extra effort.” Then she sat back, placing a hoof across her chest. “I promise: you’ll love every moment of it, you’ll feel so much better afterwards, and there won’t be any slips or wandering hooves intruding on the experience. Caps-back guarantee.”

“I dunno,” Starlight repeated. “Sounds nice. I mean, if Emerald says it’s okay, then—”

“Excellent!” Dazzle replied, clopping her hoof against the table again. “Are you available today? If I go fire up the heater now, I should be able to have things ready by the time you’re done eating and checking in with Emerald.”

Starlight blinked. “Uh... sure? I mean, I guess that works.”

“Perfect!” Dazzle turned her smile to me. “I don’t suppose I could convince you to change your mind and give it a shot?”

I sighed. As bad of an idea as I knew this was, I wasn’t going to leave Starlight to face it alone. “I’ll go, too.”

“Even better!” Dazzle grinned and stood. “I’ll go get things ready. My place is past the gate, second house on the left. Just let yourself in if I don’t

answer, I might not hear you knock if I'm in the back setting things up. See you two soon!"

And with that, she turned and strutted off, with far too much of a bounce to her step for a simple business arrangement.

Starlight watched her leave, her cheeks still faintly colored. "...Did I just make a horrible mistake?"

"I'm pretty sure she just wants to get her hooves all over you," I said. "You can say no."

"I guess," Starlight said, though her tone sounded unconvinced. "Still, she made it sound really nice." She looked up to me, then leaned in, dropping to a whisper. "There were a lot of salons around before the megaspells, right? Did you ever go to one?"

My ears flicked back, realizing where this was going. "A couple times. And yes, they can be nice, but it really depends on who's doing it." I inclined my head the way Dazzle had gone. "And I think she's more interested in getting under your tail than in grooming it."

Starlight flushed at my targeted use of euphemism, chewing on her lip for a moment. "...Yeah, probably. But I mean, we've got a lot of caps now, and I'd like to do *something* fancy with it, just once. And if Emerald says she's okay..." After a moment, she chuckled, her smile returning. "Besides, there are two of us and one of her. Pretty sure we can kick her flank if she tries anything."

I could have shut the whole thing down right then. Dazzle did a good job of pushing Starlight along, but she wasn't there any more. Maybe I should have. But Starlight was clearly excited by the idea, to even consider putting up with Dazzle's nonsense. She could use something nice.

Besides, I'd be right there, watching out for her.

So I put on a sly smile. "Just be sure to give her a good, swift buck if she tries to sneak a grope."

She giggled. "Can do."

I nodded, and with that, resigned myself to spend the evening at the salon.

So much for relaxing.

## Chapter Nineteen

# Just Relax

After a delicious meal of grilled vegetables and a drink that made a passable attempt at being tea, Starlight and I returned to Emerald, who immediately dashed my one last hope.

“Oh, yes,” Emerald said with a chuckle. “I wouldn’t exactly call it a business, more like a hobby, but she certainly puts some effort into it.”

Starlight smiled a little, sounding genuinely surprised. “Huh. I kinda thought she just came up with it to get her hooves on me.”

Emerald laughed softly. “Oh, no. She came up with it a long time ago to get her hooves on any mare she could. That poor filly’s never had any luck with love. Still, she managed to channel something productive out of it. She’s good, too.”

Starlight hummed thoughtfully, while I, still feeling suspicious, pressed on.

“And how many of her customers get treated to wandering hooves?”

Emerald leaned on the counter, giving me a knowing smile. “Best I can say is nopony’s ever complained. As far as I know, she’s never gone too far with a pony who wasn’t receptive to her advances, and it really isn’t my business what happens with the ones who *were*.”

There was just a hint of color to Starlight’s cheeks. “Well we’re not.”

“Wouldn’t be my business if you are or not,” Emerald said. “But as long as you’re clear with Dazzle as to where you stand, I expect that’ll be all there is to it. She might come on a bit strong, but she’s good at heart.” She watched Starlight’s skeptical expression for a couple seconds before smiling, and added, “If it makes you feel any safer, tell her I’ll thump her head if she tries anything, okay, hon?”

Starlight grumbled softly. “I guess.” After a moment, she glanced up again. “So she’s, you know, good at that stuff?”

“Oh, very,” Emerald said with a nod. “She’s got a real talent for it.”

“Well... okay, then. I guess we can give it a try.” She glanced my way, seeking to reassure me. “We can always leave if it starts getting, um... weird.”

“I suppose,” I said, even though I felt like it was already there. I turned

to Emerald. "How exactly does a guard also run a spa? I've heard of some strange business combinations before, but that's stranger than usual."

"Guard work is a volunteer thing," she replied with a shrug. "Dazzle's taken to it well enough that the others consider her to be in charge, but it's all pretty informal. So long as at least one pair of eyes are on lookout, we don't need a bunch of ponies lining the walls at all hours of the day. She's usually up on the wall, but it's no trouble for her to slip away for some side business."

I suppose that made sense. I turned back to Starlight. "Okay. I'm going to go up and talk to Dusty real quick, then we can go."

We parted ways, and I returned to our suite. Dusty's reaction was pretty much as I expected.

"So let me get this straight," he said, his expression a skeptical combination of amusement and annoyance. "You argued with me to get the chance to go shooting, and now you're wanting to blow it off to go take a bath?"

"No," I said, giving a wry smile. "I'm putting it off to stand guard over Starlight while *she* takes a bath."

Dusty let out a long sigh. "Whisper, we're supposed to be here to relax."

"I know that," I replied, and quickly dialed back the harshness that had crept into my voice. "But Starlight's gotten excited by this idea, and I'm concerned about what might happen if I let Dazzle have too much time alone with her. At least if I'm there, I can make sure it's just a nice, relaxing evening rather than something she'll regret."

The sound of empty bottles clanking in the next room preceded Sickle's entrance from her room. She was grinning, her eyes just a little too wide. "Hah. Somepony's jealous."

My ears pinned back as I fixed her with a glare. "Starlight is my friend, and I'm protective of my friends, especially now."

"Maaarefrieend," Sickle teased, tongue lolling from the side of her mouth for a moment. Then her ears flicked and she gave a full-body shudder.

I scowled. "Sickle? Shut up, you're... are you high?"

"Fuck yeah," Sickle replied, a little too loudly. "Buck and Dash. Dash is the best fucking hangover cure ever, and add in some Buck? It's just... fuck yeah! I can do fucking anything! Hah!"

"Except expand your vocabulary," I dryly noted, actually earning a laugh

from her.

"Eh, fuck words," she said. "Anyway, you two have fun slobbering all over that weird mare. You can have her. Town like this has to have plenty of pent up stallions ready for a good rut. Time to show these cunts how to party!"

Dusty groaned softly. "Please don't get us kicked out of town. I like this town."

"You would," Sickle rumbled with a sneer, then turned to trot off. "Later, losers!"

If you've never seen a pony that size trotting along in the upper story of a Wasteland-era building with an energetic, drug-fueled bounce to her steps, be glad. It could have easily passed as a minor earthquake.

Dusty shook his head once the thumping finally stopped. "Maybe somepony should be keeping an eye on *her*."

I smirked back at him. "Well I'm watching over Starlight today, so have fun with that."

He gave a short, dry laugh. "Hey, I need to relax, too." Then he sighed. "Anyway, have fun. And I mean it, at least *try* to have fun."

"I'll try," I said, though from his look, it didn't seem very convincing. I quickly changed the subject. "Want to do the shooting thing tomorrow?"

"...Yeah, sure."

"Okay, then. See you later."

I headed downstairs to meet up with Starlight, and together, we set out.

Dazzle's house was rather large, and while obviously of post-war construction, it appeared quite well-made and sturdy, with a blue paint job that was only slightly faded and worn. The only unusual aspects were the large water tank beside the house, and a sign hanging on the front wall, with the word "Dazzle's" painted in delicate, curving letters.

Starlight halted several yards away, staring at the sign for several seconds.

I looked back at her. "Did you change your mind?" I was perhaps a bit hopeful.

Instead, she slowly cracked a smile and snickered. "This is so stupid. I mean, I've ran right into raider dens without a worry, but now I'm all nervous about going into a freaking *salon*."

"It makes sense to me," I said. "It's an unfamiliar and more uncertain

situation, with more complex possible consequences, where the danger is less direct and more abstract. It lacks the clarity of potential combat. It's not surprising that it would be uncomfortable."

"Thanks," she dryly replied, then gave a snort of amusement as she advanced toward the door. "It's still stupid."

Just seconds after she rapped on the door, it flew open to reveal Dazzle's grin. "Hey! You made good time. Come in! Come in!"

We shuffled into her living room, and she shut the door behind us. Our hooves clopped softly on the wooden floor, which was actually sanded smooth and finished with enough skill that it might have been passable back before the megaspells. The space was fairly sparsely furnished, with a trio of mismatched ancient couches around a more recently constructed coffee table. One wall had a line of bookshelves, full of magazines.

Starlight took one look at them, and color started to touch her cheeks again. "Are those porno mags?"

Dazzle laughed. "No, those are *fashion* magazines. Mostly focused on beautification, mane care, coat care, stuff like that." She stepped past us toward the hallway at the back of the room, giving Starlight a wink over her shoulder. "Though I'm sure I could dig up something a little harder if that's what you're looking for."

"It's not," Starlight replied, the color in her cheeks spreading.

"Well, come on back," Dazzle said as she reached the hall. "I've got almost everything ready to go. So, have you decided what exactly you want? Or shall I just go with the full deluxe treatment?"

I made a point of suspiciously eying her, though I kept my expression otherwise neutral. "That depends entirely on what you intend that to include."

"Now, now, strictly professional," Dazzle said with a sly smile, before slipping into a more business-like demeanor. "The full treatment starts with a thorough cleaning, down to the skin, and complete with one of the finest set of beautification products available in the Wasteland. After that, there's a full trim and groom, hooficure, a horn-filing for Star here, a few cycles through the sauna with cool-down sessions and warming hoof-baths in between, and all ending with a deep massage and a final touch-up grooming to make sure you leave here feeling as relaxed and beautiful as possible."

She smiled proudly at the conclusion. I had the immediate impression of somepony throwing down a challenge.

“Sounds thorough,” Starlight said, though cautiously.

“And of course, I can customize the session any way you like,” Dazzle said, her smile softening. “The whole point is to pamper yourself, after all. We can just start with that list as a baseline, just feel free to make any requests that come to mind. Does that sound good?”

Starlight nodded.

Dazzle grinned. “Good! Then let’s get started. But first, as much as I hate to interrupt things with the talk of money, we should get that out of the way now. Even if I find a couple of beautiful mares to be a reward in itself, I’m still running a business, such as it is. Normally I’d charge about fifty caps for a full session, but Emerald likes you, I’m a sucker for pretty mares, and I’ll throw in a bit of a group discount, and call it... say, seventy for the pair of you?”

I’d been to salons before. Compared to the prices I’d seen back before the fall of Equestria, that seemed on the low side. Starlight, however, had no such frame of reference.

“That seems like a lot of caps for some bathing and a massage.”

“It’s worth every cap and more,” Dazzle said, still smiling. “Trust me. That goes on the whole ‘caps-back guarantee’ deal, too. When you walk out of here, you’ll be thinking it’s the best seventy caps you ever spent.”

Starlight chewed on her lip a moment, but finally pulled out a pouch of caps.

“We’ll see,” I said.

“Yes, you will,” Dazzle said with a wink, then turned to Starlight, who had moved to the coffee table to count out her caps.

When Starlight was done, Dazzle swept up the caps into another pouch, pausing for a moment as she fished out one of the un-crimped caps. “Huh, that’s a funny looking one.” She turned it over in her hoof, then shrugged and dropped it in with the others. “Anyway, that’s all taken care of, so let’s get to it. Follow me!”

She had an energetic, tail-swishing walk as we followed her down the spacious hallway of her home. We entered into what was easily the largest bathroom I had been in, with multiple doors in and out. An old bathtub

that could have fit one of the princesses—or my own queen—with room to spare sat empty in the corner of the room, with a crude wooden framework built around it to hold it in place. The centerpiece of the room was the wide-open shower, with mismatched tiles and metal making for an effective shower floor, if not a terribly attractive one. The plumbing ran along the ceiling, exposed, and ended in a shower head that looked to have been made out of a metal bowl with tiny holes drilled through it. A rubber garden hose ran down to connect to another, detachable shower head, an old pre-war model made of faded plastic. Somewhere in the distance, I could hear a generator running.

Back during the war, a salon looking like this would have been looked down on as a miserable pit, if not outright condemned, but with the way things were after the megaspells, it was rather impressive. Dazzle had put some serious effort into this.

Not that it let me overlook that Dazzle had just led us into her own personal bathroom. That was something that still suggested a degree of intimacy to me. Ponies have a strong separation between private and public areas, and all manner of implications tended to stem from those.

“Is the shower okay?” Dazzle asked. “There was a good storm a month back, so I’ve still got enough water for a bath, but I’d have to charge extra.”

“A shower is fine,” I said, and Starlight nodded.

Dazzle nodded. “Good! Then all I need you to do is strip down. You can stash your bags on the counter.”

Starlight’s expression tightened in alarm, especially when Dazzle motioned toward her leg. “PipBuck, too. You’ll want to get cleaned under there pretty regularly.”

When Starlight’s hoof moved protectively over her PipBuck, Dazzle added, “I can’t really clean there when you’re wearing it.”

I set down my saddlebags. “We can clean ourselves.”

“I can tell,” Dazzle said, smiling at me. “I’m curious. When’s the last time you had a proper shower? Soap and all.”

My ears twitched. “Almost a week ago,” I said, hiding a flash of shame that was, in hindsight, rather absurd.

Dazzle laughed. “I knew it! Goddesses, I love a mare who knows how to take care of herself.” She continued chuckling as she scooped up my bags

and deposited them on the counter beside a large sink. “But anyway, another set of hooves does wonders for getting clean in all those hard-to-reach places. While I’m sure the two of you could take care of that yourselves, that’s what you’re paying me for, so just relax and enjoy a bit of pampering, okay?”

“...Okay,” Starlight said, her voice full of reluctance as she unlocked her PipBuck. She set it reverently on the counter, her eyes lingering on it for a moment before turning back to Dazzle.

Dazzle smiled at us. “Now, I’m afraid my business is still fairly small, so I’ve only got the single set of hooves available. I’ll try to alternate between the two of you so you don’t feel left out. So, who gets to go first?”

Starlight and I exchanged glances, and I asked her, “Do you mind if I go first?”

Not that I was eager to have Dazzle’s hooves all over me. I wanted to see what it was she was going to do before she had a chance to do it to Starlight.

Starlight simply nodded.

“Well, step on up,” Dazzle said with a wave of her hoof, before turning to walk to the back of the shower. “Time to get you all good and wet.”

I fixed her with a flat glare as I stepped up to stand under the shower. She answered my glare with a snicker as she snatched up the detachable shower head. A quick flip of one lever sent a cascade of warm water across my back. “Now, this is rainwater, so it’s very slightly radioactive. It’s fine for bathing, just try not to drink too much of it.” Flipping a second lever sent another spray from the shower head held in her teeth, which she used to spray the areas that the overhead shower didn’t reach. She also didn’t seem to mind the water, and by the time she deemed me suitably soaked, she was almost as wet as I was.

“Go ahead and take a seat for a sec,” Dazzle said to me, then motioned to Starlight. “Come on in, let’s get you ready.”

Starlight hesitantly stepped under the shower, her short mane flattening to her neck as the water coursed over her. I kept a close eye on Dazzle as she sprayed down Starlight, especially the brief moment where she angled the shower head to spray along her belly.

Once Dazzle was satisfied, she shut off the detachable shower head and hung it up again. “Now you just enjoy the water for now,” she said to Starlight. “I’m going to get your friend here all lathered up real quick.”

She stepped over to a cabinet, opening it to reveal dozens of different bottles. What followed was a series of questions about our coats, manes, and tails, until Dazzle finally selected a suitable set of bottles for each of us. While Starlight remained under the warm flow of water, Dazzle took one of the bottles and poured a small amount of liquid along my back. Then she went to work, scrubbing her hooves through my coat, starting with my shoulders and working down along my chest. Naturally, this put her body very close to my own, something I'm sure was not at all unintended.

"You've got such a clean coat," Dazzle said as her hooves scrubbed down along the side of my chest, pausing for a moment to push back the hair and peer at the skin beneath. "Hardly any grease or grime. I'm impressed. You must have found some good soaps or shampoos out there, hmm?"

"We found a little in some ruins a while back," I said, vaguely.

"Well I'd say you put it to good use," she said with a chuckle. "You ever have any extra you want to sell, I'm always in the market. Or I can use it on you, if you'd rather. I could give a huge discount for that."

Off to the side, Starlight snickered softly. "We'll keep that in mind if any of the wartime facilities we track down end up to be a day spa."

Dazzle laughed softly, her hooves finishing with my legs and moving to my side. "If you do, I'd certainly appreciate it. Emerald is amazing at digging up the most unusual and uncommon supplies, but I can always use more."

"She sure is," Starlight said, a smile crossing her face. "I have no idea how she managed to get her hooves on a set of PipBuck keys."

"She knows pretty much every trader in the region," Dazzle replied, her hooves scrubbing down along my side and belly. "In fact, she—oh, hold on; fair warning, getting to the tender bits." My jaw tightened reflexively as her hooves scrubbed further down my belly and between my legs. My first instinct was to rear back and buck her, but I held firm. It would have been easy for her to give a little more sensual attention to those parts, but her hooves didn't linger, simply working the shampoo into my coat the same as she had elsewhere.

Then she patted me on the flank. "You can relax again," she said, a hint of teasing to her voice. I huffed out a quick breath, doing my best to relax, and she started to scrub down along my thigh. "Anyway, I was going to say, Emerald's the whole reason I even started this project. You might not

believe it, but I used to be a shy, lonely little filly.”

Starlight snorted softly. “Yeah, that’s kinda hard to believe.”

“But it’s true,” Dazzle said, working her hooves along my leg; my tail flicked anxiously when her hoof rubbed along the inside of my thigh, but she didn’t seem to notice. “Shy and quiet, no friends, no family, and the worst possible luck when it came to love. I was a sad, miserable little filly. Anyway, I came to Emerald, hoping to get some of those porno mags you were asking about, so I could at least get a look at some pretty mares I could pretend might like me.”

She finished with one hind-leg, repositioning to sit alongside the other. I twitched a little when her hoof rubbed along the top of my inner thigh once more. “Anyway, I don’t think she was comfy with the idea of digging up some porn to sell to me, seeing as I was still a bit on the young side. I think she was overreacting a bit, but it turned out well enough. She got some trader to bring some fashion mags, and convinced me to take them instead. I figured, sure, why not? It’s still a bunch of pretty mares to look at. Except they also had some nice tips on how to get looking that pretty. So I started trying some of them. And you know what? I *liked* it. Pretty soon, I’ve got my cutie mark, I’m strutting around feeling all pretty and happy, all of it.”

I gave a dry snicker. “So you’re saying we can blame Emerald for all this.”

Dazzle let out a loud laugh. “Hah! Yeah, I guess that’s one way of putting it! She seemed pretty happy with how things turned out, for sure.”

Her hooves slipped away from my ankles, then patted me on the flank. “Okay, let’s get you back in the shower. ‘Scuse us, Star.”

Starlight stepped out of the water, and I stepped in. Dazzle grabbed the second shower head and had me close my eyes before quickly working a bit more shampoo into the coat of my face, scrubbing, and rinsing it out again. Then she went to work washing out the rest of my coat, her hooves once again running all over my body as the water coursed over me. I was keenly aware of her body right up close to mine, just as soaking wet as I was under the shower’s stream.

I tensed up once again as she leaned in, her hooves once again scrubbing down my belly and between my legs, this time accompanied by the spray of water she angled in there. Once again, she kept the attention purely

professional, scrubbing and rinsing without any special attention given, but she hardly needed to; it's still a very delicate and sensitive area of the body to have another pony rubbing all over.

It was thankfully brief, and she moved on to scrubbing along my legs. It was then that I finally noticed that Starlight was very intently staring at a blank wall, away from us.

Dazzle's hoof patted my flank again. "You go ahead and enjoy the shower, relax some." Then she turned and stepped up to Starlight. "Okay, little Star. Your turn."

She repeated the process with Starlight, her hooves scrubbing all over. I stayed under the stream of water, but my attention remained entirely focused on Dazzle. She practically hovered over Starlight, standing so close that they had to be brushing against each other, while her hooves explored all over Starlight's body. The sultry look on Dazzle's face didn't help matters any, nor did the way she swayed her hips, or the way her tail was hiked just a little too high.

Dazzle gave the same warning she had given me. I could hear the sudden intake of breath from Starlight even over the shower, her cheeks flushing with color. Dazzle's expression looked just a hair too smug for my liking, but she didn't do anything explicit that I could have clearly objected to.

And then she was moving on, her hooves moving to Starlight's flank, while Starlight tucked her tail between her legs.

"So," Dazzle said in a pleasant, conversational tone. "Are you two a couple?"

"No," Starlight huffed, then took a deep, calming breath. "I told you, I'm not into mares."

"Mmm-hmm," Dazzle said, brushing Starlight's tail out of the way to scrub down along her leg. Then she leaned in to speak almost conspiratorially, a motion which brought her head far too close to Starlight's hips for my comfort. "I just couldn't help noticing that Whisper is watching us like a jealous lover."

Starlight glanced my way, while I frowned at Dazzle, which probably didn't help that impression any.

"We're not lovers," I said, firm and clear.

Dazzle chuckled softly as she continued scrubbing down Starlight's legs.

“Hey, a couple, ‘like sisters’, comrades in arms, unrequited lovers...” Her smile developed a hint of a smirk at that last one. “Whatever it is, you’re protective of her. I get it. And you don’t have to worry. I might be a shameless tease, but I’m not the type to take things too far.” She cast a sly smile my way. “*Especially* not with a couple of dangerous mares like you.”

“Dangerous?” Starlight asked, glancing back.

“Mmm-hmm!” Dazzle hummed, the patted her on the flank. “Shower time.”

We swapped places, the conversation briefly on hold until Dazzle finished cleaning over Starlight’s face. When she finished, Starlight opened her eyes to find Dazzle’s face right in front of hers, the water flowing over her.

“I saw that shot you popped off last time, when you were leaving town,” Dazzle said, her voice soft in what I could only describe as ‘seductive’; I realized I was glaring again. “You tagged a tree from across the valley. Must have been close to a mile, hmm?”

Starlight was blushing, her ears folding back. “Yeah. Maybe.”

Dazzle chuckled softly, slipping off to the side to start scrubbing again, and Starlight huffed out a near-silent sigh of relief.

“Hell of a shot,” Dazzle said. “I mean, sure, I could have hit that tree too, but that’s because I’ve got a giant fuck-off cannon that fires half a dozen bolts per second of exploding magical fire. Give me a good long burst, sure, I’d hit that tree. I’d just blow up half the hillside in the process. But you?” She nudged Starlight’s side playfully. “Heck, I’m betting you could tag a raider right in the head at that range and not even singe the mane of the pretty mare standing next to him.”

Starlight was blushing again, though she replied with a modest, “Maybe.”

Dazzle chuckled, then leaned over Starlight’s back to look at me. “And then there’s you. Hoo, if even half the stories about you are true, you are one mare I do *not* want to piss off.”

I had to fight against the tinge of adrenaline building in my gut to keep my expression neutral, my eyes fixed on her. “What sort of stories did you hear?”

Dazzle grinned at me. “Something about you leveling three city blocks and flying around on a minigun, all while taking out forty or fifty heavily-

armed mercenaries.” She snickered a little, still eying me as she continued scrubbing. “Granted, most of this came from the unreliable lips of a very heavily drugged-out pony, but it got me curious just how much of that was true.”

I made a mental note to discuss information security with Sickle, as soon as I figured out how to do so without being maimed in the process. “There may have been some exaggeration involved.”

“Oh, I figured,” Dazzle said, still scrubbing at Starlight’s side. “Like what?”

“There weren’t forty or fifty mercenaries. It was about half that, thirty at the absolute most.” I caught the rise of her eyebrow and quickly added, “And it wasn’t all me! Dusty took out...” I thought back, tallying what I had seen. “...at least two? Oh! And the first four were all Dusty and Sickle.”

“Ohhh,” Dazzle said with an exaggerated nod of her head. “So you only took out *all but six* of the thirty mercenaries yourself.”

“At least six,” I said, my voice gone quiet. “They might have gotten more.”

“I don’t think we did,” Starlight said. I shot her a glance, but her eyes were closed.

I looked away again, grumbling. “It wasn’t nearly as impressive as it sounds.”

“Uh-huh,” Dazzle said.

“And it was three buildings, not three blocks, and one was really small. Maybe two and a half, the motel was partially collapsed already. Also, most of the supermarket is still there.” I just kept digging the hole deeper. “...And there was a minigun involved, but I most certainly wasn’t ‘flying around’ on it. I just kinda held down the trigger until it stopped...”

Dazzle was staring at me over Starlight’s back. There were a few seconds where the only sound was the water falling on them and the tile below. Then Dazzle laughed, resting a hoof on Starlight’s back. “Holy crap, it’s all true. Hah! And here I thought she was pulling my leg.” She resumed scrubbing, leaning in close to Starlight. “Sorry, little Star. I think I might be falling for your friend.”

While Starlight gave a surprised and concerned look her way, I gave a flat glare. Dazzle ignored both of our reaction, simply snickering as she continued to scrub.

The rest of the scrubbing went without incident, save for Starlight's sharp intake of breath when Dazzle scrubbed between her legs again. A couple minutes later, Dazzle sat back to look between us. "So, that's coats done. Now for the manes and tails."

That went quicker, despite Dazzle's pausing to admire my mane and tail while sitting right alongside me. And then there was the moment she started working the shampoo into the base of my tail, the underside of which was remarkably sensitive to having hooves pressing and rubbing all along it. I tensed up at her touch, but moments later she was working her way down my tail, and I slowly relaxed.

It went much quicker with Starlight, given the relative lengths of our manes and tails. She also gave a jerk and a sharp inhale of breath when Dazzle's hoof slipped under her tail. My jaw tightened, but Dazzle was already speaking. "Sorry, Star, got to get this worked right into the base of the tail for it to do good."

Starlight grunted out something quiet in reply and remained perfectly still as Dazzle worked her way down the short tail.

With that, we were done.

And then we got to do the whole process over again with conditioner.

Another go-around, with Dazzle's wet body hovering close beside us in the comforting flow of warm water, her hooves roving over every single inch of our bodies. By the end, Starlight's face seemed to be locked in 'permanent blush' mode, and she gave several deep huffs to calm her breathing. As for myself, I had to work at keeping a neutral expression, or at most, showing only a tiny bit of the irritation I felt. Dazzle didn't have to do anything overt to make the whole scene exceptionally sensual, and I'm sure she knew it.

After what felt like an eternity, the shower was finally over. Dazzle turned off the water, which was starting to lose its warmth, and fetched three matching sets of towels. She insisted on helping us dry off, of course. Yet another excuse to rub her hooves all over Starlight and myself, though the towels at least gave some sense of a barrier.

Not that it helped too much when she got to drying certain parts.

Once the two of us were merely damp rather than soaking wet, she dried herself. Neither of us offered to help. In fact, Starlight was fixated on the wall once again, while Dazzle happily swayed her hips and hummed as she

worked.

When she had finished, she tossed the towel aside with a playful flourish. “Now then, time for some trimming and grooming. Follow me!”

She led us out, strutting the whole way. Starlight spent the whole time staring down at her own hooves.

Our destination was a spare room beside the bathroom, with a couple of plush chairs, a pair of stools, and a few cabinets. Dazzle fetched a toolbox filled with scissors, files, brushes, and other grooming implements. “So, trimming. Either of you have any preferences? Any cute new mane or tail styles you’d like to try out? I could trim back your coat a bit if it’s been a bit too thick and warm, or even to adjust your contours.”

Starlight eventually settled on trimming her mane and tail just a little, since she thought it was growing out a little long, while I passed on the offer.

“Normally I’d insist on at least trimming out any split ends,” Dazzle said with a playful smile, and ran a hoof along my mane. “But I think I’d have a hard time finding any.”

Then there was the grooming. Dazzle spent a good amount of time cooing over my mane and tail some more, even pausing at one point to simply run her hooves through my mane and admire how it fell across my shoulders. Grooming Starlight’s was quite brief by comparison, as it only took a couple passes of the brush to get the hairs in order, in what Dazzle described as, “Neat and playfully tousled.”

Grooming our coats seemed like another good excuse to rub all over us, though this time with a brush between her hoof and our body. At least she refrained from brushing over the most sensitive areas, as I’m sure even she recognized that such a harsh sensation would be counterproductive. I still kept a careful eye on her as she brushed the inside of Starlight’s thighs.

With that out of the way, she had us sit back in the more comfortable plush chairs, and started polishing our hooves. “You’ll want to keep up on hoof care,” she said as she filed one of Starlight’s hind hooves. “They’re a bit of a mess. Lots of digging through old ruins without any filing, I’m guessing?”

Starlight looked away, ears pinning back. “I try to take care of them.”

“Well, you avoided any nasty cracks or the like, so I suppose you’ve done better than a lot of ponies.” Dazzle continued filing, slowly smoothing out

the surface. "Just a little bit of care and the occasional polish should keep them in good shape.

When it was my turn, the tune was completely different. "Now your hooves, they are immaculate. I'd almost think you didn't use them at all, if I didn't know better. All they need is a little polish to be perfect!"

She had a few bottles of polish, and after joking around about a couple different colors, she gave our hooves a thin coating of a clear polish.

Starlight spent a few moments looking at her hooves with a mixture of uncertainty and admiration. I distantly noted that my own hooves were as smooth and glossy as my shell, something I had always liked about hoofcures back in the old Equestria, but I pushed that thought to the back of my mind.

While Starlight admired her hooves, Dazzle moved on to her horn. As Starlight hadn't the slightest clue about horn fashion, they eventually settled on simply smoothing the surface nice and even, rather than getting fancy about tip and groove shape.

Once the hoof polish had dried, Dazzle brought in a pair of shallow bins filled with heated water. She had us soak our hooves for a couple minutes, then led us through the back door of the room.

That led us into her makeshift sauna. It was a cramped space, with just enough room for the ring of three small single-pony benches and the pile of large rocks in the center, which radiated a powerful heat throughout the room. I could hear the generator a little more clearly, no doubt powering whatever it was that heated those rocks.

"Take a seat and relax," Dazzle said with a smile. "We'll do a few rounds here, about fifteen minutes each. If you start feeling dizzy or uncomfortable, come on out and cool down. There's some bottles of water under the bench to pour over the stones if it's too dry for you, and I'll have cold ones outside for you. Anything else I can get for you while you're here?"

She said that last bit with a subtle sway of her hips that I'm sure was supposed to be suggestive. "We're good," I said.

"Okay, then!" she said, turning around to step out. It made for an even more suggestive pose as she turned to speak over her shoulder. "See you in fifteen!"

The door shut, leaving us alone for the moment.

While I settled down on one bench, Starlight flopped down on the next,

groaning softly.

“Feeling relaxed yet?” I asked, dryly.

“More like exhausted,” Starlight replied, slowly rolling over onto her back. Once there, she lifted a hoof again, looking at the fine polish. “I didn’t expect it to be quite so... much.”

“We can always leave.”

She sighed, lowering her hoof. “...Nah. Might as well finish this. I mean, we’re almost done, right?”

“There’s still the massage. Another chance for Dazzle to run her hooves all over you.”

Starlight grimaced. After a couple seconds of silence, she flipped over to lie on her belly. “Well she better not try to massage... *there*, or I *will* kick her.”

I gave an unamused snicker. “Me too.”

“Good,” she said, chuckling a little as she fidgeted around a bit to get comfy. After she finally settled into place, she laid down her head, groaning softly. “It’s way too hot in here.”

“I’m afraid that’s the point of a sauna,” I said, closing my eyes as I relaxed. “I think the old saunas were a little hotter than this, even.”

Starlight merely grunted in reply, already breathing a bit more heavily.

It seemed like hardly any time had passed before Dazzle was back. “Okay, that should be good enough for this round,” she said as she stepped through the doorway. “Let’s get you some air and cooled down, hmm?”

She led us back to the shower and turned it on, and we both crowded under the welcome flow of chilly water. Starlight gasped out at first, but was soon practically dancing around as she turned this way and that beside me, eyes closed and repeatedly bumping into me as she enjoyed the feeling of the cool water running over her. As nice as it was, though, I couldn’t help but note that Dazzle was standing nearby, watching the pair of us with interest.

Once the feel of the water had turned from “refreshingly cool” to “rather chilly”, Dazzle turned off the water. She fetched the bins, which had been refilled with warm water, and had us stand in them as she quickly towed away most of the water. At least it was brief. Starlight hardly even reacted to the attention, her eyes closed throughout, merely giving a faint huff and lifting a hind-leg just a hair to let Dazzle finish a little quicker.

Then it was back into the sauna.

We repeated the cycle two more times. By the end of the third, I was feeling almost dead on my hooves, with my body so relaxed that I felt like I might collapse if I didn't focus on staying upright. Starlight looked to be in the same condition, her head hanging low and eyes closed.

It was in that state that Dazzle led us out and into another room. "Hop on up," Dazzle said to us with a smile.

I was feeling so lethargic that it was only then that I noticed the giant bed, large enough for one of the princesses, and probably a couple suitors as well. "...Why are we in your bedroom?"

Starlight stopped and looked down, having already placed her forehooves on the bed before realizing where we were.

Dazzle's smile grew. "Because I haven't been able to scrounge up any massage tables yet, and this is more comfortable than the floor." When I continued to frown, she rolled her eyes. "No funny business, I know. I'm just working with what I've got, here."

Starlight had finished climbing up and lying down, so I relented. "Fine," I said, stepping up to lie beside her. I sank into the mattress, which was more worn-out than soft, but otherwise in remarkably good condition given its age.

"Just relax," Dazzle said as she climbed onto the bed beside me, her hooves moving to my shoulders. She pressed and rubbed, squishing the flaccid flesh against the hard, interlinking structure of bones beneath in a way that was simultaneously disconcerting and strangely soothing.

She had to pause to remind me to relax several times as her hooves worked over my body. I closed my eyes, and tried my best to do so, which was usually followed by her asking me to relax once more. It became particularly difficult when her hooves made their way over my hips, massaging my rump. She had just moved her hooves to massage down my legs, with one rubbing firmly over my inner thigh, when she snickered softly. "You must be really enjoying this to have your tail lifted *that* high."

My eyes snapped open, my tail jerking down again. "That is a natural reflexive reaction to the manual stimulation of an erogenous zone," I said, remaining as still as possible. "It doesn't mean anything more significant than that."

"Mmm." She continued to work her way along my leg. "So I know little

Star's off-limits. What about you?"

I grumbled, closing my eyes again. "It's not going to happen."

"Aww," she said in a mock-hurt tone. "I suppose you're not into mares either, hmm?"

"Mares are fine. It's still not going to happen."

"Can I ask why?"

I fought back the urge to snap at her, and instead kept my voice calm and level. "Because you hardly know us, yet you immediately slept with Sickle, relentlessly pursued Starlight, and then turned to me when that didn't work. None of that would have been a big deal, except you pressured Starlight into coming here just so you could rub your hooves all over her, all with the hopes that you'd get her so worked up that she'd give in and have sex with you, against her better judgment and despite her repeated rejections. You're trying to *manipulate* her into having sex rather than *convincing* her, and I don't appreciate anypony trying to manipulate my friends."

And no, that's not hypocritical, except in the most casual reading of that statement.

Dazzle's hooves froze for an instant, then resumed their work, a little slower and softer. "...Yeah," Dazzle said, her voice quiet and low. "Sorry."

I have to admit, not arguing it might have bumped her up a step in my opinion. Not that I was going to let her off entirely easy for a momentary change of heart. "I'm not the only one you need to apologize to."

"Sorry," she repeated, and I cracked an eye open to see Starlight's eyes were barely open, looking a little thoughtful and a little concerned, but mostly looking as if she were about to drift off to sleep.

Dazzle sighed as she continued her massage, moving to the other leg. "The thing is, I kind of have to move fast. I love this town, but ponies only come here for some quick trade or a new weapon. I get a day or two to make some sort of impression, then they're gone again. It's either come on strong, or don't even get noticed."

I frowned a little at the sudden change in tone, mentally chewing that over as she worked down my leg. After the experience so far, I was sorely tempted to just tell her off, but I didn't. Maybe the massage was just that relaxing. "What is it you're looking for, exactly?"

Her hooves paused without answering, so I clarified my question. "Are

you looking for casual sex? A long-term relationship? Something in between?"

She gave a soft snort of amusement. "Hell, I'd settle for some casual sex every now and then," she said, resuming the massage. "But something more would be... nice. Very nice."

"Then a little advice: manipulation and tricks might get you something short-term, but it's very likely to be destructive to the kind of trust you'll need for anything longer. Pressuring somepony into something they don't want to do is more likely to just hurt them." My eye opened again, head lifting just enough to look back over my shoulder. "And if there's one thing I like less than somepony manipulating my friends, it's somepony *hurting* them."

She looked down at her work, not meeting my eyes.

My point made, I laid my head down and closed my eyes again. "If you want something longer, put some effort into knowing a pony first. Know what they like, and give them a reason to like you. With the effort you've put into your appearance, I'm sure you can appreciate that. And if you absolutely have to go for casual sex, at least stick to flirting to seduce a pony, instead of pressuring them. You're less likely to make them regret the time spent with you.

"And yes, it'll take some time and effort, but it sounds like Emerald has made quite a few friends among visitors. There must be a fair number who stop in regularly. There must also be a few ponies who stay longer than just a day. We're planning to be here a whole week, for that matter."

"Easier said than done," she said, finishing with my ankle. I felt the bed shift as she sat back. "Wish I'd known you were in town longer. I don't suppose you're saying that because I still have a shot, are you?"

I gave a soft snort. "I won't lie; you made a horrible first impression, and I'll remember it. I'll probably be suspicious of anything you do around Starlight or myself, but I know better than most that first impressions can be inaccurate. I don't foresee anything working out between us, for reasons you wouldn't even imagine, but I won't stop you from trying. Maybe the whole Kindness and Generosity thing is rubbing off a bit."

Or maybe I just don't like to burn bridges when I don't have to, even when the bridge is already soaked in oil and I have magical fire just a single

thought away.

She huffed out a quiet chuckle. “Shit. Emerald really was right about you. You really are one of the good ones. Most ponies probably would have just stormed off instead of giving me pointers and another chance.”

I shrugged. “I try.”

“More than most ponies do,” Dazzle said. The bed shifted again as she moved up between Starlight and myself. “Question is, how good *are* you? You’re not going to shoot me if I try flirting with you, are you?”

“Seems like a bit of an over-reaction. Maybe a swift buck if you’re planting hooves where they don’t belong.”

“Noted,” she said, with a soft chuckle. A bit of humor was returning to her voice. “So, should I take that to mean you won’t shoot me if I flirt with little Star, here?”

“Now that’s entirely up to her, isn’t it? Starlight can take care of herself.” I gave a hint of a smile. “So not unless she asks me to.”

“Tempting,” Starlight murmured.

“Aw, don’t be like that,” Dazzle said, and I could practically hear the smile in her voice. “You haven’t even experienced one of my massages, yet.”

Starlight snorted faintly, while the bed shifted with Dazzle’s movements. She settled in a moment later, followed by the slow, rhythmic motions of the massage. Starlight grunted faintly with the first one. Then she groaned, quietly at first, and growing in volume as the massage continued, with the occasional murmur of what might have been obscenities behind them.

While I was fairly sure Dazzle wouldn’t have tried something too direct immediately after the exchange we just had, I still cracked open an eye to look. Sure enough, Starlight was sprawled out, groaning happily as Dazzle’s hooves massaged down her back. Dazzle’s smile grew as she worked her way down, and was just starting to massage Starlight’s rump when she paused. “You know, it’s really hard to resist teasing you when you’re moaning into my bedding with your tail up in the air.”

Said tail immediately snapped down, and Starlight’s face flushed again. “Well you just keep on resisting,” she said, sounding a bit short of breath. “It’s not going to work, anyway.”

“Mmm,” was all Dazzle said in reply, though she resumed her massage. Starlight’s blush grew as the hooves worked down over her rear and thighs,

her breathing growing just a bit faster in response to the physical stimulation.

A minute later, we were done. Dazzle brought out the brushes again, giving us one final brush down. I felt so relaxed and tired that I might have fallen asleep, except for the desire to keep an eye on Dazzle.

When that was done, she sat back, smiling. "Well, as much as I'd love to have a pair of beautiful mares spending the night in my bed, I'm sure you've got your own beds to get to."

Starlight made some mumbled, wordless reply before pushing herself up. "Yeah, we should go," she said, still sounding a bit short of breath.

"Well, come on," Dazzle said, smiling. "I'll lead you out."

There was less of a strut to Dazzle's walk as she led us back to our possessions. Starlight had just locked her PipBuck back in place on her leg when her ears shot up. "How is it that late already?"

"Time flies when you're having fun?" Dazzle said, leaning against the doorframe. "Beauty takes time."

"Did I fall asleep in there or something?" Starlight shook her head, slipping on her bags. "I didn't think it was that long."

Sure enough, when Dazzle led us to the front door, the sky was rapidly darkening with the onset of night. She lingered at the door for a minute as we walked away, watching us go.

"Oof," Starlight said, once we had gone far enough to speak freely. "So that was a little... intense."

"I'm not normally the type to say 'I told you so'..."

"Yeah, yeah," Starlight said with a weak chuckle. "Still, it was nice. I don't think I've felt this good in... ever." She smiled, though I caught the hint of a shiver go through her. Arousal has a way of leading ponies into situations they would normally avoid, and I was pretty sure Dazzle knew it.

"She was probably counting on that."

"Yeah, probably," Starlight said, casting a glance over her shoulder, and shivered again. "It still ain't happening."

Given her reaction, I had to suspect it might have, had I not been there. I don't mean to sound like I'm disrespecting Starlight, or that I think she can't stand up for herself. It's simply that I know quite well how even a strong-willed pony can be manipulated.

Emerald was reading an old house-care magazine when we returned,

and we exchanged brief pleasantries before heading up to our suite. The massage had loosened up things in that strange way they did for ponies and other weird endoskeletal creatures, making my body feel so wonderfully relaxed, but also strangely heavy and even more alien than usual.

So I just went straight to bed, dropping my saddlebags and holster beside the bed, with hardly even a thought towards how the latter had become part of my “walking around town” apparel. Then I slipped into bed. Starlight followed moments later. I only vaguely remember her fidgeting about to get comfortable before I drifted off to sleep.



I woke to find that I was oddly chilly. Not outright cold, *per se*, but certainly cooler than I would have preferred. The reason, I discovered on opening my bleary eyes, was that I had only a small corner of the blanket draped across my side. Turning my head further, I found where the rest had gone; Starlight was tangled up in the blanket, most of which had ended up in a bundle with her legs wrapped around it.

I gave my corner of the blanket a light tug, but she simply pulled the blankets in tighter, murmuring faintly. I released, and the corner slowly slid from my side.

Sighing, I took that as a sign to get up. I gave a long, slow stretch—my body really did feel much better—before sliding out of bed.

The motion finally woke Starlight, who groaned softly into the blankets, moving around a bit before lifting her head and looking over her shoulder. Then she made a sound that roughly approximated, “Good morning.”

“Good morning,” I echoed back, much more clearly. “Should I be getting us a second blanket?”

She blinked a couple times before fully processing what I had asked. Then a hint of a blush touched her cheeks, and she kicked her legs, quickly disentangling herself and spreading out the blanket again. “Sorry. I, uh... didn’t sleep very well last night.”

“Maybe you should try getting some more sleep,” I said. “We don’t have anything going on, today.”

She hesitated for a moment, then grunted and kicked off the blankets. “No, I should get up,” she said, quickly rolling off the edge of the bed and

onto her hooves. "I mean, I don't want to spend all day in bed, after all." She stood stiffly, her expression a little too tight.

I cocked an eyebrow. "Are you bothered about how last night went?"

"What? No!" she quickly replied. "Dazzle will have to work a lot harder to bother me."

I blinked, then opened my mouth to speak again, but she cut me off. "We should get breakfast! I'm hungry."

She turned and walked briskly to the door, and I couldn't help but note that she was keeping her tail tucked low between her legs. Not bothered, indeed.

Dusty looked up from a book as we entered, and smiled. "Morning." He gestured with a hoof to the table, where an ancient coffee pot sat beside a plate with a few carrots and apples. "Emerald made coffee and insisted on sharing. Should still be hot."

Starlight descended on the food with a passion, while I took a somewhat more leisurely pace. I even had some of the coffee; I don't normally care for the taste, but a bit of caffeine was sounding like a good idea.

As I sat back with a carrot and a well-worn mug of lukewarm coffee, I looked down at the book Dusty held. "What's that?"

"Some war story Emerald rented to me for a cap," he replied. "A special team goes into the Zebra lands to assassinate their Caesar and end the war."

I gave a dry chuckle. "So it's fiction, I see. Is it any good?"

"It's entertaining enough," Dusty said. "Just as long as I overlook how the combat is basically nonsense."

I smiled. "Speaking of which, are you still willing to go shooting today?"

He nodded. "Sure. Just say when."

I tipped back the cup, draining it dry. "How about now?"

He shrugged. "Let me get to the end of the chapter, then sure."

Starlight looked up from the apple she was halfway through. "Hehh, hoo—" She paused, swallowed an overly large bite, and tried again. "Hey, you mind if I tag along?"

"It's not like you need my permission to use Arclight's range," Dusty said with a chuckle. "But sure, might as well make it a party."

We set out shortly, after we had gathered a small collection of weapons, ammunition, and equipment. Dusty purchased a set of earplugs for both

Starlight and myself, and then led us back to our wagon.

When we arrived, we found Sickle, her shoulders wedged under the wagon as she did push-ups, lifting the whole vehicle, cargo and all, with each repetition.

Starlight was, naturally, the first to speak upon seeing the odd scene. “Sickle, what the hell are you doing?”

Sickle paused, her chin nearly touching the ground. “The fuck does it look like I’m doing?”

“Uhhh...”

Sickle blinked. “...I’m exercising.” She pushed herself up again, the contents of the wagon rattling. “Ain’t been going around in my armor and hauling shit all the time. Got to do something to keep in shape.” She sneered a bit as she lowered and pushed herself up again. “What, you think I got this big lying around and fucking all the time?”

Starlight frowned. “I just thought it was the Buck.”

“Eh, sure, that helps,” Sickle said with a shrug that shook the wagon.

Dusty stepped up beside the wagon. “Think you could stop for a second? We need to get some stuff.”

She didn’t stop. “So get the stuff. Ain’t like I can’t lift your ass, too.”

Dusty sighed, then grabbed the edge of the wagon and hauled himself up. The extra weight seemed to mean nothing to Sickle.

He balanced atop the wagon with remarkable ease as he dug through the equipment within, and eventually hopped down with three of the suppressors he had acquired in the hive. Two went into his bags, while the last, one of the two smaller ones, he held out to me.

I took it, though I gave him a questioning look. “You know I don’t have subsonic ammunition for my rifle, right?”

“They’re still useful, for lots of reasons” he said, closing the flap of his bag and motioning for us to follow. “But today, the only reason that matters is that it’s easier on the ears.”

We made our way to the range, and after Dusty and I fixed the suppressors to our rifles, started shooting.

Starlight went at it with a gusto, popping pieces of scrap, old cans, and broken bottles with her weapons. She even spent a while with both weapons out, giggling as she used her targeting spell to employ them si-

multaneously against multiple targets. Dusty was a good deal slower and more methodical, first spending some time carefully tuning the pair of rifles he had brought—the older, heavier rifle, and an assault rifle like my own—before going for a more combat-style shoot, where he rapidly engaged multiple targets, placing two rounds on-target before switching to the next. Each shot still produced the sharp crack of the bullet flying downrange, but between the earplugs and the suppressor, even his heavy rifle had lost its ear-pounding bark.

As for myself? Well, I mostly missed a lot. After my third shot missed a stationary bottle halfway across the small field, I looked over to Dusty. “Think you could give me some pointers, here? I feel like I’m doing something wrong.”

“We’re not teaching today,” he said, peering down his sights as he made a tiny adjustment. “This is just for fun.”

“It’d be a lot more fun if I could hit anything,” I said, laying the bitterness on a bit thick. “I’m not even sure if the sights on this thing are accurate.”

He considered that for a moment before offering to give my weapon a try. I hoofed it over, and he took the bit. “Hmm,” he said, staring down the sights for a moment. “Well, you’ve got the sights set to three hundred yards and you’re shooting about fifty, but that should only put you a couple inches high. Firing.”

A moment later, the rifle cracked, and the bottle went tumbling, the upper half of it vanishing in a burst of glass shards.

“Yeah, a couple inches at most,” Dusty said, then shifted his aim. He fired another three times, kicking up a thin cloud of dirt behind a board sticking out of the ground. Setting my rifle down, he lifted his binoculars to look closer at his work. “Yep. Sights are good. Holds a decent pattern, too.”

He picked up my rifle again and passed it back to me. “Just take your time. If you want to get used to aiming it, shoot one of those boards out there. Pick a clear mark to aim at, fire a few rounds, then glass it to see where they land.”

“Okay,” I said, taking the bit in my mouth and squeezing the stock against my shoulders. I leaned in, peering through the rear sight to line up the front, then lined the front sight up on the same mark he had been shooting. I tongued the trigger, and the rifle made its strangely muted clack-crack as

a puff of dirt boiled up from behind the board.

"A couple more," Dusty said, looking through his binoculars. I fired twice more, taking my time. When I had finished, he nodded. "Not bad."

I grabbed my binoculars and peered through them. While I could see some of the holes unaided, it gave me a much better picture of my accuracy which, as expected, was not terribly good. A small X was painted in near the middle of the board. A couple inches above that was a jagged and uneven hole that I could see easily without the binoculars, but which I could now see were likely the result of Dusty's three rounds striking at nearly the same point. A couple smaller holes were scattered loosely above that, just a couple inches higher, and a third hole pierced the board a good six inches off to the side.

I lowered my binoculars. "Not bad? I'd hate to see what you *would* count as bad."

"Oh, we've got some work ahead of us," Dusty said, the corner of his mouth inching upward. "But you put every round on the board, almost held a pattern, and didn't shoot yourself, so you're already above average for a beginner. Plus you keep your eyes open when you shoot."

I quirked an eyebrow questioningly at him, but he merely gestured out toward the field again. "Enough lessons for now. Go on." He flashed a smile and turned back to his own weapons.

I settled into shooting, firing a few rounds before looking through my binoculars to get a good idea of where I was hitting. Slowly, the holes drifted more reliably together. When I started on the second magazine, I even adjusted the range on my sights. When I found that they only went down to one hundred yards, I switched to shooting the distant line of targets, set at about that distance.

My last ten rounds all landed in a pattern just about the size of my head, with a single stray off to the side. I smiled as I scoped it out, a small bit of pride building within me; I was making progress.

I'd never really understood why ponies might find firing off guns at inanimate objects for no discernible purpose to be an engaging form of entertainment, yet there I was.

Starlight was giddy the whole way back to the inn, thoroughly enthused by the experience with her targeting spell, and retelling several of the fancier

tricks as if we hadn't been there to see them. Dusty remained relatively quiet, though he wore a faint smile. It further amused me to reflect on that, and just how much the social dynamic had changed between those two. I might even go so far as to call them friends.

Emerald was distracted by a merchant who had just arrived in town, so we simply waved and headed up to our room.

As we climbed the stairs, Dusty asked us, "What are you planning to do with the rest of the day?"

While Starlight shrugged, I replied, "I think I'll sit down with my mother's data-store and see if I can recover anything. I should have the tools for it, now."

Dusty's smile slipped. "I'm not sure if you're getting the idea of relaxing and having fun."

"What?" I said, frowning at him. "Working with computers is fun."

It would also be a productive use of my time, but I figured that reasoning wouldn't carry much weight at the moment.

"If you say so," he said, his tone full of doubt. "Just remember, we're supposed to be relaxing."

"I'm going to be kicked back in bed, playing with a digital puzzle," I said, smiling again to sell the story. "It'll be plenty relaxing."

He huffed out faint chuckle, but didn't object.

So when I got back to my room, I pulled out one of the new terminals from the hive and its collection of software tools, and the data-store my queen had left behind. I set them on the bed, lying out as I hooked things up.

Starlight came in, as well. "I think I'll kick back and read some," she said, lifting her PipBuck. "Maybe listen to some music. You don't mind, do you?"

"Of course not," I said, connecting the old data-store. A data-backup tool made copying over the corrupted contents quick and easy.

Starlight laid out on the end of the bed. "That was fun," she said, flashing a smile my way. "Looked like you were enjoying it, too."

I nodded. "I feel a little less useless, too," I said. The transfer completed in only a few seconds; there wasn't much there.

"Hey, you're certainly not useless." She laughed as she pulled out a set of earbuds. "Hell, you kicked some serious flank in Mareford."

“Sneaky I can do.” The size of the data-store’s contents might have been a huge number of text files, or perhaps a single audio log. I was hoping for the latter, and with the context of why the device had been left behind, it seemed the likely answer.

Starlight inserted one of the earbuds, then paused. “So, um... I was wondering something.”

“Yeah?” The data-recovery tool loaded, slowly displaying what it could make of the corrupted file structure.

“Well, you feed—” she paused, glancing toward the door, then spoke again in a quieter tone. “You feed on love. So, uh, does ‘making love’ actually, you know, *make love*?”

I blinked and looked up from my terminal. I was rather concerned about why she would ask a question like that, but my immediate response was, simply, “What?”

“It’s just that Dazzle seems to have an interest in you,” Starlight quickly explained, gesturing with one of her hooves in the general direction of the gate. “And I know you need love to survive, and have been pretty hungry at times, and... well, I know you were getting a bit angry with her, but then you let her off easy, and I was just wondering if that might, you know, be able to help you.”

I relaxed and chuckled. “Thank you for the concern, but you don’t have to worry. I’m getting enough from you and the others to keep myself healthy.”

“Oh, okay.” She nodded. “Good.”

“In any case, it doesn’t quite work that way. ‘Making love’ is just a euphemism. Sex doesn’t produce love.” I shrugged. “Not in itself, anyway. It can be a very useful tool for manipulating ponies, including in ways that could develop further affection, but I never had a use for that.”

She tilted her head ever so slightly. “Why’s that?”

“Because I don’t like manipulating ponies.” I smiled. “Sure, I’ll do it when it’s necessary, but remember, I was a love collector. I gathered food for the hive. Most of the ponies I interacted with were regular folks. I didn’t need to use sex or any other manipulation to build affection. I just made friends.” I paused, then chuckled softly. “It could possibly be useful to *Maintain* a relationship, though. Or further one.”

“Oh. Did you, uh... made use of that?”

I paused, considering her for a moment, but honesty still seemed the best policy. “There were a few times relationships developed to that point,” I said, though my ears drooped a bit as I said it. “I tried to avoid it, though. Ponies tend to associate intercourse with strong attachments, which I tried to avoid. I might be recalled or reassigned, and I didn’t want to hurt somepony by suddenly breaking off a relationship that they felt strongly about. It was easier if it never got to that point.”

Her ears perked up, curious. “Even if it would get you more love? I mean, it would, right?”

“Sure,” I said, nodding a little. “But I could get enough without it. It was better for everyone, that way.”

“But you still... *did* with some of them?”

“On occasion.”

She stared at me, expectantly. I held out for several seconds before giving in with a sigh.

“Well, there was Lucky. That was a mistake, for all the reasons I just gave. I thought he wouldn’t attribute too much significance to intimacy, but he did. I tried to ease things down, but it just soured things between us. On the other hoof, there was Tumbleweed. Heh, even he joked that he was the dumbest stallion in all of Appleloosa, but that wasn’t fair. He wasn’t book-smart at all, but he was clever enough, and probably the nicest and most genuine pony in that town. I... think he was the only one who really knew I could never be anything more than a good friend, but he was okay with that. Even after he married Mayflower, we remained close.

“And then there was Sweet Treat.” I smiled. “She was one of the most flirtatious and playful ponies in town, though much more selective than some ponies asserted. We were best friends, and had very similar outlooks on intimacy. There were no complications, there. She reminded me of Desire, which I think is what first caught my attention.”

“Because she reminded you of Desire?”

“Yeah,” I said, chuckling a little. “Desire was always the flirtatious one. Very friendly and playful. Think of Dazzle, only much more talented.”

Starlight grimaced. “Ugh. I hope she wasn’t *really* like Dazzle, because...”

"I only mean superficially," I said, smiling. "Dazzle is flirtatious, but she's a bit blunt about it. Desire, though? She was a natural at appealing to a pony's desires."

"So... she was good, huh?"

"Oh, yes," I said, nodding. "I didn't see her work out in the field, of course, but I saw plenty during training. She knew better than to pursue things too aggressively with someone she wanted to seduce, like Dazzle was doing. She could tease just enough to put you off-balance and get you excited, but could keep things subtle and slow enough that you'd feel comfortable with every single move she made. She'd make Dazzle's shower and massage look amateur."

"Huh." Starlight was staring off into space, and I caught her shifting her position slightly, her tail curling in close alongside her. It wasn't hard to see where the conversation was taking her mind, so I quickly moved on.

"I was always more like Shadow, though. Or Ripple. We were the quiet ones of the group. Subtle, I suppose. Shadow was much sneakier than me, though. I don't have a clue what they had her doing, but I'm sure she excelled at it."

Starlight's eyes refocused as she shifted her position again, taking advantage of the distraction to further change the subject. "So, did you have a lot of pony friends?"

"Yes," I said, and gave a little chuckle. "Enough that it was practically a full-time job to keep up with all of them."

She nodded slowly. "...How come you never talk about any of them?"

My smile slowly faded. The question hung in the air for several long seconds before I quietly replied.

"Just over a month ago, I helped throw Meadowlark's twenty-fifth birthday party. The week before that was a foal shower for Tumbleweed and Mayflower. Then there were the dinners with Legerdemane and Marblehoof, and my weekend vacation to Manhattan with Sweet Treat." I slowly shook my head. "Then I wake up here, and they've all been dead for two hundred years..."

Starlight's expression wilted. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," I said, then quickly added, "Thank you."

She looked down at her hooves, chewing on her lip.

After a moment of silence, I touched my portable terminal. "I should really get to work on this."

"Oh. Yeah. I guess so." She gave an awkward smile, and after a moment, turned back to her PipBuck, slipping an earbud into her ear.

I drew in a deep breath, sighed, and returned to my work.

The copied contents still sat there, unreadable. The data-recovery tool was unable to make heads or tails of the file or files.

That didn't surprise me. Whatever was there was almost certainly encrypted, which would complicate data retrieval. The plus side was that the encryption was almost certainly one of the more commonly known methods the hive used, to ensure we could reveal her message.

I spent a while messing with the various software tools in an attempt to find an easy solution, but none of them were able to produce anything significant, except to finally single out the actual data from the damaged spell matrix that contained it. A quickly written script iterated through various ciphers and keys, outputting a new file for each one in the hopes that one of them would decode into a meaningful file.

Slowly, meaningless jumbles of random values filled the output directory.

And then one of the files resolved as a valid audio file.

I stared, my ears standing on alert as a hint of adrenaline burned in my gut. Starlight noticed my reaction, removing one of her earbuds and looking at me with a concerned expression.

I took a slow breath. "I... think it might have worked."

Starlight's ears perked, and she sat up.

I stared down at the portable terminal, the audio file highlighted, waiting for me. I took a slow, deep breath, turned on the speakers at a low volume, and pressed play. The sound from the speaker was marred by the occasional bit of static or squelch of distortion, but none of that could hide the beautiful, melodious voice of Queen Ephema.

---

*Hello, my children.*

*I am sorry I can not be there for you. The chrysalis that had protected me has failed. I can only assume from the good condition of the others*

*that my body had put greater demands upon it, and that this has led to its failure. As I look at you all, sleeping peacefully, I at least can take some comfort that you are safe and healthy.*

*I cannot open the door. Even if I were able to override the lockdown, I could not. The terminal here tells me troubling things. I find it hard to believe that eighty years could have passed, all in a single, dreamless sleep. I never imagined this endeavor would have lasted this long, but it seems it must continue even longer. According to the terminal, the outside world is poison.*

*If I stay here, I will slowly starve, but if I open the door, we will all die. I can't do that. As your Queen, my greatest duty must be to the well-being of our hive, even if that means sacrificing my own life so that others may survive.*

*Please, do not mourn me. My choice, as ever, is made for the good of the hive. The hive needs you, now, more than it needs me.*

*As sad as I am to know I will never see you again, I can feel only pride as I look upon you now. Our home is gone, lost to the balefire that has consumed the world, but our hive is more than a hole in the ground. It lives on in you.*

*Gossamer. Trickle. Whisper. Slab. Bolt. Surge. Midnight. Aegis. Slip.*

*The task ahead of you is great, but I trust in you. You are all here because you are the greatest, the most capable that our hive has to offer. You will lead the hive into the future. For you, I leave all the love I still hold. Take it. Find your sisters. Ensure that our hive lives on.*

*I love you all. Goodbye.*

---

The recording clicked off, and I heaved a deep, shuddering breath. Tears were running down my cheek, but I found myself smiling.

Starlight scooted up close beside me, a foreleg slipping around my shoulders to give a gentle squeeze. As I reached out to tenderly brush a hoof along the portable terminal, she said, "She sounds nice."

My first attempt to speak made a sound halfway between a sob and a chuckle. My second attempt was a little more coherent. "She was. I was afraid I'd never get to hear her voice again."

"Yeah," Starlight said, softly. "It helps."

I leaned into her, and while I had to wipe the tears from my cheek, my smile grew a little more. "Yeah."

She gave another gentle squeeze. "You okay?"

I sniffled, but nodded. "Yes. This... this is good." I looked at the terminal for a moment. "...And I was right. I have a purpose."

"And we'll do everything we can to help you," Starlight said, offering a soft smile.

"Thank you," I said, my voice cracking.

"And, um... if you ever need to talk about any of this stuff, you know..."

I gave a weak chuckle. "I wouldn't even know where to start."

She thought for a moment. "Well... maybe tell me more about your sisters? Or your friends?"

I swallowed, hesitant, but nodded. "Okay."



We managed to talk about mostly nothing for the rest of the evening. Mostly, it was about the regular, day-to-day life in Appleloosa. To me, it was completely mundane; the simple job of keeping shipping records, the work involved in moving from my original apartment into a small house, and the myriad little stories of my interactions with the other ponies in the town.

Mundane to me, but practically alien to Starlight. She threw in her own contrasting stories, and while she and her mother had technically had a small house on the edge of a small village near the Dodge City ruins, they had really lived in the burned-out buildings and ancient facilities they scavenged, and the rolling hills and deserts they had hunted. While my life had been all about social interaction and paperwork, theirs had been a regular search for

survival.

Most of our conversation was spent at Pumpkin's place, enjoying a nice dinner, even though we had to speak quietly when discussing certain things.

Dazzle approached us at one point with a flirtatious greeting, but Starlight very politely informed her that we needed some privacy. To Dazzle's credit, she accepted it without any argument, and only a little hint of flirting when she promised to catch up with us later.

It was getting dark when we returned to our suite again. Sickle had returned, to Dusty's apparent dismay. He was sitting at the table, his half-finished book set before him. More than a dozen bottles of various types decorated the table, half of which were empty. Dusty himself was nursing a bottle of beer, while Sickle held a larger liquor bottle in her hooves. I hoped most of the empty bottles were from her.

"It's still a load of shit," Sickle grumbled to him before looking over at us and giving a sneer. "Hey, cunts. You want a drink?"

Dusty was rolling his eyes, half hidden as he took a tiny sip of his beer.

"Yeah, I'll pass," Starlight said, and I shook my head.

"You see?" Sickle said, looking at Dusty as she gestured our way with her bottle. "Everypony is a stuck-up, no-fun bitch in this town."

"So you've said," Dusty wearily said.

Sickle snorted and tilted back her bottle, taking several deep gulps from it, then lowering it again to stare at it. "Huh. This shit ain't half bad."

Starlight, unfortunately, took the bait. "What is it?"

"One of the bottles the green bitch sold me," Sickle said, looking over the label. "Something called port. It's weak, but kinda good. Like wine that ain't shit." She swung the bottle around, offering it to Starlight. "Try some."

"No thanks."

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Sickle growled, gesturing again with the bottle. "Stop being such a little chicken-shit and take a taste. Ain't like I'm asking you to chug the whole fucking thing."

Starlight glared back at her over the offered bottle before snatching it in her magic. "Fine," she shot back, and took a quick swig from the bottle. She lowered it again, opened her mouth to reply—and instead coughed, her eyes widening. She recovered quickly enough. "Urg. There. I tried it."

Sickle leaned over the table, crossing her forelegs. "Yeah? How is it?"

"It's okay," Starlight said, despite an expression of distaste.

"See?" Sickle said as she grabbed another bottle. "That didn't kill you, did it?"

Starlight snorted. "I prefer things to be a lot better than, 'it didn't kill me'." She held the bottle out to Sickle, but the other mare waved it off.

"Keep it, I've got another." She bit down on the cork and pulled it out, sending a splash of purple liquid over her snout and neck, then spitting the cork across the room.

"I don't want it," Starlight said, still holding it out.

"I don't care. Drink it, pour it out, shove it up your ass, whatever!" She licked the liquid from her lips before tilting back the new bottle, swallowing a couple times before lowering it again. "And seriously, lighten the fuck up and have some fun every now and then instead of obsessing over all your stupid shit. I mean, look at me! I don't give a shit, and I have more fun than all of you cunts combined. More than this whole fucking stuck-up bitch-ass town!"

Starlight frowned as she set the bottle on the table. "What the hell has you so worked up now, anyway?"

Dusty groaned, mirroring my own thoughts. I was going to nudge Starlight away from the table, but Sickle spoke first. "Worked up? Hah! Ain't that the fucking word for it. I spent the last two days trying to find any stallion worth a damn in this little shitstain of a town, but I couldn't find a single one that wasn't an uptight prude. Just that weird cunt with the cleaning fetish. I mean, I don't give a shit if you're married. Bring your bitch along, too, make it a party, but nooo..."

As Sickle took several more deep gulps from her new bottle, Starlight was rolling her eyes. "Charming as ever, I see."

Dusty grumbled. "She's been bitching about this for hours." He followed by taking another sip of his drink.

"Oh, fuck the both of you. Ain't my fault this town is full of dumbasses. Shit, at least when I was still rolling with my old gang I could get fucked every night." She snorted around the neck of the bottle as she took another drink, more fluid running down her neck as she licked her lips. "Heh, shit, more like three or four times a day. That was good."

Starlight rolled her eyes. "And maybe ponies don't want to sleep with

someone who's been with half the Wasteland. Or who looks like somepony fed her through a meat grinder. Or maybe they just don't like the idea of knocking up some random stranger."

"Hah, don't have to worry about that one," Sickle said, grinning. "I can't have kids."

Starlight's ears perked up in surprise, her expression turning to concern. Seeing the conversation going even further into territory I'd rather avoid, I quickly stepped up to her, speaking quietly. "Maybe we should—"

"Why not?" Starlight asked, oblivious to my concerns. I suppressed a groan.

"Cause of this bad boy," Sickle said, thumping a hoof against her chest over a large, puckered scar, one of the larger signs of injuries dotting her body. "Hard to get knocked up when you ain't got a uterus any more."

Starlight blinked, and I have to admit, I was a little confused as well—and possibly a little concerned at how happily she had just mentioned missing a somewhat significant internal organ. "Wait," Starlight said, lifting a hoof to point at her. "That's your chest. The uterus is, like..." She lowered her hoof, pointing down more to Sickle's belly.

Sickle blinked, then snorted out a laugh. "It's a bullet wound, dumbass. Ain't like it stops at the skin. Shit, I thought you were smarter than that." She took another swig, then set the bottle down with a thump. "Yeah, some bitch with a monster fucking rifle shot me in the chest this one time. I didn't have the heavy armor I got now, not that it would have done much. Still got almost halfway to her before I passed out. Woke up the next day, all fucked up.

"Cutter said the bullet went through a lung, stomach, intestines... I think the liver? Then the uterus, and finally lodged in the pelvis. I guess none of those cunts thought I'd live, but I showed them. Cutter said I lost the uterus and some of the intestines, but he sewed me up, and I was out kicking ass again in a week."

She sat back, taking another draw from the bottle before thumping it down, empty. "Heh, we found out I was pregnant, too. Guess I dodged a fucking bullet on that one." She blinked, wavered a moment, then started snickering uncontrollably.

Everyone else's reactions were much less amused. Dusty grimaced,

taking another drink, while Starlight looked at her wide-eyed, her ears pinning back. “That’s horrible!”

“Nah,” Sickle said, still snickering. “Sure, it hurt like fuck, and it sucked when I couldn’t walk. I nearly beat Crunch to death, trying to fuck me with a broken pelvis. Still, wasn’t the worst I had.”

Starlight drew her head back. “I mean losing your child,” she said, her voice subdued.

“What, that?” Sickle snorted, pushing aside some of the bottles as she fetched a beer. “Like I give a shit. The hell would I want with a kid, anyway?” She bit off the cap, spitting it out and draining half the bottle in one go. She thumped it down on the table, letting out a bitter laugh. “Shit, I’d probably stomp the little brat to death within a week.”

Starlight blanched, weakly repeating, “That’s horrible.”

Sickle took another drink, looking off into space for a moment. Then she let out another chuckle, and touched a hoof to the side of her jaw, where the mass of scar tissue had left her skin bare. “Nah, actually, this one, that’s probably the one that hurt the worst. That cunt Char caught me right in the face with a fucking molotov. I don’t know what it is about getting burned, but that shit hurts worse than anything else.” She grinned darkly. “I’m guessing Char agreed, with the way she screamed.”

Starlight shuddered, then took up the bottle again to take a quick gulp. She shuddered again at the taste of the alcohol. “Ugh. You have got to be the most unpleasant pony I’ve ever met.”

“What?” Sickle said with a snort. “Fuck you, runt. I’m trying to be *nice*, here.”

“This is you trying to be *nice*?”

“Yeah!” Sickle gestured to the bottles, knocking several empty ones over. “I’m giving you my booze, sharing some stories, and not stomping anypony’s ugly face in.” She grabbed her bottle again, downing the rest of it, and angrily tossing it aside. “Shit, most of the fighting types I’ve known *love* scar stories.”

Starlight had cocked her head to the side, looking over Sickle more closely. I think she was thinking the same thing I was at that moment: that, as awkward and aggressive as it may be, this seemed to be Sickle’s attempt to be *friendly*.

After a few seconds, Starlight set the bottle on the table again and pulled

out a chair to sit on. "They do, huh?"

"Yeah," Sickle said with a snort. "Dirt and I shared ours years ago, even if he ain't got shit on me." She delivered the last part with a grin aimed at him, which he answered with a sigh. "Hell, I've got some good new ones traveling with you cunts, too!"

Starlight glanced my way, and when I shrugged, prompted Sickle. "Oh?"

I reluctantly claimed another chair for myself as Sickle laughed. "Hell yeah," she said, grinning. "I think Gutfuck shooting me in the ass is going to be a new favorite." Then she lifted a hoof, thumping the side of her muzzle. "And shit, I get to brag about getting shot in the face with a fucking minigun! How badass is that, huh?"

"I... guess that is kind of impressive, yeah," Starlight quietly said.

Sickle swept a hoof over to gesture at her. "See? Hell, I got a lot of stories." She grabbed yet another bottle, and then, as if an afterthought, offered a beer to me. I accepted it reluctantly, and she sat back, taking a swig before speaking again; from the amount of alcohol I'd witnessed her drink in the short time since we had arrived, I was surprised she wasn't slurring her words.

"I've been shot more times than I can count. Most of those are pretty boring. You know, they shoot me, I don't give a fuck because I'm big and tough and drugged out of my mind, that sort of thing." She started to point out parts of her body as she continued, her hide an illustration of her violent encounters. "Nearly lost my leg to some stallion with a double-barrel. Shotguns don't do shit against armor, but the stuff I had then didn't cover my legs. Put both barrels into my leg at close range. You could see the bone and everything, and we didn't have any healing potions, so I couldn't walk on it for weeks. Oh, and that zebra! She had this thing that was like a machete strapped to the end of a pole, and was slippery as fuck. She just kept slashing away and dancing out of range. Cut my thigh open, sliced my lip, and damn near caught me in the throat. She was pretty good."

The tales of violence and injury continued for a good while, interrupted only by Sickle taking another drink. She managed to finish off another two beers and a half-empty bottle of rum before I thought I could detect a faint slurring of her words. And, while the subject matter was grotesque, there was something strangely refreshing about Sickle making the attempt to be

friendly—however horrific that attempt might have been.

I made a point to avoid thinking of who these ponies were that she had been fighting. It sounded like plenty of her fighting had been with other raiders, but I also knew what raiders did to regular ponies.

Eventually, she ran out of stories, and she sat there, slowly spinning the empty rum bottle with a hoof. "...Okay, come on. I'm out of stories. Someone else go." When we looked around silently, she groaned. "Star, your turn. You keep going on like you're hot shit. You got any good fighting stories?"

She frowned, setting the bottle of port down again, and I should note I was much relieved that she had only had the occasional sip rather than making any attempt to emulate Sickle's prodigious rate of consumption. "I didn't get into many fights before traveling with you. Just the raider ambush." She shook her head. "I dunno. My mom and I took down some big critters when we went hunting. I shot a few feral ghouls, too, but that wasn't very impressive."

"Hunting, huh?" Sickle gave the rum bottle another spin. "What kind of big critters?"

"We took down manticores a couple times. Mom even let me take the shot once. Probably, oh... quarter mile? Vaporized its head. Got a good amount of caps trading all the meat."

"Hmm," Sickle mused. "I've never fought a manticore before. Not bad."

Starlight slowly smiled. "Wait a minute. Are you saying there's something I'm better at than you?"

Sickle snorted and laughed, reaching over to give her a shove that almost sent her toppling over. "Yeah, right, runt. I'm just saying I ain't fought one, yet. After, then we'll see."

"Y-yeah," Starlight said, regaining her balance, though her confidence returned quickly enough. "Yeah, let's see you take one out with one hit and not a scratch."

Sickle snickered, sitting back. Then she looked my way. "How about you? The buggy little super-spy got any fun stories?"

I smiled, more to keep the mood going than out of any real humor. "Not unless you count paperwork and making friends as fun stories."

"Bo-ring," Sickle announced.

Starlight gave a salute with her bottle. “Well *I* thought your friend stories were nice.”

I smiled.

After a moment, a mischievous look crossed Starlight’s expression, and she turned to Dusty. “What about you? A Mareford Ranger must have a few good stories.”

Dusty shot her a look, but it was Sickle who replied. “Nah, he’s being an uptight cunt today. He’s barely said more than like three words since I got back. He’s just been moaning and bitching about me moaning and bitching.” She turned to him. “Seriously. You need to go out there and get laid or some shit.”

“Not everyone is as obsessed with sex as you are,” Dusty grumbled.

“Oh, shit, he speaks!” Sickle grinned. “Also, that’s a load of shit, Dirt. You’ve been obsessed with pussy since before we first met.” She leaned in, her eyes narrowing a bit, her grin turning predatory. “Cept it’s always been one pussy in particular, ain’t it?”

Dusty glared. “That’s none of your business.”

“Yeah, sure.” She sat back. “But really, get over it, and get laid. You could use a good fucking.”

“Some of us don’t solve our problems with random sex,” Dusty muttered.

Sickle snorted. “Yeah. Some of us are fucking stupid and whine about the same shit for years.” She abruptly turned back to Starlight and myself. “Come on, somepony come up with some other story or some shit. Just... fucking anything!”

Starlight and I exchanged glances as we tried to think of anything, and Sickle groaned. “Errgh, fuck all of this. How long are we going to be in this lame-ass town.”

“Well,” I cautiously said, “we’re here for a week, and this is day three, so... we’re almost halfway there.”

Sickle groaned again. “Shit. I really hope that trader was carrying booze. I’m almost out already.”

Starlight looked up from the bottle she was cradling in her forehooves. “You’ve drank all of it already?”

Myself, I wasn’t at all surprised, given the rate I’d been watching her consume it.

"Just about!" Sickle replied. "I need *something* to do, but I'm almost out of booze, I ain't been in a fight all week, and I ain't had a proper fuck since Spot!" She snorted, hoofing lazily at the rum bottle before pausing to pick it up. "Heh. Guess I can make do with some of these, but it ain't the same as a real stallion. Not like there are any of those in this lame-ass town."

Starlight's nose scrunched up. "Gross."

Sickle didn't seem to hear her. She was staring down at the bottle, the hints of a grin forming at the corner of her mouth.

I caught the glance over to Dusty; he didn't.

Sickle rose up, her forehooves catching Dusty around the chest, and pushed. He toppled backwards with a shout as she drove him down to the floor. An instant later, he was pinned on his back, and she straddled him, sitting on his hips.

"Damnit, Sickle!" he snapped, shoving uselessly at her chest with his forehooves while his hind legs stuck out awkwardly behind her. "Get off!"

"That's the idea," she said, lips curling back in a leer.

"Sickle!"

She laughed. "You ain't fucked a mare in over a year, and it was, what, another year before that? And I know you ain't jerked it the whole time we've been traveling." She rocked back, very plainly grinding her hips against his. "Shit, most stallions would explode, trying to hold it that long."

"Yeah, well I'm not 'most stallions,'" Dusty countered, which just made her laugh again.

"No shit. Dusty, you need to get laid more than any stallion I've known. And hey, I need somepony to fuck. Works out nicely for both of us." She ground her hips again, her grin growing. "Feels like that's a 'yes'."

"It's not and you know it!" Dusty said, his hind legs kicking once as he squirmed.

"Hey, it ain't like it'd be the first time we fucked. You had a lot of fun with it, too, even if you like to pretend you didn't."

"I was drunk!" Dusty snapped, shoving at her chest again.

She didn't even budge, grinning down at him. "You're drunk now."

He glared, huffing a couple deep breaths before replying. "I am not nearly drunk enough to have sex with you, Sickle."

She chuckled. Dusty grunted and pawed at her body as she leaned back,

grinding her hips against his as she snatched up a bottle of whiskey, then leaned over him again, thumping it down on the floor beside his head.

For several seconds, he glared angrily up at her lurid grin, silent except for the heavy breathing. Then, with an irritated snort, he snatched up the bottle. "I fucking hate you sometimes."

"Good!" Sickle said as she got up. "I like angry sex."

Dusty snorted again and popped open the bottle. He got only a single gulp down before Sickle grabbed him around the chest and hauled him up, sending a splash of whiskey down his chin. "Damnit, Sickle!"

She just laughed, hauling him along into her room, and kicking the door shut hard enough that it rebounded open several inches.

Leaving Starlight and I sitting there, very still and silent, with similarly strained expressions.

Starlight, as usual, was the one to break the silence. "So... that happened." She lifted her bottle, taking a quick sip before lowering it again. "Like, right in front of me and everything."

"Yeah," I quietly agreed, having no more useful thoughts of my own to contribute. Not that I was unused to sexually active individuals, I just wasn't quite certain what to think of that particular event.

The occasional sound crept out from Sickle's room, mostly the occasional chuckle from her, the shuffling of hooves, or a sound suspiciously like that of a grown stallion being dropped on an ancient bed.

Starlight started to raise the bottle again, then thought better of it and set it on the table.

Moments later, the sound of a bed protesting loudly emanated from the room, mixed with the muffled sound of voices, or maybe grunts. After a few seconds of that, a new sound joined the mix: the deep thump of the bed knocking against the wall. That sound repeated a moment later. And then again.

Starlight jumped to her hooves, breathlessly blurting, "Okay I'm going to bed goodnight!" as if it were one long word, and hustling off to our room.

I sighed, looking down at the beer I still held, the same one Sickle had first passed to me. There was only a little left in it, and I was surprised to find myself, at that moment, a little disappointed at the fact. I finished it off, set it on the table, and went to bed myself.

When I entered the room, Starlight had a hoof laid across her head in an attempt to block out the sound of the energetic coupling going on in the other bedroom. The extra wall did rather little to muffle the sound.

As I slid into bed, I asked, “Are you all right?”

“Peachy,” she grumbled, fidgeting and rolling around a bit before giving up and placing her pillow over her head.

I sighed softly, laying my head down, and tuned out the sound. Starlight struggled to do so for quite a while longer. She kept shifting around, pawing at her pillow, and generally doing everything except sleeping.

I was near to drifting off when she finally started to still. A few seconds later, she murmured, “Fuck it.”

The bed shifted as she moved, then the blankets lifted up, and suddenly Starlight was right there. Her body moved over mine as she straddled me, beneath the blankets. I ended up on my back, her belly and hips brushing against mine. She looked down at me, breathing heavily, her forehooves planted on either side of me.

“I want to have sex,” she said, in what was easily the bluntest and most awkward way I’d ever had the subject broached.

I found that I had moved my hooves to her chest, supporting her, but also placing a fragile barrier between us. I have to admit, the touch of her lower body, without even the faintest attempt to rub against me or otherwise tease, was surprisingly enticing.

Despite that, I still had to voice my concern. “What happened to not being interested in mares?”

In the faint, monochrome light of her PipBuck screen, I couldn’t see for sure, but the way her ears twitched back suggested that she was blushing. “Well... I mean, it’s different. You can change stuff like that, so it’s not *really* like being with a mare, right?”

I hesitated, while she looked down at me. The soft coat of her belly brushed against mine with every breath. “Starlight, changing what I look like won’t change anything about who or what I am beneath that.”

Her ears flicked back, as if from a flash of embarrassment, but then stood tall again. “Well, maybe I like what’s beneath that, too.”

After just a moment of consideration, I called up my magic. Starlight squeaked and jerked back as the green fire flashed over my form, stripping

away my disguise. Suddenly, her soft belly was brushing against smooth, hard chitin. She blinked away the dazzling flash of light, and once she had looked back, I fixed her with a flat stare. "You mean this?"

She stared down at me, her eyes slowly moving over the distinctly non-pony form, from the nearly luminescent and featureless blue eyes, to the glossy carapace reflecting the green PipBuck light.

Then she pushed forward, slipping past my hooves as her body pressed against mine, and mashed her mouth against mine in a clumsy kiss that was far more passionate than it was skilled. She pressed and twisted, showing no sign of hesitation even when her tongue met sharp teeth.

Then she drew back, ending the kiss as abruptly as it had started. Her muzzle hovered just above mine as her eyes darted over my expression. A faint tremble ran through her body, though I couldn't say whether it was from nervousness or excitement. The feeling of affection flowed strong.

She slowly smiled. "...Yeah."

I have to admit, I wasn't sure how to reply. I didn't need to. She pressed in once more. Her muzzle slipped in beside mine to nuzzle affectionately, her body rubbing against mine, and a hoof slid down my smooth side to grab at my hip.

It was an interesting night.

## Chapter Twenty

# Unarmored

The sun had been up for several hours before I finally extricated myself from the bed and made my way over to the wash basin. I was thankful for the opportunity to sleep in my natural form, and not just for the comforting familiarity of it. Lying across Starlight's foreleg would have likely been rather uncomfortable in a pony guise, with the limb squeezing soft flesh against hard bone, never mind the PipBuck that had been wedged against my side.

I fetched a worn washcloth, and for a moment simply enjoyed the sensation of the damp fabric gliding over my carapace. Another plus of my natural form; chitin cleans much easier than a coat of hair. I had gotten to cleaning between my hind legs when Starlight groaned and stirred, rubbing lazily at the leg I had been lying on. A moment later her eyes opened. "Holy crap, it's noon."

"Guess we needed the sleep," I said, finishing up with scrubbing my forehooves clean.

"Yeah, guess so." Starlight groaned again as she sat up, rubbing a hoof over her eyes. "Urgh. Explains why I'm so hungry, too."

With a flash, I retook my earth pony disguise, and began the careful examination to make sure I had gotten every detail correct. "You should probably clean up before going out," I said as I brushed a hoof along my chest, ensuring the coat laid just right.

"I'm not—" She halted herself, raising a hind leg up slightly as she looked down. A hint of color tinted her cheeks as she snatched the washcloth in her magic. "Gimme that."

She was about halfway through her own cleaning when she paused, her ears slowly falling back. "Um... crap, I... *really* should have asked before, but, uh..." She swallowed. "Changelings and ponies can't, um, you know..." Her expression looked strained as she raised her forehooves, awkwardly gesturing them toward each other in a way that I might have thought meant "have sex" if not for that question having an obvious answer. When I didn't show any sign of comprehension, she meekly finished. "...Have kids?"

"Oh! No. Our species aren't biologically compatible."

Starlight exhaled, giving a relieved nod.

"In any case, I make all my forms sterile. It's a standard precaution, since a changeling shapeshifted into a pony and a regular pony *are* biologically compatible, which can lead to all sorts of complications." I paused before adding, "And yes, you really should ask questions like that before it becomes important."

"Yeah," she said, ears still hanging low. "I was a little preoccupied... I mean, I figured, but it's good to make sure. Just... maybe make sure earlier."

I gave a little smile to soften things up. "Earlier would be better, yes."

She gave a little sigh, her hoof returning to the washcloth as she finished giving herself a quick cleaning. "I am *really* hungry. Thirsty, too." She looked over to me. "Want to get breakfast?"

I nodded. "Sure. I'm pretty hungry, too."

She tossed the washcloth back beside the basin and crawled out of bed, slowly fetching her holster and saddlebags. Once she'd gathered them, she simply sat there, holding them in her lap. "...That was really good. I mean, I figured it had to be, but... yeah, that was good."

I slowly nodded. "It can be." Finishing my inspection, I turned to look at her again. "This was your first time?"

Her ears drooped again, and she gave a weak, self-deprecating laugh. "It showed that badly, huh?"

"Not really," I said, giving a soft smile. "Open and honest passion is a good deal better than simple technical skill."

She chuckled a little as she started to strap on her holster. "Yeah, I was maybe a little worked up. And then that thing you did with your tongue..." She huffed faintly and shook her head. "Nope, not thinking that right now." She tugged on the last strap. "Do we have any plans for today?"

"Not that I'm aware of," I said.

She hummed softly, thinking. "...I dunno, want to go shooting again? Not much else to do around here."

"I'd rather not waste too much more ammo before Dusty starts teaching me. It sounds like we'll go through plenty, then. I might tag along, though." I slipped on my saddle bags before asking, "What would you normally do for fun?"

"Climb around in some ruins," she said. "Jump from one building to the next, crawl through windows, explore all those empty places. Maybe even find some place nopony's been to in centuries." She shrugged. "I kinda had to make my own fun, growing up."

"There seems to be a lack of extensive ruins around here," I noted.

"Yeah," Starlight grumbled, but then her ears perked up. "Though there is that mine behind Arclight's place. Underground ruins are a bit too serious-mode for playing around in most of the time, but that could work. Just as long as nothing's living in it. Better than climbing all over the buildings ponies are living in now. Hmm." She idly tapped a hoof against her leg, then looked back to me. "What about you? What were you thinking of doing?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I was thinking of digging around through those files we got at Paradise Beach. The C.L.T. stuff could use a more thorough double-check, and I've got plenty of time now that we're not walking constantly. I might look through the stuff from the other companies, too."

Starlight was rolling her eyes halfway through my statement, and ended with a flat stare. "Come on, Whisper. We're supposed to be relaxing and having fun."

My ears pinned back defensively. "Well, I'd be lying here in bed. It'd be hard to argue that it isn't relaxing."

When Starlight continued to stare, frowning, I sighed. "Maybe I could see if I could borrow that book once Dusty's done. That should pass an evening or so." After another moment of thought, I shook my head. "Actually, I suppose I could just tag along with you or Dusty. Socializing and 'hanging out' are always good."

"Then it's settled," Starlight said as she rose to her hooves. "We're getting some food, then you're coming with me to explore the mine."

"A mine that's already been explored," I pointed out, though I rose to follow her.

"Shush," she said, walking to the door, and I followed her out.

Dusty and Sickle were both there. Dusty was sitting hunched over the edge of the table, a couple empty beer bottles set nearby. Sickle was kicked back against the nearby wall, I assume because it let her sprawl back in her typical lewd fashion. I missed whatever it was she was saying to Dusty as we

entered. I just noticed how the conversation immediately stopped.

A grin quickly spread across Sickle's muzzle. She lifted her forehooves and started to clop them together, slow and loud. "Yeah-heh-heh! Damn, it's about fucking time, bitches!"

Starlight stopped with a squeak, her cheeks instantly turning red.

"Guess I was wrong about you two," Sickle said, chuckling. "Here I thought you two were fucking the whole time and just being all sneaky quiet and shit, but *damn* was that wrong. Hoo!"

Starlight fell back to her haunches, her ears hanging low. "You... heard that?"

Sickle practically cackled. "Heard it? Fuck me, runt, you probably raised every dick in town with how loud you were!"

"You weren't that loud," I quietly said, casting a disapproving glare Sickle's way, while Starlight covered her face in her hooves.

"Sure she wasn't," Sickle said, giving another snicker as she addressed me. "Shit, you had her going for what, an hour or two? Dirt and I finished, and you two just kept on going on and on. Started getting me horny again! What the hell were you doing to her in there?" Her ears perked up, her grin growing. "Oh, shit, did you do the hellhound thing? I told you it was fucking awesome!"

My glare was turning into a glower. "I did *not* do the 'hellhound thing'."

Beside me, Starlight quietly murmured, "Changeling tongues are amazing."

I lurched a little, caught off guard. Her cheeks were still burning red, with her chin tucked down and her eyes on the floor. It almost succeeded in hiding the smile that was forcing its way out.

Naturally, Sickle busted out laughing, thumping a hoof against the floor. "Ahaha! Oh, shit, this is too good!"

While Sickle continued to laugh, Starlight cast a glance my way. I'm not sure if it was supposed to be apologetic or amused, but when I raised an eyebrow in reply, her smile grew a bit more, despite her apparent effort to constrain it.

"Ahhh, shit," Sickle said as her laughter died off, and she laid her head back against the wall. Still grinning, she patted her crotch with a hoof. "Hey, how about you show me how good that tongue is, Whimper? I ain't ever

fucked a bug before.”

My eyes narrowed, and I found myself baring my teeth, despite how unimpressive that gesture is with a herbivore’s flat teeth. “First off, *keep it down*. Your voice carries, and I don’t want to end up in trouble because *you* can’t handle basic secrecy. And second...” My eyes glanced down along her body, then returned to meet her eyes. “...If you’re going to insist on making passes at us, you would do a lot better if you put some effort into making the offer less revolting.”

“Oh, yeah, sure,” Sickle said, smirking. “Cause you sounded all kinds of revolted about fucking last night, huh?”

“I’m talking about basic hygiene,” I said, frowning at her. “We all know you’ve had sex with every living creature you could get your hooves on, we don’t need to see and smell it, too.”

She chuckled, and though I refused to look, I could see the movement of her hoof patting between her legs, and the suggestive look she gave with it. “Hey, plenty of ponies like it messy, but you know, if you want to clean me up down there...”

“There is a marked distinction between ‘messy’ and ‘filthy’,” I replied, and turned toward Dusty to signal the end of that conversation. “Are you okay?”

“M’fine,” he grumbled, his hooves tightening around a bottle. After a moment, he spoke louder, though slowly, as if carefully sounding out his words. “I am lamenting the passing of my late self-respect.”

“Aaand he’s back to being an uptight cunt,” Sickle said, reaching out with a hind hoof to lightly thump the side of his chair, which almost knocked him to the ground. “Only you could get so mopey over getting your dick wet.”

I shot a look her way. “Shut up, Sickle.” While she made a crude gesture, I turned back to Dusty. “Seriously. Are you all right?”

Dusty grumbled, but when he finally looked up to me, he managed a small, uneven smile. “I will be. Just give me some time.”

“Yeah,” Sickle said. “He’s just pissed because he knows I was right.”

Dusty sighed as he finally lifted the bottle he was holding. “Yeah, pretty much,” he said, then tipped back the bottle to take a drink.

Sickle blinked in surprise, then laughed again. “Hah! About fucking time!”

“You’re still a bitch,” he said around the mouth of the bottle.

"The biggest, bestest bitch around," Sickle proudly declared, to which Dusty just rolled his eyes.

I leaned in a little. "Did you want to talk about it?"

"Fuck no," he said, taking another quick drink before setting the bottle down. "Don't worry. It's done with."

"If you say so," I said, with just enough of a frown to show I had my doubts.

He merely grunted in reply.

"Eh, he's fine," Sickle said. "Shit, maybe better than fine. Woke up to him crawling on top of me for a morning fuck, and—"

"Okay!" Starlight said, leaping to her hooves again. "Breakfast time. Food. Leaving now. Bye."

She quickly made her way to the door, and with a parting look of disapproval toward Sickle, I followed.

Breakfast was a quick meal of grilled carrots and boiled cabbage from Pumpkin, and then we made our way to Arclight's. While he expressed confusion as to why anypony would want to go wandering around in the mines, he allowed us in, on the condition that we couldn't take any of the gemstones that his work depended on. He even assured us that there was nothing living in the tunnels, or at least, not as far as he'd explored.

He unlocked the gate, and we entered, my flashlight and Starlight's PipBuck lighting the way. A set of cart tracks followed the slowly curving tunnel, leading further into the hill.

After a minute of quiet walking, we emerged into an open space. The tracks continued around a large pit, with offshoots leading down tunnels. One offshoot instead ended at a lift, suspended over the edge of the pit, with a set of steep metal stairs leading down. Beside the top of the stairs was a small, windowed structure, likely a foremare's office.

"Hey, this is a little more like it," Starlight said, trotting right up to the edge of the pit to peer into the depths. The bottom was barely visible in the darkness, maybe a hundred feet below. The metal stairs wound back and forth, anchored to the edge of the pit.

"It is?" I asked, but she had already turned around. She gave a short run-up before leaping and catching the edge of the small office, swinging her hindlegs up in a smooth motion. She grinned in the darkness, standing atop

the structure, though she had to duck her head to not knock her horn on the ceiling.

“What are you doing?”

“Having fun,” she said with a grin, trotting along the edge of the roof. “And practicing. It’s kinda weird having this thing on my leg instead of around my neck. Don’t want it throwing my balance off at the wrong moment.”

With that, she halted, swinging her rear out over the open space while her forehooves caught the edge of the roof, and neatly slipped in through one of the windows. I trotted up to see her standing inside, looking around her. There wasn’t much to see, just a bare desk, a chair, and an open and empty filing cabinet.

A moment later, she was climbing out the opposite window and back onto the roof. “Yeah. Yeah, I think I’ll get used to this pretty quick.” The sound of hoofsteps echoed dully through the metal structure. “Did we have an extra flashlight? The PipBuck worked better as a light when it wasn’t at ground level.”

“I think we had an extra,” I said. “If not, I doubt Sickle is going to use the one we gave her.”

“That could work,” she mused. “Okay then! Let’s head on down.” There was a clatter of hooves as she leaped from the roof—and missed the edge of the pit, falling into the void.

My heart lurched as I tore away my disguise and lunged forward, but even as my transformation was finishing, I heard the impact of hooves on metal. I came skidding to a halt at the edge of the pit, wings flicking for balance. Starlight looked over her shoulder from where she stood on the stairs, and she chuckled at my wide-eyed expression. “What?”

“Don’t do that!” I said, probably a good deal more emotionally than I normally would.

“Do what?” she said, smiling. “I’m just having some fun.”

“And nearly giving me a heart attack,” I said, hopping over the edge to land beside her with a soft buzz of wings. “This structure is at least two hundred years old. What if it gave out when you jumped on it?”

She grinned. “Why do you think I landed right on a support?” She thumped her hoof on the metal grating, where an I-beam ran beneath it.

“First thing a good scavenger does in a ruin is check out how stable the place is. Look for the supports. Big, solid beams, sunk deep in the rock, no sign of corrosion? Sickle could have jumped down here, and it could probably take it.”

I frowned as I looked at the beam, taking a moment to come up with an objection that didn’t sound somewhat infantile. “...Okay. Just, maybe a little warning next time?”

“Hey, I’m going to jump into this hole now?” she said, smirking. Then she reached out, playfully thumping her hoof against my chest-plate. “And you know I love the armor, but seriously?”

“I wasn’t putting any thought into my transformation,” I replied, drawing back a step. “It was a bit of a panic moment. I thought I was going to have to catch you.”

She snickered. “Well, relax. I’m not going to jump off a cliff without knowing I’ll be perfectly safe. I know what I’m doing.” She followed that up by climbing up onto the railing of the stairs, balancing precariously on the thin metal bar, though she maintained her balance with no apparent effort.

“I can’t help feeling a little nervous about a wingless pony around long drops,” I said, forcing my wings to lie flat.

“As if this is the most dangerous thing we’ve done,” she said, then grinned. “Going down!”

Even with what technically could pass as a warning, I lurched again as she fell off the railing. At least, it looked like a fall at first, until the hoof she hooked around the rail swung her under the walkway. She dropped a good ten feet to where the stairs doubled back and landed with a loud clatter of hooves, while I hopped over the edge to glide down to her.

She grinned as I landed on the railing nearby. “Relax, Whisper. We’re here to have fun, right?”

“Preferably without breaking any bones,” I said.

“Nah, I’m not going to break anything.” She hopped up on the railing again, swinging out to climb down the outside of the stairs. “Maybe some scrapes or bruises at most, nothing serious.”

It was a completely impractical way of getting down, though she made surprisingly good time. I hovered beside her as she made her way down. The last ten feet were covered in a single leap, producing a loud “Oof” as

she landed beside the tracks.

I landed beside her, a flash of green illuminating the chamber as I retook my disguise. Starlight was shaking her PipBuck-clad leg.

“You okay?” I asked.

“Oh, yeah,” she said, placing her hoof down again. “Just still not used to wearing this thing like this. It’s all good.”

To demonstrate her point, she hopped up onto the cart tracks, walking easily while balanced on the thin strip of metal. Her balance was almost perfect, with only the rare waver. I followed along beside her on the much easier flat ground.

We walked on in silence, save for the crunching of grit and gravel beneath my hooves and the soft metallic clunks from Starlight’s. After a time, I noticed her smile fading, her ears slowly lowering. I was about to ask if something was wrong when she finally spoke. “So, uh... you know, about last night...”

I’d been wondering when it would come up again. “Yes?”

“I, uh... I just, you know... what happens now?”

“That’s up to you.”

She turned to look my way, wobbling for a moment as she continued walking. “What, you don’t care?” Her tone struck me as disappointed.

“Of course I care,” I replied, looking back at her. “We’ve only known each other for a little over a month, but we’ve been through a lot in that time. That sort of thing can build strong emotional connections. And even with how bad the world has gotten and how rough things have been, you’re still cheerful and friendly. It’s... a kind of idealism I think the world could use more of. It’s something I can admire.”

“Huh,” was all she could reply with, looking off into space as her pace slowed.

“You’re also one of the rare ponies I can be completely open with. I don’t have to hide things from you, so there isn’t some barrier of secrecy and duty between us. Even with my closest sisters, there was still that barrier there. There’s a lot of reasons I like you, and because of all of that, I want to see you happy. That’s why I say it’s up to you. As long as you choose what will make you happy, I’ll be happy.”

“Really?” she asked, cocking her head as she glanced my way. “So, you’d

be fine with me choosing... whatever?"

"I'm a changeling," I said, giving a weak smile. "We're adaptable."

"Well, sure, but..." She paused, chewing on her lip for a moment as she continued slowly walking along the rail. "...But, I mean, you've got to *want* something, right? Like, if it was entirely up to you?"

I looked down at my hooves, contemplating the question for several long, silent seconds, before finally shaking my head. "I don't know. I... don't think I'm in a good place to make a decision like that right now. Right now, I'm focused on finding my hive, and everything else is falling into the background. I know what my training suggests, but that's all about manipulating and deceiving ponies. I'd rather just... follow your lead, to be honest. I may have some thoughts and insights to share, but I'm willing to put my trust in you."

After a moment of silence, she gave a small smirk. "Just so long as I'm not jumping into deep pits?"

I huffed out a weak chuckle. "As long as you give a little more warning before doing so," I said. "Also, that's a rather effective metaphor."

"Um... thanks?" There was a pause as she hopped up onto a toppled minecart, laid across and blocking the tracks. "It just feels like, you know, this is some huge change, and I'm not really sure what to make of it."

"A change, maybe," I said, "but it doesn't have to be a big one. I know some ponies like to divide relationships up into a few, very firm categories, with certain things only belonging in certain categories, but real relationships are a lot more varied." I paused, frowning for a moment. "...Plus, social pressures are much less of a concern when there's practically no society left."

"Score one for the apocalypse?" Starlight said, and hopped off the cart for the tracks beyond. Her hooves landed square on the rail, though one slipped off to hit the ground beside it. "Damnit." She quickly regained her footing and continued on. "So you're saying, just... do whatever?"

"I'm saying, do what feels right. Don't feel like you're forced to do something, for whatever reason."

"Hmm." She mused over that for a moment. "So you'd be okay if, you know, we... just kinda keep on going like we have been?"

I nodded. "Yes."

She continued walking for a couple seconds before the corners of her

mouth twitched upwards. “Just... maybe with the occasional, um, you know...”

I smiled. “Sex?”

Her ears pinned back in embarrassment, though her smile grew. “Uh, yeah, that.” She shook her head. “Eesh, okay, it’s still a little weird talking about, with you being a mare most of the time.”

I couldn’t help a little teasing. “I was a mare most of last night, too.”

Her balance wavered. “Y-yeah, well... I was a little distracted by other things. And once you started... um, doing that thing with your tongue, you know... yeah, I kinda had other things on my mind.”

I chuckled a little. “You know, for a pony who claims to not be into mares, you did a pretty good job of copying that ‘tongue thing’.”

“I may have been a teensy bit worked up and excited and...” She shook her head, nearly losing her balance again. “And anyway, I’m not into mares! I’m into *you*.”

She abruptly halted to bring a hoof to her face. “Luna smite me, that has to be the cheesiest thing I’ve ever heard.”

I stood there, quiet for a moment as I contemplated her. Then I stepped over, sitting beside her. “Actually, I think I understand exactly what you mean. I’m kind of the same way.”

She lowered her hoof, cocking her head as she looked at me.

“When you get down to it, I’m not really into ponies,” I said.

“Uh...” Starlight blinked a couple times. “Haven’t you slept with, like, half a dozen different ponies?”

“Four,” I said, then quickly corrected, “Five, now. But it’s still true.”

I pulled at my magic, transforming back to my natural form, sans armor, and raised a hoof to touch to my chest. “I’m a changeling. We aren’t like ponies. When I think of two bodies touching each other, I expect them to be firm and smooth, gliding against one another. But with ponies...” I retook my earth pony guise. I pressed again with my hoof. “There’s all this soft flesh that squishes and wobbles in all sorts of strange ways as you move. When two ponies come together, their bodies mush against each other, all squishy and flabby, and squeezed between the hard endoskeletal structure inside them. It’s weird, alien, and kind of disturbing.”

“Wow,” Starlight said with a flat tone. “Charming.”

"So, yeah, I'm not into ponies." I flashed a smile at her. "Just *certain* ponies."

She held her flat glare for a couple seconds before rolling her eyes, slowly relaxing. "Okay, that's the *second* cheesiest thing I've ever heard." Despite that, she smiled as her eyes returned to me. "But thanks."

I nodded.

After a moment of comfortable silence, I rose to my hooves again, and we continued on.



We spent almost two hours following different tracks through the tunnels. Starlight enjoyed the sense of exploration, and treated every piece of mining equipment or outcropping of crystals as her own makeshift jungle gym. Myself, I enjoyed the company and conversation.

Afterwards, we took a rest in the town square, sitting on a couple benches beside Pumpkin's place. We mostly relaxed and chatted about nothing in particular. Dazzle came by to socialize, and when she saw us dusty from the mines, offered to let us freshen up in her shower.

Starlight quickly declined, but Dazzle held up a hoof. "Hooves-off, I won't even be in the room. I'm not trying anything, I just thought you'd like that chance to freshen up. I'd just ask for a couple caps to cover water costs."

Starlight hesitated before replying. "Maybe next time."

"Okay, then," Dazzle said. She remained for a while longer, trying to carry on a conversation with only minimal flirting, before eventually excusing herself and returning to the gate. Watching her walk off, her enthusiasm long since faded, I felt a little sad for her. Her chances were poor enough before, but now they seemed practically nonexistent. Judging from Starlight's expression, I think she was thinking the same thing.

The day was steadily progressing from relaxing to boring when, about half an hour later, the town bell rang out. It was a lazy, un-urgent ringing, and we could see Dazzle, who had been lying back against her cannon, sitting upright to look out over the wall. A minute later she turned to call back. "Open up!" Then she waved out over the wall. "Hey, Wheels! Good to see you lot again!"

The caravan rolled its way into town with three wagons, the largest of which was pulled by a pair of brahmin. Each wagon was heaped high, and accompanied by several ponies. All of the ponies carried a weapon of some sort, though only four looked to be guard types. Other than the pistols, I saw a couple of pipe rifles, a shotgun, and a long bolt-action. It left me in the curious position of considering them lightly armed in comparison to myself and my companions. Then again, they were probably as well-armed as the raiders I'd seen, and maybe even better; none of them were relying on knives or spears.

While I was evaluating their capacity for survival in the Wasteland, Starlight had sat up, smiling. "Hey, maybe some fresh faces will liven things up. Think we should introduce ourselves?"

"Certainly worth a try," I said as I rose to my hooves. "At least then we can make some sort of impression before Sickle does."

Starlight laughed and hopped up, and we went to meet the new ponies. She called out as we drew near. "Hi there!"

A couple of the ponies had noticed our approach, and now one of the guard ponies, the stallion with the shotgun, let out a low whistle. His eyes traced over my body. "Celestia above, I love this town already." The pair of stallions with the pipe rifles snickered, and one of them thumped him lightly on the shoulder before he continued. "You all part of the welcoming committee?" he asked, grinning.

"Nah," Starlight said, smiling back. "We're just here for a few days, thought we'd say 'hi'."

"Well I'm glad you did," he said, turning his smile her way. "It's always nice to meet a couple of fine mares."

An older stallion atop the lead wagon called back. "Don't go harassing the locals, Scatter. I don't want a repeat of Mareford."

The other guards laughed, while Scatter's ears flicked back. "Aw, that mare didn't know how to take a compliment. 'Sides, these two ain't locals, ain't that right?"

The older stallion sighed. "I don't care if they're local or not, just don't go causing any trouble. 'Specially not here, okay?" He looked our way. "You two wouldn't happen to be friends of Dazzle, would you?"

Seeing where Scatter's mind was going, I leaped on the opportunity and

flashed a smile. "You could say that."

The older stallion smiled, with just a hint of mischievousness to his expression.

The conversation was disrupted by an icy voice from the rear wagon. "It's about time we got here. It's bad enough having to travel with you imbeciles without the trip taking twice as long as it should have."

We looked back to see a golden-orange pony step from the wagon, giving the vehicle one last disdainful look as she did so. Her perfectly groomed coat and elegant looks had caught Dazzle's attention, and she was leaned out over the wall to get a better view.

Beside me, Starlight's voice turned icy. "Amber."

The mare in question stopped, turning to look down her nose at us. "Oh. It's *you*." She said it with the kind of bored contempt that went beyond simple loathing, expressing a feeling much like one might have towards an unsightly stain on someone else's carpet: unpleasant, undesired, and of absolutely no consequence to herself.

The older stallion, who I had assumed was the caravan leader, gave a quiet snort. "Ah. Y'all have met before, I take it?"

"Yeah," Starlight said, a fire rising in her voice. "She pulled a gun on us."

"A reasonable precaution when a group of hired killers practically force their way into my room," Amber said as she retrieved her saddlebags from the wagon. "Funny how you can remember that, but you can't remember my proper title. Now if you'll excuse me, I've wasted all the time I intend to with you." Without another word, she turned and walked to the far side of the wagon.

Starlight snorted, muttering under her breath.

"Glad we're done with that bitch," Scatter muttered before looking back to us, an eyebrow raised. "Hired killers?"

Starlight grumbled. "That sounds so much worse than mercenary." She frowned. "Uh, mercenary sounds kind of bad, too. We help ponies. Just... I guess it tends to involve a lot of shooting."

"She hired us for a job," I said. "It involved killing some raiders."

"Yeah?" Scatter said, and smiled again. "Well, ain't nothing wrong with that. Good riddance. How many of them scum did you bag?"

Starlight looked to me. "It was, what, twenty?"

"About that."

We looked back to Scatter, whose smile had disappeared. His tone no longer sounded amused, but doubtful. "The two of you took down twenty raiders, huh?"

"Not just us," Starlight said, smiling again. "We're only half the team. Heck, the other two did more than us in that fight."

I gave a dry chuckle, to emphasize my own self-deprecating statement. "I'm not even sure if I hit any of them."

Starlight chuckled along with me. "I'm reasonably certain you didn't," she said, then gave a thoughtful look. "Though, you know, when you came around the corner on that pack of five or six of them, you laid out a lot of fire. You might have gotten some of them."

Scatter was simply staring at us by now, and I enjoyed his expression of stunned disbelief.

The fourth guard, with the bolt-action rifle strapped across his back, stepped past Scatter. "Sounds like you two have some pretty good tales to tell." He smiled. "How's about when we get these wagons parked and gear stowed, we all get together and swap some stories?"

"Heck yeah!" Starlight said, giving a happy little hop and grinning from ear to ear.

While the wagon crews pulled the wagons around behind Emerald's store, we headed in with the guards and the old caravan master. Inside we found Dusty and Emerald, both with their forelegs crossed on the store counter as they chatted. Emerald looked up on our entrance, and smiled.

"Wagon Wheel! I was starting to wonder when you'd make your way around here again. How have you been?" As she spoke, she stepped out from behind the counter, and gave the older stallion a hug.

"Oh, not so bad," he replied with a smile as he hugged back. "My knee's been feeling a lot better lately, too. Still ain't going to be running any marathons, but at least it doesn't hurt to walk."

"Good to hear!" Emerald said, releasing him. "I hope you're all staying the night? I can get Pumpkin to whip up something for everypony."

"Sure am," he said.

"Well, good! These fine folk here have the northern suite, but the southern one's still open. You all go ahead and take a load off, and I'll see about

getting us all some dinner.”

Wagon Wheel’s reply was cut off by an icy voice. “How utterly charming, I’m sure.” Amber stepped forward, her eyes slowly tracing around the room. By the time her gaze reached Emerald, the green mare had retreated behind the counter, her smile having vanished. Amber stepped up to the counter, looking down her nose at Emerald. “I require lodgings separate from the rest of these... individuals.”

Emerald eyed her warily. “I can do that, miss...”

“It’s *Lady* Amber,” Amber scornfully replied. “Not that anypony seems to be able to remember that simple detail.”

“*Lady* Amber,” Emerald echoed, giving a slow nod and a strained smile. “I have plenty of rooms available. Eight caps per night. All the ground floor rooms are open. You can take your pick.”

Amber scoffed faintly as she drew out a pouch, casually retrieving several caps. “I suppose it’s too much to hope for that the doors lock?”

“They latch from the inside.”

“Then I suppose that will have to do.” Amber tossed the small collection of caps onto the counter. “I will pay you each night. Other than that, I expect to remain completely undisturbed. Do you understand?”

Emerald’s smile faltered as she nodded. “I understand.”

“Good.” With that, Amber turned and walked away. She paused a moment as she passed Dusty, eying him, but then continued on, her nose high.

Dusty sighed as soon as she disappeared. “I see she’s as charming as ever.” He gave a weary smile Emerald’s way. “Well, I’ll get out of your mane. Talk to you later.”

As he turned to leave, Wagon Wheel stepped forward, his brows furrowed in concern. “Hold up a sec. Are you Dusty Trails?”

Dusty halted, his ears standing alert. He turned to face Wagon Wheel, and I felt an eerie twinge as I recognized he had just set his hooves the same way he did when shooting. “I am,” he replied, his voice even and calm in a way that put me on edge.

The other stallion eyed Dusty for a moment before taking a half-step back. “Ain’t none of my business,” he said, shaking his head, “and I don’t plan on *making* it my business, but I figure Emerald here ought to know what’s what.”

Emerald looked up from the single bottle cap she held in her hoof, blinking a couple times as she caught up with the conversation. "...What's that?"

"Dusty Trails here is wanted in Mareford," Wagon Wheel replied. "They say he killed a bunch of ponies. They put out a bounty on him." He held up a hoof. "I ain't got any interest in bounties. Neither does my crew. Hell, as far as I'm concerned, anypony under Emerald's roof might as well be under Celestia's wing. I just figure Emerald deserves to know who the pony is that she's dealing with, and what might be following them."

Emerald looked back and forth between them, slowly turning the cap over in her hooves. It was a few seconds before she replied. "Well... I like to think I'm a good judge of character, and Dusty strikes me as a good pony. I wouldn't be surprised to hear that he's killed a good number of ponies, given his line of work. The real question is who those ponies were."

She ended looking right at Dusty.

He slowly sighed before speaking. "In this case... twenty some mercenaries under the employ of Mareford's mayor, and three Militia Rangers."

He was met with various looks of surprise, discomfort, and even fear. Emerald just looked inquisitive.

"But it ain't who I killed," Dusty continued, staring back at them. "It's why. Those ponies, they ambushed me and my friends. They tried to murder all of us, on mayor Big Gun's orders, to cover up what *he* did. And you know what he did?"

He waited just a moment, looking around at the other ponies before stepping up close to Wagon Wheel. "That water caravan that got hit a few weeks back? That was his work. He sold out his own ponies to a gang of raiders."

Several ponies murmured. One of the pipe-rifle guards said, "Brahmin-shit."

"He told the raiders when and where they'd be," Dusty said, glaring at the guard. "The mercenaries he had guarding them? They abandoned the caravan right before the raiders showed up. These were ponies he was supposed to protect, and he sold them out to a bunch of butchers. I saw the wreckage. The raiders slaughtered them. They cooked and ate a stallion in front of his family. They made a mother watch as they tied up and raped her little filly! And *he*'s the one who made it all happen!"

Dusty was trembling, and forced himself to take a step back. The other ponies looked around, uncertain, but when nopony said anything, he continued. “That’s the kind of shit he does. I’ve seen it before. Maybe not as bad as this, but bad all the same. I used to be a Ranger. I was on the ground in Stinkpit. I went in, did my job, got Big Gun’s trader out. You know, I heard a lot of talk, afterwards. Ponies were talking about how Stinkpit had gone raider, how they’d massacred some other travelers, skinned some ponies, even tortured the trader they’d captured, stuff like that.

“But I was there, and when I look back, all I see is a bunch of scared ponies defending their homes from the ponies attacking them. They weren’t raiders. Hell, the trader we were supposed to be rescuing was hosted in their makeshift inn, not a scratch on him. He was hiding under his cozy little bed. And you know, I would have just thought it was all some horrible mistake, some... misunderstanding or miscommunication. Except the same damn thing happened again in Hayseed, and more innocent ponies died. And it just keeps on happening. Only this time, this time we found out what he’d done, and he tried to have us killed for it.”

The other ponies’ looks had grown decidedly uncomfortable. A couple of the ponies in the back were quietly murmuring to each other.

“So what’s the word on Rust?” Dusty asked, which was met with several blinks of surprise before Wagon Wheel spoke up.

“What about Rust?”

“Big Gun didn’t have a water caravan slaughtered for giggles,” Dusty said. “Wild Runner might, but not him. He did it for profit and power. He’s already taken two towns by force, just to get cheaper goods. Now Mareford’s water caravan gets hit right after leaving Rust? How long until he starts pushing for a change of management?”

More murmurs sounded across the crowd. The bolt-action guard spoke up first. “I heard rumors in Mareford. Bunch of ponies grumbling about Rust, saying it was them that hit the caravan.”

“Brahminshit,” Wagon Wheel said with a grunt. “I know Steel Shot. He wouldn’t put up with anything like that, and he sure as Tartarus wouldn’t go hiring some raiders. Hell, Rust puts out a hefty bounty on raiders. No way.”

“You’re right,” Dusty said. “He wouldn’t. But Big Gun would.”

Wagon Wheel mulled it over for several seconds. “You sure about

all this?"

"Not a doubt," Dusty said. "We hit those raiders a day or two after they hit the caravan. They had a message telling them exactly when and where the caravan would be left unguarded. We rescued a couple ponies that confirmed the guards left them just before the raiders showed up. And then when we go looking into it, Gun's mercs attack us, and we find out it was on his orders."

Wagon Wheel cursed.

"That would explain some things," Emerald said, quietly. "I've heard of some questionable things around Mareford, and the rumors about Stinkpit and Hayseed."

"And that's just the stuff we know about," Dusty said. "There's been a lot of caravans getting hit by raiders lately." He looked to Wagon Wheel again. "Might be good to get the word out to the other caravans. If he's associating with raiders and selling out his own ponies, there's no telling what he might be willing to do to other traders."

Wagon Wheel slowly nodded. "I think I'll do that, yeah."

"...Out of curiosity," Dusty asked, "how much of a bounty did he put on my head?"

Wagon Wheel hesitated before saying, "Four thousand caps for bringing in proof of your death. Another five hundred for each pony with you."

"Shit. Bounty like that'll bring out every two-bit bounty hunter and wannabe merc in southern Equestria." Dusty shook his head. "Still, if that's the price for doing the right thing, I'll take it."

After a moment of consideration, Wagon Wheel spoke again. "I'll share your side of the story, too. Won't say anypony'll believe it, but I'll put it out there."

"Thanks," Dusty said, and offered a hoof. They shook. "And I'll get out of your manes. Just be careful out there. Seems like all the worst shit is stirring up, lately."

"Yeah, I'll do that," Wagon Wheel said, though I could still see a hint of skepticism to his expression as Dusty walked off.

Scatter looked back to Starlight. "You two are with him?" When we nodded, he added, "And those raiders he was talking about, those the same ones you were talking about?"

“Yep,” Starlight said.

The bolt-action guard stepped up again, his smile uneven. “Well, now I *really* want to hear that story.”

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We spent most of the evening in the caravan’s suite, talking with the guards and crew. I even produced Gutrip’s notebook, showing the message in question. It got passed around, to muttered curses and dark looks.

If that hadn’t been enough to draw their sympathy, the story of Silverline and Quicksilver certainly was. Wagon Wheel was nearly in tears halfway through that part of the story, and shared a supporting hug with his wife, Summer Breeze. Scatter, on the other hoof, looked almost murderous.

Thankfully, the story put everypony on the same side, relieving the tension that had hung in the air. Soon we had all moved on to more pleasant stories. There was still the occasional bout of violence, of course. Fairwind, the guard with the bolt-action, told a story of fighting off a small band of ill-equipped raiders that had tried to ambush the caravan some years back. Listening to a story of four malnourished raiders charging a small caravan with machetes, throwing spears, and a single rusty shotgun, only to fail miserably in the face of superior firepower, seemed almost quaint in comparison to my own experiences.

Once again, I found myself spending a good while in quiet reflection at how I had come to such a point as to think of a life-and-death experience, however small, in such terms of insignificance.

But there were also more relaxed stories of simple Wasteland life. Various funny anecdotes and happy encounters filled most of the tales. There was always some undercurrent of the realities of the Wasteland, whether it was looking for food and water, or the simple tedium of being a guard on the watch for raiders and bandits, but the stories of regular life and happy times made me smile.

Sickle joined the gathering as soon as she learned of the dozen new ponies in town. It was clear enough that she’d been hitting the booze and chems; she smelled of alcohol, her pupils were mismatched in size, and she’d twitch and shudder on occasion. That said, she actually managed to be relatively pleasant.

Admittedly, “relatively” for Sickle meant she didn’t threaten to crush anypony’s skull or the like, and she didn’t pin anypony to the ground and sit on them when blatantly trolling for sex.

Given his prior interest in Starlight and myself, I wasn’t at all surprised when Scatter’s initial reaction of suspicion and distaste was replaced with interest in what she offered. It also didn’t help that Sickle practically sprawled between the guards—dwarfing all of them, even lying on her side—and started prompting them for stories of a more erotic nature.

We eventually split into two groups: those who remained with Sickle, telling tales of excess and prior conquests, and those of us who discussed less lecherous topics. It wasn’t too long before the tales in the other group came to the point that Sickle led Scatter and the two pipe-rifle guards—I never did get their names—back to her own room. I’d say she practically dragged them, given her own aggressive enthusiasm, but they didn’t show any signs of reluctance. Among those who remained, there were a few snickers and the shaking of heads, but nopony seemed to think too much of it.

It reminded me of the seedier stories I had heard about soldiers and sailors; away from home and loved ones for days, weeks, even months, then arriving in some town and seeking out whatever quick pleasures they could find in the brief window of opportunity.

They returned about half an hour later. Scatter walked in, rubbing a hoof at his snout and occasionally drawing a hoof back to look at it, as if expecting to find blood. One of the other guards was snickering and nudging his shoulder, while the other just looked kind of awkward.

Scatter finally lowered his hoof as he passed by us, giving us a disgruntled look. “Your friend’s kind of a bitch.”

“Only kind of?” Starlight said with a snicker. “Wow. She must have really liked you.”

The rest of the gathering chuckled, and a fair amount of light-hearted ribbing followed, including some teasing at how desperate they must have been. It’s probably good Sickle hadn’t accompanied them back, as she likely would have maimed someone on principle.

The only one who didn’t show up at the gathering was Dusty. Even Emerald showed up a couple times, bringing some food and exchanging some friendly words with Wagon Wheel, but she seemed distracted and

quickly excused herself. Not that I'm surprised Dusty avoided the gathering. After the mention of bounties and the discussion that had followed, his presence would probably be awkward for all involved.

It occurred to me that I had a bounty on my head, too. That was certainly a first. Admittedly, the bounty was for Whisper Winds, the earth pony, not Whisper, the changeling, but I'd put a lot of commitment to my current alias. I could shake the bounty with a simple change of form, but it was an option I'd rather avoid.

There was at least some dark humor that, if somepony did kill me, they'd be faced with the difficulty of convincing other ponies that the bug-creature they brought in was the earth pony they were trying to claim the bounty on; it seemed unlikely that they would be able to profit from my death.

That wasn't much consolation.

Deciding to check up on Dusty and discuss a few things about our newfound criminal status, I excused myself from our little gathering. While Starlight stayed to talk with the traders, I made my way back to our suite.

Dusty wasn't there, but Sickle was, lying against the outer wall with a foreleg hanging out the window, and looking precisely as if she had just had wild and vigorous sex with three different stallions in rapid succession. Her head wobbled as it turned my way, her pupils pinpricks despite the dim lighting, and she smiled upon seeing me. "Wiiiisp," she said in a quiet and almost dream-like tone. She raised a hoof, beckoning me over. "Wisp, c'mere."

I took a hesitant step forward. "Are... you okay?"

She gave a quiet chuckle, her head leaning to the side to rest on the edge of the window, and her hoof dropped to her side. "Yeah, I'm good." Her eyes shifted, staring off into space. "I think the buck wore off."

"Something's still working," I noted, and she cracked a smile again.

"Yeah, I loaded up on painkillers. They're great for relaxing." She trailed off, once again staring off into space. A small frown slowly formed.

I took another step closer. Even with the excessive amounts of drugs likely involved, such erratic swings in behavior are always concerning. "Is something wrong?"

"Nah," she said. "Just thinking."

I immediately imagined all the snarky things Starlight might say in

response to that, ranging from comments on smoke or grinding gears, to simple expressions of concern.

Sickle, oblivious to my thoughts, beckoned with her hoof again. “C’mere already.”

“What were you thinking about?” I asked, taking another cautious step forward.

“Eh, nothing,” Sickle drawled, then immediately contradicted herself. “That green bitch.”

I halted, ears perking up. “Emerald?”

“Yeah, green bitch.” She stared out the window, blinking a few times. “She thinks I’m a good pony or some shit.”

I moved up beside her, looking on with curiosity. “She does?”

“She’s stupid.” Sickle blinked a few more times before realizing how close I was, then smiled as she reached out. I was too close and too slow to react as she looped a foreleg around my shoulders and dragged me off my hooves. I ended up laid out against her side, pinned under a heavy foreleg.

Her head wobbled as she leaned over, her eyes struggling to focus on me, and giving me a face-full of sour breath as she spoke in a low, slurred voice that I assume was supposed to be seductive. “Hey, you want to do your shape thingy and change into that big-ass stallion? Bet you could put all three of those little colts to shame.”

My ears pinned back as I frowned at her. “I’d rather not, thank you.”

“Oh. Okay.” Her tone was disappointed, her smile fading a bit. She shifted her position. Her leg lifted from my chest, but before I could capitalize on my freedom, her hooves had closed on my sides, and she bent down, shoving her massive muzzle between my hind-legs.

“Hey!” I snapped, planting my hooves on her head and shoving. “Sickle, knock it off!”

“Settle down,” she mumbled, shaking her head to throw off my hooves and pressing in again, her snout practically ramming against my groin.

I kicked and twisted, my heart pounding. “Sickle! Stop it!”

Her head twisted as I shoved, shaking off my hooves again, and I kicked wildly to push her away, but she ignored it. “I’m just trying to—damnit! Stop squirming!” Her hooves tightened around me, pinning me to the floor as she pressed in again, overpowering any attempt I could make to stop her.

“Settle down, I—ow!”

One of my wild kicks had managed to catch her in the neck, and while I doubt it did anything to harm her, it was apparently just enough to catch her attention. Her head snapped back, eyes wide and blinking, as if surprised by the blow. Then her expression hardened into one of furious rage.

She hit me.

I know this only from later deduction, as I have no memory of the blow itself. The whole transition from that look of rage to what came after is a jumbled mess of confused thoughts.

The brain does strange things when recovering from unconsciousness.

For some undecipherable period of time, I was convinced I was walking through a tunnel leading out from my hive. In that dreamlike state, the faint, wavering light in front of me was the end of that tunnel, leading out into the open air beyond. My face felt odd, as if there was some weight resting across it. I thought it was wet. I drifted through the tunnel like a ghost.

Slowly, the feeling of my body manifested once again. Something touched the side of my face, which I was slowly coming to realize felt *wrong*. My eyes cracked open, returning a blurry view of a silhouette before me. The lip of a bottle touched my lips, a cold fluid splashing into my mouth. I drunkenly reached up to grip at the object, holding on as I swallowed.

A tingle ran through me, mostly my face, and the world slowly coalesced. The light I had been following through the tunnel revealed itself to be the bare bulb hanging from the room’s ceiling. The taste that lingered in my mouth was that of a healing potion. The silhouette looming above me was Sickle.

Her ears hung low, and her expression was one I had never seen on her before: concern. It struck me as completely bizarre, even as my brain struggled to come up to speed.

As I was slowly piecing together exactly what had led to that moment, Sickle spoke.

“Sorry.”

The ember of anger that was flaring up, ready to consume my emotions, was instantly snuffed out. If it had been anyone else, that one word, on its own, would have been grossly insufficient, but this was Sickle. Rather than showing any form of contrition over the terrible things she had done, she

wore them with a sense of pride.

Now she looked ashamed.

I lay there for several seconds, blinking as my eyes finished focusing. “...What was that—” I halted immediately; my voice was wrong. I lifted my head to look down at my black, hole-filled hooves, still clutching the bottle of the healing potion Sickle had fed me.

My head reeled, and I laid it down again with a soft groan. The surface it met was soft. I was lying in a bed.

Sickle rumbled, her voice low and quiet. “You changed when I hit you,” she said. “I thought I might have killed you.”

I focused on breathing for a couple of seconds, until my head cleared up, and tried speaking again. “What was that all about?”

She grunted faintly, rolling her jaw. I could see her eyes better; the pupils still looked constricted, but much less so than before. Finally, she grumbled. “I just... I dunno, wanted to do something nice for you.” She looked away, reaching up to wearily rub a hoof at the side of her face. “Sure fucked that up.”

My ears pinned back. “And that was supposed to be something *nice*?”

She grimaced. “...Shit. The only things I’m good at is fighting and fucking. I know you had fun fucking Star. Thought maybe you’d like some more fucking. It made sense at the time. Dunno why...” Her face slowly contorted into a grimace. “And fuck, it ain’t like that kick even hurt! I just got so pissed off...”

The look of anger quickly bled away, leaving her staring blankly at the floor.

I stared at her for a long time. A part of me wanted to snap at her; to just verbally lay into her over what a stupid idea it had been. The more logical part of my mind recognized how pointless it would be. She was already making an unprecedented apology. Venting might be cathartic, but it wouldn’t be productive.

So instead, I asked, “Why did you want to do something nice for me?”

She shrugged weakly, without answering. Several seconds passed before she turned further, presenting her back to me, and flopped down on her side. The impact jostled me and produced a loud screeching groan from the bed, but the tortured piece of furniture held.

After a long silence, I spoke again. "Sickle?"

Still no answer.

Eventually, I rolled to my side and weakly pushed myself up. My head spun, my heartbeat loud in my ears, but I eventually made it. Touching a hoof to my sore muzzle revealed that it was sticky with congealing blood.

I looked around. I was in Sickle's room, which was littered with empty cans, various alcohol and pill bottles, and the thick slabs of metal that formed her armor. It took a moment to find the wash basin, and my horn lit up, floating over a washcloth. Even that minor effort sent a faint throb through my head.

Sickle continued to lie there, her eyes half lidded as she stared at the wall.

I had cleaned away most of the blood when Sickle finally spoke.

"I'm leaving in the morning."

I finished wiping away the blood that had run down my cheek, and floated the washcloth back over to the wash basin. Then I looked to her. "Why?"

Her eyes closed. "Cause I'm going to kill one of you if I don't."

"...You're scared something like this will happen again."

Her jaw tightened. "I ain't scared of shit."

I quickly rephrased that in a more palatable fashion. "You're concerned for our well-being."

She slowly relaxed, and eventually grunted. "Yeah. Sure."

I reached out, gently resting a hoof on the side of her thick neck. "You're not used to caring about other ponies, are you?"

She gave a faint snort that I took as an affirmation.

"I'm guessing you haven't had many friends before?"

She went still, her eyes opening again. For a moment, she didn't move, or even breathe. She simply stared at the wall in front of her. Then she took a long, slow, breath, and spoke. Her words were quiet, but hard. "There's only been one pony I ever thought of as a friend, and I beat him to death."

"...Was it—"

"On purpose," she said. "And I was sober. And I made sure he suffered."

The muscles of her neck had tightened under my hoof. A tremble ran through her body. Cautiously, I asked, "What happened?"

Her ears flicked, and she closed her eyes.

When it was clear I wasn't getting an answer, I changed tracks.  
“Don't leave.”

“...Why not?”

I stroked my hoof gently along her neck. “Because when you're not being intentionally grotesque or trying to smash my face in, I've come to somewhat like you.”

She snorted. “So, what, when I'm asleep?”

“No,” I said. I scooted forward, gingerly lowering myself to lie against the back of her shoulders and neck. My foreleg rested gently across her neck, while my head rested against the back of hers; I ignored the dirty, oily smell of her scraggly mane. “When you set aside the whole emotional armor thing you've built up, and try to be friendly.”

She was silent for a long time before giving a soft huff, deflating as the tension in her body slowly faded away. After that, she remained still and silent.

I remained there, slowly stroking along her neck as she lay there, until I drifted off into unconsciousness once more.



I distantly heard the sound of the door shutting, and the soft clopping of hooves on the wooden floor. A hoof touched my side, giving a gentle but firm shake, and words pierced the fog of sleep to reach my groggy brain.

“Whisper, put your disguise on.”

It was Dusty's voice. I groaned something unintelligible and slowly focused on my magic. My head throbbed as I did so, but a few seconds later, my magic washed over me, transforming me into my favored earth-pony guise.

I rolled onto my back, my foreleg sliding away from Sickle's neck, and slowly blinked up at Dusty.

“You need to get up,” Dusty said, his expression serious. “We have a job.”

## Chapter Twenty-One

# Shadows of the Past

I staggered blearily from Sickle's room, squinting against the morning light that shone through the open window. Even dulled by the ever-present clouds, it was uncomfortably bright to me. My head felt better than it had the night before, but the headache still lingered in the background, and I found my balance wasn't quite as it should be. Despite the handicap, I made my way to the table and collapsed onto one of the chairs, groaning softly. Dusty was still in Sickle's room, and I could hear him trying to rouse her.

It was then that I realized Starlight was sitting at the table as well, wearing an expression of concern. Only then did I realize how the situation must have looked.

I groaned softly, raising my hooves to rub at the side of my head. "Okay," I murmured. "Just so there are no misconceptions, no, we didn't have sex. Sickle is... well, I'm not sure exactly what's going on with her, but I think she needed someone to be there for her last night."

Starlight cocked her head to the side, staring at me as if I'd just babbled gibberish. "...Seriously? Sickle?"

"Yeah," I grunted, letting my hooves fall to the table. I slowly sank down until my head rested on the surface. "It's... I don't know. I'm not even sure what to think of it. Something's wrong."

"Well, yeah," Starlight said. "It's Sickle. There's probably a *lot* wrong." She was frowning. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I repeated. Then, "I think I might have a tiniest bit of a concussion."

"A *concussion*?" Starlight sat upright, ears standing alert. "What the hell happened? Did she hit you?"

"Yeah," I said once more. When Starlight's expression grew more surprised, I hastily added, "Though I kicked her first. But that was because... uh, it doesn't matter. It's all taken care of."

"Taken care of?" Starlight said, as if it was the dumbest thing she'd ever heard. "You're nearly passing out on the table because of a concussion and

it's taken care of?"

"I'm just groggy and waking up still," I weakly replied. "And she said she's sorry."

"Oh, well that makes it all better! She's—" Starlight halted, blinked, then turned another skeptical expression my way. "Wait, she said she's sorry? Like, she used those actual words and everything?"

"Yeah," I said, one more time.

Starlight sat back in her chair, blinking. In the end, the only reply she could come up with was a distant, "Huh."

I slowly pushed myself up, wobbling a little, but held. "Look, I'll take care of... whatever it is going on with Sickle. Don't worry about it. What's this 'job' Dusty was talking about?"

"Not a clue," Starlight said with a shrug. "He just woke me up, told me we had a job, then went to get you two." She grit her teeth. "He better not have taken a job from Amber."

I groaned again, sharing her concern.

It was a minute before Dusty returned with Sickle in tow. She plodded along after him, her expression tired and dark, brows furrowed. I'd seen her angry several times before, but I don't think I'd ever seen her looking grumpy. Something about it struck me as incredibly dangerous, as if she might simply beat to death the next pony to commit the offense of being cheerful in her presence.

Starlight looked my way, quirking an eyebrow questioningly, but I just shrugged.

We followed Dusty downstairs to one of the inn's back rooms, and filed in one at a time. Inside, I was surprised to meet not Amber, but Emerald.

"Good morning," she said, giving a halfhearted smile. "Have some coffee."

I eagerly took one of the cups and downed its contents, and started in on a second as we got situated at the table. Sickle simply sat on the floor beside the table, looming like a dark cloud off to our side. Her eyes remained fixed on Emerald the whole time.

"So," Dusty said as he set his cup down, his hooves placed evenly on either side of it. "What in the wild world of Equestria do you want to hire us for?"

"Saving some lives, I hope," Emerald said, her smile fading.

Dusty gave a smile that looked more like a grimace. "So you've said. I was hoping for a little more detail than that."

"Of course, sorry. I'm... not terribly used to this sort of thing." She cleared her throat, repositioning herself, and spent a few seconds fiddling with her cup before quickly setting it down. "There's some farmsteads nearby. I learned that one of them was hit by raiders in the last few days. I know the couple that lives there, Quartz and Flint. They've got a couple of foals. I want to make sure they're safe, and since there are raiders out, I'd rather like to have some capable ponies around in case they come across me."

"So I want to hire you to accompany me to their farmstead. If the raiders took Quartz and Flint, then they need to be rescued. And... and I want you to make sure these raiders are never able to do something like this again."

Dusty slowly nodded. "Yeah... yeah, we might be interested in that. Though, no offense, but it might be better if you stay in town. We can check on them for you, and if we get in a scrap with a bunch of raiders, it'll be safer if you were back in town."

"I appreciate that, hon," Emerald said with a sad smile. "All the same, I need to go there myself. I know what kinds of things raiders can do to a pony. I'm sure they'll appreciate a group of well-armed ponies galloping to their rescue, but they're going to need a friendly face. 'Sides, it's all well and good to talk about ideals when I'm hiding behind a wall."

"I suppose so," Dusty said. "All the same, it makes the job a fair deal more complicated than it needs to be."

"Oh." Emerald looked down to her cup again. "Sorry about that, but I'm afraid I'm going to have to insist. I need to be there. If it's any consolation, I've spent my time out in the Wasteland, on my own, sometimes for months at a time. Those are lessons I don't think I'll ever forget."

Dusty frowned, idly tapping a hoof against the table. "Well... can't say I like it, but if that's what you're hiring us for..." He looked back to us. "Sound good with all you?"

Starlight nodded, as did I.

"Yeah," Sickle rumbled, without any apparent enthusiasm. She was still glowering at Emerald.

"Okay then," Dusty said, turning back to Emerald. "We'll need to discuss

some conditions, but for now, let's go with it." He leaned forward, crossing his forelegs on the table. "Now let's hear the details of this job."

Emerald extended her leg, displaying her PipBuck and the map on its screen. She'd already prepared a set of markers, highlighting a pair of locations out in the Wasteland. "The farmstead is about half a day to the southeast. I'm not sure exactly where the raiders call home, but it seems they're based further south, likely in one of the ghost towns near this other mark. I can copy all of these over to your PipBuck, too."

"Thanks," Starlight said with a nod, still staring at the screen. "That's a long ways from town if raiders are around. Why were they out there?"

"Not much choice," Emerald said. "There ain't so many places you can grow crops nowadays. Quartz and Flint got a working well. Barely enough water for some small fields, but it feeds their family with a bit spare to trade. I'm guessing the raiders decided the food should go to them, instead."

Dusty hummed softly. "What do we know about these raiders?"

"Not much, I'm afraid. They've been hitting the occasional trader and farmstead, but this is as close as they've come to Gemstone. They've let some ponies go alive, too, always with some warning about what happens to ponies that fight back, so I've heard a few things. They're led by some mare named Boomer, and they seem well-equipped for raiders. From what I've heard, they've cobbled together a bunch of heavy armor and have a real thing for explosives."

"Boomer?" Starlight echoed. "What a dumb name. Wonder if she's related to Banger?"

"We're not that lucky," Dusty said, then turned to Sickle. "You know anything about Boomer?"

"No."

Dusty hesitated a moment, then shook his head and turned back to Emerald. "Any idea on numbers?"

"Sorry," she said. "The stories are all over the place. At least six, maybe double that."

"Not much to go on." He stared down at the map, frowning, but finally nodded. "Yeah, we can work with that. You're sure they're based around here?"

"Not entirely, but the areas they've hit form a nice semi-circle around

that area.”

“Makes sense,” Dusty said. “Raiders tend to be lazy about setting up shop. From what I saw with the Militia, they always seem to establish themselves in existing structures rather than build anything from scratch, and I’m not seeing many other places they could commandeer.” He sat back. “On the plus side, raiders also tend to be incredibly unsubtle. If they’re in the area, we should be able to find them, assuming we can’t track them from the farmstead.”

Normally, I’d expect Sickle to chime in with some comment, but she remained silent.

There were only a few more questions, such as descriptions of Quartz and Flint, and any other details Emerald could come up with. It was very brief.

“So that’s about the sum of it,” Emerald said. “Which I guess brings us to the matter of pay.” She produced a large sack, loaded with several pounds of bottle caps, and set it on the table. “Fifteen hundred caps, to check on the farmstead and eliminate those raiders.”

Dusty slowly nodded. “Suits me fine,” he said, while Starlight and I nodded. “Still seems strange, you hiring some ponies to kill some other ponies, with all that Kindness and Generosity talk.”

“Believe me, hon, I understand.” Emerald’s ears hung low. “I’d love to find some peaceful solution to this situation, but allowing somepony to be hurt because you refuse to act isn’t showing anypony Kindness.” She gave a weak, halfhearted smile. “At least I can make a claim to Generosity by offering some of my savings to help these ponies.”

“Don’t get me wrong,” Dusty said. “I think it’s the right thing to do. Hell, I feel a bit scummy taking your caps when there might be lives on the line.”

Emerald quickly shook her head. “I wouldn’t ask you to do this for free. It’s a dangerous business, and if you’re going out there to risk yourself for strangers, you deserve all the material reward I can offer.”

Dusty looked back to us. “Well, I’m up for it. You guys?”

“I’m good,” Starlight said.

I nodded.

Sickle made a single grunt.

"Well, good," Emerald said as she stood. "I'll go get my stuff and meet you out front when you're all ready to go."

"No, hold on there," Dusty said, raising a hoof. "We aren't quite done, yet. Like I said, if we're going to take this job, and you're insisting on going out with us, then we need to set some conditions."

Emerald hesitated, but nodded. "I suppose that might be fair. What conditions?"

"Just the one, I suppose." Dusty gestured a hoof in the general direction of the town gate. "As soon as we're outside those walls, you follow my orders to the letter. If I tell you to do something, I need you to do it right then, no questions asked, no hesitation, no second thoughts. Got it?"

Her ears flicked back. "Well, I guess that depends on what sort of thing you're asking me to do."

"No, it doesn't," Dusty said, his expression firm. "And it won't be asking, it'll be telling. You're asking us to go with you into a dangerous situation, where something can go wrong without any notice. You might be the kindest, most giving pony I've ever met, but when it comes to fighting, I don't know a thing about you."

He swept his hoof back to indicate the rest of us. "I've fought with these ponies. I know what they can do, and I trust them to do their job. I don't know you like that, and that means you're a liability. If you do something wrong, or something unexpected, or even just hesitate at the wrong moment, it could be one of them that ends up paying for it. If you're going with us, I need to know you'll follow my orders, whatever they are."

Emerald was frowning by the time he was done. She reached out to hold her cup again, slowly rolling it between her hooves. "I think you're a good pony and all, but you're asking for a lot of trust, there."

"I'm not going to tell you to do anything immoral," Dusty said, "but you're asking me to trust my life and the life of my companions with you. If we're going to do this, you're going to have to show the same trust back."

Emerald chewed her lip, thinking, but finally nodded. "Fair enough. You have a deal."

Dusty slowly nodded. "Then there's one last thing I need you to consider."

"What's that?"

"I can not guarantee your safety," Dusty said, slowly and clearly. "I'll do everything in my power to keep you safe, but there are no guarantees in this business. You can stay here, and you'll be safe, but if you insist on coming with us, you're going to be in danger, and there might not be a single thing we can do about that. You need to be perfectly clear that having some ponies guarding you doesn't mean this is safe, okay?"

Surprisingly, Emerald replied with a soft smile. "I understand, hon. Heck, couldn't really say I'm living up to Generosity if I'm not willing to give something, could I?"

When she was met with Dusty's critical look, she replied in a more somber tone, "I understand, and I'm still going. I'm willing to accept that risk."

Dusty contemplated her a moment longer before nodding. "Okay, then. Gear up."



I stepped out of the store and into the chilly morning air, all geared up and ready to go. My saddlebags rested a bit heavier, loaded with four days of food and water, plus half a case of spare rifle ammunition. My ammo pouch rested against my chest, the magazines all topped off, with a pair of grenades tucked in alongside them. My electronics were stashed in one bag, and a small collection of explosives were stashed in the other. My medical box was once again serving its original purpose, holding a pair of healing potions safely inside it. And my rifle, with its new suppressor attached, hung from the strap around my neck.

It was an absurd abundance of equipment compared to what I was used to, especially when most of it was intended to kill ponies, but I found the weight comforting.

Other than the new armor and the location of her PipBuck, Starlight looked no different than when we had first met. She gave me an awkward smile, which I mirrored. We both sat on the store's porch, waiting. Dusty was still inside with Emerald, going over her equipment. My head was feeling a little better, though a headache still lingered at the edge of my perception, lurking like a shadow.

The dull thump of heavy hooves and the clattering of metal on metal

preceded Sickle's arrival. She emerged from the front door with a tight frown half hidden under her muzzle. It was hard to read her expression under her helmet, but I had the impression of her glaring out through those eye slits.

She was walking past me when she halted, her head turning to me. "Whisper."

My ears flicked back as I looked up at her. She jerked her head to the side, then turned and walked in that direction. The message was clear.

I placed a hoof on Starlight's side. "Wait here. I'll be right back."

She gave a worried look, but nodded, and I stood to trot after Sickle.

Falling in beside her, I asked, "What did you—"

"Shut up," she rumbled. Her tone wasn't sharp or angry; if I had to describe it in a word, that word would be 'dark'. My mouth snapped shut so quickly you could hear my teeth click.

We walked in silence, until we reached a small, dusty clearing, tucked in behind the town's wall and well away from where most ponies traveled. She came to a halt and sat with a crash of metal.

"Sit down."

I obeyed, sitting beside her.

For almost a minute, we sat in silence, save for the soft clinking and scraping of her armor shifting with every breath. She sat staring at the ground ahead of her. Under her helm's muzzle, she was still frowning, her teeth clenched as if holding back her anger. At that moment, the only thing that seemed more dangerous than sitting next to her was trying to leave.

Then she reached up. Her hoof caught the clasp at the side of her helm, undoing it with a soft click, and she shook off the muzzle to hang against her neck. She returned to staring at the same point for a couple more seconds before speaking. "You've been asking a lot of questions."

My ears flicked back nervously. It sounded like an accusation, especially with the hint of tension in her voice. I had no idea if she expected me to answer or remain silent, but I carefully offered a quiet and inoffensive reply. "Yeah, I have."

I also silently tried to plan my escape, if things went poorly. None of those plans were terribly optimistic.

There was another pause of silence before the metal plates rattled and

scraped a little louder; she drew in a deep breath, let it out in something halfway between a sigh and a growl, and spoke again. “My dad got sick when I was fourteen,” she said, and my ears shot up. Plans for escape and evasion were immediately shelved as I focused my full faculties on the words she said.

“It was really bad. He couldn’t even stand. Mom had me and my little sister watch over him while she went to town for medicine. Should have been a couple days each way.

“Dad died a week later. We waited another week before we were sure mom wasn’t coming back. We were pretty much out of food, so we set out in the same direction mom did, looking for any signs of life, or even some old place we could scavenge from.”

She huffed faintly. “Sis only made it four days. We were both starving. We dug through a bunch of buildings, but none of them had shit in ‘em. Then we went in one, and the floor broke under my fat ass. Fell into the basement with all the junk and shit down there. I was fine, just some scrapes and bruises, but sis... she got a broken leg, and sliced up her side on some nails or something. Just a couple little cuts, but we couldn’t get the bleeding to stop.

“I kept going. Found some ugly looking plants to eat that only made me a little sick, but it was food. Managed to live off that for a few more days. I dunno, maybe a week? Finally crushed some stupid spitting fly thing. Tasted like shit, but it was the first good meal I’d had since leaving home.

“Anyway, a couple days later I finally stumbled into some ponies, with a nice walled-off fort.” She snorted. “Yeah, ‘cept I was too happy to find ponies to notice all the spikes and skulls and shit. Walked right up to a fucking raider camp and said ‘hi’. Must have made their fucking day.

“So yeah, they grab me, all laughing and cheering over their luck. Bunch of ‘em pin me down, then they start arguing over who gets me first. That’s when this one asshole shows up. He was pretty much the boss’s second-in-command, but nopony liked him, ‘cause he was the kind of asshole that always pulls rank to get what he wants. But, you know, the boss said he outranked them, so they have to let him have first crack at the pony they caught.

“So he fucked me,” she said. My ears pinned back, but otherwise, I forced

myself to remain silent and neutral. "I just went still, let him finish. Soon as he pulls out, he's all grinning and boasting to everypony else, and that's when I kick him as hard as I fucking can. And yeah, I wasn't as big as I am now, and was pretty light on food, but I was still big and strong. Caught him right with the edge of the hoof, too, right in the junk. Tore off one of his balls and cut him open good. Blood all over the place."

Her lips curled back, baring her teeth. "He went down, and I got on top of him and just started beating the fuck out of him. And you know, the other raiders hated his ass, so they were all laughing and cheering me on, like it was some show. I'd beaten him till he couldn't move before they finally decided he'd had enough and grabbed me again.

"Cept then, the real boss showed up, made 'em stop. He was a big fucker." She lifted a hoof to thump against her chest. "'Bout as big as me now. And him, he liked what he saw. Said some bullshit about... beautiful rage or something. You know what he did?"

Her head turned to look at me. I nearly winced, and gave a tiny shake of my head.

She turned away again. "He offered me a place in his gang. I'd beat the shit out of one of his best ponies, so he thought I'd make a good replacement. Guess he saw potential in me or some shit. I'd get to be his... I dunno, apprentice or whatever the fuck you'd call it. Hell, he even offered to let me finish off that asshole that fucked me. And you know, I was still so fucking pissed, I went for it." She lifted a hoof, thumping it down into the dry dirt. "I just kept hitting him until I'd crushed his skull to paste."

She let out a dry, humorless chuckle. "Course, a couple of those cunts whined that they didn't get the chance to fuck me. The boss? Heh, he tells them they can fuck me all they want. 'Cept then he points to the pony I'd just beat to death, and told 'em all that I might do that to them if I didn't like it. And I'm just sitting there all blood-spattered, panting, and glaring back at those fuckers, and you know what I saw?"

Her mouth slowly parted in a savage grin. "They were scared of me. Not like... terrified or some shit, more like... I dunno, respect for how strong I was. Heh. That morning, I'd been lost, alone, barely making it day to day, and now? Now I had twenty fucking raiders around me, and they were all *scared* of me. I felt like I was the baddest fucking pony in the Wasteland.

Like nothing could fucking touch me any more. I *liked* it.

“‘Cept, you know, they still tried to fucking rape me. So the next morning, I walk down from the boss’s roost, grab the first one of those dipshits I come across, pin him down by his neck, and fuck his little pea-brain out. Right in front of everypony, give ‘em a good show. Sure enough, one of the others tries to get some. I give him one warning, then I beat his ass until he can’t walk. And you know, the boss is kinda pissed that I broke *another* of his goons, ‘cept he goes down and kicks the guy’s ass himself for trying shit after he warned their asses about what would happen.

“So yeah, message delivered. Heh. Nopony fucked with me.”

She paused, her smile slowly fading away as she thought. “...Went on my first raid, what, a week later? I dunno. Some dinky little caravan, only had two ponies. They killed one of ‘em, grabbed the other. Some young stallion, kinda scrawny. Half the gang started tearing through their cart, but the others decided to have fun with him. Beat the shit out of him, then started fucking him.”

She huffed faintly. “Hell, couple times I thought, maybe I should feel more, you know, sympathy or some shit. I’d almost been there. ‘Cept I wasn’t. I was stronger than those other raiders, so I came out on top. Except I wasn’t just stronger than them. I was stronger than everypony. *Everypony*. And that scrawny little fucktoy was another reminder of that. I wasn’t some helpless little bitch. As long as I had ponies like him squirming under my hoof, I was in charge.

“So I dived right in and helped them out. Hell, it was fun.”

I sat silently, trying not to fidget or edge away as she described these horrible things. Even knowing that she had been a raider wasn’t enough to prepare me for hearing her discussing those things so casually. And yet, as uncomfortable as I was over the topic itself, I listened intently; every word she said helped me understand her a little better, and maybe even raiders as a whole.

“Pretty soon, I was looking to prove myself. Every time we went out on a raid, I’d look for the meanest motherfucker out there and go head-on with ‘em. Every time, I’d come out on top. Got torn up pretty good a few times, but the boss made sure I got the best armor they could cobble together, then set me loose to tear shit up. Even started calling myself Sickle, ‘cause it

sounds more dangerous.

"Got into chems during some dull stretch between raids. Getting drunk and fucking half the camp was a good way to pass the time. Never had any problems getting rutted. Guess it ain't surprising, it was almost all stallions, and they were a horny bunch of cunts. Bunch of them, and just four mares before I showed up. Heh, and two of those bitches didn't last long once we started butting heads. The stallions, though, once they got it through their thick heads that I was above them, we got along great. So long as I got my share of the chems, they could have everything else, and I was always up for a quick fuck. Hell, everypony wanted to be in when I was leading a raiding party. You ain't ever had a good rutting like a half dozen blood-crazed raiders after a good hard fight."

She paused, her pleased smile slowly fading away before speaking again. "It was the boss I really liked, though. He taught me how to fight, helped me grow strong, got me some good armor, all that shit. Introduced me to Buck, too. That helped a lot with the 'getting stronger' part. He liked me, too. Said it was 'cause I was like him. Said I was the biggest, meanest cunt in his gang, just like him. Said a bunch of... what's the word?"

She tapped her hoof on the ground a couple times before saying, "Philosophical. Yeah. He liked his philosophical shit. He said I was better than all those other ponies, because I wasn't scared of the Wasteland. 'Cause I'd run right out there and beat it into submission, while other ponies try to hide from it. Said a lot of other stuff, too. I dunno, most of it was bullshit, but he liked me.

"And holy shit, the sex." Her mouth split into a grin again. "He was the best fuck I'd ever had from a pony. Spot's the only one who's ever matched him. I mean, we were big fucking ponies. If I went all-out on any other pony, I'd just break 'em. Yeah, sometimes that's fun and all, but shit, sometimes you want somepony who can give as good as they get. But with each other? We could go fucking wild. There were times we'd walk away bruised and bleeding. Hell, first time I tried Dash, we ended up breaking down the fucking wall!" She snickered, but after a few moments, her smile started to fade again. Before long, she was expressionless, staring once more at that same spot in the dirt.

"...Some raiders like collecting trophies," she said, her voice quieter than

before. "Usually some body part. Ears, teeth, skulls. Him, he collected cutie marks." She lifted a hoof, brandishing the blades welded to her leg armor. "He'd take his blades, and cut them right out of their flank. Most of the time, he'd do it when they were still alive and kicking. He said... he said he wanted them to know. He wanted them to know that he wasn't just taking their life, he was taking what made them... *them*, like he was taking their soul. Said some bullshit about it making him stronger, or showing that he was stronger, or whatever. That philosophical shit again. And hell, he had a fuckton of 'em before I'd even got there, and he just got more over the years. Must have been a couple hundred, just this giant pile of little, colorful hides. Some of the others in the gang even pitched in, cutting off the cutie marks of their kills to give to him, like... tribute, I guess.

"I never really paid much attention to it. I did it too, just 'cause, you know, why not? It made him happy, and it was fun. But that's about all I cared about 'em. They were his thing, not mine. Once they went in the pile, I barely ever looked at 'em again. There were some that had been there for years, and I never even saw them.

"But sometimes I'd get really bored, run out of chems and stallions, and I'd need something to do. So there were a few times I'd laze around and hoof through a bit of his collection. Sometimes I'd recognize a cutie mark, maybe from some pony I'd beaten down, maybe from a fight he'd gotten into. A few came from fights we'd both been in. Those were my favorite, mostly 'cause they usually ended with us fucking.

"Then this one time, I found another cutie mark I remembered. It was years old by then, all tattered and faded and shit, but I could make it out. It was an ice-cream cone on a faded pink coat."

She paused, taking a slow, deep breath, before speaking again. Her voice was quiet, but hard as steel. "It was my mom's."

Her jaw was tight, her teeth clenched, and I could hear the faint shudder of her breath as her fury welled up. I remained as still and silent as possible, to avoid drawing any attention toward myself. I didn't even breathe. At that moment, as she seethed beside me, I was certain a single wrong word or gesture could lead to a grisly death.

"I hurt him," she said in a low growl, her spiked hooves grinding into the dirt beneath them. "And it wasn't some pussy-ass slow shit. I fucking

let loose on him.” She lifted a hoof and stomped for emphasis. “He didn’t even see it coming. I snapped off his horn. I broke his legs. I beat him until my hooves hurt.”

Her armor rattled with the angry shudder of her body. “Couple of the others came in to see what was going on. I threw their fucking heads out as a warning to the others, then got back to work on him.”

“But I didn’t just kill him.” She snorted, lips peeling back in an angry sneer. “No, I wanted to *hurt* him. And you know, he was always going on about being stronger, about taking everything from a pony, all that philosophical shit. And the one thing he valued the most? His reputation. His name. He wanted to be the biggest, baddest, scariest motherfucker in the world. Some king of the raiders that everyone in the Wasteland would know and fear. He talked about it like it was some kind of fucking immortality, about how he’d still be there even after he was dead. He really thought he could do it, too.

“I didn’t really give a shit about any of that, but he did, and I knew that was how I could *really* hurt him. Broken bones weren’t shit. He’d taken so much from me, so I was going to take *everything* from him.” Her hoof slammed against her breastplate. “I took the armor he was so proud of, wore it while I hacked away at his flanks until there wasn’t a trace of his cutie mark. I told him I was going to wear that armor, and I was going to be the scariest motherfucker in the Wasteland, so that whenever somepony saw that armor, the only pony they’d think of was me.

“I told him... that I was taking everything he’d built up, and burning it to the fucking ground. That I was going to go out there, kill his entire fucking gang, kill every raider boss he’d ever had dealings with, hell, kill every pony out there who even knew his fucking name. By the time I was done, there wouldn’t be a single pony who even knew he’d existed. He wasn’t going to have his ‘immortality’. I wasn’t just going to kill him. I was going to *destroy* him. And he screamed and flailed all the way to the end. I was halfway through gutting him when he finally passed out.”

She shook her head, a quick, rough motion that rattled the armor plates, and took a few slow, deep breaths before continuing. “And yeah, I could have just left, or taken over, or any of that shit. He was dead, after all. Like I said, I don’t buy into that philosophical brahminshit. But I had a rule, ever

since my first day as a raider: when I make a threat, I *always* follow through. And he knew it. So I walked out of the roost, wearing the old boss's armor, covered in his blood, and I killed every single motherfucker in that camp. I hung them around the place, pissed on their corpses, then set the whole place on fire and walked off."

She fell into silence again, just breathing as she glared at the same spot in the dirt. I remained still and silent, waiting for her. Eventually, she huffed out a sigh and shook her head. "So... yeah. That's how it all happened."

I felt as if she were prompting me to speak, so, cautiously, I hazarded a quiet question. "And that's why you're killing raiders now, instead of being one?"

She gave a snort, cracking a smile. "Nah. That's just why I killed those raiders. That was years ago. Now I kill 'em because it's fun."

As the silence stretched on, I hazarded another question. "If you don't mind me asking," I said, hoping I was neither overstepping nor coming across as insensitive, "why did you decide to tell me all this?"

Sickle shrugged. "I dunno. It's like... I guess I still wanted to do something for you, and you've been asking all these fucking questions. I figured this was better than smashing your face in. 'Sides, already told you I killed my last friend. Figured I'd give the rest of the story."

I stared up at her, and to my surprise, felt myself slowly starting to relax.  
"...Thank you."

She grunted.

"...Could I ask one more question?"

She grunted again.

"If your name isn't really Sickle, what is it?"

Her jaw tensed ever so slightly. "That *is* my name."

"And before?"

She sat silently for a moment, frowning, but eventually answered. "It's just shortened from another nickname." She gave a quiet huff before cutting off my next question. "Popsicle."

I blinked. "Popsicle?"

"Yeah, it..." She paused, tensing up a little... and then slowly relaxing again. "It's what my mom nicknamed me."

She took a slow breath and started talking again. "She made ice cream.

I know, it seems like the dumbest fucking thing to do in the Wasteland, but for a little filly it was great. She'd found this compressor in some ruins, and slapped together this crude freezer. Made treats for me and my sis. Was hard to find the ingredients for ice cream, but any time we found some canned fruit, or juice, or even just some old sodas, she'd mix it into some water and freeze it up, and we'd get popsicles.

"So whenever she decided we got a treat, she'd call out, like, 'Berry, popsicle!' and I'd come running. Before long, it was just 'Popsicle!' She joked I responded to it better than my real name, so she started calling me that." She finished with a shrug.

"Berry?"

Sickle froze, and for a moment, I was gravely concerned that I had stepped too far. Then she sighed. "Yeah," she said, her voice tight. "That's what my mom named me. Strawberry Shake."

I'd like to thank my training and experience as an Infiltrator in giving me the skill to keep a straight face, even as my mind teetered between boggled skepticism and hilarity over the utter absurdity of it all. I'm certain neither of those reactions would have been welcome. Instead, I stared silently, responding only with a wary nod.

Sickle huffed, then stood with a clatter of metal. "Anyway, enough of this shit. Got a job to do." She raised a hoof to walk off, then stopped. She set it down again and turned her head to stare right at me. "You tell anypony else any of this, and I'm stomping your ass."

I quickly nodded again. "I won't say a word."

She stared at me for a couple more seconds before giving a sharp nod. "Good." Then she started walking again.

"Sickle."

Part of me immediately regretted speaking up, but I knew if I didn't then, I'd probably never say what I wanted to say.

Sickle stopped and looked back at me, and I, having committed myself, spoke again.

"Since we're having a bit of a... heart-to-heart here..." She snorted at that phrase, which gave me a moment of pause, but I pushed on. "What almost happened last night? That wouldn't have happened if you were sober."

She grimaced, staring at me for a long moment before finally speaking

again. "Yeah. It wouldn't."

I nodded. "Good. I just wanted to make sure you were considering that." Then I stood, approaching her. Outwardly, I did my best to remain calm and focused. I stopped right in front of her. Then, with a quick breath to steel my nerves, I reached up with a hoof and thumped it firmly against the center of her chest. "Because if you ever get so drugged up that you try to rape somepony, like Starlight... I will stop you."

Her head had drawn back, seemingly surprised by my sudden assertiveness. Then it lowered again, glaring silently at me.

For my own part, I lowered my hoof to the ground and stood there, appearing firm and defiant, while inside I desperately hoped that I understood her as well as I thought I did.

Slowly, a smile spread across her muzzle, an eerie sight of scarred lips and bared teeth. I fought back a tremble as she chuckled, but it wasn't the angry, eager chuckle I feared. She actually sounded pleased. "Good," she said with a nod, then turned to continue walking. "Let's go."

I completely failed to hide my breath of relief, and turned to follow alongside her. I only made it a few seconds before frowning. "I hope you didn't take that as encouragement, as if I meant you didn't have to worry because I'd watch your back and make sure you didn't do anything you might regret, because—"

"Whisper," she rumbled, turning her head to smirk at me. "You're talking too much again."

I shut up and nodded, and we continued on in silence.

Dusty and Emerald were waiting out front when we returned. Emerald looked almost unrecognizable. The green shopkeeper was clad in rugged full-body bardings, which I'm pretty sure I had seen hanging up in her shop before. A magical energy rifle, one of Arclight's designs by the look of it, was slung across her back, with a regular pistol holstered at her side. Large saddlebags were supplemented by additional packs on her back. Several folds of thick, tan cloth hung around her neck, along with a pair of goggles; if she were to don the goggles and wrap the cloth around her head, the only part of her that would be visible would be her tail. She looked as well-equipped and ready to go as any of the rest of us.

Dazzle was there, too, clad in her heavy bardings, but unlike Emerald,

she looked particularly agitated.

"It's still stupid!" Dazzle was saying, gesturing wildly with a forehoof. "I'm sorry, Emerald, but it is!"

"Oh, wonderful," Sickle grumbled, pausing for a moment to latch her muzzle back in place before continuing on.

Despite Dazzle's apparent frustration, Emerald was smiling calmly. "I understand your concern, Dazzle, but I'm still going. I've hid behind these walls for too long, but there's a lot of good to be done out there."

Dusty sighed and looked over as we approached, giving a weary shake of his head.

"Then why don't you want me coming, too?" Dazzle demanded. "Cause I'm sure as hell not going to sit on my tail while you go out there trying to get yourself killed!"

Emerald stepped up, silencing Dazzle's protests with a hug. "I've got some very capable ponies watching out for me, hon. I'll be as safe as I can be outside of these walls, but if something does go wrong, and those raiders decide to come after Gemstone, the ponies here will need you."

It took a couple of seconds before Dazzle stopped resisting and relaxed, wearily raising a hoof to return the hug. Her voice was considerably quieter, and if we hadn't walked up beside Dusty already, we might not have heard it. "They need you, too."

"I appreciate the sentiment," Emerald said, giving a squeeze. "But I think you'd all manage just fine." She released, drawing back just enough to look Dazzle in the face. She raised a hoof, gently touching the younger mare's cheek. "Don't worry. I fully intend to come back, but even if I knew I wouldn't, I'd still go. There are ponies out there who need our help, and we shouldn't shy away from helping them just because it's dangerous. Even if something bad were to happen to me, goddesses forbid, don't you despair. One should never regret giving something to help their fellow ponies. Putting others before ourselves, that's how we beat the Wasteland. You remember that, you hear?"

Dazzle's expression slackened, and she stared back at Emerald for several seconds before swallowing. She gave a slow, almost timid nod. "I will," she quietly replied, blinking. I think she was near tears.

As for myself, my ears had perked up, and I watched Emerald closely.

Something was wrong there.

She patted Emerald on the shoulder and stepped back. "Now you go run along. We'll go find that family, and we'll be back before you know it."

Dazzle reluctantly left, casting a couple glances back our way as she made her way back to the gate. Emerald watched her go with a soft, almost motherly smile.

I was surprised when Sickle stepped forward to stand beside Emerald. She rumbled, but kept her voice quiet. "You know they're already dead, right?"

Starlight winced. "Shit, Sickle, come on."

Emerald drew in a breath and sighed. "Probably." Her smile wavered, slipping for a moment before holding strong. "But it doesn't change anything."

Sickle's armor rattled as she shrugged.

As Dazzle climbed the stairs to the wall top over the town gate, Emerald turned back to us. "Okay, then. Dusty's already made sure I have the proper supplies and equipment to take care of myself. Mostly, I'll stay out of your way, but if you need any aid, just ask. I have extra supplies for any ponies we find, plus all the medical supplies I had in stock. You already traded for most of what I had, but I scrounged up a few magic-laced bandages. All of it's free if you need it."

"You sure you're going to be able to carry all of that?" Dusty asked. "We can have Sickle carry some, if you need."

Sickle grumbled. "Ain't your fucking pack mule."

"Thank you," Emerald said, nodding to Dusty. "I think I'll manage. I try to keep in shape, but it's been a long time since I've done any traveling. Guess we'll see."

Straps were tightened and equipment was checked. Finally, Dusty raised his rifle. He pulled back the bolt, peered into the chamber, and let it slam shut, chambering a round. "Okay," he said, giving a final nod to us. "Let's go."

I mimicked his actions, and then we were walking. The gate opened, and we passed through it, while Dazzle watched us pass below her with a sad expression.

But mostly, I watched Emerald, and waited.

We made our way down the path leading away from Gemstone, and followed alongside the ancient railroad tracks. Our path led us out along the level low-ground. We walked, while I bided my time. It must have been ten minutes and most of a mile before we made our way around the edge of a hill and passed out of sight of the town.

I was just drawing in a breath to speak when Emerald spoke first.

"Hold up," she said, coming to a halt.

I shut my mouth, eying her with a mixture of wariness and curiosity.

When everyone had halted, Emerald drew in a steadyng breath, then turned to one of her packs. She reached in, slowly drawing out a large bag, and tossed it. It landed between us with the clinking rattle of bottle caps. "I'm doubling your pay for one extra condition."

"What the hell?" Dusty frowned at her. "You couldn't have asked us in town?"

Emerald shook her head, blinking slowly. Her own ears had drooped, and she swallowed in a way that suggested she had a lump in her throat.

Something was very wrong.

Dusty looked down to the bag, then back to Emerald. His expression softened just a hair. "What's the condition?"

Emerald swallowed again. Her voice was thick as she spoke. "Once you've done what I hired you for..." She hesitated, casting a quick glance back the way we had come before looking to Dusty again. "You go back to Gemstone, and you tell them I died fighting the raiders."

Starlight's eyes went wide, her head drawing back. Sickle just tilted her armored head.

And Dusty glared back at Emerald. "Seriously? That's what this is all about? You're faking your own death?"

"I am," Emerald said. "I have to."

"Why?" Dusty demanded. "What possible reason could you, of all ponies, have to fake your own death?" His expression abruptly softened, looking concerned. "Did something happen?"

She slowly shook her head. "I'd really rather not say. I'm sorry."

"Well you'd better say, if you want any chance of me picking up that sack. Shit, Emerald, you know how many ponies you're going to hurt, just disappearing like that? I'm not about to put that kind of pain on a pony

unless it's for a damn good reason, and I'm going to need to know what that reason is."

Emerald looked around at us, then to the sack, sitting in the dirt. None of us moved toward it. After a moment, she deflated, slowly sinking to her haunches. A hoof went up to her chest, slipping into a pouch. "It's because of this," she said, and pulled out a single, uncrimped bottle cap.

We all looked on in varying degrees of confusion.

She cradled the cap in her hooves, looking down at it as she slowly turned it over. "That job you took from Amber. She paid you with caps like this, didn't she?"

"She did," Dusty said, brows furrowing. "It was odd, sure, but what's that got to do with this?"

"Because I know where they came from," Emerald said.

"...And?"

"And..." Emerald stared at the cap. After a moment, she tucked it back into the pouch she'd retrieved it from and rose to her hooves. "And I know the only way for Gemstone to be safe is for me to leave."

"Hold up there," Dusty said, raising a hoof. "I'm going to need a bit more than that."

"That's why I'm paying you extra."

"That's not what I mean, damnit!" Dusty shook his head angrily. "It ain't about the caps! I don't care about caps if it means doing the wrong thing, and no offense intended, but this is sounding all sorts of stupid to me."

"I'm sorry," Emerald said, her ears falling as she looked away. "I can't tell you any more. Not without it being dangerous to you, too."

Dusty cocked his head, staring at her for a second. "Emerald, what the hell are you getting us into?"

She stood there, silent, chewing on her lip. I stepped in to give just a little more pressure.

I spoke with a soft, gentle tone. "Emerald, you've talked a lot about Kindness and Generosity. How about Honesty?"

She gaze shifted to me, her expression sad. I replied with a soft, supporting smile, and she sank down as the final resistance faded.

"I know where those caps came from," she said, slowly and carefully. "Which means I know the pony Amber works for. And I know how bad that

is, because I used to work for the same pony.”

A few looks were exchanged between us before Starlight spoke up. “But... if *you* worked for them, then why—”

“It was a long time ago,” Emerald said, and slowly shook her head. “I was a different pony back then. Did some things I’m not proud of. Things I’m still ashamed of.” She cast a glance toward Sickle, then quickly looked away again. Sickle stared back, silent, her jaw tightening.

Emerald chewed her lip for a moment before continuing. “And the pony I did those things for, they had a near-unlimited supply of unused bottle caps, the same ones Amber’s using.”

Starlight’s gaze shifted around. “Uh... what kind of bad things are you talking about?”

Emerald hesitated, and I could practically see her forcing herself to speak. “Mostly, I just scouted places out, gathered info, stuff like that. I rarely got involved directly, but... but I still saw plenty. Saw whole families grabbed up and marched off to live the rest of their life in captivity. Sure, I might not have been one of the ponies doing the grabbing. I was just the pony telling them where to find these helpless, isolated ponies.”

Dusty’s head had drawn back, his ears flat. “You’re saying you used to work for *slavers*?”

“Yes,” Emerald said, and though the shame was clear in her expression, she pressed on. “And worse, I’m sure. But the really terrible thing is, I didn’t feel bad for any of those ponies they took. I never even thought about it. I was just doing a job.”

“What changed?” I asked, and she gave a weak, appreciative smile.

“I spent some time with one of those families,” she said. “I’d found a farm, one that looked more built-up than the others I’d come across. I went in to appraise how well they could defend themselves. Ends up, they were some of the nicest ponies I’ve ever met. They were poor farmers, but they welcomed me, fed me, and showed me every measure of hospitality and generosity, even though I was a complete stranger to them. Heh, they treated me better than my own family did.”

She finished with a smile, though it quickly faded again. “Something about that generosity made me reconsider things. How could I condemn those ponies to a lifetime of slavery after the hospitality they had showed

me? I couldn't.

"Problem was, there was no way I could stop things, and this wasn't exactly a job you could just 'quit'. These are ponies who see such things as treachery. You're in for life, one way or another. So, I got out the only way I could. I went out on my scouting, and I just disappeared. They probably figured I died out in the Wasteland. It happened from time to time."

"That's why you left Serenity?" I asked.

She gave me a concerned look, but it quickly softened to a faint, sad smile. "Yes. It hurt leaving my family behind, but they were too tied up in things. To them, I'd be a traitor. I still love them, though, even if they're misguided. Maybe, someday..."

She trailed off, looking out into the distance, then quickly shook her head. "Amber is working for the same ponies. I left home more than twenty years ago, so I doubt she'd recognize me even if we had met, but somepony might. If they did, everypony in Gemstone could be in danger."

Dusty's ears perked. "Why?"

"Because... do you remember way back, how I said the folks back home were a touch paranoid? I... might have been understating it. If they think I might have shared any of their secrets, they'll do whatever it takes to contain that information."

Dusty's expression hardened. "Such as?"

"With the arsenal they have at their disposal, they could flatten Gemstone. Or maybe they'd throw their near-endless supply of bottle caps at some mercenary group to do it for them." She slowly shook her head. "Or maybe we'd get lucky and they'd settle with just killing me. I just can't take that risk."

"You're sure Amber is with them?" Dusty asked.

"She's been spending thousands of their caps on mercenaries, and she's looking to hire more. She's with them." Emerald frowned, glancing back in the direction of Gemstone, concealed behind the curve of the hill. "And whatever her intent is, she's already hostile enough for my PipBuck to recognize it."

"Wait a minute," Starlight said. "She's red to you, too? I thought it was just because she'd pulled a gun on us before."

"Red?" Dusty asked. "You mean she's showing as hostile? Shit, Starlight, that's the kind of thing you need to be sharing."

"What?" Starlight said, shrugging. "I mean, it isn't like anypony *didn't* know she was a hostile bitch."

"You should still tell us," Dusty said. "Communication is important." He turned back to Emerald. "What if we helped protect Gemstone?"

Emerald gave a sad smile. "I appreciate the offer hon, but it wouldn't change anything. These ponies aren't secretive and paranoid because they're weak. They've spent decades and who even knows how many caps to see to their safety, and have amassed an arsenal of the best tech to be found. Four ponies, even four exceptional ponies, wouldn't so much as slow them down. Besides, even if you did, it'd be a lot of death. I don't want that, on either side. No, better I disappear again."

We all stood in silence, but as much as everyone wanted to argue, it seemed none of us could summon up a good argument. Eventually, Dusty broke the silence.

"Where are you planning to go?"

Emerald looked around at us, but reluctantly answered. "There's a little town way off south, called World's End. Fitting enough name, given the location. From what I hear, they take on ponies that aren't welcome anywhere else, and they don't ask questions. Sounds like the kind of place for making a new life."

"We're familiar with the place," Dusty said. "They didn't seem to care for us."

"Does seem like the kind of place that might be a bit wary of random mercenary types showing up on their doorstep," Emerald said.

Dusty grunted. "So, what, it's a refuge for ponies hiding from the law?"

"It's a refuge for ponies looking for a second chance," Emerald said, and gave a wry smile. "All things considered, I think I'll fit in well."

"Well..." Dusty looked around, but none of us said anything. "... Shit. Don't suppose you'd want an escort there?"

"Thank you for the offer, hon, but I'm afraid you'll be needing to go back to Gemstone after we're done. Don't worry. I used to travel a lot. 'Sides, there's about to be a lot less raiders in the area."

"I doubt we'll be staying long, with the news we'll be delivering," Dusty said with a shake of his head. "We could meet you after that."

Again she hesitated, but this time she smiled and gave a small nod. "I

can't say I'd mind the company."

"And maybe on the way, you can fill us in on this 'Serenity' place."

The smile vanished. "I... can't do that." When Dusty started to speak again, she cut him off. "I know, they've done some terrible things, but... but it was still my home, and it's still my family living there. I know I cut ties with them, but I'm not ready to go that far."

Dusty mulled that over, and slowly shook his head. "At the very least, they're preying on innocent ponies that don't even know they're out there. I know you might not want anything bad to happen to the ponies you used to live with, but you're talking about whole families being put in chains. Ponies need to know that's happening."

"Believe me, hon, I've thought of that." Emerald sighed, looking away. "Pretty much every night since I left, I thought of it. Problem is, I can't see any way it wouldn't just make things worse."

"Worse?" Dusty asked. "You were just saying how they might wipe out a whole town just to keep their secret."

I chimed in. "And then there's whatever Amber is hiring mercenaries for."

"And that," Dusty said, gesturing a hoof in my direction.

"I know!" Emerald said, her voice growing thick. "I know, and I hate it. Do you have any idea how much it hurts to hide stuff like this from all the ponies I love? To have this horrible danger that I have to keep secret, all because they'd be in even more danger if they knew?"

"What about us?" I asked. "It sounds like you've already told us enough that these ponies would want us dead. You won't be putting anypony in danger by telling us, and you're already trusting us to keep your secret. We might even be able to help."

She stared at me, and slowly, the tension in her body began to relax. "Yeah... yeah, you're right." She took a slow, deep breath, raising a hoof to wipe at her cheek. "It's still quite the thing you're asking for, but... heck, might be nice to finally tell somepony. I don't know. Just... I need to think on it a while, okay?"

Dusty nodded. "We've got a lot of traveling ahead of us," he said. "Plenty of time to share. At least we'll have something to talk about."

"That we will," Emerald quietly replied, nodding.

As we fell silent, Sickle rumbled. “Are you cunts all done crying into each others’ manes, yet? Let’s get to killing some fucking raiders already.”

Dusty shot her a glare, but she just shrugged it off. Shaking his head, he looked back, paused for a moment, and walked over to the bag of caps. He picked it up in his teeth, then stopped, looking at Emerald. “You’re sure about this?”

She nodded. “I’ve got enough to make a good start of it. Figure you deserve it for what I’m asking of you.”

“I don’t mean the caps,” Dusty said.

“I know,” Emerald said, and gave a sad smile. “And yes, I’m sure.”

Dusty hesitated, but eventually sighed and turned to Sickle. “You mind carrying this?”

“Oh, hey, you learned how to fucking ask,” Sickle replied, and popped open one of her armored saddle-bags.

With the caps tucked away, Dusty looked around at us. “Okay. Take two. Let’s go.”

As we set off again, I wondered what other surprises were waiting for us.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

# Sanguine

The light was just starting to fade as I crept up to the ridge of a low hill to peer out at the farmstead, only a quarter mile away. I lifted my binoculars, scanning over the remains of buildings. To my sides, Dusty and Starlight did the same.

The barn had collapsed, and many of its boards were blackened and charred. The house itself, a small, single-story affair, showed some fire damage along one side, and the door was broken down, but the building was still standing. An old, decaying fence surrounded the buildings. Only the outhouse appeared undamaged.

The fields themselves had been torched.

“Doesn’t look good,” Dusty murmured, lowering his binoculars.

I nodded, lowering mine as well. “It looks vacant,” I said. “I can’t imagine the farmers would have stayed with everything destroyed, and it seems like the raiders would have to be incredibly persistent to wait in hiding for so long.”

“Yep,” Dusty said with a nod, then looked back over his shoulder. “Okay, we’re going straight in. Keep your spacing wide, and your eyes out. There might be friendly ponies in there. If you’re absolutely certain you see a raider, lay on the fire while everypony else gets to ground. Otherwise, return fire only as a last resort. Got it?”

There were nods all around, followed by Sickle’s voice. “Sure thing, Dirt. I won’t shoot anypony.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Dusty said as he rose to his hooves. “Like you’d listen to what I say, anyway. Let’s move.”

We all stood, following after him. After a couple short commands, we spread out on either side of him. Dusty walked with a relaxed pose, and while he held the bit of his rifle in his mouth, he kept the barrel low. I tried to emulate him, loosening up my stance and holding my rifle lightly. I imagine the idea was to look as nonthreatening as possible, while ready for a fight at a moment’s notice. Those two goals worked against each other quite thoroughly, even without Sickle’s armored bulk clattering along beside us.

Striding across the barren earth and ashen fields, we were greeted only by silence.

When we reached the fence, Dusty came to a halt and crouched. The rest of us took up places along the fence spread out on either side.

Sickle remained standing, staring down at Dusty. "Seriously? What now?"

He ignored her, looking back and gesturing to Emerald. When she came up to him, he said, "Go ahead and call out, see if they're in there."

She looked over the house and stood tall, calling out in a clear voice. "Quartz? Flint? It's Emerald." She hesitated, chewing on her lip for a moment before adding, "Are you there?"

Only silence answered, and her ears drooped.

"Okay, we're sweeping the house," Dusty said. "Stick together, check every room, and stay alert until we're sure we've cleared it all."

Sickle immediately walked past him, stepping over a broken section of fence. We followed. Dusty held his gun up, tracking the nearest window. I raised my own rifle, seating the stock firmly against my shoulder, despite the awkwardness of doing so while walking.

Dusty had fallen into a slow, careful walk, keeping the window covered, while Sickle trotted casually up to the door.

I was just starting to pick up my pace when Sickle stepped into the doorway.

During the war, I had come up with a certain theory in regards to ponies, weapon development, and the psychological processes involved in such. The simple version was that ponies' driving mentality during the war was emotion rather than logic. It explained the rapid rise of xenophobia in a culture that had always been so open to outsiders. It explained the fear and anger that arose in people unfamiliar with war. And it explained why some weapon designer had made a weapon that would warn its target, as if to avoid feeling guilt over making an "unfair" surprise attack.

But as the mine chirped below Sickle, my experience with raiders immediately produced a new theory: that whoever had designed the standard Equestrian anti-personnel land-mine had been a sadist, a sick and twisted individual who took immense pleasure from that one moment where you look upon her creation and realize there is absolutely nothing you can do to

prevent what is about to happen.

I remember Sickle had raised her hoof right before it went off. Whether she intended to shield her face, or was merely trying to stomp the device that had just announced itself, I'm not sure, but it may well have saved her life. The entire world immediately turned into an incoherent daze, choked with dust and abruptly twisted beyond any attempt at comprehension. When reality started to congeal again, I found myself on my side, blinking against the dust-filled air as bits of dirt and debris fell to earth all around me. My chest felt tight, and the world reeled even as I lay there. It only occurred to me later that I didn't hear anything.

I turned my head, and the whole world spun around me. Despite lying on the ground, my legs kicked out, instinct insisting that I was falling over. My brain still hadn't processed the events leading up to that moment, leaving me confused as to why I was lying there.

Then I saw Starlight. Her movement had drawn my muddled brain's attention. She had just rolled onto her back. Her hooves were at her neck, her mouth open. My mind immediately focused on the thick spurt of blood that surged out between her hooves.

I leaped to my hooves, or tried to. My hoof caught on the edge of my cloak, jerking me back down to the ground. I rolled to the side to disentangle myself, and tried again. The world lurched under me as I rose, sending me staggering one way, and when I tried to rebalance, my right foreleg simply gave out from under me. I collapsed to my side, and looked down at the limb that had betrayed me. I was met with the sight of blood and bone. My lower leg was bent where it had no business bending, and the bone that was supposed to remain on the inside of a pony was protruding out through the skin, joined by a jagged piece of metal.

But it didn't hurt, so my attention immediately went back to Starlight. In just that brief moment of distraction, she was drenched from chin to chest in blood, her mouth flapping as if she were drowning.

I tried to get to her, but my body continued to betray me, always moving in any direction but the way I intended.

Then a hoof fell in front of my vision, and another gripped my side. A head moved over me. With my view of Starlight obstructed, I instead found my world focused on this other pony. It took a moment to recognize

Dusty's worried expression. His nose was bleeding, but he was otherwise well. He might have said something, but I'm really not sure. All I know was that he was the happiest sight in the world at that moment.

Then he moved past me, and I saw Starlight choking on her own blood again, and my world came crashing down.

Another set of hooves grabbed me, but I kept struggling to reach Starlight—which I'm sure consisted mostly of flailing my hooves in her general direction—until Emerald appeared before me. I know she tried to say something to me, as I remember her mouth moving, but I didn't hear any of it. I wasn't paying that much attention. I knew there was something important, something that I needed to do, but as she gently shifted me to lie flat, I couldn't for the life of me remember what it was.

It was around then that the pain started to truly sink in. The tightness in my chest started to grow worse and worse, but what really set it off was when Emerald shifted my broken leg. It was bad enough to feel it twist and turn in ways it never should have, but I think what really did it was the sight of the bone slipping back inside the mangled wound, like some alien entity tucking itself away inside my body. Every instinctual fear and revulsion surged forward at once, and I screamed and kicked against the horror that was hiding inside me. Only Emerald's firm grip and steady stroking of my side brought my panic under control, and I'm thankful that, in my struggles, I hadn't thought to transform to a form without a theoretically internal skeleton; I have no desire to discover what a compound fracture of an internal bone would become for an exoskeleton.

The following moments were a blur. I squirmed and grit my teeth as Emerald tended to me. Every movement of my leg was like the stab of a knife, and every flinch and jerk I made in response merely worsened the pain. I choked back a scream as she pulled a shard of metal out of my leg, as sharp as a blade, but twisted and jagged. Her hooves were smeared with my blood. My own leg was coated in it.

A healing potion was shoved into my mouth. I tilted my head back, trying to grasp at it, but she kept my leg pinned down. The attempt sent another jolt of pain through me, and I nearly choked on the potion, but coughing and sputtering, I managed to down it.

Within moments, the pain receded, and the world reoriented, becoming

more real. It felt as if my ears popped, and distant, muffled sounds soon drew closer until I could hear Emerald moving over me.

I also heard Starlight's wet, sobbing coughs.

"Starlight!" I again attempted to get to her, only for a spike of pain to flare up from the leg Emerald was still keeping pinned down. Despite how much better I felt for having the healing potion, it seemed I was still injured.

"She's okay," Emerald reassured me. "She's stable. Right now, we need to care for you. Where are your healing potions?"

I laid my head down again, finding myself increasingly tired. "Medical box," I mumbled. "Left bag."

She kept her hooves on my leg as she leaned in, opening my bags with her mouth and pulling out the misshapen medical box. She retrieved another healing potion and fed it to me. The remaining pain rapidly diminished. After a few more seconds, she slowly relaxed her grip on my leg. She gave it a few careful prods, asking me how it felt.

"Sore," I answered, slowly relaxing. The pain had finally receded into a deep ache throughout my body, but my head felt relatively clear once more.

Emerald prodded a few more times to be sure. I did my best to minimize the tremble as the squishy flesh mashed against the hard bone that had, moments earlier, been stabbed through the very same flesh. I think she mistook my disturbed reaction as one of pain, but I assured her it was merely an ache.

"All the same," she said, "you should go gentle on it. I'd prefer to immobilize your lower leg."

She eventually produced a splint from her own medical supplies, a good one produced during the war, and went through the process of fixing my leg in place.

As Emerald worked, I got a good view of Starlight. She was lying on the ground, facing away from me, with her side rapidly rising and falling. Even facing away from me, her neck and shoulder were completely caked in blood and dirt. Dusty had rolled her to her side, facing away from the large puddle that was slowly seeping into the dry earth. It was a truly shocking amount of blood, enough to make me wonder how it could all come from one pony.

Dusty came over to us, snatching up the other healing potion. He

returned to Starlight, cradling her head as he tilted her face upwards and carefully fed her another healing potion. She weakly grasped at it, and after a few gasps for air she started to relax, her rapid breathing slowing, but only a little.

I lay there as Emerald worked, feeling so utterly useless.

Sickle was sitting on the opposite side of Starlight, with a few empty healing potion bottles lying between them. Sickle's muzzle hung open, but it and her face were dripping with blood. She just sat there, panting and occasionally spitting out a bit of blood.

As soon as the splint was in place, I struggled up to my hooves. The world wobbled and contracted around me, my heartbeat rushing in my ears, but it smoothed out as I took a few deep breaths. I was able to stand long enough to move over to Starlight. She looked up to me, still panting softly. Her cheeks were wet with tears.

I lay down with her, slipping my good foreleg around her to hug, ignoring the blood. She snuffled against my neck and held me tight, trembling.

"Watch over them," Dusty said to Emerald, then turned to speak across us. "Sickle, you good to move?"

I heard a spit in reply, followed by a grunted and weary, "Yeah."

They moved up to where the doorway had once been, now just a ragged gap in the wall. What floorboards remained were shattered and thrown about, and the roof sagged. They passed through the gap, slow and wary, while we waited outside.

A minute later, Sickle strolled out again, walking a few paces past us before flopping onto her side with a clatter of metal and a weary grunt. Dusty emerged after her, though he stopped to sit on the porch. He looked exhausted and downcast, eyes unfocused even as he pulled out and lit a cigarette.

Emerald stood. "...Are they in there?"

Dusty took a long drag of his cigarette, followed by a deep sigh. "Just the foals," he said. "A colt and... I think it was a filly."

Emerald's ears drooped. I'm sure she had expected such bad news, but that hardly made it any better. She shook her head, then walked toward the door.

"Don't," Dusty said, holding up a hoof. "You... you don't want to

see that.”

She stopped, but slowly shook her head. “I can’t just leave them in there. They deserve a burial.”

“They’ll get one,” Dusty said. “Just... you don’t need to see what’s in there. At least let us get them down, first.”

Emerald’s expression wilted, and she sat again. Her eyes watered as she nodded.

We sat in silence until Dusty had finished his cigarette, dropping it to the dirt and grinding it under-hoof. “Okay,” he said, standing and walking up to Starlight and myself. He produced a water bottle and held it out. “Here, Star. You’re going to need plenty of fluids, so drink up. Try to eat something, if you can. It’ll help you recover.”

Starlight’s grip slowly relaxed around me, and she pulled her head away to look up at the bottle. Her eyes were red and puffy. Her horn eventually lit up, wrapping the bottle in her magic.

“Now let’s get you sitting up,” Dusty said, crouching down to wedge his muzzle in against her side. Between the two of us, we got her sitting upright, though she leaned heavily against me. She sniffled and wiped at her cheeks, only to stop and stare at her blood-covered hooves. A tremor passed through her, and she shut her eyes, taking a long drink from the bottle.

With that settled, Dusty took a step back. “Hey, Sickle. Help me out with... the stuff inside.”

“Why?” Sickle rumbled, not even moving. “Ain’t like they’re getting any less dead.”

I sighed and looked up to Dusty. “I’ll help.”

He frowned, contemplating me for a moment. I imagine he was thinking on whether I should be exposed to whatever was waiting inside, but he finally nodded.

Emerald sat beside Starlight, giving her another shoulder to lean on. “I’ll be right back,” I promised, and Starlight looked up to me with a weary, almost hopeless look. I gave a smile back, trying to be reassuring. She meekly nodded, her eyes closing again.

I stood and, forgetting about my own injury, winced as I put too much weight on my injured leg. A quick shuffle solved that, and I followed Dusty. He paused for a moment, casting a glance at my leg, but said nothing.

We went inside. The house had once been nice enough, but it had come across hard times lately. The mine had done a terrifying amount of damage to the old structure, completely obliterating most of the flooring in what had once been the entryway, and all the walls we could see were torn up, with holes ranging from barely visible to several inches wide. A few pieces of furniture lay nearby, upturned and scarred by the blast. The stench of smoke filled the air, but as we moved further into the house, another, fouler smell began to emerge.

The raiders had ransacked the place, overturning and smashing furniture as they rummaged through the place for loot. The kitchen was badly charred, but the fire hadn't spread further. And then there was the final room we entered, one which looked to have once been a pleasant place for a family to relax, now turned into a showcase of brutality.

The room itself was wrecked, but it was the colt that I first focused on, or at least, what remained of him. He was hung from the rafters by a rope tied around his rear hooves. His head was missing, and his upper chest was so torn up that one of his forelegs had been severed and was lying on the ground several feet away. Between the carnage and a couple days of decay, it was hard to guess at his age. Ten, maybe twelve at the most.

The couch he was hanging beside was torn apart, and bits of debris covered the floor. In the dim light of the room, I first thought the debris was pieces of the cushions or other furniture. It was a couple of seconds before I focused on the pale, curved fragment of a skull. His head wasn't missing; it was all right there, scattered about the room.

Another foal hung opposite him, suspended by a pair of ropes tied to their forehooves. I think it was a filly. She was at that age where it can be hard to tell from just the face, even before decay. More reliable methods of identification were impossible. Her body ended where her hips should have been, while much of what had once been her insides now lay in a shredded mess beneath her. Her hind-legs lay on the floor, with the curved shards of a destroyed pelvis still attached.

All of that was enough to make me feel a little queasy, but the worst was her face. Her head was lolled forward, mouth hanging agape and eyes open. The expression on what remained of her decaying face seemed one of dull shock and distress. It was disturbingly macabre, as if she were still aware of

the horrors done there.

After that unnamed army depot and Paradise Beach, I had thought—hoped, at least—that I would never be surprised by the vileness that one pony could inflict upon another, but raiders continued to find new ways to horrify.

I nearly jumped when Dusty's hoof gently patted my shoulder. "Take your time," he said, his voice quiet. I focused on him as he looked around the room. His eyes lingered on details, giving the impression of an immense sadness. But I saw a little deeper. I could see the bit of hardness in his eyes as he looked over the scene.

We couldn't save these ponies, but we could damn well make sure the ponies responsible could never do this again.

I steeled myself, standing tall and firm, and gave Dusty a nod. "Okay. I'm ready."

Getting them down was a gruesome affair. Fortunately, Dusty had a knife, which we used to cut through the ropes. It was a far better alternative to untying them with our mouths. If not for the knife, I would have been tempted to transform and use my magic, even if it risked Emerald discovering what I was. She seemed like a reasonable mare; explaining my situation to her seemed preferable to putting my mouth on those ropes.

Plus, it seemed she was good at keeping secrets. Sadly, I had a more important task at hoof than to ponder that fact.

Dusty found a pair of blankets in the bedrooms. We bundled the foals up in them and brought them outside.

The burial was a brief affair, without ceremony. We managed to find a pair of shovels amidst the heap of farming tools the raiders had ignored, and we dug a pair of tiny graves. I'll admit, the digging went much quicker when Sickle got tired of waiting, shoved me out of the way, and took up the shovel herself. Emerald claimed a couple of pieces of the broken fence to form simple grave markers, and borrowed Dusty's knife to carve a name into each one: Sage and Pebble.

Starlight spent most of the time leaned back against the building, looking groggy as she alternated between downing a second bottle of water and eating a pack of crackers. With the burial done, Emerald drew some water from the hoof-pumped well and returned to Starlight's side, dunking a washcloth

in the old bucket. "Let's get you cleaned up a little, hmm?"

Starlight grunted quietly, setting her food and water down to let Emerald work. Slowly, the worst of the blood was cleaned away.

I ended up doing the same thing Dusty was: keeping an eye out, in case the explosion had drawn any attention. Thankfully, it was quiet.

Starlight was mostly cleaned up when Sickle stepped up to her. "Let me see," Sickle rumbled, shoving Emerald's hoof out of the way, then nudging Starlight's chin back. Sickle frowned, then pushed Starlight's head to the side to look at the other side of her neck before releasing her again. "Well, shit. That sucks. Don't even get a cool scar out of it or anything."

Starlight huffed out a breath that might have been faintly amused, and I think the corner of her mouth might have twitched upwards.

Emerald resumed the cleaning, though she watched Sickle and her blood-stained snout. "You might want to clean up, too."

"Right," Sickle said, chuckling. "You ain't seen me fight. Ain't any point in me cleaning up yet."

Rather than argue, Emerald merely shook her head and shrugged. "Suit yourself," she said, returning to cleaning Starlight.

Some ten minutes later, we gathered around, with Starlight sat against the side of the house, as Dusty appraised the situation.

"Between the potions we've already used, and the bottles that broke from the explosion, this is all we have for arcane medical supplies."

Set between us was a single healing potion and three magic-laced bandages.

"Got plenty of painkillers," Sickle said with an armor-rattling shrug.

"Useful, sure," Dusty said. "But they don't stop bleeding like a potion does. The bandages are useful, but not nearly as good. Somepony takes a nasty hit, a potion might be the only way to keep them alive. Two someponies take a nasty hit, and one of them might not be making it home."

"Right," Sickle said. "Stop getting hurt, got it."

"If only it were that simple," Dusty muttered. "We haven't even seen these raiders yet, and we've already gone through most of our medical supplies."

I stared down at the small collection, feeling distinctly uncomfortable about the situation. I'd just downed two healing potions, and my leg still ached. "Are you suggesting that we go back?"

"We can't go back," Emerald said. "Quartz and Flint might still be out there! And besides, it isn't as if more potions are going to magically appear in my store overnight. You cleaned out my stock already."

"I'm not saying we have to turn around," Dusty said. "Like you said, going back to Gemstone won't do us any good. Maybe if a caravan comes in, but how often do you see healing potions turn up?"

Emerald thought a moment, then slowly shook her head. "Maybe a dozen or so over a whole year. Sometimes more. Ponies tend to hang onto them."

"Maybe another settlement?" I asked.

"Like where?" Dusty asked. "We might luck out and find a couple in Rust, but that's, what, a day or two there? Same back. Mareford would have plenty, but that's out of the question."

"Raiders will have some," Sickle said, grinning. "Funny how many dead ponies you find with perfectly good healing potions on 'em."

"Got to live long enough to use them," Dusty noted. "Anyway, this isn't about some quick fall-back to refit and try again. There is no quick resupply. Right now, the question is whether we continue on with the mission, or we abort and spend the weeks or months we need to get adequate supplies for a second attempt."

"Quartz and Flint won't have weeks or months," Emerald said, her ears hanging low. "They might still be alive." She turned a desperate look toward Sickle. "Right?"

Sickle scowled, but her expression eventually mellowed as she shrugged. "Maybe. Depends on why they took 'em. If they brought 'em back to have fun torturing or putting on a show, they're already dead. If they brought 'em back to be fucktoys, they might still be alive. Probably not. Depends on how rough they like to play." She followed that with a dry chuckle. "And from what they did to those foals, I'm guessing they like to play plenty rough."

With a shiver, Emerald turned back to Dusty. "W-we can't turn back. Those ponies are depending on us."

"I'm not saying we're turning back," Dusty replied, a bit of an edge creeping into his voice. "I'm saying the situation just got more dangerous, and every one of you needs to consider that before we move on."

We stared at the supplies in silence for a minute before Starlight spoke up, her voice quiet and tired. “I’m still going,” she said. “Least we can do is scout things out. Find the raiders. See if those ponies are alive. Heck, maybe Whisper could do her thing and sneak in, take a look...” She blinked, casting a glance my way, then shook her head. “No, bad idea. But we can still look.”

“Are you going to be able to make it?” Dusty asked.

“Of course I can make it,” Starlight said, her voice rising, though a moment later she sagged against the wall. “Shit, Dusty. I almost *died*. I-I...” She swallowed and took a deep breath. “Yeah, I can make it. I’m going.”

Dusty nodded solemnly, and looked to me.

I gave a wry smile in reply. “As if you have to ask?” I said, gesturing a hoof toward Starlight.

He looked to Sickle, who gave an exaggerated roll of her head. “Oh no, I might get hurt.” She drew in a deep snort and spit out a disgusting glob of mucus and blood. “Of course I’m going. Fuck, I ain’t killed a pony in weeks, and I need to murder the *shit* out of some motherfucker for that sneaky fucking trick.”

With a sigh, Dusty looked back at the supplies. “Okay. Emerald, you’ll be carrying those medical supplies. Keep them safe.” He looked back to Starlight. “Are you going to be able to travel?”

“Yeah,” she said, though I caught the hesitant tone to her voice. “I’ll manage.”

“Here,” Sickle rumbled, and something small and pale sailed through the air. Starlight yelped weakly as it bounced off her chest, then fumbled with her forehooves in a failed attempt to catch it.

Sickle glowered at her as Starlight bent over and picked up the object, blowing off the dirt, and looked at the thick, white tablet. “What’s this?”

“It’s Buck,” Sickle rumbled. “Should keep you going for an hour or two.”

Dusty’s mouth opened to protest, but he hesitated, and eventually shook his head. “Well, I can’t say it’s the worst idea I’ve heard.” To me, the statement seemed to have an implied “but it’s close.”

Starlight was frowning down at the tablet. “Uh... maybe I’ll just hold onto it. I can use it later if I need it.”

“Whatever,” Sickle said with a snort.

Starlight tucked the pill inside her bags. “...Thanks.”

We set out shortly after that. I expect we made for a rather pitiful sight. I was limping, not from pain, but from a desire to be gentle with my injured leg. Starlight tended to lag behind and weave a little, but every time, her head would snap back up, and she'd push on. Even Sickle seemed a little more lethargic than usual.

To everyone's relief, we only traveled for an hour before Dusty decided we were far enough from the farmstead to be relatively safe. We took up a spot in a small recess of a rocky hill, sheltered by the rocks rising to either side, and settled in for the night.

After a quick meal, Starlight laid out her bedding right next to mine. We all settled in, except Dusty, who took the first watch.

It was hardly a minute before Starlight slipped over, pressing close against my side. She was trembling. I shifted more to my side, slipping my splinted foreleg over her and tucking the blanket over both of us. She, in turn, buried her muzzle against my neck, muffling the faint sobs that accompanied her shaking.

I held her close and tight, tucking my head in against hers, until she slowly relaxed.



When morning came and ponies started to wake, I stayed close beside Starlight. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," she murmured, looking away as she rummaged through her bags. "I'm just really hungry."

I kept my voice low, so the others were less likely to overhear us. "Are you sure?"

She paused, holding a package of mixed vegetables in her magic. "...I almost died last night," she said, her voice quiet, and shook her head. "It's... I don't know. I almost died, and I couldn't even do anything about it. I didn't even try, just..."

I slipped a foreleg around her shoulders, and she sighed. "I just panicked."

"I tried to run on a compound fracture," I said. "I think we might have both been a little concussed."

She gave a weak snort. "Yeah, sure. Still, I was just... useless."

"You're not useless," I said, giving a squeeze, but she just rolled her eyes.

"I mean I *felt* useless," she said. She opened her mouth to continue, then shut it. I waited as she tried a few more times before speaking again. "It reminded me of when my mom died."

I gave another squeeze, but held it, and leaned my head against hers. She sat there, still for a few moments, before giving another huff and shrugging her shoulders, pushing me back just a bit. "Hey, I'm better now," she said, giving a weak smile that was only partially convincing. "The sleep helped a lot." Her smile slowly faded away, and after a moment of silence she added, "It just freaked me out is all. It's the only time I've felt so... scared and helpless."

She glanced warily my way. "...You know what I mean?"

I slowly nodded. "Yeah. I know what you mean."

"Yeah." She sighed, then tore open the bag of veggies and tipped the bag back, dumping several bite-size pieces of various vegetables into her mouth. "Ehhee huhhggy," she said around the mouthful as she chewed. While I speculated at what she had intended to say—"Really hungry," I think—she started scratching at her neck. "And my neck is itching like mad," she said, once she had swallowed the mouthful.

I'm not surprised. Despite Emerald's effort to clean her, Starlight's scratching dislodged several flecks of red, blood that had dried under her coat. She eventually stopped, looking down at her hooves, speckled in dried blood, and blearily declared, "I need a shower."

I looked down at my own hooves. I'd cleaned thoroughly with the well water, but I was sure I'd be imagining the feeling of dried blood under my coat until I'd had the chance to clean up in my natural form. "I think I could use one, too."

She gave a dry chuckle, tipping back the bag of veggies again.

Soon everypony was gathering up their bedding and eating a quick breakfast. Starlight ate ravenously, and downed the entire package and a can of beans before washing it down with a bottle of water. Afterwards, she lay out with a groan, waiting for everypony else.

Dusty laid out a brief plan for the day: head toward the area Emerald had indicated, scout out any raider presence, and attempt to locate their base of operations. "And above all else," he said, "stay alert. Keep an eye out

for ambushes, booby traps, stuff like that. We already know they like to use mines, and we can't afford to get surprised like that again."

As we donned our packs and gear, I saw Starlight staring off toward the horizon and taking a few slow, deep breaths. On the final exhale, she murmured, "Okay." This was followed by a grimace as she noticed I was watching her. "...Okay, so I'm a *little* nervous," she said with a frown, "but I'm not going to let that stop me."

I cautiously nodded, uncertain of what to say.

Since Sickle had merely flopped down in the dirt to sleep, she had no bedding to pack or equipment to re-don, and was ready to go as soon as she got up. As a result, she waited as impatiently as ever while we got ready, occasionally waving a spiked-and-bladed hoof at one of the flies buzzing around her head.

Emerald slung her magical energy weapon across her back and paused, looking over to Sickle. "You know, if you cleaned up that blood, you probably wouldn't have all those flies bothering you."

Sickle growled. "Oh, hey, yeah, keep poking at me, bitch." She swatted at another fly. "Then in a couple minutes I can tell you how if you just kept your cunt mouth shut, you wouldn't have a broken jaw. How's that sound?"

I sighed quietly. Not that I was surprised by Sickle's behavior. Just, maybe a little disappointed.

Emerald looked disappointed as well. "I'm sorry," she said, her ears drooping. "I didn't mean to offend you. I was just trying to offer some help."

"Well don't," Sickle replied with a snort, and looked away.

Despite my hopes that Emerald would just leave things be, she spoke again. "You really don't like me, do you?"

I started walking closer to the pair, hoping to intervene if Sickle replied too aggressively.

Sickle gave a short, dry chuckle. "Course not. You're a fucking idiot."

Emerald glanced over to me as I approached, giving a questioning look. When I shrugged, she looked back to Sickle. "I have to wonder why you think that."

"Because you think you're actually helping," Sickle said, her head turning to fix on Emerald. "You're not. You just hide behind your walls and your guns. It's like you're living in some fucking fantasy land, where you think

happy thoughts and smile, and everything's okay. 'Cept right on the other side of those walls, you got a bunch of ponies getting raped to death by raiders. But hey, maybe if you think they're actually good ponies for long enough, they'll all stop with the raping and murdering and join in singing some happy song about friendship and rainbows and shit. Any decade now, right?"

Emerald's ears hung low. "...The world isn't going to get any better if we just keep killing ourselves," she said, her voice quiet, but growing stronger with every word. "I know, some ponies need to be stopped, sometimes even killed, but we have to work towards something better, instead of just keeping what we have. You can kill off every single raider in existence, but it won't make a difference if we don't deal with the reason they exist."

Sickle laughed, sharp, bitter, and without humor. "Like you know why raiders exist."

"And anyway," Emerald said, her head rising as she took up a more firm posture, "I'm not hiding behind those walls now. I'm out here, trying to do what's right."

"Brahminshit!" Sickle growled, rising to her hooves. "You're out here because you're a fucking coward and a liar."

"Hey!" Dusty shouted, trotting in our direction, while adrenaline started to tease at my senses.

"Fuck off, Dirt!" Sickle took a step toward Emerald—I took a step in, as well—and snarled in her face. "You talk a lot of shit, but as soon as push came to shove, you pussied out and ran away. Don't play like you're out here to make the world a better place. You lied to everypony, pretending everything was good and happy, right before you turn around and abandon them. You're nothing but a fucking coward that thinks she's better than everypony else."

The pained look on Emerald's face was too much. I stepped in. "That's enough, Sickle. She already explained why she needs to leave."

Sickle turned her glare to me, staring for several seconds before finally snorting and turning away. "Yeah, sure. We going, yet?"

Dusty was glaring at Sickle, but slowly nodded. "Yeah, we're going."

I looked to Emerald. She stood still, eyes shimmering with tears. Her expression was like a hoof to the gut.

I stepped forward, gently placing a hoof on her shoulder. "It's okay." She looked to me, her eyes full of sadness, and sighed. "No, it's not."

She slipped away from my hoof, slowly walking along behind Dusty, who cast a concerned look back our way before returning to keeping an eye on Sickle.

"I've helped a lot of ponies," Emerald quietly said, her head hanging low as she walked. "I know I have. I've done what I can to make life better for as many as I can, but... I'm not a fighter." She cast a quick glance Sickle's way. "I'm not a coward, either. I'm a pony who's willing to give up everything she has for a cause she believes in. I'm just not a fighter. And yeah, sometimes we need fighters. Sometimes, we need ponies who will stop the monsters that try to kill us. Heck, even the ponies who embodied the Elements themselves fought to protect Equestria."

She paused, and a flicker of a smile crossed her face. "Well, maybe not Fluttershy, but she still helped those who did." The faint smile faded away a moment later. "But I'm still not a fighter."

The ground crunched quietly under-hoof as we continued on in silence. Eventually, I nodded. "I know what you mean."

Emerald cast a glance my way. "Is that so?"

"Yeah." I looked down at the rifle slung at my chest, which now felt so familiar there. "I had never fired a weapon in anger before a month ago. I had never been in a real fight before then, much less a firefight. Heck, it still seems weird when ponies see me as someone who can fight."

Emerald considered me for a few long moments. "From the stories Dazzle told, I would have never guessed."

I gave a wry smile. "Adversity seems to be a very efficient teacher."

"For some things," Emerald said.

"For some things," I echoed with a nod.

She nodded thoughtfully, but that eventually ended with a slow shake of her head. "I hope you're not trying to convince me to stay and fight."

I considered my reply for a few seconds before speaking. "No, I'm just offering sympathy. If I were to make comment on the situation at hoof, it would be that there are fighters out there, sometimes in places you don't expect it."

"...Thanks." She looked down at her hooves as she continued walking.

“Except right now, they don’t even know they’re needed.”

I nodded. “All the more reason to share that information.”

“Yeah,” Emerald said, heaving a deep sigh. “And I will. It’s just... hoo. You have no idea how hard it is. You seem like good ponies, but I’m still not sure how you’ll take it. I’m not even sure if you’ll believe me.”

I had to smile at that. “And that’s something I can *definitely* sympathize with.”

She turned a questioning look my way. “Oh?”

“Yeah.” I smiled at her, looking at her expression of curiosity. I thought of all the things she had said and done, all the good she had tried to accomplish, all that she gave without expecting anything in return, and I came to a decision. “How about this: I’m pretty sure I can top whatever story you’ve got. These are some very understanding ponies we’re traveling with. And you, you seem like a good pony, and one who is very good at keeping secrets when they’re for a good reason. So, how about a deal?”

She blinked, her ears perking up. “What’s that?”

I inclined my head in the direction we were traveling. “We go out there, play the heroes, maybe save some ponies. Then, when that’s all done, you and I swap stories of our dark and mysterious pasts.”

Starlight’s ears had shot up in alarm, and she cast a concerned look my way, as if to say, “Are you sure?” I could certainly understand. She understood exactly what I was offering. Even I felt a little uncomfortable about sharing. A few weeks earlier, and I would have never considered it, but I had shared my secret with three of the ponies I was traveling with, even if it hadn’t been entirely by choice. Instead of leaving me more vulnerable, as I had feared, that shared secret left us all better off.

Emerald had caught Starlight’s look, and watched her curiously before looking back to me. I simply smiled back, and after a moment of wary hesitation, she smiled as well, slowly and cautiously. “Okay, then. It’s a deal.”

In hindsight, I could have pressed her right then. I was reluctant to share my own secrets, but I was convinced that she was a pony they would be safe with. What she had already shared was enough for that. I’m sure that revealing my own past, not to mention my hidden nature, would have been enough to convince her to share her own story, but I didn’t press the matter.

Maybe I should have.

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Neither Starlight nor Emerald's PipBucks had a name for the tiny ghost town we found. The settlement had once had about twenty buildings, mostly simple two-story houses. Now more than half of them now lay in ruins, whether collapsed from the wear and tear of two centuries or torn down by scavengers for material. The ones that remained were in poor repair. Roofs sagged, walls had holes where boards had fallen away, and all of them were caked in two centuries of dust and dirt. Stretches of broken-down wire fence marked out several large patches of land between the surrounding low hills. Once, they might have been fields for crops. Now they were nothing but desolate patches of dry earth.

The center of the tiny town was a cluster of four buildings. One was still identifiable as a saloon, though one of the side walls had partially buckled. For the others, I could only make vague guesses as to their original purpose.

Between the buildings stood a tall pole, and lashed to that pole were the dry bones of a pony.

"They've certainly been here," Dusty said as he peered through his binoculars. "Don't see any sign of them right now."

"Unless they're inside," I noted, slowly sweeping my own binoculars over the scene. Even in mid-day, the ever-present cloud-cover turned several windows into dark pits.

"Naturally," Dusty said with a slow nod. He lowered his binoculars, though his eyes remained fixed on the town, just a quarter mile away. His hoof idly tapped the ground in front of where he lay, as he mulled over the scene.

"Wish we had broadcasters," he muttered. "Could be a lot more flexible that way." He shook his head, as if chasing away the thought, then spoke up. "Okay, plan of action. Left side of town, closest to us. You see that single-story building with the wide windows and stone foundation?"

As one, our heads turned to look at the building he had pointed out.

"Our first move is going to be toward there. It looks unoccupied, and if we do run into trouble, it should give better cover than one of the wood buildings. Stay spread out when we're crossing the open, just like before.

If we take fire, I want you all to lay on the return fire. Suppress the shit out of them and fight your way to that building. Move when your buddy is shooting, then stop and shoot so they can move. Once we're enlodged there, we can move on to sweep the rest of the town. Got it?"

Nods and affirmations went around.

"Good," he said with an authoritative nod, and stood. "Let's move quick."

He took his rifle's bit in his mouth and led us out in a slow trot, and we spread out on either side.

We crossed over the fallen remains of a wire fence and into one of the old fields. Nothing but dust remained, kicked up by our hooves in tiny clouds to drift away in the gentle breeze.

My heart was beating a bit too hard for the mild pace, my breathing a bit too fast. I watched the slowly approaching windows, and checked once more that my safety was disengaged.

The distance steadily diminished. There were no signs of movements in the town, save for a few tattered scraps of cloth caught up in the displayed skeleton, fluttering gently.

We were less than a hundred yards from our destination when Starlight called out. "Hey! Uh..." Her head dipped down, then looked up at the saloon, directly across the street from where we were going. "I've got red marks over there."

Dusty's rifle was already swinging up and over before she had finished; I saw the puff from his muzzle an instant before the roar of incoming gunfire shattered the silence all around. I jumped, putting a round into the dirt in front of me, then quickly swung my weapon up in the direction Dusty was firing. My sights fell over the saloon. Muzzle-flashes blazed within the upper-story windows of the saloon, and I mashed the trigger as fast as I could. Puffs of dust and fragments of wood flew from the face of the building, followed by the brilliant flash and crack of Starlight's Lancer putting a new hole in the wall. Snaps and cracks sounded all around me, but I only distantly recognized that the tiny puffs of dirt kicked up around us were incoming bullets.

My weapon jerked as I pulled the trigger on an empty chamber, my magazine already spent in what felt like a single instant. I glanced to to

my left. Dusty had galloped ahead and had just thrown himself to the ground, his hooves moving swiftly as he reloaded his rifle. I followed his lead, breaking into a gallop, moving while he put out more fire, kicking up clouds of dust with every shot. A quick glance further to the left caught sight of Starlight and Emerald scrambling along, with the former helping the latter. The concern that stirred up had to wait; I had more pressing matters to attend to.

I had just passed Dusty when his rifle fell silent. I threw myself down in the dirt, sending up a small cloud of dust, and let my empty magazine fall to the ground as I fumbled a fresh one into place. Dusty was already galloping past behind me by the time I pulled the charging handle to chamber a round.

Flashes lit up the upstairs window again, matched with a frighteningly rapid chatter of gunfire. I swung my sights over the window and mashed the trigger again, answering it with my own shots. Dust flew up around me with each shot, obscuring my view, and more sprays of dust and wood fragments flew from the building as I put round after round into it. The incoming fire stopped almost immediately, but I didn't stop until my weapon ran empty again.

I leaped up to my hooves, turned, and galloped again. Dusty had already halted, standing just a dozen yards from the safety of our destination, and started to steadily fire toward the building. Another burst of fire, slower and deeper, answered back, but fell silent almost immediately under Dusty's steady, accurate fire.

As I galloped past Dusty, I saw the others had already made it inside. I dove in through the wide window, tumbling to a halt on the debris-strewn floor. I immediately saw Sickle, sitting there half exposed, her muzzle hanging to the side to reveal an enthusiastic grin.

I righted myself, disentangled from my cloak, and kicked out the empty magazine to reload again.

Dusty leaped across me and dropped neatly behind the edge of the window as he started to reload. "Star! Get on line, I need you shooting. Emerald! How bad is it?"

As I chambered another round, I glanced back. Starlight scrambled up to the edge of the window beside us, but I looked at Emerald, who was lying on her side and panting. She had pressed a hoof to her chest, and lifted it

away, looking at it as if expecting blood.

"I'm okay," she called back. "The barding stopped it!"

Dusty's shout jerked me back to attention. "Whisper, get shooting!"

I snapped my head around, tugged on the bit to seat the stock against my body, and rose up. I saw flashes of white around the upper floor of the saloon, but in that frantic moment, I couldn't be sure if they were the flashes of muzzles or the results of bullets striking the building. I simply pointed at wherever I saw movement and kept firing.

Then I saw a flicker of something dark arc from one of the windows.

Starlight's Lancer swung upwards, and its near-blinding light was answered with a flash and the sharp blast of the grenade detonating in mid-air. I cringed, ducking down for an instant. I think Starlight laughed. S.A.T.S. is pretty amazing stuff.

I forced myself to rise again and resume shooting. I only got two more rounds out before I dropped down again, ejecting another spent magazine.

I was halfway through reloading when Sickle threw a pair of Dash inhalers to the ground. "Yeah, this is more like it!" she roared, slapping her muzzle back in place and latching it. She turned her manic grin our way. "Okay, you cunts! Let's get this fucking party started!"

Then she leaped out the window, bellowing out an incoherent battle-cry of rage as she charged right across the open ground between the two buildings.

Dusty cursed, quickly snapping off several rounds into the upstairs windows, and as soon as I had finished reloading, I did the same. I heard only a short chatter of return fire, but saw no impacts; I assumed our suppressing fire had worked.

Sickle barreled straight through the half-broken doors of the saloon, disappearing into the darkness.

The windows flashed with light for an instant before the hammer-fall of an explosion hit me in the chest, throwing a billowing cloud of dust and fragments out of the lower-story windows. Everypony ducked. I heard debris striking the building, and kept my head down until the sound had stopped.

Dusty was already up and covering the upstairs windows by the time I had risen again. My heart was hammering. There was no sign of life within

the building, even as the cloud of dust started to thin. Then I heard Sickle's furious roar. I couldn't make out what she yelled for sure, but if I had to guess, it would be, "You cheap-ass motherfuckers!"

Gunfire erupted from inside the upper floor of the saloon, that rapid chatter and slow boom mixing into a wild cacophony. Flashes of light lit up the windows, but they weren't shooting at us.

Emerald moved up behind me. "Is everypony—"

A sharp crack interrupted her as she let out a pained yelp. My head snapped around to see her fall to the ground. I turned back to look for a shooter, only to have my vision filled by the suppressor of Dusty's rifle as he swung it around to a new threat. I cringed back as an ejected casing slapped against my side, but the suppressor turned the rifle's ear-shattering muzzle blast to sharp, echoing cracks. I recovered quickly, backing up and bringing my own weapon around.

I saw the flicker of bits of wood flying from the upper levels of a distant two-story house, probably two hundred yards away. I settled my sights over it and started to fire.

After a couple shots, Dusty yelled out. "Star! Far right, end of the road, two-story house. Follow my shots." He fired off a couple more rounds, while Starlight scrambled over, sliding into place beside me and leveling her Lancer out the window.

"I see it!"

Dusty fired off a couple more rounds before shouting again. "Single upstairs window. There's a shooter in there. He pops his head up again, you take it off!"

"Got it!" Starlight said, focusing down her scope.

My gun clicked, and I dropped down to reload again. I kicked out the magazine, which fell to the ground with a deep thunk. There were still rounds in it, but I didn't take the time to contemplate that as I slid a fresh magazine in. I had to rack the bolt a few times to get it to finally close all the way.

As soon as I had, I brought my weapon up again, just in time to see the upstairs wall of the saloon explode outwards as Sickle plowed straight through it. She fell to the street, streaming dust and shattered boards like a descending meteor, her forelegs wrapped around a flailing pony.

It only occurred to me upon retelling the encounter that I had fired more than one hundred rounds of ammunition by then, and this was the first time I had directly seen one of the ponies we were fighting.

They crashed to the street with such an impact that I'm sure I felt it through the ground. Somehow, the other pony, a mare clad in metal barding and sporting a neon green mane, had survived Sickle tackling her through a wall and landing on her. Sickle solved that by bringing her head back and smashing her armored muzzle down on the pony's head. I'm sure the first impact had finished the job, but I watched in morbid fascination and horror as Sickle repeated the action twice more, finally pulling her head back with blood and bits of brain dripping from the bars of her muzzle.

I tore my eyes away from the scene and focused on the distant house. Dusty had just finished off a magazine, dropping down a bit to reload once more. I carefully lined my sights up on the distant window, and as I started to put out carefully aimed shots into that dark void, Dusty spoke up.

"Emerald? You up? Can you shoot?"

I wanted to look back, but I kept focused on the building. Aim, squeeze, breath. Aim, squeeze, breath.

Emerald's groan came as a welcome relief. "Yeah, I can do that." She slid herself up beside me, and I saw she was holding a foreleg tight against her chest. She was clearly in pain, but I saw no blood, so I assumed her barding had again stopped the bullet.

Dusty slapped in the magazine. "I'm going to need you giving us covering fire. As soon as we move, I need you putting steady shots into that upstairs window. Star, you nail that shooter if he shows himself. The moment we get inside there, you two hold fire. I don't want you shooting us on accident, got it?"

While they nodded, I had a sinking feeling as to who "we" were.

Dusty turned to call out toward the saloon. "Sickle!"

Sickle had risen to her hooves, and was limping in our direction, though she didn't respond. She was giggling, interrupted as she staggered drunkenly. I could see now that blood was dripping heavily from her belly and running down her hind legs.

"Damnit," Dusty muttered when he got no response from her, and he turned to me. "Whisper, you're with me. Whatever happens, keep up!"

Despite my concerns, I gave a quick nod.

Dusty took a deep breath, then called out to Emerald. "Suppressing fire!"

Emerald had propped herself up enough to see out the window, and the gem of her rifle flashed as thin lines of light snapped in the air, sending out small clouds of cinders from the distant house. Dusty popped off several rounds, and then went up and over the windowsill, galloping away. My heart hammered with a fresh surge of adrenaline as I leaped after him, leaving the relative safety of the building behind.

We galloped across the street, my lungs already protesting at the dust-choked air. We passed the remains of the mare and her heavy, raider-styled armor, and moved to the wall of the saloon. Dusty led us down along the line of buildings, most of which were merely collapsed ruins. Rather than focusing on the house ahead of us, his attention was focused to our left, on the buildings we were passing. The ruins seemed to offer few places to hide, but he wasn't taking chances. I mimicked him, looking for additional threats.

When the snaps of Emerald's magical energy rifle fell silent, Dusty dropped down to a trot, firing off a couple rounds towards the house. I slowed and did the same. I was sure I had no chance of hitting anything like that, between the trotting and my panting. I just wanted to keep that pony's head down.

A thin line of light flashed between the two buildings, and Dusty broke into a gallop once more. I followed, becoming increasingly aware of the weight of equipment bouncing and jostling around me. My leg was aching again, despite the magic I had spent in subtly altering and reinforcing the bone and muscles there.

We hooked around to the side of the house, closing the final gap from the side, where that upstairs window couldn't see us. I nearly collapsed when we halted beside the house. I struggled to control my breathing. Dusty merely looked a little winded, his chest steadily expanding and contracting as he kept his rifle leveled, unwavering, at the corner before us.

He gave me about ten seconds before stepping back to crouch beside me. He lifted a forehoof to hold his rifle in place as he released the bit, and quietly spoke to me. "Load a fresh mag. When we go in, I want you to stay

right on my tail. Just don't shoot me in the flank, got it?"

"Yeah," I said in what I hoped didn't sound too much like a gasp. I swapped the magazine in my weapon with one from my pouch, which had grown considerably lighter than it had been just a few short minutes earlier.

Dusty reloaded as well, his motions slow and deliberate. He gave me a few more seconds, then he rose up and prowled forward like a predator, his body staying perfectly level as he moved.

I followed.

The snaps of Emerald's rifle fell silent by the time we rounded the corner of the house. Dusty slowed as he approached a window, stepping up close to it, his rifle held low. Then he surged forward, his rifle coming up to point inside. He moved to the side, sweeping his view around, then moved past it, his rifle pointing toward the door we were approaching.

The whole way, I kept glancing down at the ground. I was certain that, at any moment, we would find another mine.

Inside the house, I could hear a stallion's voice, muffled through the walls, but fast and urgent.

When we reached the door, Dusty paused, then surged forward again, his gun tracking the inside of the house as he moved from one side of the door to the other. The muzzle swept over everywhere he looked, including, I was thankful to see, the ground. Satisfied that we weren't walking straight into a mine, he moved quickly and smoothly through the door. I followed right on his tail, rather less smoothly.

The stairs up were just inside the door, and Dusty led the way up, his rifle focused on the doorway at their top. The voice was coming from upstairs, and was much clearer.

"...fucking dumbass, they killed Chatter!" There was a pause as Dusty continued up, halting just below the level of the upper floor. "Cause she's got a fucking army with her, that's why! One of 'em's got power armor or some shit. We ain't got nothin' to deal with fucking power armor!"

Dusty glanced at me as I came to a halt beside him, my rifle leveled at the doorway. He gave a quick nod, and dipped his head down to one of the pouches on his bardings.

"Yeah, no shit!" the voice angrily shouted. "I shot her in the head! It didn't do a goddess-fucking thing except piss them all off, and they're

turning this building into fucking Swiss cheese! ...Yes, the one with the fucking holes you retarded shit-for-brains!"

Dusty's head rose up, a grenade clutched in his teeth. He gripped it with his hooves, looking to the doorway, and pulled the pin.

I stared at it with mounting tension as he just held onto it. I wanted him to throw it. I *willed* him to throw it, for all the good it did.

"Brahminshit!" the stallion in the next room shouted; his was still the only voice we had heard. "What kind of shopkeeper runs around with a small army and a fucking Steel Ranger?"

Dusty's ears pinned back, and he swung his hoof around, arcing the grenade through the door.

"Well you fucking tell Boomer if she wants that green bitch dead, she needs to get the whole fucking gang and every fucking bomb we've got before they kill every one of—FUCK—"

The building shook with the explosion, pounding at my head and chest, and sending a cascade of dust and grit falling over us. I realized Dusty was already moving, and I scrambled after him.

I passed through the doorway just in time to see Dusty put two rounds into the sprawled and dust-caked raider lying on the floor. The clack of his rifle echoed sharply in the small space, even over the sharp hum in my ears. The raider didn't even twitch, and Dusty was already moving past him to another doorway. We swept through the room without pause, then another, before returning to the first.

"We're clear up here," Dusty said, returning to the downed raider. The floorboards just a couple feet away were shattered; the grenade had punched a small hole down to the floor below, and torn up everything around it, raider included.

The raider himself was clad in heavy metal armor that was wrapped in ragged bits of cloth, and sporting a good number of pouches. He was missing most of his face thanks to the bullets Dusty had put into his skull, but I could see goggles and a face-wrap tangled up in the remains. A banged-up bolt-action rifle lay beside him.

"Watch the stairs," Dusty said as he stepped over the raider, staring down at him. I turned my attention back the way we came, pulling the stock of my rifle in tight again.

Several seconds passed before Dusty suddenly spoke. “There you are.” He dipped down, retrieving something, though I kept my attention focused on the stairs. In the corner of my vision, I saw him fiddling with whatever it was he had found. That lasted for several seconds before he grumbled. “Damn it.” He shoved the object into a pouch, then spoke up. “Let’s get back to the others.”

He led us down the stairs and out, heading across the open field at a steady trot.

As we were returning, I could see Sickle had made it back to our building, though she now lay on her side. Starlight was at her side, and looked to be speaking to her, though Sickle showed no sign of replying. As we drew nearer, I saw her reach out to shake Sickle’s shoulders, or at least try to. Still no response.

Emerald was staring down at the healing potion she held in her hooves, her expression sad. After several seconds, she caught Starlight’s attention, and held out the bottle. Starlight took it and managed to unlatch Sickle’s muzzle, shoving the bottle into her mouth.

I was climbing in through the window after Dusty when Sickle groaned, rolling onto her back. Emerald retrieved some of the magic-laced bandages and offered them to Starlight, who grabbed them in her magic and hurried to Sickle’s rear.

“You’re still bleeding,” Starlight noted as she went to work. Given the amount of blood coating her belly, legs, and groin, and the amount pooled on the floor, I had to wonder how much she had left to lose.

Sickle grunted, her head rolling drowsily to the side. Her words were slow and slurred. “Yeah. Had a mine go off under my ass. Cheap fucking trick...”

Dusty approached, quickly appraising the scene before stepping in. “Let me handle that,” he said, stepping in to take one of the bandages. “You’re the salvage expert, right? Think you can get this thing working?”

He’d fished out the object he had retrieved from the sniper-raider, and I immediately recognized it.

Starlight took it in her magic, peering at it. “A broadcaster? With... what, they wired a spark battery directly into it? What the hell did they do to this thing?”

"I don't know," Dusty said as he pressed the bandages into place; Sickle's bare groin and rear were a mess of gashes, and while the healing potion had stopped most of the bleeding, some of the larger cuts were still leaking. "Just see if you can get it working. The raider who had it was talking to somepony. I want to listen in if they say anything else."

"Oh, good idea," Starlight said, sitting down and pulling out tools. "I'll see what I can do."

Dusty packed the magical bandages over the worst wounds, then used some mundane bandages to hold them in place. As he was tying the first one off, he noticed my attention. "Eyes out, Whisper. You're our lookout right now."

I nodded and turned away, scanning over the view outside those windows, while trying to ignore what was happening right behind me.

My concern was alleviated to a degree when Sickle started to giggle, and eventually mumbled, "You're just looking for any excuse to get between my legs, ain't 'cha, Dusty?"

"Just keep telling yourself that," Dusty quietly replied, earning a chuckle from both Sickle and Starlight.

There was a rattle of armor as Sickle moved, then the sound of her armored saddle-bags opening, followed by Dusty's sigh. "Just don't overdo it."

"Yeah, yeah," Sickle weakly replied over the sound of pills rattling in their bottles. A few seconds later there was a louder rattle as she struggled up to a sitting position. I saw Dusty was helping her.

"You okay?" he asked, once she was upright.

She groaned, leaning heavily on the window sill. "The buck and painkillers say yes. Woo..." I glanced over as she chuckled faintly, licking over her lips. A few bits of former-raider were still stuck to her snout.

While she giggled quietly to herself, Dusty moved up to the window as well. With a second set of eyes, I took a momentary break to look back to Emerald. She was lying down with her foreleg held against her chest. Her brows were furrowed as she panted shallowly, though her expression softened when she saw me looking. She coughed, swallowed, and spoke up. "I think I've changed my mind."

Dusty looked back. "What's that?"

"About going with you," she said, then shook her head. "I mean, to fight

the raiders. I... I think this was enough fighting for me.”

Dusty frowned, but nodded. “I understand. Afraid you’re kind of in the middle of it, though. If those two ponies are still alive, we don’t have time to head back and make another try at it.”

“Oh, no, no,” Emerald said, raising a hoof to wave off the comment, then wincing and tucking her leg back against her side. “You all go on without me, those ponies need you. I’ll just wait behind for you.”

“Can’t do that,” Dusty said. “We’re in raider territory.”

“I’ll go back to the farm,” she quickly said. “I can wait for you there.”

“You’re not safe anywhere outside of town,” Dusty said, then pointed to Starlight and the broadcaster she was working on. “Those raiders were gunning for you. Boomer wants you dead, and we’re not leaving you unguarded.”

Emerald’s expression went slack. “Me? But... why?”

“Don’t know,” Dusty said. “I intend to find out, but until we deal with them, they’re going to be looking for you, and I don’t intend to leave you unprotected.”

“Amber,” Emerald muttered. “She must have...” She shook her head. “Doesn’t matter. Look, I... I’ll go back to town and wait for you where we made the, uh, second deal. If the raiders come looking for me, I’ll run for the gates. I’ll probably be safer there than I will getting into another fight.”

Sickle rumbled quietly. “Chickenshit.”

“Yeah, I am,” Emerald quickly replied. “And I’m not going, but you all need to if you’re going to save those ponies.”

Her eyes glanced to me, and I realized I was frowning as I tried to piece together her reasoning. I had one thing absolutely correct: this was not a sudden bout of cowardice.

Dusty was shaking his head. “You’re talking about a day-long trip through raider territory, even if you weren’t cradling your leg like that.”

“This is nothing,” she said, giving a pained smile, and wiggled her PipBuck-clad hoof. “Just a bruised rib. I’ll be fine as soon as I catch my breath.”

Dusty’s frown deepened as he mulled it over, and I looked to him. While I didn’t like it, I was willing to go with whatever he decided.

Emerald continued to hold her smile.

Then she twitched, and Dusty's ears perked up, his brows furrowing as he looked at her.

"I'm fine," she reassured him. She swallowed, then twitched again, the faint, full-body convulsion of somepony trying to hide a cough.

Dusty stepped forward, his expression abruptly business-like. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Emerald said, though I could hear the rising fear in her voice. "Just really sore from—"

Her words were cut off as she clenched again, her body shaking several times before she couldn't hold it back any more and let out a couple of coughs. They were short, weak, and wet.

Dusty moved to her side, fixing her with a stare. "Okay, now it's an order. Tell me what's wrong."

"Nothing," she repeated, choking back a couple more coughs. Tears were forming in the corners of her eyes. "Just go."

"Damnit," Dusty muttered as he sat in front of her, his hooves reaching for her side. "We had a deal, Emerald."

"No!" Emerald's legs kicked out, trying to swat his hooves away as he grabbed at the strap of her saddlebags. "I'll be fine, just go without me! Stop!"

I wavered; hearing Emerald's pained cries of protests as she struggled wildly against Dusty's grip was deeply disconcerting, enough that I started to question what Dusty was doing.

Then he froze for a moment, his eyes widening. He tugged at the strap across her belly, working past her struggles, and as she cried out, pulled away the saddlebag with its tiny, overlooked bullet hole. The underside was soaked with blood.

"Shit!" Dusty snapped, and threw the bags out of the way to grab at the straps of her bardings. "Damnit, Emerald, you don't hide shit like this!"

"Please, don't," she sobbed, her panting growing ever faster, mixing with increasingly wet coughs. Her struggles had fallen off to weak gestures. "Just go. Leave me. Save Quartz and Flint."

Dusty ignored her, and I found myself moving in to help him undo the buckles of her bardings. A final strap came undone, and Dusty pulled back the side of her bardings. It peeled away from her side.

The barding had done a good job of containing the blood. Her entire side was soaked in it, from shoulder to flank. She sobbed softly, and each cough produced a little surge of blood from the tiny hole in her side.

“Fuck,” Dusty blurted, then grabbed my hoof, pressing it over the hole, I almost drew back from the surge of warm blood that met me, but Dusty barked, “Pressure!”

While I pressed on the wound, trying fruitlessly to stem the flow of blood, he grabbed at her foreleg and the PipBuck clasped to it. “Let me see,” he said, his voice much softer, though his grip was firm when she tried to pull it away. “Easy,” he said, his other hoof moving to her neck. “We’ll take care of this.”

She whined and coughed under my hooves. “Please... just go...”

Dusty ignored her, except to give a reassuring stroke along her neck. His other hoof poked at the PipBuck, switching to its medical display. I was a bit too far away to make out what it said, but still close enough to see the several flashing warnings it was giving.

“It’s okay,” Emerald said, giving a weak smile. “You can’t save me. I know.” A short fit of coughing interrupted her. “But you can still save Quartz and Flint. Please, just go.”

Dusty ignored her. He stared at the PipBuck screen for a few more seconds, then turned to push my hoof away, taking my place. “Starlight! Sniper house. Whisper! Street and saloon. Search those raiders for medical supplies. Go!”

I turned and ran, leaving bloody hoof-prints in the dirt. I slid to a halt at the raider Sickle had killed, ignoring the pulped remains of what had once been her head to rifle through the few pockets and pouches her crude armor had. I found water, dried meat, and ammunition, but the closest she had to medical supplies was a bottle of mixed pills.

Leaving her, I ran to the saloon. I didn’t pause to take in the devastation of the ruined main room. I bound and scrambled up the torn-up stairs, having to haul myself up the last bit to the top floor, and made my way to the room the raiders had been shooting at us from.

The third raider was half embedded in the floor, in what I presume was a result of Sickle stomping him. He wore remarkably thick metal bardings with spikes protruding from the back, for all the good it had done him.

I searched through his pouches, and then the saddlebags I spotted near the window. The only medical supplies I found was a single magic-laced bandage. I grabbed it my teeth, turned, and ran.

I vaulted down the stairs, ignoring the flash of pain in my leg upon landing, and burst out the front doors. I was panting hard when I finally got back inside, sliding to a halt in the loose grit scattered on the floor.

Dusty had our final magical bandage pressed against her side, but it was already completely soaked through. Sickle sat nearby, watching silently. The containers at her side were open, and a variety of drugs were set on the floor before her.

The moment Dusty saw the bandage in my mouth, he snatched it, pressing it to the wound.

“Don’t,” Emerald protested, tensing up for a moment before laying her head down again. She was still panting hard, but increasingly shallowly. “Save... save it. It’s not... it’s not going to work.”

She trailed off, and ten seconds later, the new bandage was just as soaked as the old one.

There was a clatter of hooves as Starlight returned, Dusty and I looked up, only to be met with her worried look and a quick shake of her head.

I sat beside Emerald’s head as Dusty tried to stem the bleeding. I could hear the wet, raspy sounds of her breath as she gasped for air, and I gently placed my hoof on the side of her neck to offer what meager comfort I could give. She blinked a few times, lifting her head, then coughing and setting it down again. It took her a few blinks to finally focus on me, and once she had, tears started to well up in her eyes. Tiny flecks of blood dotted her lips.

“Please,” she gasped, weakly lifting a hoof in my direction. “...Leave me. Leave me...”

It wasn’t until later that I realized I had misheard her. At the time, looking down on that expression of pain and fear, I had thought she was afraid we would leave her to die alone. The alternative made no sense. Not yet.

So I took the hoof she had raised in my own, giving it a squeeze, and attempted to reassure her. “We’re here,” I said, soothing. “We’re not going to leave you.”

The tears started to flow, her ears pinning back as she stared up at me.

The look of pain in her eyes was far more than just physical. She looked terrified, sobbing to me, “Don’t... don’t tell them—”

She was interrupted by another fit of coughing, and ended with her head slumped to the ground, eyes half-lidded. “...Don’t tell them...”

I leaned in, stroking at her neck as I squeezed her hoof again. I wanted to keep her talking. “Don’t tell who what?”

She coughed again, only weakly. “A-about me,” she gasped. Another cough. “D-don’t... don’t tell...”

She trailed off, giving a few incoherent mumbles as her eyes shut. As she fell silent, the pace of her breathing changed. It was weak, and so shallow that her chest barely moved.

“What about you?” I asked, but she didn’t answer. Her hoof had gone limp in my grasp. I released it, my hooves cradling her head to angle her face up. My heart was hammering again. “Emerald, stay with me. Don’t tell them *what* about you?”

“Keep her talking,” Dusty called out.

“I’m trying!” I gripped her head, leaning in close. “Emerald? Emerald! Wake up. Don’t tell them *what* about you?”

“Shit,” Dusty muttered beside me. As I tried to get her to wake up, he looked over the PipBuck screen again. “Damnit... Whisper! Give her a hit of Dash.”

I set her head down, immediately following his order and snatching up one of the inhalers laid out before Sickle. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?” I asked, even as I popped off the cap and pressed the nozzle into her mouth.

“It’s a terrible idea,” Dusty said, glaring down at the PipBuck. “But it’s all we’ve got.”

I pressed down on the inhaler, sending a spray of the drug into her mouth. She twitched, then gave a phlegmy cough as her body jerked in response to the powerful stimulant. Her eyes fluttered open, but they didn’t focus. “N-no,” she wheezed. Her gaze weaved around, her eyes unseeing. “It w-was real... all... all real...”

Already, her eyes were closing again, her body going limp.

“See if you can get her to take some Buck,” Dusty said.

Though I figured it was said out of desperation, I turned back to the assortment of chems. I searched for a moment before Sickle lifted a hoof to

indicate a bottle. Snatching it up, I retrieved one of the thick tablets.

Sickle spoke quietly. "She's done."

"No she's not!" I reflexively replied, lifting Emerald's head a bit to open her mouth and slid the tablet in. "Emerald, I need you to swallow this. It'll help."

Of course, she didn't respond. She was completely limp again, her eyes half-shut and unresponsive. I glanced at the screen of her PipBuck. More warnings had shown up, and the vital signs were steadily diminishing.

I gave her a gentle shake. "Come on, Emerald. Talk to me."

Nothing.

I looked back to Dusty. "What do we do?"

He just stared down at the PipBuck and slowly shook his head. His hooves lifted from the sodden bandages, and rested on softly on her side.

My ears fell. I wanted to protest, to do *something*, but I couldn't. There wasn't anything to be done. So I sat there, watching the PipBuck screen, knowing what was coming.

Time passed slowly, agonizingly. Numbers I didn't quite understand slowly changed on the medical display; mostly, they marched steadily downward. Several words, mostly starting with hypo- or tachy-, flashed red on the screen.

Then a larger warning flashed, clear and dominant on the screen: respiratory arrest. Just a few seconds later, another warning joined the first: cardiac arrest. The eyes of the cute little cartoon pony on the medical screen turned to 'x's.

Dusty's lowered his head. Starlight sniffled.

Myself, I stared down at Emerald, my ears hanging low. I just sat there, watching, and waiting, and dreading.

And seconds later, the green flames flashed across her form, revealing the glossy black beneath.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

# Rage and Retribution

I took things about as well as could be expected.

I sat back, staring down at her in silence, my hooves moving to my muzzle. Even with the seed of suspicion planted with Emerald's final pleas, I wasn't entirely prepared for what I saw. While Dusty and Starlight gaped and murmured, I simply stared, and tried to think, to piece everything together, to make sense of it all.

That lasted about five seconds before I broke down crying.

Emerald was dead. One of the kindest mares I'd met, and she'd died in pain and terror, choking on her own blood. The first changeling I had discovered since losing my own hive. One who professed the same kind of outlook as my own sisters had. One who could have even been a descendant of my own hive. One who had died in my own hooves, and me, unable to prevent it.

A changeling who, if her story were true, had been as isolated from her own kind as I was. The two of us, so close to discovering that we were not alone.

I sank down, escaping Starlight's comforting hooves to grasp Emerald's body, clutching her tightly as I sobbed into her still chest. An irrational part of me wanted to shake her, to beg her to wake up, as if my pleading might do what first aid and magical bandages could not. I even stripped away my own disguise at some point, as if to show her, belatedly, that she wasn't alone.

Eventually, my cries faded, while Starlight gently rubbed a hoof along my back. As the sudden wave of emotion started to break and recede, my mind started to engage.

My first thoughts turned to shame and recrimination. Not simply at breaking down over the death of another changeling, mind you, or even over the sense of failure at having been unable to protect her. No, I felt shame for how selfish my thoughts were. This was a mare who had given so much, given *everything*, and in the face of her example, I was crying over what her death cost me. I was crying over the lost opportunity to reconnect with my own kind.

I was probably being a bit too harsh with myself, but I suppose it's understandable, given the situation.

In any case, sorrow and guilt weren't going to help us now. Slowly, my mind turned toward more productive thoughts.

I sniffled, drawing in a deep breath as I pushed myself upright. Starlight pressed up against my side as I sat up, her forelegs wrapped around me, but I ignored her for a moment. My horn lit up, grasping Emerald's PipBuck and lifting it. I undid the strange latch on the back—which now made sense to me—and removed it. The medical screen flashed fresh errors, but I ignored them, pressing buttons as I sought one particular piece of information.

After a few seconds, I froze, staring down at the screen.

Starlight gave another gentle squeeze. "What is it?"

I swallowed, and when I spoke, my voice came out thick and rough. "Serenity."

Starlight and Dusty scooted in, looking down at the map screen with me. The map marker seemed so insignificant amidst the hundreds of other marks. It wasn't labeled as a settlement, or even a ruin. It was just a generic landmark tag, which could so easily blend in with all the others.

"That's where she came from," I said. "Her family."

"Oh, shit," Starlight murmured, a hoof moving to her mouth. "You mean... other changelings?"

I nodded, but Dusty wasn't quite as sure.

"Or it could have just been ponies she had worked for. Hell, maybe still did."

"What?" Starlight said, straightening up. "No way she was still working for those slavers!"

"We don't know any of that," Dusty replied, shaking his head, and his eyes fell over Emerald's still form. "Maybe that was just another lie. I... I don't know. Sorry. Not the time for it."

I lowered the PipBuck, looking down at her as well. My throat constricted as tears started to well up once again. "No," I croaked. "We know."

Dusty looked at me. I could see he wasn't convinced, but he didn't argue. He merely looked down upon her once more.

We sat in silence for a minute before I finally stirred, reaching out with my hooves and my magic. Slowly and carefully, I disentangled her body

from the barding and equipment, and after a few moments, Starlight and Dusty joined in to help me.

Soon she was lying bare on the floor.

I wish I could have seen her like that in life. She was a striking changeling in many ways, elegant and fit, and while her carapace was healthy and smooth, age had faded the glossy shell to a duller gray. It was the look of a changeling who had lived a long, happy life, full of love.

Laid out on her other side, to conceal the jagged hole and the majority of the blood, she looked almost peaceful.

I stood over her for a long moment, taking in every detail. Then I lowered my head, touching my horn to hers, and called up my magic.

Green fire flashed into being, rippling steadily across her form. I stepped back, as did the others, and watched as it rapidly consumed her. Seconds later, there was nothing left but a fine layer of ash.

Starlight was the one to eventually break the silence. “What now?”

“Fall back or push on,” Dusty murmured, slowly shaking his head. “Normally I’d just make the call, but I’m not feeling so hot about my judgment, lately.”

“Fuck falling back,” Sickle growled. “I was already going to murder the shit out of them for those pussy-ass mines. Now I’m going to get fucking *nasty*.”

Starlight eyed her skeptically. “Why, because of Emerald? You didn’t even like her.”

“Fuck no, I didn’t like her.” She followed that with an armor-rattling shrug. “But you cunts did, and that’s good enough for me.”

I sniffed, wiping at my cheeks, and threw in my own two bits. “I’m with Sickle. We press on. Kill them all.”

“Fuck yeah,” Sickle rumbled.

Dusty nodded, though he threw in a word of caution. “Just keep in mind, we’re out of decent medical supplies. There’s going to be no margin for error.”

“They’ll have some,” Sickle said. “Just make sure to kill them all before they can use ‘em.”

“And after we’ve taken out the raiders,” I said, “I want to go check out Serenity.”

Dusty's ears folded back, giving me a concerned look, but he didn't argue. Instead, he opted for a more neutral position. "Let's just focus on dealing with these raiders, first." He sat back, looking around, and slowly shook his head. "Let's take a few minutes, get all our gear sorted and everything. Then we'll set off."

I stood without a word and walked off, the PipBuck floating beside me. I retrieved the magazines I had left on the ground, then reloaded them with the spare ammo I carried, a process made much easier with magic. Soon that was done. Lacking anything else to do, I started to disassemble and clean my rifle, trying to remember exactly how Dusty had done it. The interior was surprisingly filthy, caked with carbon and dirt. I focused, meticulously scrubbing at every part.

I was so focused that I was caught by surprise when Starlight touched my side. I froze, glancing her way to see her look of concern. I held her gaze for a couple seconds before drawing in a slow, calming breath, and forced myself to relax. "...I'm trying to not make this all personal," I said, my voice quiet as I turned back to my weapon. "I don't think I'm doing a good job of it."

Dusty spoke up from across the room. "Just keep your mind on the mission. That'll help." I looked over to see him slowly loading fresh rounds into his own magazines, while his eyes scanned out the windows. "There'll be plenty of time to go over it all once you're not in the field."

"Sounds familiar," I murmured, focusing on the bolt and all its little, fiddly pieces as I scrubbed it clean. "The mission comes first." I sighed, trying to suppress the bitter feelings that threatened to bubble up. "...You've been here before, I take it?"

I heard his sigh. "Yep. I led a Ranger squad for a few years, and we got called in for all the worst shit. Got into combat probably fifty times, mostly against small raider bands, bandits, and the rare wanted criminal. Had more than a dozen casualties under my lead. Three of them died. Every time, we had to press on and finish the mission, and we had to focus, so more ponies wouldn't join them." He slid the last magazine into its pouch and closed his saddlebags. "Just focus on the mission. We can deal with the rest afterward."

I nodded. "Sounds a lot like being an Infiltrator. Keep going, complete

your mission, and don't let your own emotions get in the way of what you're doing."

"Yeah, pretty much," he agreed. "And you know, you seem to be pretty capable. Just stay focused, and I think you'll do fine."

"Maybe," I said, though without any enthusiasm. "It's been a rough month."

"It's been an outright hellish month," Dusty corrected. "And yeah, it's taken its toll, but you've kept going. You've done a lot better than most ponies would."

I was tempted to argue, but I held back. "...Thanks."

We settled into our work. Starlight spent some time working on the broadcaster before declaring it a totally lost cause, with its circuit board broken in half and at least two gems cracked. Afterwards, we searched the raiders for any supplies we might have missed in our frantic scramble for potions.

There wasn't much.

The collection of weapons seemed almost pitiful when compared to our own. The pair in the saloon had one of those little short-barrel submachine guns with a drum that was larger than it was, and a smooth-barrel pipe rifle that still had a misfed round jammed sideways in its breach. The sniper-pony's bolt-action rifle was the best of the lot, though it was badly worn, and its scope was freshly broken thanks to Dusty's grenade. We took the submachine gun and its ammo, just in case, and Dusty searched the sniper for what little rifle ammo he had.

We claimed their food and water as well, while Sickle cut away the right ear of each raider, or in the case of the submachine-gun mare, tore it away from the mess of flesh and bone that had once been her head.

She spent the rest of her time hacking apart the raider inside the saloon. Starlight grimaced and walked out, looking somewhat ill. I merely felt a slight, distant concern that I wasn't more bothered by Sickle's actions.

With nothing left for us in that ghost of a town, it was time to move on. I had no more excuse to delay.

I floated up Emerald's PipBuck, regarding it in silence. I felt so torn over it, so many warring emotions all demanding attention. Instead, I did as Dusty had said. I set them aside for the moment, and pressed on.

A quick flicker of green flame hid part of the armor over my left foreleg, and I floated the PipBuck into place. The latch closed, and the screen flashed various notifications as it took in its new situation.

My vision flashed and flickered as the Eyes Forward Sparkle came online, overlaying information across my vision. Notifications scrolled rapidly by as the device calibrated. I turned my head, and the compass display at the bottom swung around. A single green blip marked Starlight's position.

The notifications abruptly ended, and I looked back to the screen. The status display was content once again. The cute cartoon pony had been replaced by a similarly stylized changeling.

I blinked.

So many questions welled up, but I pushed them aside. There would be time for that later. Right now, I needed to focus.

I looked around again, familiarizing myself with the elements of the E.F.S. display. It was fairly simple and, I was thankful to note, unobtrusive, hovering at the edges of my vision.

"Pretty cool, huh?" Starlight asked, though she lacked any real enthusiasm. I appreciated the effort, though, and nodded in agreement.

"Get real familiar with that thing," Dusty said. "Those PipBucks are probably the most tactically useful piece of kit we've got."

"Yeah, they're pretty great," Starlight said. A real smile started to creep out across her muzzle. "Did you see that grenade I tagged in mid-air? S.A.T.S. is awesome."

Dusty smirked. "I meant the whole friend-or-foe system. Picking up threats and friendly locations through solid walls is a huge tactical advantage."

I looked down at the screen again, and its strange, smiling changeling. Another bout of emotion welled up in protest to the thought that came next, but I focused on the practical. "Maybe you should have it, then."

Dusty looked down at it as well, mulling the idea over. It was obvious that he saw merit in the idea, but he shook his head. "No, you keep it. Figure you've got a better claim on it. So long as you're quick and clear on communicating anything your E.F.S. picks up, that should be good enough. Besides, you'll probably get more out of S.A.T.S. than I would."

"...Thanks."

"Speaking of which," Dusty said, "you might want to give it a try just to get used to it. Better to familiarize yourself with it now instead of in the middle of combat."

A ruined building thirty yards away supplied me with targets. I loaded one of the submachine gun magazines into my pistol, using the raider's ammo instead of my much more uncommon subsonic rounds.

I started with a test round, taking my time and firing a couple bullets at each of three small sections of barely-standing wall. It was an unfamiliar sensation, firing my pistol while holding it in my magic. For one, the sights were much further forward. There wasn't the same physical kick, merely the sudden movement as the pistol tried to twist out of my magic's grip.

Still, it was reasonably easy, so long as I took my time.

I lowered the pistol, scanning over my targets again. Then I triggered S.A.T.S. and brought my weapon up.

It's hard to describe exactly what the Stable-Tec Arcane Targeting Spell is like. It was as if I was hyper-aware of my weapon and targets. Every little movement, every little detail. As I brought my pistol onto the first target, I corrected the alignment of my sights, smoothly pulling back the trigger to fire the moment the weapon was on-target. It bucked, and I smoothly compensated for the weapon's recoil, bringing it back for a follow-up shot.

The moment the pistol recoiled, I transitioned to the next target, snapping off two more shots before reversing direction and firing twice on the final target.

For that moment, I felt as if I really knew what I was doing.

S.A.T.S. fell off around the final shot, and I lowered the pistol to survey my work.

I wasn't Dusty; no simple targeting spell was going to change that. I'm sure he could have done better, likely even in the midst of combat. I was shooting in a calm situation, with my hooves firmly planted, and without the stress of combat or the threat of death looming over me. It wasn't some grand accomplishment, or an amazing display of skill, but if those three bits of ruined wall had been ponies, every round would have hit.

I slowly nodded, looking over the results of my shooting. "Okay. I think I'm ready."



We trekked across the roadless desert, seeking the locations Emerald had given us. They weren't far, now. Our journey took only a couple of hours.

The whole way, I kept glancing at the information her PipBuck was showing me, watching the compass for the first sign of hostile contacts.

But every now and then, I would look back over my shoulder, the compass tape swinging around to show the navigation marker I had set.

Serenity.

Then I would turn back, focusing on the task at hoof for a few minutes more.



Once again, we found ourselves lying on a ridge, scouting out the territory ahead. Half a mile away, in the gloom of the rapidly failing evening light, we could see the raiders' base.

According to Emerald's PipBuck, it had once been the Palomino Army Base. Two centuries later, the place was in ruins. The chain-link fence that had surrounded the heart of the base was broken and fallen. The rusted-out remains of a couple of tanks lay abandoned, as did the small collection of skywagons and motorwagons in what had once been a motor pool. Now it was nothing but a vehicle graveyard.

Only two of the original buildings stood, side-by-side; one looked like a single-story barracks, while the other was a narrow, two-story office building of some sort. Every other building had been torn down, apparently scavenged for materials. Most of those materials went into the pair of walls that stretched between the two buildings, enclosing a small courtyard between them. Even the buildings themselves had been built up, with their outer walls reinforced and additional structure tacked on the sides and even the tops. All told, the pair of buildings had been turned into a single multi-level fort maybe a hundred feet wide.

A single gate appeared to be the only way in or out, with its approach lined by the hulks of ruined vehicles, metal spikes, strands of barbed wire, and various bones; a crude collage of Wasteland warning signs. The gate itself was watched over by one of the two watchtowers built atop the walls.

They were small, only enough for one or two ponies, and didn't look terribly stable, but they gave good vantage points. As for the walls themselves, they were uneven, especially where they connected the two-story office building to the single-story barracks. Despite that, they looked to be heavily reinforced, and the walkways behind them offered good fighting positions to hold off an attack from any direction. The additions built atop the tallest building almost doubled its height, giving an even higher vantage point than the watchtowers, and possibly serving as a final hold-out if the walls were breached.

The raiders had themselves a small, crude, but effective fortress.

On top of that, everything was packed in tight inside those walls. A stealthy intrusion would be difficult.

Suffice to say, it wasn't looking good.

"Close tower," Dusty said, and we looked with him. "Mare, heavy armor, combat shotgun. That looks like the tip of a rocket launcher leaning on the wall next to her."

"Yeah, I see her," Starlight said. "Sure looks like it."

"Okay, treat that as a high-threat target. That thing could ruin our day." His binoculars shifted a fraction. "Stallion in the other tower has a pipe rifle. Nothing special there. Looks like he's got four grenades on that shelf next to him, though, something to be aware of."

Sickle groaned, and I lowered my binoculars to glance her way. She lay sprawled out on her belly beside us, her chin resting on the ground. "Boooored..." Other than her occasional protests, she lay perfectly still. She'd even given up flicking her tail or shaking her head to chase off the flies that still pestered her.

Dusty grimaced, but ignored her. "Star, let me know if you see that pony that was on the walls, see if you can scope out what gear she's got."

"Can't see much of anything in there," Starlight replied. "Caught a glimpse of something at the top of that tall building, but only barely. Some pony in armor."

"Let me know if you see them again." He frowned. "Also, let me know if you see another way in beside those gates." He pondered the scene for a moment before asking me, "Do you still have those demolition charges?"

I nodded. "The small charges, yes. Four blocks."

"Think you could knock down that gate with them, if it comes to that?"

I raised my binoculars, peering out across the distance. "Maybe. I'd feel a lot more confident if we could see how it's mounted and barred. I've only got five pounds, so placement is going to matter. Maybe if we can pull one of those vehicle hulks over to tamp the explosives." I glanced towards Sickle. "Though even if the charges don't break down the gate, they should damage them enough that Sickle could bust them open pretty quickly."

Dusty grunted and nodded.

"What about flying?" Starlight asked.

"Not in daylight," Dusty said with a quick shake of his head. "Way too visible. If they don't have any lights, it might be viable after dark."

Sickle groaned impatiently.

"And I kind of doubt Whisper can lift Sickle," Dusty added.

"Maybe if I turn into a dragon or something," I mused.

Starlight lowered her Lancer to stare at me. "Holy crap, you can do that?"

"A little dragon, sure," I said, scanning over the rooftops. "Big enough to lift Sickle? I'm not sure if I have enough magic for that. Even if I did, I'd probably be tapped out and useless afterwards."

"I can get over the wall fine on my own," Sickle cut in, though she still hadn't moved from where she lay. "Even if I couldn't, I could go *through* it. Why aren't we killing these fuckers already?"

Dusty sighed, shaking his head. "Because we have no margin for error, so I want to gather as much intel as possible before we make a move."

Sickle gave a particularly exaggerated groan. "Fuuuuck. I swear, Dusty, only you could make killing raiders *boring*."

"Boring is good," Dusty said. "Boring means we're not dying."

"Means we ain't living, either," Sickle muttered.

"Anyway, we have flexibility in how we approach this. We can take the time to figure out the best way to proceed." He looked over to Starlight and me. "Any suggestions?"

Sickle spoke up first. "Yeah. Charge on down there, bust the fucking door in, kill every motherfucker we see, and have a nice big celebratory fuck at the end of it all."

Dusty grimaced, but ignored her.

After rolling her eyes at Sickle's response, Starlight asked, "Isn't tactics kinda supposed to be your thing?"

"Yeah," Dusty said, ears drooping a bit. "Like I said, I'm not so sure of my judgment lately."

"Why?"

He frowned. "That's not really important. I'll deal with it afterwards. We need to deal with this, first."

I had my own problems to dwell on, but this seemed important enough to speak out on. "I hope you'll pardon me," I said, "but if you've gone from a confident tactical thinker and leader to hesitant to take responsibility, that seems like something we should deal with before getting into another fight."

Dusty's ears pinned back as he stared back at me for several long, unwavering seconds. Finally, he sighed, looking away again. "It's all this shit with Emerald. And I don't mean losing somepony under my lead. It's the whole... changeling thing. I didn't see it coming. *I should* have seen it coming, but I didn't. What else am I missing?"

Starlight set her Lancer down. "Hey, we didn't know Whisper was a changeling, either. I mean, passing themselves off as something else is kinda their whole thing." She gave a quick glance my way, as if I might be offended by what she had said, but I was already nodding in agreement.

"Sure," Dusty said, a hint of bitterness in his voice, "but we didn't even know changelings were a thing. Now we do, and Emerald, shit, how could I not see it? The whole double life, secret shady past, working for 'ponies' that act behind the scenes, not to mention the whole 'Kindness and Generosity' act."

My ears pinned back, my jaw and neck tightening. "That wasn't an act."

"I'm just saying it makes sense for a changeling. You guys feed on love. I figure she got plenty from that."

My hooves dug at the ground. "She didn't do that for *food*, Dusty."

"Maybe—"

I pushed myself up. "Not maybe! She gave her last healing potion to another pony even though she knew she was dying. It wasn't a fucking act!"

Dusty's ears pinned back, blinking a couple times, while I tried to control my breathing. Somewhere behind me, Sickle grumbled.

Starlight's hoof touched my side, and after a moment of silence, I relaxed

and sagged back down to the ground.

After a moment, Dusty quietly, and cautiously, spoke again. “Maybe she didn’t realize how bad it was.”

Thankfully, Starlight took the opportunity to answer that one. “She had a PipBuck, Dusty. Trust me, they aren’t exactly subtle about telling you you’re bleeding to death.”

Dusty looked away, back toward the raider compound in the distance. His ears hung low. “Even so, there were the other signs. She lied to me, and I didn’t even suspect it.”

“Us,” I said, swallowing back the final bit of the receding anger. “None of *us* realized it, and that includes the changeling Infiltrator who’s much better trained and equipped to handle such a situation than you are.”

He looked back to me, his eyes wary. “You never even suspected?”

“Not until the very end. Before then, I made a point to avoid doing so.”

His head tilted a hair to the side, and I answered his unspoken question. “It’s far easier to see changelings where there are none, than it is to find an actual changeling. I’m guessing you never heard of the Changeling Scare?”

When he shook his head, I continued. “It was before my time, thankfully. After Chrysalis led her hive against Equestria, ponies started to suspect changelings everywhere. Ponies can be panicky like that. Strangers were changelings trying to steal your love. Unfriendly strangers were changelings that hated ponies. Charity workers were changelings trying to ingratiate themselves upon the vulnerable and unfortunate. Friends and family that had an off day were changelings who were bad at acting. It was like a precursor to the kind of xenophobia that would kick off during the war.”

I gave a weak, derisive snort. “Of course, the real changelings were all playing normal, ordinary, consistent ponies. We’re taught to blend in. We’re also taught to avoid falling into the same suspicions those ponies did. We’re trained to *not* see changelings in everything, because ninety nine percent of the time it’s wrong, and constant paranoia over low-probability threats detracts from more legitimate concerns.”

He frowned, staring down at his binoculars for a moment. “And... what if they really were a changeling?”

“In general?” I shrugged, then lifted my binoculars again. “It didn’t matter.”

"But you're *trying* to find other changelings now."

My ears drooped a little. "Yes. But I'm not going to find them by trying to figure out which pony is secretly a changeling. Not unless they do something stupidly obvious, like try to feed off me."

He remained silent, still frowning.

"If it helps," I said, "she was going to tell us. She just... never got the chance." My throat started to tighten up again; I focused on glaring through my binoculars.

He mulled that over for several seconds before lifting his own binoculars again. "...Any suggestions on how to crack this?"

Sickle lifted her head barely off the ground. "We should just charge—"

"I heard you the first time," Dusty replied sharply, then moderated his tone by adding, "I'd like to hear any other ideas before committing to that."

I scanned again over the roofs, considering the layout of the small fortress. "If we wait for dark, I can do recon. I can fly over low, inside E.F.S. range."

"Could be useful," Dusty agreed. "Though we'll get that information as soon as we get up close, anyway. Doesn't really help us get inside."

I focused my gaze on the watchtower, with the bored-looking mare sitting beside the rocket launcher. "No, but if we're waiting for night, I think I might be able to take care of that."



The dark desert floor passed beneath me, the wind flowing silently under the wings of my chimeric body. Normally, I would avoid a form that blatantly combined elements of different races or species, much as I'd avoid any other disguise that stood out as 'unusual'. At the moment, however, function trumped appearance, and the difficulty of incorporating such fine alterations was well worth the result.

At that moment, my form was mostly like that of the so-called 'bat ponies', with golden slit-pupil eyes that soaked in what little light penetrated the nighttime cloud cover, and large, tufted ears that easily picked up any wayward sound in the still night air. All of that was complemented by the dark charcoal coat, blending in with the dark clouds above.

While already unusual enough just by virtue of the rare breed, my form

stood out even further with the wings; rather than the membranous wings one would expect, I sported a pair of feathered wings, but not a normal pony's wings. They were thick and soft, with carefully arranged feathers and edge shape to minimize the sound they made passing through the air. A skilled observer would recognize the wings as belonging not to a pegasus, but an owl.

My unusual appearance was of little importance. Success depended not on blending in, but in never being seen in the first place.

I had cast off most of my belongings in the name of stealth. I had only two tools that would be useful for this stage of the plan, and so they were all I carried. One was Emerald's PipBuck, clasped to my foreleg, its screen turned off to avoid giving away my position. The other was my pistol, strapped to my shoulder with its two spare magazines.

I entered a shallow bank as I passed over the raider compound once more. It was my third pass, each lower than the last. Tick-marks on my E.F.S. lazily drifted off to my side as I passed by. I confirmed my previous count: nine red marks, and not a single green.

There were lights in the compound, but only a few. Most were inside, sending narrow blades of light through loosely-fit boards. Only two lights were outside, one in each of the watchtowers. Their feeble light lit up the inside of the tower itself and little else. Likely they were so the ponies could find their way across the darkened rooftop and walkways. To me, they were a mixed blessing. On the one hoof, the light would impede the night vision of the ponies who stood guard, leaving me effectively invisible outside the short radius of their glow. On the other hoof, they illuminated the two places I absolutely had to go.

Two raiders remained standing guard after nightfall, although 'standing' was something of a misnomer. My pass revealed that both were laid back in their towers. While the mare by the front gate was tipping back a bottle to drink, and thus clearly awake, the stallion in the rear tower had his chin tucked in against his chest, apparently asleep.

Only one step remained before committing myself. I turned my head, teeth clasping down on the bit of my pistol, and drew it. I checked that the magazine was full, the safety was disengaged, and a round was chambered.

With a slow, deep breath, I pitched down, tightening my turn as I de-

scended toward the gate-side watchtower. I flared my wings, feathers fluttering near-silently as I bled off energy, keeping my glide nice and slow. My turn took me over the rear tower, then across the old barracks building. By the time I was closing in on the front tower, I was perfectly level with it, and coming from directly behind the relaxed and unaware raider. I back-winged, bleeding off the last of my speed as the faint light in the tower started to illuminate my dark coat.

Even as silent as my form was, there is only so much that one can do to mask the passage of a pony-sized object through the air. The raider mare's ear twitched in response to some barely heard sound or faint air current, but I didn't give her the time to consider it further. I was barely a yard away and in a hover when I pulled the trigger.

My weapon gave a sharp clack, like a hammer striking a nail, and the bullet smashed into the back of her head with an audible smack. The mare jerked and spasmed with startling violence, sending her bottle clattering to the floor and kicking the wall of the tower. I hurtled myself forward, diving into the tower. I grappled with her flailing limbs as I placed the tip of my suppressor against her head and fired again, but she gave no reaction, nor did it stop her movements. She continued spasming, emitting a weak, wet gurgle. I simply held on, trying to muffle the sound as much as possible. Within seconds, the spasming weakened, and soon stilled, though her body remained tense, her legs at full extension. Her eyes were still open, unseeing, her expression slack as blood dribbled from the back of her skull.

Once she had stopped, we lay together, still and silent. The walls of the tower concealed us from the other guard's position, but only if he didn't wake and investigate the sound of struggling.

I heard nothing but my own heartbeat hammering away.

My attention turned to my E.F.S. None of the red marks were moving. I waited another ten seconds or so before hazarding a peek over the watchtower walls. The other guard was still out of sight, presumably still dozing and unaware of what had happened to his compatriot.

I huffed out a quiet sigh of relief, then turned to the lantern. It was a simple spark-powered camping lantern, its dim light painful against my night-adjusted eyes. I turned it off, plunging the inside of the tower into darkness.

I stepped out, carefully unfurling my wings, and slowly beat them. It was just enough to stay level as I crossed the courtyard to the other tower; flying was more assuredly quiet than risking a walk on those ancient roofs, even as sturdy as they looked.

My ears picked up his faint snoring as I came up to the tower, and I back-winged again, coming to a halt right at its entrance. With all the time in the world, I carefully aimed at the center of his sleeping face and pulled the trigger. Once again, the sharp clack of my weapon echoed in the still night. The stallion twitched with the impact, but that was the extent of it. The casing clattering across the roof produced more noise than he did.

I slipped into the tower, extinguishing the lantern there, and sat in silence once more. Still no sounds of ponies coming to investigate. Still no movement on my E.F.S. So far, everything had worked perfectly.

I flew back to the front tower. After another cautious glance around, I lifted my left foreleg, placing the attached PipBuck across the top of the wall, pointing out. I turned on the screen, with the brightness set low, and turned it off again. I repeated the action twice more, then left it off.

The hulk of ruined skywagons and other metal decorations stretched out from the gate. Even with my altered eyes, I could only make out the closest in any detail. The rest rapidly turned to silhouettes, slightly lighter shapes against the darkness beyond.

Out in the distance, past the end of the wreckage, a faint green glow flickered into life, vanishing an instant later.

I turned back, watching over the rest of the compound for any ponies who might intrude. Mostly, I watched the addition built atop the two-story building; a door opened onto the roof, and from the light seeping through the cracks, I assumed at least one of the pips Emerald's PipBuck showed was inside there.

Every few seconds, I'd glance back outside the walls. Soon, green pips started to appear, superimposed over the E.F.S.'s compass. Not long after, I could hear the rattle and clank of Sickle's armor approaching.

I waited, keeping my eyes out for threats, until they had reached the base of the wall beside me. I slipped out from the tower and over the wall, dropping down to the ground with a quick flutter of my wings.

Starlight and Dusty crouched behind an overturned skywagon with

crude spikes protruding from it. Starlight's lancer was still strapped across her back. Instead, she held Emerald's magical energy rifle in her teeth. Sickle, meanwhile, stood directly in front of the gate, unconcerned.

Dusty stepped out to crouch beside me, and I quickly filled him in.

"Single story has two raiders," I whispered, lifting a hoof to point to the left. "South side of the building. I can clear that silently once we're inside. Two story..." My hoof swung to the right. "...has five, spread out along it. There were two more in the towers, but I took care of them already."

Dusty gave a sharp nod, his rifle bobbing with the motion, and stood.

With a near-silent flurry of wings, I floated over him, wrapped my forelegs around his barrel, and lifted. It was a thankfully short flight to the roof of the taller building. I deposited him there, and as he crouched to cover the approaches, I descended again.

Starlight stepped out as I drew near, clutching the rest of my belongings, and I lifted her as well. Once I had released her, she crouched beside Dusty. In the overcast darkness, with the uneven wall top as a backdrop, they were as good as invisible to a normal pony.

Moving to the edge of the roof, I gave the courtyard a more thorough looking over. It looked trashed. More skywagon and motorwagon wrecks lined either side of the courtyard, forming a crude wall of metal hulks. A single rusted-out tank sat at the back of the courtyard, missing its tracks and hatches. The huge machine gun atop the turret was the only thing that appeared to be in good condition, and I could see it was loaded.

The ground itself was torn up, and even cratered in places, with bits of debris scattered randomly. Even with my enhanced night-time eyes, I couldn't make out all of the details. I found myself relieved by that. I was fairly certain that some of the debris was body parts.

There were no ponies, and it didn't appear that any of the angry red marks on the E.F.S. compass were near the doors. I slipped over the edge and dropped to the ground. The gate was barred by a single metal beam, which produced only a faint squeak as I removed it.

The gate creaked open to show Sickle's hulking form through the opening. I stepped back, and she walked in, armor rattling with each step. Once she was inside, I held up a hoof. She halted, though the way her head turned to me indicated she was glaring underneath that helmet.

That was fine with me. She'd been patient so far, and that was about the best I could ask for. She'd have the opportunity to act soon enough. But first, I had one more thing I wanted to take care of.

Since the two hostile contacts in the single-story building were on the south end, near the back of the compound, I entered through the door near the north end. My suspicions were proven correct; it was a barracks building of some sort, mostly open space, though that space was filled with boxes, barrels, and heaps of junk. The light at the southern end struggled to reach my end of the building, leaving me creeping along carefully, barely able to see my hooves.

A small room along one side, perhaps a commanding officer's office or bedroom, offered me both a moment of rest and an opportunity to change my form. With the flash of magic hidden by those walls, I stripped away my disguise, returning to my natural form, with my as-yet unused armor. I did perform one slight alteration, and hid my fangs; gripping my pistol in my mouth would be impossible with them, and I couldn't risk the glow my magic would produce while holding it. The altered dentistry, with my sharper omnivorous teeth, changed how the grip fit in my mouth, but it was easy to shift the bit around and align the sights once more.

I slipped out of the office again, and started slowly picking my way across the junk-filled space.

I could already hear the two raiders ahead of me. There was a stallion and a mare, but with the way they were grunting and panting, on top of the rapid creaking of well-worn furniture, I suspected the chances of them hearing my approach were minimal.

As I drew closer, the light grew enough that I could clearly make out the objects I was passing. Most of it seemed to be junk; random tools, worn clothing and bags, the broken remains of a cart, and other rubbish like that. Army crates with stenciled words faded by two centuries lined the other side of the room.

Closer to the raiders, the space was filled with barrels, presumably full of water, and heaps of food. Some were in cans or packages. Others were loose vegetables, which I imagined had been taken from the farm they had just hit.

Rounding a pile of discarded cans and boxes, I could see part of the final

room, bathed in the light of a bare bulb. From the half of it I could see on my approach, it appeared to be serving as a crude kitchen, with a rickety stove and numerous knives and pans.

There was also a table, with the hacked-up remains of a pony lying atop it.

At first, I thought she—I think it had been a mare—had been badly burned and maimed. Then I realized that wasn't quite accurate. She had been *cooked*. Her legs were missing, and enough of her chest had been carved away to reveal ribs. The metal spit was even still there, piercing through her pelvis and out her mouth. Several slabs of meat lay on a stained platter at the edge of the table.

I stared, simply processing that for several seconds, before I realized the sounds further in the room had stopped. I could still hear the rapid panting of the two raiders, but the sounds of copulation had ceased.

I moved forward again, peeking around the edge of the crates that formed a crude wall. The pair lay on an old army cot. The mare lay on her belly, panting, and wore a lazy grin. Heavy metal armor enclosed her chest, painted red and adorned with spikes, and matching her wild, spiked mane. The stallion that still lay atop her was fairly scrawny, wearing only a thick metal collar, and his legs were crisscrossed with scars. His cutie mark was a crosshair; I assumed that made the pipe rifle lying on the floor his, which would in turn make the large-bladed spear leaned against the wall hers.

The stallion was panting into the mare's mane, giving a few firm nuzzles. His lips pulled back in a grin as he nuzzled into her ear, murmuring something that led both of them to snicker.

It almost seemed tender, as if, under the spikes and scars, these two were really just a pair of ponies.

But my eyes glanced back to the table, with the innocent pony they had murdered and butchered. I thought of the pair of foals, brutalized in their own home. I thought of Emerald, the first changeling I had encountered in two centuries, choking on her own blood.

I prefer to plan my actions through detached logic, but emotion can be a powerful motivator.

I was already calling up S.A.T.S. as I walked smoothly around the corner. I brought the weapon up, and in the middle of my stride, tongued the

trigger. At maybe two yards distance, the arcane assistance was more than enough; my weapon bucked simultaneously with the wet smack of the bullet smashing into the side of the stallion's head.

The muzzle swung down to the mare, who jerked in surprise as the stallion collapsed. I pulled the trigger, but her head turned toward me, as if to seek the sudden sound. The round struck her in the muzzle. I fired a third round as smoothly as if I had planned it the whole time, and this one struck her squarely in the center of her head. She jerked and collapsed, forelegs twitching once before going still.

S.A.T.S. disengaged as the final casing clattered to the floor, leaving me panting softly. The moment felt surreal, as if I had killed them in a trance that I was waking up from. I knew, logically, that every single action I had taken had been my own, but something about the spell felt unnatural and unnerving.

It was also undeniably effective, I recognized, as I looked down upon my hoof-work. Even Dusty couldn't have done much better.

I shook off the feeling, focusing again. Four raiders down; five to go.

Emerging from the same door I had entered, I walked up to Sickle, standing in the darkness where I had left her. I glanced around, spotting one of the ramps leading to the wall-tops, and gestured for her to follow. She grunted, sounding annoyed, but did so. I tried to suppress the urge to wince at every clank of her armor or groan of the boards.

We rejoined the others. While I took my belongings from Starlight, I reported to Dusty in a whisper. "The single-story is clear. Just the five in this building now."

He nodded and whispered back. "Soon as you're set, lead us out. Sickle, you follow her. Then me, then Starlight. If things go loud, Whisper, you fall in behind me. Good?"

I gave a quick nod. Even though it was all part of the plan, I felt the burn of adrenaline building. There were too many raiders too close together within the building to be sure of stealth; we were just hoping to eliminate as many as possible before things turned into a firefight.

With my bags strapped on and rifle resting across my chest, I was ready. I glanced around, getting two nods and an impatient grunt in reply, and set off across the roof.

I paused at the door for everypony to gather behind me, the light seeping from between the boards playing over their bodies like zebra stripes. I put my eye to one of the cracks, trying to see inside, but the narrow sliver of view was useless. I pulled back, horn lighting up as I gripped the latch of crude door, slid it back, and strode straight in.

I was ready to trigger S.A.T.S. at a moment's notice, and hit it the instant I saw the raider sitting at the table on the far side of the room. He looked up, and in the hyper-focused state, I could see his questioning expression past the sights of my pistol. I also saw that he wasn't wearing armor.

He hadn't fully processed what was happening by the time I fired, putting three quick rounds into his torso as I advanced. S.A.T.S. disengaged as he tumbled back off the chair, legs flailing. I think he might have made a pained groan, but I'm not sure. His legs clutched at his chest, his eyes wide with shock at the sudden violence.

They were still wide when I halted just above him. Even I didn't need S.A.T.S. to put a final round into his head, ending his life.

A clatter of metal preceded the sound of Sickle's blades sinking into flesh. I looked back. While this half of the room had tables, chairs, and couches, well-lit by the ceiling-mounted bulb, the darker half had a couple of cots. Sickle was at one, pinning a struggling raider down by the neck as her other foreleg rose and fell, stabbing them with her leg-blades. Dusty and Starlight were moving in as well, each of them smartly covering the other two doors of the room.

A mare's voice called out from above. "The fuck was that?"

From below, a more muffled voice sounded. "Is somepony shooting?"

I had already swapped out my pistol magazine for a fresh one, thanks to my magic. On hearing the voices, I holstered it, swapping to my rifle. The raiders knew something was up. It was time to hit them as hard as possible before they finished putting the pieces together.

The only problem with that was Sickle. The raider beneath her was still very much alive, emitting faint gurgles and grunts as his forelegs flailed and kicked against her. Sickle should have killed him already, but she hadn't. I could see then that she'd been stabbing him again and again in the hips and thighs; painful, crippling injuries, but not immediately fatal.

Dusty scuttled over to her, hissing something to her, but she kept

stabbing.

The door at his end of the room opened, revealing a raider. I didn't get a good view of him before firing. S.A.T.S. was still recharging, so I went without. He tumbled back down the stairs beyond the door, and I only then realized Dusty had been firing as well.

A shout came from below, answered by a yell from above. "What the fuck's going on down there?"

I glanced up, just as a metal mask peeked up in the doorway. Dusty and I both fired, and it dropped down again. I thought we had hit, but a voice immediately shouted out. "Luna fuck me, it's Sickle!"

I shouldn't have been surprised that a raider might know who Sickle was. Heck, she might as well be a raider celebrity.

Dusty dropped his rifle to his hooves and plunged his muzzle into a pouch. It came back a moment later with a grenade, which he quickly primed and threw through the doorway.

A deep thump sounded above, followed by the upstairs-mare's voice, this time amplified by some loudspeaker. "Get to the—"

The blast of the grenade cut her off, but only for a moment. "Get to the fucking can! I'll handle that bitch!"

The ceiling rattled as massive hoofsteps sounded above us, accompanied by the groans and squeals of machinery.

My heart was pounding even harder.

Dusty shouted past me. "Star! Lancer!"

The hoofsteps banged down. Whatever was up there was *massive*.

I looked back. Sickle was looking up at the ceiling, grinning wide in excitement. Starlight was running over to us, quickly swapping Emerald's rifle for her own Lancer.

The hoofsteps thumped in unison, and the ceiling groaned loudly in protest.

An instant of silence followed, broken by the deep slam of the hooves landing on the roof outside. The floor trembled under me, and outside, machinery groaned and hissed.

The loudspeaker crackled as the amplified voice returned. "Hey, bitch! You in there?"

A strange, vaguely mechanical thump followed her statement. It was

lost immediately behind a deafening explosion as the wall across from us was reduced to flying splinters. An armored leg came down on me, throwing me to the ground as explosion after explosion hammered around us. The first explosion had knocked out the light, leaving only the strobe of explosions to illuminate the room. The only thing I could see was Sickle's head, tucked in tight to shield her face as she crouched over us. Her armored bulk sheltered us from the worst of the barrage.

The sound relented, plunging us into smoke-choked darkness. My ears were ringing, but the amplified laughter of the mare outside cut through it.

I felt the floor tremble and the screech and groan of machinery returned. "Hah, you still alive in there, Sickle?"

Sickle rose, growling as she shook off several boards and bits of debris. I scrambled to my hooves, my mind racing at how to get away. I blinked away the after-images of the explosions as my eyes rapidly adjusted to the darkness once again. Through the dispersing smoke, I caught a glimpse of a huge, pony-shaped form moving outside, but to my relief, not in our direction.

It was then that I realized the explosions had knocked out power throughout the entire little fortress. There wasn't a single light to be seen. I was our eyes.

Hoping that the mare outside couldn't see any better than the ponies I was with, I hurried over to where the wall used to be. Only a few fragments of it remained, sticking up like wooden ribs of the devastated structure and giving scant cover. Starlight stumbled and scrambled after me while I peeked out.

That's when I saw Boomer. She was every bit as huge as Sickle. Hydraulics whined and metal scraped and screeched as she walked, each hoof-step sending another small tremble through the structure. At first glance, through the cloud of dust and smoke, I thought 'she' was a pony-shaped *machine*.

Then it struck me.

She was wearing power armor.

I felt completely inadequate with my tiny little gun, immediately understanding why Dusty had called for Starlight's Lancer. Fortunately, the power-armored raider was moving away from us down one of the walls,

taunting us the whole way.

“Yeah, you think you can just come in here and take *my* gang, huh? Hah!”

Sickle staggered past me, coughing, her head turning from side to side as she tried to spot our adversary, but it would have been hard enough for her to see in that darkness even without her helm restricting her view.

The power-armor had a battle saddle. Through the darkness I could see the chunky body of a huge gun with a short, thick barrel; an automatic grenade launcher, the very weapon that had just torn apart the side of the crude structure.

But what really caught my attention was the contraption on her back. It looked like a long set of rails with some bulky mechanisms along the underside, and an object nestled in the base of those rails. I didn’t realize what it was until I caught a faint wisp of sickly green.

I’d never seen one before, but I’d heard them described; somehow, this power-armor-clad raider had a Balefire Egg Launcher. I realized then that she wasn’t running away from us as she crossed the wall to the other building. She was just getting to a safe distance.

“Starlight!” I shouted over the buzz in my ears. “Shoot her!”

Starlight coughed against the smoke, but brought her Lancer around. She squinted, searching in the darkness outside. “Where? I don’t see her.”

My hoof shot out, pointing. “Right there!”

She squinted a bit more, her Lancer swaying well off from where I indicated. “I can’t see anything,” she said, then added, “Are you pointing?”

Outside, Boomer continued to taunt, her amplified voice echoing off the buildings. “You think you’re such hot shit, huh? Well you ain’t taking a fucking thing from me!”

She stepped onto the roof of the opposite building.

“Starlight!” I shouted, my wings flicking to life as I lifted off. “I’ll illuminate her!”

I shot out, arcing up into the sky and banking around to fly directly over the raider.

She was still walking, nearly to the middle of the roof. “This is my gang. *My* home. I ain’t going to let some buck-guzzling *bitch* take it from me, even if I have to flatten the whole fucking place myself!”

She turned just as I fluttered to a stop over her. I kicked on the PipBuck

screen, cranking the brightness up to max. The green light spilled out, lighting the twisted amalgamation of scrap metal that formed Boomer's armor.

A powerful flash of red split the air a moment later with a sharp crack. I recoiled, blinking furiously. All I could see was the after-image of the Lancer's shot.

My heart sank as I heard the laughter, distorted and amplified. As my vision returned, I saw Boomer recovering her balance. The shot had vaporized part of her chest-plate, leaving a few glowing bits of molten metal, but had failed to penetrate.

"So that's how you want to play it?" Boomer called out, clearly amused at her seeming invincibility. "Okay, then. Catch this, you fucking—"

Her head snapped to the side as Sickle came barreling out of the darkness.

I had never before seen a pony simply *take* Sickle's charge.

Though Boomer remained standing, the impact rocked her back. The Balefire Egg Launcher discharged. I back-winged, lurching back as the projectile passed me, sailing well over its intended target.

Below me, Boomer turned and threw her shoulder into Sickle, sending her staggering, and followed up by rearing back and kicking out. It was immediately clear to me that Boomer, with her power armor, was at least as strong and durable as Sickle, if not considerably more so.

But with how big and bulky she was, it was easy to forget how terrifyingly quick Sickle could be. She slipped to the side, catching only a glancing blow that her armor easily turned, and grappled the other mare. The difference in skill was telling, and a few seconds later, Sickle had gotten a grip across Boomer's back.

That was the end of it. Sickle twisted backward, hauling the power armor off its hooves and swinging it over herself to slam down on the roof. The power armor lacked the flexibility to fight back effectively, and Sickle alternated between holding on and jamming her blades into the armor.

The balefire egg finally landed, several hundred yards away. A brilliant flash of vivid green cast everything into highlights and shadows, even casting a glow across the clouds above. The sharp blast of the explosion was followed by a deep, rumbling echo, and the distant fireball climbed into the sky, rapidly burning out. In moments the light had faded, plunging the world into darkness once more.

"You missed," Sickle happily growled, jamming a leg-blade into the shoulder of Boomer's armor and tearing away a chunk of armor plate.

Dusty's voice echoed across the courtyard. "Whisper! Status!"

"We're good over here!" I replied, drifting a little closer as I did. In the aftermath of my shout, I heard another mechanical squeal, but not from the struggle behind me. My gaze dropped down to the courtyard. The turret of the ruined tank was slowly turning, its cannon swinging towards the building where Dusty and Starlight were.

We'd forgotten about the other raider!

I lurched and dove, my magic digging inside the pouch strapped across my chest as I sped toward the top of the turret. My eyes glanced down to the E.F.S. compass; the red mark was centered right on the tank. That raider was inside, slowly traversing the giant cannon toward my friends. I had to stop him!

I didn't know much of anything about the inside of a tank. I didn't know where the gunner would sit, though I guessed somewhere in the turret, and my E.F.S. could help narrow it down. I didn't know what I might find if I tried to get in there to fight him. But I did know one thing: the inside of a tank is a small, enclosed space.

Grenades love small, enclosed spaces.

I levitated the grenade from my pouch as I swooped by the turret, pulling its pin and slapping the explosive in through one of the open hatches. Then I swooped up, getting distance as I banked around to watch and evaluate the effectiveness of my attack.

The muffled bang sounded almost like a huge, metal drum, deep and hollow, and oddly unsatisfying. It was followed a moment later by a quieter thump, and then the vehicle erupted. Plumes of flame poured from every opening, roaring like rockets. I banked sharply away, dazzled again by the brightness that lit the compound and the surrounding area.

The plumes of flame rapidly dwindled, and moments later had died out, leaving only a few bits of flame flickering inside the burned-out hulk. The violence of the conflagration had knocked the turret askew. The red mark had vanished from my compass.

I swung around in a circle, searching, but the only remaining red mark was the one in Sickle's hooves. "That's the last one," I called out.

Boomer was snarling and growling furiously, her voice still amplified by her armor's speakers. She even tried firing her grenade launcher. The thump of them firing was almost drowned out by the metallic 'chunk' of the weapon cycling. The first three rounds sailed harmlessly out of the compound. Then Sickle attacked the weapon itself, striking it with her blades and spiked hooves. It fell silent, inoperable.

I glided down and landed next to Sickle. Despite the power armor's strength and durability, Sickle had done some horrible damage to it. Several pieces were completely torn off, and one of the forelegs seemed locked in place, unmoving.

It was an incredibly crude piece of technology. Maybe it had once been Steel Ranger armor, patched time and time again until it was more scrap metal than original armor. Maybe it was something somepony had cobbled together after the war. In either case, it looked to be an amalgamation of all manner of scrap metal welded haphazardly together over a heavy robotic frame. The grenade launcher was simply bolted to the side, and several compartments were built into the armor. Jagged spikes of metal protruded from the armor, and likely would have posed a significant problem for anypony less armored than Sickle.

While crude, I imagine it was horrifyingly effective. What could the average caravan or isolated farmer hope to do against such a terrifying machine of war?

A loud shriek of metal made my ears pin flat against my skull as Sickle peeled back a section of armor along Boomer's back, then laughed. "Hah, I got you, you little bitch! Time to come out and play!"

Boomer continued to scream obscenities and struggle ineffectively as Sickle pulled and pried at her armor. Metal squealed, followed by several loud cracks and pings as parts broke. Finally, the damaged armor gave one final screech as Sickle tore away the back, leaving a squirming, pale-blue body exposed.

Sickle reached in. The loudspeakers abruptly cut off as she pulled the kicking and screaming raider from the armor, lifted her up, and slammed her down onto the roof.

The difference was stark and shocking. Boomer couldn't have been any bigger than Starlight, and just as lean. Her coat was ragged and worn, and

looked as if it were slightly too small for her, so that her joints protruded sharply.

Sickle pinned her down, looming over her and laughing. “Heh, you’re just a little runt, ain’tcha? So cute and tiny!”

Boomer responded to the mocking by kicking Sickle in her armored gut.

Sickle, naturally, laughed off the feeble blow. “Oh, you want to play rough, huh?”

Her demeanor changed in an instant. A hoof came down on Boomer’s head, roughly pinning it to the roof. While Boomer grunted in pain, Sickle lowered her head, pressing her blood-and-gore stained muzzle into the smaller mare’s face. All hints of amusement were gone. “Why the fuck were you gunning for that mare, you flimsy little runt?”

Despite her situation, and the grimace of pain, Boomer grinned. “Aww, did we kill your marefriend, you obese mother—graah!”

Sickle had pressed down, twisting her hoof a little. Blood started to trickle down Boomer’s face where the spikes had dug in. I cringed, more than a little uncomfortable with where this was going, and stepped in. “Sickle, stop.”

She did stop, though she raised her head to glare at me. “Why should I?” she asked, her teeth bared in a snarl.

A short time ago, that would have been enough to send me scurrying away. For whatever reason, I felt much more comfortable with it, now. “Torture and the threat of torture or death is an extremely unreliable method of extracting information. Ponies say anything to get out of it, and we’d have to waste time verifying her answers. I should know. Getting information from ponies who don’t want to give it is my specialty.” I raised a hoof, gesturing to Boomer. “Let me try.”

Sickle’s head tilted slightly as she considered it.

Beneath her, Boomer was looking at me with a grin. “Wow, that is one fucked up face you got—errrg!”

“Shut the fuck up,” Sickle said as she twisted her hoof again, thinking. After a moment, she relaxed, and flashed me a grin. “Sure, let’s see this. But once you’re done, this little bitch is mine.” She sat back, keeping Boomer pinned down with one hoof, while her attention turned to the torn-up power armor.

I nodded, stepping up close to lie down face-to-face with Boomer.

She tried to spit on me, but couldn't get the distance from her position. I frowned at her. "You seem to have developed a very abrupt interest in Emerald, haven't you?"

"Oh, was that her name?" Boomer replied, her mouth splitting in a cruel grin. "Hey, I don't see any green ponies here. Did she not make it?"

Sickle growled and looked back, but I lifted a hoof, and the growl quieted to a mere grumble.

Boomer laughed, cold and condescending. "Hah! I never thought the big scary Sickle everypony's always pissing themselves over would be some deformed runt's little bitch!"

"Yeah, keep talking you mouthy little cunt," Sickle growled without looking back, while she pulled a surprising variety of explosives from the armor's compartments. "That's gunna end well for you."

"You haven't had any interaction with Emerald before," I said, dragging the conversation back on topic. "You've never seen her, you only vaguely knew about her, and you had no personal reason to specifically target her. Someone hired you to kill her, didn't they?"

She sneered back at me. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"It was a rhetorical question," I said flatly. "I already know the answer."

She gave another condescending laugh, something I suspected was a defense mechanism in the face of her near-certain death. "Yeah, well you can suck my rhetorical dick, you bug-faced bitch!"

"You shouldn't use words you don't understand," I chided. "I know the idea to kill her came from outside your charming little following. I just want to know who."

The smug sneer returned. "Still don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do." I said. "But let me ask you another question: was it worth it? You've lost everything you've ever worked for. You lost your gang. You lost your home. You're not going to live to see the dawn." I considered how to put the next part in appropriate raider-ese. "The individual who hired you for this fucked you. She's the reason you've lost everything. Chances are, she was hoping it'd end like this. It's tidier that way."

"Except, you see, she fucked us, too." I leaned in a little closer. Boomer had gone silent, though her lips curled back to bare her teeth at my approach.

“So you and I have exactly one thing in common: we both want to get back at the pony who fucked us. I’m willing to make you a deal. You give us her name, and we’ll make sure she pays for what she’s taken from us.”

Boomer went silent, her grin having vanished. She glared back at me, eye-to-eye, and held there for several long seconds. Then her sneer returned. “Sorry, bug-face. Never did get a name.”

I nodded, standing, and glanced toward Sickle. “So they were hired.”

Sickle rumbled and nodded. “Figures.”

“Yeah, and both of you fuckers can go suck a grenade!”

I started to turn away, but stopped halfway as I remembered a question Starlight had asked earlier. “You know Banger?”

She spit again. “What about him?”

I’m thankful it was dark, even with the PipBuck screen turned way up; it likely hid the hint of surprise I showed. I hadn’t expected any connection. I quickly switched gears, my mind racing to pick out the correct course of lies to get the information I wanted. “He’s caught up in this, too,” I said, looking down at her. “If you don’t know who she is, he will. She’s fucked him over, too, but now we can’t find him. The entire mercenary band he was in was wiped out, but he’s not among the dead. We need to talk to him. Where would we find him?”

Boomer had gone quiet, the wall of defiance vanishing for a moment. “...Fuck if I know.”

I watched her for a second before reluctantly accepting that it was probably true. “Pity.”

“You done, then?” Sickle said, a bit too eagerly for my tastes.

“Yes, she’s all yours,” I said, feeling a little dirty as I said it. “Just make it quick. No torture.”

While Boomer cursed and kicked, Sickle simply grinned. “Yeah, I’m not exactly the slow-torture kinda mare.” She lifted a foreleg, then sank her leg-mounted blades into the roof beside Boomer. “Going to make this plenty gruesome, though. You want to watch?”

I sighed, turning away. I could see the glow of Starlight’s PipBuck as she headed our way, leading Dusty to the wall connecting the two buildings.

Sickle chuckled behind me, then spoke. “I only got one question for you, string-bean. That farm your gang hit a few days ago, with the the pair

of ponies and their two foals. Did you actually get in on that, or were you hiding back here like a little chickenshit?"

"Yeah, I was there," Boomer spat back. "Should have seen those little fucks crying when we killed their kids. Friends of yours?" She laughed.

That laugh was cut off by a scream of pain and profanity. I winced, but the cry quickly diminished to the labored, whining breathing of a wounded pony. Most notably, a very not-dead pony.

Dusty shouted out from the opposite roof. "What's going on over there?"

I looked back. Sickle was opening one of the containers strapped to her side. Her helm's muzzle hung to the side, and fresh blood was dribbling from her chin. Boomer had her forehooves pressed to the side of her head, and in the monochrome lighting, I could see the wetness of blood spattered across her face.

"Sickle, what are you doing?"

She paused, looking up at me, then spit the bloody ear into the open container. "What? This thing's worth fifty caps!"

I blinked. "...You could have taken it after she was dead."

She paused, her head tilting as she considered what I said. "Guess so," she finally said with a shrug, and turned back to Boomer. "Too bad, I could have a lot of fun with you, you scrawny little rat. Let's get this over with." I looked away again, waiting for it to be done with. The anger that had burned in the back of my mind had burnt out. The adrenaline had faded, and in its absence, I felt so tired. I'd seen enough ponies die for one day.

Boomer's pained whines grew to a flurry of cusses and grunts, accompanied by the sound of a struggle as her hooves scraped and banged uselessly against Sickle's armor. Her voice rose abruptly to shrill, pained screams, furious and panicked. I felt like something was withering inside me, especially as the screams of pain turned to struggles once more. Sickle was chuckling.

My ears flattened in irritation at that, and I turned back to shout. "Sickle!"

I had just turned back when Sickle swung around, hurtling Boomer out over the courtyard, spinning and cursing.

Boomer exploded.

I staggered and fell over out of pure shock at the unexpected detonation.

I scrambled back to my hooves and rushed over to the edge of the roof. Boomer's remains lay on the ground below, her belly completely blown out. Everything to the rear of her chest was torn and mangled. A severed hind-leg lay several yards away, and the other looked to be attached only by a small section of skin.

"What the fuck was that?" Dusty shouted. He and Starlight were picking themselves up on the walkway behind the front tower.

Sickle was still chuckling with satisfaction as I turned toward her. "What the hell did you just do?"

Her chuckle stopped as she looked at me. "What? That scrawny little cunt killed Emerald. You're really going to complain about this?"

"I know that, but..." I looked down at the mangled corpse. Then I looked back to the collection of explosives Sickle had pulled from the power armor. "...but this..."

"How about those foals, then?" Sickle said. "You know why that colt was missing his head? It's 'cause they stuck a grenade in his mouth and pulled the pin."

She stepped in, pressing her face close to mine as she gave a savage, bloody grin. "Now guess where they stuck it in the little filly."

I drew back, horrified.

Sickle's grin grew a little wider. "Yeah." She gave another dark chuckle as she walked past me. "I love me some fucking irony."

## Chapter Twenty-Four

# Picking up the Pieces

Dusty stared down at the crate he had just opened. “A mortar.” His voice was halfway between awe and exasperation. “Shit, I don’t know if we’d ever find a use for it, and I’m *still* tempted to take it.”

Starlight glanced over from the crate she was prying open. “What would we even use a mortar for? I mean, at least I can see a use for that little grenade launcher you snagged, but isn’t a mortar a bit excessive?”

“There’s no such thing as too much firepower or too many tools,” Dusty replied. “Just too much weight. And since we’ve got Sickle...”

I looked up from the crate I was looking through, with its variety of explosives. We’d gotten halfway through the line of crates, and the amount of munitions kept piling up. There were mines, grenades, rockets, cannon shells, mortar rounds, and just about every flavor of explosive I could think of.

“We still can’t carry it all,” Starlight said, “even with the cart they’ve got. They must have found some buried munitions bunker or something.”

Dusty shook his head. “We aren’t taking everything. Just what we can carry or haul in the wagon. We’ll demo the rest.”

“Demo... you mean blow up?” Starlight asked. “Shit. Seems like a waste.”

“Better than some other ponies wandering across it.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Starlight muttered. “Still seems like a waste.”

The door banged open as Sickle entered. “Okay, Miss Medium Well is buried.”

Starlight grimaced, keeping her eyes fixed on her crate. “Did you bury *all* of her?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Sickle said, snickering under her helm. “I still say it’s a waste of meat.”

“You’re disgusting,” Starlight grumbled.

“We already went over this,” Dusty said, frowning as he pulled the mortar tube out of its crate. “We’ve got plenty of food. No eating ponies.”

Starlight grunted, digging around inside her crate. “Can’t believe we even need to say that.”

“Do raiders count as ponies?” Sickle asked with a grin. “Cause I don’t usually go for extra-crispy, but Whisper fried one up pretty good in that tank.”

Starlight muttered quietly.

I was feeling much too tired to deal with this. “Sickle, knock it off.”

“Fuck you, too,” she replied, grinning. “And shit, did you really kill those two while they were fucking? That’s just cold.”

“They’d just finished,” I said. “Not that it makes any difference.”

She paused, considering it for a moment, then chuckled. “Nah, okay, that’s not so bad. Guess they went out on a high note.” She looked back toward the kitchen, where the bodies still lay; unlike the remains of the ponies we had hoped to rescue, we weren’t bothering with burying the raiders. “Shit, you kinda went on a murder-fest in here, didn’t you? How many of these fuckers did you kill?”

I grit my teeth, but paused in my inventory-counting to think back, knowing she likely wouldn’t relent without an answer. “Six.” Possibly seven, but Dusty and I had both shot at the raider on the stairs, and I figured he was more likely to have gotten the killing blow than I was.

Sickle thought for a moment, then snorted. “Fuck! Even with the two cunts from earlier, I only got four. ‘Course, one of those was in power armor, but fuck!” She thumped me unpleasantly hard on the shoulder. “You need to lay off the killings, Whimper. You’re going to make me look bad.”

I restrained the urge to bare my nice sharp teeth, though my voice carried enough sharpness to make up for it. “Believe me, I would like nothing more than to never have to kill a pony again. Unfortunately for me, that doesn’t seem to be very likely.”

“Hey, if you’ve got to kill a bunch of ponies, you might as well learn to fucking enjoy it,” Sickle said with a grin and another pat. I shook it off with a quick shrug of my shoulders. She actually laughed at my display of irritation. Thankfully, she didn’t push it any further, and instead turned her attention to Starlight. “Hey, runt! You want me to haul that power armor down from the roof? Should be just your size.”

Starlight’s head came up, the expression of irritation immediately twisting in confusion as the barb she had expected instead seemed to be a genuine offer to help. “Uh... sure, I guess?”

"Might be a bit of a fixer-upper," Sickle said with a chuckle as she turned to head out again. "I fucked that shit up good."

When we had finished with what was stored in the barracks, we moved on to the other building. Doing so meant passing through the courtyard, and therefore, passing by Boomer's remains. I avoided looking, but the mere presence was enough to bring it to the forefront of my mind.

The whole subject left me feeling conflicted. What Boomer had done was horrific. I wasn't at all upset that she was dead. The method, however, troubled me, not only because it was equally horrific, but because I could appreciate the almost karmic justice of it. Sickle's method of execution seemed like something I should object to, *did* object to, but could still sympathize with.

I felt dirty.

We scoured the other building. It lacked the stockpile of the barracks, but we searched all the same. Mostly, we turned up personal belongings, a few scattered caps, some low-quality weapons, and a modest assortment of drugs. The most interesting was another broadcaster, wired up in similar fashion to the one we had found on the raider sniper.

The three healing potions were a bitter prize.

But the capstone was what we found in Boomer's quarters. There were quite a few items of interest: tools, scraps of metals, various machinery parts, and a large floor crane, not to mention yet more explosives. All of that seemed insignificant compared to the case we found under Boomer's cot.

We sat around the open case, staring down at its contents.

I'm sure my expression was one of wide-eyed shock and fear.

Dusty stared with narrowed eyes, as if appraising a dangerous situation.

Starlight's eyes were as wide as mine, but where I looked on in apprehension, she was struggling to restrain a grin.

And Sickle merely sat there, head tilted slightly to the side, until she broke the silence with a single word. "Dibs."

"*Fuck no*," Dusty said with a start. "You're psychotic enough already. No way in Tartarus am I arming you with a case of balefire eggs."

"What?" Sickle said, gesturing at the case, and the egg-shaped objects within. They cast off a deep green glow, while necromantic energies swirled within them. "Hey, it's half a case at most." Technically, that was true; while

the hard foam within the case had eight slots, only three were occupied.

Starlight snickered, not even hiding her grin as she looked down on the balefire eggs. “I like how you didn’t argue the ‘psychotic’ part.”

“Well, yeah,” Sickle said with a grin I could only describe as proud.

“We’re demoing these with the rest of the excess,” Dusty said. “These things are more dangerous than they’re worth, it’d be like... using a megaspell to dig a ditch. And there’s no way I’m letting these get loose for some other pony to use. Shit, we’re lucky Boomer didn’t decide to hit a settlement just for laughs!”

Starlight looked away from the dancing lights just long enough to glance up at Dusty. “Weren’t you just saying something about how there was no such thing as too much firepower?”

“I can at least think of a tactical use for a mortar!” Dusty said, gesturing wildly at the case. “How could we possibly make use of a balefire egg?”

“By blowing up everything ever,” Sickle helpfully noted.

“Yeah!” Starlight said, grinning. “Heck, if we had these, we wouldn’t have had to come in here. We could have had Whisper fly over and drop one right in the middle of the place. Boom! No more raiders!”

Sickle laughed. “Just kick back on that hillside and watch the fireworks!” Her grin rapidly faded. “Wait. Then I wouldn’t get to do any killing. Fuck that, that’s a shitty plan.”

Starlight rolled her eyes, still grinning. “Come on, I’m sure you’d get a kick out of watching something like that.”

“Well, sure,” Sickle said, then raised a blood-spattered hoof. “Still ain’t as fun as doing it by hoof.”

Starlight grimaced a bit at all the blood, and turned to me. “You’re like our demolitions expert, right? Think you could make use of them?”

I frowned, staring down at the trio of balefire eggs. I really wanted to argue the ‘expert’ part, seeing as I had fairly limited training and experience, but I suspect that would have all been moot after the events in Mareford. As much as I didn’t want to take responsibility for anything involving balefire, it was my turn to contribute.

“If I wired them up with an initiator, they’d make for an extremely compact and powerful demolition charge,” I said. As Starlight’s grin widened, I added a word of caution. “Also, an extremely volatile one. I wouldn’t want

to take one into a combat situation. Take a blow to the bags while carrying one of those, and we all die.”

Starlight looked back to the eggs, and the hooves she had placed on the edge of the case slid back an inch. “They’re that volatile?”

“They’re sturdy enough to not go off when fired from a Balefire Egg Launcher, but volatile enough to detonate when they hit the ground. I’d guess their durability at around that of a glass bottle.” I gave a wary look her way. “Just, a glass bottle that kills you and everyone in the general vicinity if it cracks.”

She looked warily down at the eggs, as if they might decide to crack of their own volition at any moment. “...Are they safe as long as they’re in the case?”

“It doesn’t look armored, so a bullet might still set them off. Other than that, the foam casing will probably protect them from impacts, so long as we don’t do something stupid like toss the case off a high-rise.” I reached out to tap the corner of the foam, where a small gem was embedded. “Though it looks like the case was enchanted, too, so it might be more durable than that. Emphasis on ‘might’.”

After a moment of consideration, Dusty finally turned to me. “Okay, appraisal: would taking these with us be safe?”

“There’s no such thing as one-hundred percent safe when you’re dealing with primary explosives,” I said, frowning down at the case and mentally shelving my own pondering as to whether balefire eggs technically counted as an explosive or not. I suspect they’d be classified as incendiaries, though the difference seemed academic in this case. “If they’re kept in the case and stored where they’re unlikely to take a stray round, they should be about as safe as we can make them. I also wouldn’t take them out if there’s any possibility of a fight, which limits how useful they are, but... well, as much as I hate to say it, given that I’d be the one stuck carrying the things, I can see the use of a low-profile but extremely powerful explosive device.”

Dusty frowned, mulling it over, while I took some minor comfort that I was not responsible for making such a decision.

After a few moments, Dusty sighed. “Fine. If we’ve got room in the cart, we’ll take them.”

Starlight seemed much less enthusiastic about the decision than she had

been just a minute earlier.



The heavily laden cart creaked as Sickle hauled it up the slope, following the lights of our PipBucks and flashlights.

Starlight was walking awkwardly on three legs, the new broadcaster slotted into her PipBuck as she checked on it. “Okay, looks like this thing is working just fine. They wired straight into the existing systems without tearing anything out like a bunch of animals, so the PipBuck connector works just fine. We’ll want to find something to seal up the case where they cut into it, though. Don’t want to get dirt and moisture in there.”

“Good,” Dusty said as he turned and sat with a sigh, looking back the way we had come. We were back at the same ridge we had first observed the raider fortress from. “At least we have one functioning broadcaster. That’ll be useful.”

Starlight trotted up to sit beside him. “It’ll only be one-way, though,” Starlight pointed out. “PipBucks can pick up its broadcast, but only the broadcaster can send them.”

“One-way is good enough,” Dusty said, then quickly corrected, “Well, it’s not as good as two-way, but better than no-way. It gives us a bit more tactical flexibility. Means we can do stuff like post you up in a good overwatch location with your Lancer, but we can still talk to you to give targets or call you back.”

“Great,” Sickle rumbled as she shook off the cart harness. “Now you cunts can talk too much at long range, too.”

Dusty smirked a little. “Being able to split our forces like that also means we can be more aggressive with our maneuver element, too. You’ll get into the action quicker.”

“Yeah, we’ll see,” Sickle said, her armor crashing loudly as she flopped down on her side.

I sat beside them, looking in the same direction. Two pinpricks of light stood out in the darkness. I had turned on the lanterns in the watchtowers, and they cast a feeble glow across the raider compound’s walls.

Dusty looked over to me. “Well, Whisper, guess you can do the honors.”

I nodded, remaining silent as I retrieved my remote detonator, turned it

on, and disengaged the safety. “Fire in the hole.”

I pressed the trigger, and in eerie silence, the compound erupted in a fireball. A ghostly flicker of a shockwave tore across the ground as the explosion illuminated the world around it, dividing everything into bright light and stark shadows. The only sound was a faint thrum, barely audible, that seemed to come from all around.

Beside me, Dusty grunted. “That’s going to be loud,” he said, his ears lying flat as he tucked his head down.

I mimicked him just an instant before the shockwave hit us like a hoof to the chest, a deafening, sharp blast that receded into deep, rumbling echoes, punctuated by a few distant cracks and pops of secondary explosions.

Within moments, the great, rising fireball had burned out, plunging the world into darkness once more. The only light remaining to be seen out in the valley came from the wide-flung embers of burning building materials, now scattered wildly around where the buildings had once been. The sounds of impacts faintly reached our ears as bits of debris fell to earth. I think some pieces landed behind us.

Dusty slowly straightened again, blinking into the sudden darkness. “In hindsight, we probably should have dug the graves further away.”

“What’s this ‘we’ shit?” Sickle said, though she was chuckling.

Shaking his head, Dusty started to undo the straps of his saddlebags. “Let’s get settled in and get some rest before daylight. We still have plenty of traveling to do.”



The day’s travel was uneventful and quiet. Nobody felt particularly talkative, knowing what lay ahead of us. Even Sickle remained quiet, plodding along behind us.

But while most of us were thinking of what awaited us at Gemstone, I was also thinking beyond that.

We halted early that evening, still some ten miles from Gemstone. While I’m sure we could have pressed on and made it by dark, or shortly after, I don’t think we were in that much of a hurry to get there.

With the remaining light, Starlight climbed into the cart, finally getting both the time and the lighting to examine the remains of the bulky power

armor. She poked and prodded with her magic, peered into gaps, and even slid in through the torn-open back to see how she fit, though it seemed her PipBuck made for a tight squeeze. Her appraisal came only a few minutes later.

“Yeah, Sickle wasn’t kidding. She tore the shit out of this thing. Still... I think I could fix it.” She tapped a hoof on the armor’s shoulder. “It’s all pretty crude and basic stuff. Very loose-tolerance design. Big, clunky hydraulics and spark-powered motors, and we found a good amount of spare parts. Yeah, should be doable.”

Dusty looked up from a can of food. “How long?”

Starlight gave a dry snort of laughter. “Too long. Would be faster if I had a good workshop, but most of my tools are made for portability and quick fixes. Even with the ones we looted, it’ll be slow going. Like, trying to build a skyscraper with a tack hammer slow. A couple of weeks at best.”

Dusty nodded, thinking for a moment. “How about Rust? They did a lot of metalworking and such. Maybe they might be able to handle it?”

“Yeah, probably,” Starlight said, smiling a bit. That smile faded fairly quickly. “Not sure it’ll be that useful, though. I mean, yeah, it’ll be all big and tough and stuff, but it looks super slow and clunky. I’d *rather* get that Enclave armor working. That’s some professional work. Nice and light and agile. ‘Cept it’s also more complex than a PipBuck, and there’s no way I could fix it on my own. Not anytime this year, anyway.”

“Well, fixing up this suit would give us more options,” Dusty said. “Super heavy armor and an automatic grenade launcher can go a long way to make up for poor mobility. It could be very useful to keep around.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Starlight said. “I mean, it *is* kinda cool. Even if we really need to cut off all those raider spikes.” She contemplated it a moment longer before her eyes darted my way. “Hey! Whisper could use it!”

I coughed into my half-eaten can of pears, feeling particularly alarmed at the thoughtful look Dusty had directed my way. As soon as I got my coughing under control, I shook my head. “No way. I’m not even good at this regular soldiering stuff, much less playing at being a walking tank. Besides, that thing would be more obvious than Sickle. I kind of rely on *not* drawing attention to myself.”

“Still might be useful,” Dusty mused. “Would give you great protection

and firepower in a pitched fight, and you could always get out of it if you need to do the sneaky bug thing.”

I scowled. “Why don’t *you* use it, then?”

His expression faltered slightly. “I’m... not sure that would be a good idea. I’ve spent a lot of time training to fight in a specific way. Changing that up means a big step back, and I wouldn’t gain much from it.”

Starlight chimed in. “I don’t think he’d fit. It was pretty snug on me.”

Dusty raised a hoof to gesture to her. “There. See?”

I fixed him with a flat glare.

“Oh, hey!” Starlight said, suddenly grinning. “We could mount that minigun opposite the grenade launcher! You did good with that last time.”

“She’d burn through all our ammunition in a single firefight,” Dusty said, poorly hiding a chuckle before turning more serious. “I’m thinking the heavy machine gun. We’ve got close to two hundred rounds for the thing, but no way to use it.”

I turned back to my pears. “There’s something seriously wrong with all of us if I end up being the most heavily armed and armored.”

“Agreed,” Sickle said, grinning widely. I think she was enjoying this far too much. On a slightly positive note, the grin wasn’t quite as disturbing as it would have been earlier in the day. We’d used our PipBuck maps to locate a small, murky creek and made her clean up before heading into town.

Thankfully, Dusty decided to take a somewhat more diplomatic turn in the conversation. “Anyway, we’ve got lots to do before we’ll have a chance to get that thing fixed up. We can settle all that later.”

Lots to do. My mind returned to previous subjects as I continued eating. When I had finished the rest of the can and gotten a drink, I finally broached the subject.

“I want to go to Serenity.”

Dusty sighed, but didn’t seem at all surprised by my declaration. I imagine he had been waiting for this. “I know you want to look into anything to do with your kin, but I’m not sure that’s a good move.”

“We know there are changelings there,” I insisted, but Dusty shook his head.

“No, we don’t,” he said. “We know there *were* changelings there. And yeah, there’s a good chance there are more, but we don’t know that. Even if

they are... “He paused, his ears drooping. “Shit, all we know about them is that they scared Emerald so much that she thought it was better to abandon everything she’d built up and fake her death rather than being found by them. They’re very likely the ones who just contracted a raider band to kill her. I think it’s safe to say these aren’t good people we’re talking about.”

The reply hurt, largely because most of what he said was absolutely true. I still pressed on. “Maybe. Likely, it’s a lot more complicated than that. I’m not expecting some miraculous reunion where everything’s suddenly okay, but we’ve suddenly got solid evidence that other changelings *have* survived, and there’s the possibility of an entire hive living out there. I can’t just ignore this.”

“I get that,” Dusty said. “I’m just concerned that you’re looking too much at the ideal and not considering the risks. What if everything Emerald said was true? What if they really are slavers who will wipe out entire settlements just to remove any evidence of their existence? If this Serenity really is a bunch of changelings, then they just murdered one of their own. Do you think they’re just going to welcome you with open hooves?”

I glared at him. “Dusty, I’ve been involved in espionage and conspiracy for my entire life. I’m quite well aware of the dangers. I’m not talking about naively walking in and asking if there are any changelings around, and given how things went during the war and the sundering of the hive, I’m certainly not going to make the mistake of assuming every other changeling out there is my friend. I’m talking about doing reconnaissance, scouting out who and what is out there, and *then* deciding what to do.”

Dusty’s jaw tightened a bit at the sharpness of my tone, but he didn’t rise to match me. “Even that’s a risk. This isn’t going to be like the raiders we’ve dealt with. We’re talking about a secretive organization with apparently unlimited funding. They’ve been hiring mercs and raiders to do their dirty work, and if they’re really a bunch of changelings, they could impersonate anypony they want. They’re likely to take security a good deal more seriously, and probably have the numbers to make good on that. We just lost someone to a relatively disorganized band of raiders, and these guys you’re wanting to scout out are likely to be a lot more dangerous.”

“I’m aware of that,” I said, and made an attempt to sound more even than I had previously. “I still want to go.”

When Dusty didn't immediately reply, Starlight chimed in. "I think we should check it out."

He didn't seem to notice. He simply sat there, his eyes fixed on the ground before him without really seeing. Several seconds passed like that before he spoke. "If we do this, we're back on the old rules. If I say we back out, we back out, right then and there, no complaints. Deal?"

"I hadn't realized that rule had ever been rescinded," I said. "So I guess that's a deal."

Dusty frowned, though it looked more thoughtful than disapproving. "...Guess it hadn't. Not as such, anyway. Just wanted to say it again, make sure it's clear." He turned to face me, looking me straight in the eyes. "Changeling hive or not, if I say we're leaving, we're leaving. No objections, no 'I'll just do it myself'. We *all* leave, and we'll work out what to do next once we're safely away."

I disliked the restriction, but I could understand the reason behind it. "Agreed."

Besides, if worst came to worst, I could probably slip away and do some scouting without them ever knowing.

He stared at me for a couple seconds, almost as if he had heard that thought, before finally sighing. "Okay. We can go and take a look after we stop in town." He gestured to Emerald's PipBuck. "Let's see where we're going."

I lifted my leg and switched over to the map. As I was starting to scroll over, Starlight suddenly pressed against my side. "Woah, wait! Go back!"

I scrolled back a bit, and she quickly shook her head. "No, no! Switch back to the status screen."

"What?" I asked in confusion as I switched modes. The screen switched to the status display, complete with cartoon changeling. "Oh. Yeah. That."

"Holy crap, it knows you're a changeling." Starlight stared down, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. "That... wow. Holy *crap*. Did Stable-Tec *program* them to recognize changelings? Like, how would they even do that? Were they working *with* changelings?"

"Doubtful," I said, and switched back to the map. "It doesn't really matter."

"What do you *mean* it doesn't matter?" Starlight said, staring at me like

I'd gone insane. "This is huge! Stable-Tec knew enough about you guys to design the PipBucks with you in mind? The guys who made the Stables that kept ponies alive through the balefire? And maybe some not-so-ponies?"

"That's one possible explanation," I said, scrolling across the map. "But also one that doesn't materially change things. There is little functional difference between Stable-Tec intentionally harboring some changelings and changelings secretly infiltrating their Stables, which was always a possibility. Personally, I find it unlikely. Stable-Tec had enough attention from our own Infiltrators that such a collaboration would have been unlikely to have avoided attention. For that matter, if collaboration seemed plausible, I expect we wouldn't have had so many difficulties outfitting our hive."

"Unlikely," Starlight repeated. "Not impossible."

"Not impossible, but likely to be a dead end. Even if it were true, it's likely to be a largely academic point. Stables were intended to last a couple decades. It might turn up regions that are more likely to have changelings still living there, but that's a lot of time for them to have moved on."

Dusty grunted. "Intended to. Yeah, some of them didn't quite go that way. Some Stables stayed shut a lot longer. Heck, that mare the radio was talking up came from a Stable that just opened up a few months ago. There's probably even more out there, still sealed up. Wouldn't surprise me if some ponies open the door, take one look at the Wasteland, and decide to say 'screw that'."

I contemplated that for a moment before slowly shaking my head. "It still doesn't materially change things. If C.L.T. doesn't turn up any relevant information, Stable-Tec would be a reasonable next step, and even if true, this wouldn't change that order of priority. Besides..." I gave Emerald's PipBuck a wiggle. "If this came from Serenity, which I'm guessing it did, they might have reprogrammed it themselves."

Starlight sat back, ears low as she frowned at the PipBuck. "I guess that could make sense."

I nodded. "Though to tell the truth, it wouldn't surprise me if this is simply a result of Stable-Tec being Stable-Tec. While much of Equestria was falling into xenophobia, Stable-Tec was rather egalitarian. They had stables dedicated to Equestria's griffin population, and even zebras. It wouldn't surprise me if they simply designed their PipBucks to automatically adapt

to any user, regardless of species.”

“Huh.” Starlight looked down at her own PipBuck. “You really think they could do that?”

“They can distinguish between irritation and hostile intent at a hundred yards. At this point, I think I’d be more surprised to find out these devices *couldn’t* do something.”

While she considered this, I turned back to Dusty, presenting the map screen. “There it is.”

He looked it over, eventually reaching over to zoom the map out. “West-northwest of Mareford, probably... what is that, a hundred miles? Pretty isolated. No settlements nearby. Well, we’re certainly not going to blend in as normal traffic. Only thing up that way is Old Appleloosa.”

“As tempting as it might be to visit my old home, I think I might pass on that.”

“Yeah, one stalker alicorn is enough, thank you.” Dusty gave a dry snort. “Well, it’s a little out of the way, but not too bad. We’ll have to be careful, but it should be doable.”

“After Gemstone, then?”

He sighed. “Yeah. After Gemstone.”



We arrived shortly before noon. I once again wore my regular pony disguise. I’d tucked Emerald’s PipBuck away in my bags, after confirming that the little cartoon changeling turned into a little cartoon pony when I transformed.

A few ponies stood atop the wall as we came up to the town. One of them was Dazzle. She stood the moment she saw us, her ears standing tall and alert. Then they drooped.

The gate was already opening by the time we drew near. Dazzle had hopped down to meet us. The look of desperation rapidly turning to grief was heartbreaking.

“Where is she?” Dazzle asked, her voice catching. “...What happened to Emerald?”

We drew to a halt, right at the gate. Dusty cast an uneasy glance back at us before taking on the duty of passing on the bad news. “The raiders had a sniper. Picked her off, right in the middle of us.”

Dazzle's legs wavered, and she sat down, sagging. The other guards were in the same state of shock and sadness, with tearful eyes and drooping ears.

"I'm sorry," Dusty said.

Tears were building in Dazzle's eyes. My own throat was tightening, and I had to blink several times to clear my vision.

"...But why her?" Dazzle said, her voice weak and trembling. "She was the nicest... s-she..." Her voice caught again, her head drooping.

"I don't know," Dusty said. "But I intend to find out." He stepped up closer. There was a hint of iron to his voice when he spoke again. "Where's Amber?"

Dazzle swallowed. "S-she left just after..."

She halted, eyes slowly widening as she looked up at Dusty. Confusion was quickly giving way to dawning realization. "...She had something to do with this?"

Dusty nodded. "Yes."

She continued to stare, her chest rising and falling as her breathing picked up. "That... that bitch!" Dazzle trembled, tears starting to roll down her cheek. "W-we welcomed her in, gave her a place to stay, a-and..."

I couldn't bear to see it. I couldn't blame her for growing angry, but as much as anger can be a strong motivator, it can be a very destructive one. Here, in this place, it felt like a blow against everything Emerald had lived for.

So I stepped forward and gripped Dazzle in a tight hug, burying my muzzle against her neck.

Maybe I was thinking of Starlight, then. It was how she would comfort me.

Dazzle stiffened, her breath catching. It was very possible that I had just made the wrong move. I squeezed a little tighter. Then, with a shudder, the tension bled away from her, and she sagged against me, sniffling.

"She was trying to help ponies," I murmured. "She's helped so many. Don't let that end here."

She shuddered again in my grip, but I felt her head bob in a shaky nod.



We left just two hours later, having transferred all our new belongings into the old wagon. We stayed just long enough to seem appropriate, then left.

The town still seemed shocked by the news, as if they couldn't process that Emerald was really gone.

Dazzle had almost broken down again when Starlight offered up Emerald's rifle. Instead, she pushed it back against Starlight's chest, saying to keep it.

I felt a little guilty at having hidden away Emerald's PipBuck. It was entirely practical to do so; if anypony had seen it, there's a good chance they'd want it returned. It was an incredibly valuable piece of arcane technology in addition to any sentimental attachment, but it was also an incredibly powerful tool for my own mission. The mission came first, yet I still felt uncomfortable with the decision. As I watched these ponies grieving, trying to hold onto the values that Emerald had encouraged, it felt selfish.

After Dazzle pushed the rifle back, I felt even worse. It was possible Dazzle might have insisted I keep it.

Generosity.

I felt it was unlikely, but possible, and that was enough to twist the blade of doubt.

It feels strange to say it about Gemstone, but I was relieved when we finally left.



The journey took four days.

We woke on the second day to see the glow of sunlight creeping under the clouds ahead. By noon, we had passed from the thick and unbroken overcast and into clearer skies, dotted by scattered clouds that blew and drifted in seemingly random directions.

As silly as it was, there was still something uplifting about it. The somber mood that had clung to us since Gemstone faded. Part of me wanted to sprout wings and fly up into the glow of the sun, to revel in its warmth while it lasted. By evening, we were passing under the cloud cover once more.

The weather turned on the third day.

It was no surprise that Dusty was the first to notice the signs, and told us to prepare for rain. "You feel the humidity?" he asked as he tightened straps, bundling up. The rest of us hadn't noticed. "Only time it starts getting humid this quickly is when it's about to storm. Damn pegasi just let the rain

build up till the clouds practically burst. Ain't like they got cause to care."

The sky darkened ahead of us, and we watched as a wall of rain spread with tremendous speed, crashing down to the earth like a tidal wave. It passed overhead, and I looked up to see the water descending upon us.

The rain struck fast, growing to a torrential downpour in seconds. Visibility fell, and the ground rapidly turned to mud. The temperature plummeted. I huddled under my cloak, throwing on a quick transformation to trim my mane and tail short while adding a good inch of fluff to my coat. It was still miserable, but less so.

Our progress slowed to a crawl. Sickle stubbornly pressed on, hauling the wagon through the mud, but even she couldn't keep up the same pace. Dusty had us halt several times to rest before moving on again.

Darkness came early. Those of us who fit huddled under the wagon, gaining temporary respite from the rain, though not from the mud and puddling water. Sickle curled up beside the wagon and tucked her muzzle in under a foreleg. Despite weathering the storm all night long, she never once complained.

Even with the gear and preparation, we were soaked through. Temperatures dove further during the night, and even the extra fluff to my coat did little to ward it off. Starlight and I spent the night huddled together, sharing a pair of sodden blankets.

The rain was still falling in the morning, though it had started to give signs of slackening. We pressed on after an unenthusiastic breakfast. The whole world was mud. Dusty noted that we'd be less likely to be detected in this weather, though from his dour expression, I think even he wasn't particularly impressed by this moment of optimism.

The downpour steadily diminished as we continued on. It had fallen to what I would have once described as an "average" rain by the time we reached our destination.



Once again, we lay on a low ridge, ignoring the mud that soaked into our coats. Our binoculars were up, peering through the rain at the cluster of ancient buildings half a mile away. We'd left the wagon almost a mile back, hidden as well as we could manage.

Serenity wasn't much to look at. It wasn't a thriving settlement. It wasn't a slaver base. It wasn't even a fortified entrance to an underground compound.

It was a half-built office building with about a dozen smaller buildings around it. Stacks of concrete slabs and pipes were arranged by one side of the building. The broken remains of a crane lay toppled beside it. Several earth-moving vehicles lay rusting in the mud, while various broken-down cargo skywagons sat surrounded by empty pallets and broken crates. An open pit that had likely been intended as the foundation of another large building now formed a steep-sided pond, with a bulldozer half submerged in the water. All around the site were a number of temporary structures, much like other construction sites I had seen during the war, though most of the ones here had been broken down and ruined by centuries of neglect.

Whatever Serenity was originally intended to be, it looked as if it had never been finished.

There were no signs of habitation. There wasn't even any indication that anyone had been there in years. The buildings all looked to be in poor repair or partially collapsed, save for the two that had long ago burnt out, and there seemed to have been no attempt made to repair them.

We continued to scan for several minutes, sharing murmurs about not seeing anything. That lasted right up until Dusty grunted. "Shit."

I glanced over to him. "What is it?"

He lowered his binoculars, glowering out into the rain. He slowly rolled his jaw, mulling the situation over. It was obvious he didn't like whatever it was.

Finally, he sighed. "You see the trailer-offices there?" he asked as he raised his binoculars again.

I quickly raised my binoculars again, sighting in on the temporary structures he had indicated. "Yes?"

"Look closely at the offices just past them."

I shifted my view. A single-story building with two broad front windows stood behind those temporary structures. The windows were long since shattered, revealing upturned desks and chairs within. They were a pair of small offices. The faded gear logo of Stable-Tec was easy to pick out, but I had to squint at the other for a moment before making out a distinctive

teal, faceted heart, with the words Crystal Life Technologies written beside it.

My eyes widened. "Oh."

"Yeah," Dusty grumbled.

My heart had decided to start pounding in my ears once again, and I did my best to hide the sudden excitement. Dusty wasn't going to share in my enthusiasm, after all.

Dusty lowered his binoculars again. "And you want to check it out, I'm sure."

"I needed to find C.L.T. facilities," I quickly replied, "and we know changelings have been here, too, so—"

"I know," Dusty cut in. "I can put that together, too. Relax. We'll see about getting you your info."

I tried my best to restrain my grin. "Thanks."

He just grunted, and started to survey the surrounding area, looking for approaches.

We moved quickly, following Dusty as he guided us through the muddy low-ground, dotted with deep puddles. Nobody objected; we were already as thoroughly muddy as we could get. From the low-ground, there was a short trot to a rusted-out skywagon, then a dash to the ruined temporary construction office. At each point, we halted, while Dusty peeked around the corner and listened, his rifle up and ready. We heard nothing but the hollow patter of rain on metal. My E.F.S. showed only my friends.

The final dash took us across the paved walkway and in through the vacant window of the C.L.T. office. Dusty advanced into the office with a purpose, his rifle held up and level as we passed desks and knocked-over dividers. I followed as he made his way into a larger, individual office with a desk and terminal. He swept past the desk before exiting the room again, and we made our way to the back room. There was nothing there but a table and some chairs, with several empty bottles lying on the floor. The back door hung halfway open, letting in the sound of the rain outside.

We returned to the main room, where Sickle was shaking off the mud caked to her armor.

"We'll stand guard," Dusty said, moving to stand behind a desk that gave him a good view out the broken front window. "Make it quick."

There was little left to find in the main room. Desk drawers lay on the

floor from whatever scavenger had rifled through them, and filing cabinets lay toppled and open. I returned to the larger single office, with its terminal. The desk was as thoroughly ransacked as the others. Nothing remained but a few broken pens and other office implements.

I turned to the terminal, fetching my own portable terminal and connecting the two devices. I hit the power button. Nothing happened. Starlight was at the rear of the terminal before I had even started to ask, pulling open the back panel. Within moments, a spark battery was clipped in place, and the terminal screen flickered to life.

“Thanks,” I said, earning a pleased smile in return. The boot sequence finished in moments, replaced by a simple message.

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**Client Error Code 4  
Server connection failed**

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My own smile faded as I backed out from the error and surveyed what little was there. “It’s just a dumb terminal,” I said, starting to frown. “The kind that depends on a remote connection to server, only that connection is down. The cache is empty, too. Somepony must have cleared it out, but...”

I stared at the terminal for several seconds before turning to my own terminal, loading up the data recovery tools. While I got to work, Starlight wandered off.

There’s one fun quirk about these arcano-tech devices that many people don’t realize; deleting a file doesn’t necessarily mean it’s gone. The data is usually still there, embedded in the spell matrix until something else overwrites it. It took only a minute before I had extracted a text file from the cache.

---

*Error log event: Client Error Code 4<br/>Server connection failed* éust a minor twist. She’ll probably be pretty sore for a few weeks, but she’ll be fine as long as she doesn’t go leaping off any second floor balconies again any time soon.  
As for your other concerns, I’m a little relieved to find someone else with questions, but sad that

I can't provide any answers. You know there's a lot of secrecy involved in this collaboration (I assume you got the same stack of NDA papers I did), but it looks like Facet himself is the only one in C.L.T. that knows the full extent of the deal. You remember that mare I mentioned out at Site Alpha? That IT pony that could dig up absolutely anything I needed? She hadn't even heard it. Heck, she practically fell over herself trying to get info from me! I felt bad I couldn't help her out after that data she dug up to help with Permafrost, but I haven't got a clue what's going on over there. And no, no clue why Stable-Tec had consultants there. None of them mentioned anything before they left? Or were they just as in the dark as you? Sorry you have to put up with this. I can't imagine how boring it is sitting at a desk for consultation when they're not consulting you for anything. I'll see what I can do over here. If Serenity doesn't need a C.L.T. consultant for whatever they're doing, maybe we can get you back at Paradise Beach where you can do some good.

Hope to see you soon, Skyfrost&mu;

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The file ended with gibberish and fragments of previous messages, long since overwritten into oblivion. I read through the message again. My eyes lingered on the word 'Serenity', a name from before the megaspells. A name I hadn't heard of at the time.

Was Serenity a group that had survived since before the end? Or was this some other group who had taken up their name?

I looked up to speak to Starlight, only to stop myself. She was sitting beside an open hatch in the floor, angling her PipBuck to shine her light down below. She noticed my attention, looking up to me and asking, "Find anything?"

"Not really," I said, standing to walk over to her. "What did you find?"

"Looks like an underground utility accessway, like Paradise Beach." She turned her attention down the hatch again. "You said the terminal was connected to a server somewhere? Well, the cables from it run down here. Might be able to follow it, find the server."

"If it's on-site," I said, leaning over to look down the hole. A ladder led down to a concrete tunnel some ten feet below us. "Probably worth checking out, though."

"I just hope it's not all flooded with the rain."

We returned to the main room to fill Dusty in on what little we had found. I remember he was a little hesitant about going down into the accessway, but the early-warning ability of our multiple PipBucks minimized the risk.

Things get fuzzier from there.

I remember climbing down into the tunnels. I remember dampness, and following bundles of cables down dark passages. Then there were some rooms. Utility rooms, I think. Machinery. I remember walking alongside a long series of huge pipes. There was some light, spinning in the darkness, and shadows. Then I remember Emerald's PipBuck making a sound and displaying something, though I can't remember what. I think I was concerned about it.

And then?

Nothing.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

# Serenity

I murmured and rolled to my side, pulling my thick blankets in tight as I nestled into the plush softness of my bed. It was so warm and comfy that I just wanted to stay snuggled up there all day long.

I made a good attempt at it, but consciousness was unrelenting. Eventually, I pushed back the pile of blankets and slowly stretched, yawning as I met the day. I'd slept well past dawn, and the sun lit my cozy bedroom brightly. I must have been quite exhausted to have slept in so late, but for the life of me, I just couldn't place what I might have been doing.

Maybe I had just stayed up late. That was probably it.

I rolled over to the edge of my bed, reflecting on how it was really too large for just a single pony. Maybe Starlight should be there? No, she had her own house. Still, it was quite large enough for a visit...

My hooves set down on the thick carpet, and I took a moment to enjoy the soft feeling, combined with the warmth of the sun flowing over my side. They were such simple pleasures, so easily available, yet I soaked them in as if it had been ages since I'd enjoyed their comfort.

With a smile, I turned and slowly walked past the end table and dresser, to approach the broad window. I stood my front hooves on the sill, soaking in the sun, and looked out at Serenity.

My home was situated on a loop, and from my second-story window, I could see all the houses that lined that loop, with their spacious yards and lush gardens. The street continued off from the loop, leading to the rest of our pleasant little town of some thirty homes and a hoofful of shops, surrounded by lush grassy hills and light forests.

I swung the window open, drawing in a deep breath of the fresh morning air. Yes, moving to Serenity was the best decision I had ever made.

I couldn't really remember making that decision, but I must have done so to be there, and that was the important part.

Shutting the window, I turned back to my room. I looked over at the closet, and gave a cursory glance over the contents. I had a good collection of dresses and accessories, after all, and it kind of seemed like a shame to

not use them. As I looked through them, I found myself coming up empty. I could have sworn I had a particular cloak, but I couldn't find it. I know it wouldn't have matched anything else I had, and it was far more practical than fashionable, but it was disappointing to not find it. I knew I had it. I must have simply misplaced it when unpacking.

Deciding against wearing anything, I made my way to the door. I was nearing the stairs when I heard quiet voices drifting up from below.

I had guests? I didn't remember having guests, but I couldn't imagine anyone sneaking in just to chat in my living room. They must be guests, after all. Still, I paused. Snooping in on conversations really is rude, but I couldn't help it. There was something wonderfully mischievous about it that just seemed so appealing.

"...longer than usual, but it shouldn't be a problem." The voice was male, with a rich tone that struck me as handsome. I couldn't picture that voice coming from anything but an incredibly attractive stallion.

Another voice sounded, this one female, with a delicate and clear tone that sounded equally pretty. "Control would say so. They're not the ones who have to wait in here."

"They're waiting just like us," the stallion said, with an inflection that seemed like the auditory equivalent of rolling his eyes. "It's not like they're able to just kick back and relax like we are. Someone has to monitor the data. They're still not sure why she isn't awake yet. Medical insists she's fit."

"Fit, except for sleeping for thirteen hours. I'm starting to wonder if she's ever going to wake up. Control said the brain activity was weird. What if she's got brain damage?"

There was a long pause before the stallion spoke again. "No, Control says they're sure it's not brain damage. They say the brain activity is weird, but familiar. They'll figure it out."

"Mmm, good for them," the mare said with a sigh. "I'm bored of waiting. I'm going to see if they thought to stock any drinks. Care to join me?"

There was a huff of amusement from the stallion, but he agreed, and I heard them moving to the kitchen.

Had I taken a physical when I moved here? That must be it. It still seemed weird, but that made sense. I sighed and started down the stairs to join my guests. It seemed like the proper thing to do.

And yet...

I could easily avoid them. It seemed like such a sneaky thing to do, slipping out on guests that I must have invited, but I felt in far too good of a mood to bog things down with medical discussions.

But more importantly, it seemed so mischievous and exciting, like I'd be getting away with something I shouldn't.

I stepped back to the landing, returning to my room. I could easily fly out from my bedroom window without them ever knowing I was up.

Oh, I wouldn't let them wait too long. I had still invited them over—probably—and I didn't want to be rude by completely neglecting them. I just wanted to get out and enjoy the morning a bit, first. A pleasant stroll through the lush park under those clear skies and warm sun seemed so...

The first word that came to mind was "rare", but that wasn't right. Serenity was scheduled for warm, clear weather most days. I settled on "pleasant", even if the word seemed somehow insufficient.

I stepped up to the window, swinging it open, then hesitated. I wasn't entirely sure why. Sure, I was a changeling, but Serenity was a place of friendship, love, and tolerance. They wouldn't care if I was a changeling, or a griffin, or even a zebra. So why was I disguised? I must have had a good reason. I looked down at my chest, raising a leg to run a hoof through the thick fluff of my chest. Not only was I disguised, I was disguised in the wrong form! Why had I shortened my mane and tail, and thickened my coat? It was far too pleasant of a day to need that much insulation.

The weather must have been bad before. Yes, it had been cold and rainy, that was it. But not here. Serenity had been scheduled for sunny days with the rare shower. It must have been before I arrived, and I simply hadn't bothered to change yet. Yes, that was it.

It was only as I went to remove my disguise that I realized I was dangerously low on love. It was far too little to squander on transformation. I was tempted to strip my current disguise to save energy, but I had kept myself disguised for a reason, and while I couldn't remember what that reason was, I was certain it was a good one. No matter; I knew exactly where to go to get love.

With flying off the table, I instead climbed out the window, moving silently to the edge of the roof. It was just a short drop down to the soft

grass below; I'd made more strenuous leaps before.

It did seem a little silly, sneaking out of my own home, but I couldn't deny that it was exciting.

After a quick brush-down to ensure my thick coat was lying smoothly, I casually trotted off around the loop.

It really was a nice neighborhood. Willow and Rose's garden was in full bloom, gracing their yard with a rainbow of colors. At the next house over, Ricochet, one of Serenity's griffin residents, was maneuvering a small cloud to water her lawn. We exchanged a quick wave as she swooped around, and I had the sudden desire to fly up in the air, banking and looping around without a care in the world.

The next house was Strawberry's. She was out in the yard, working on the fence. The old fence must have needed replacing, judging by the way she bucked one of the posts, snapping it off. She noticed me passing by, and called out to me.

"What the fuck are you smiling at? You enjoying this shit, you brain-dead little cunt? Or do you need someone to go over there and fuck-start your head?"

Strawberry has such a colorful way with words. I smiled and gave a little wave as I continued on.

She responded with a snarl as she bucked down the rest of the fence. "Pull your head out of your ass and get a clue, Whisper! You retarded little shit!"

I trotted on with a light step, thinking that I really should take the time to pay Strawberry a proper visit. Maybe I could do that after meeting with my guests. As mischievous as it was sneaking out on them, I couldn't let them wait too long. That would just be mean.

Starlight's house was just a few doors down. I was just passing the house of her neighbor, Flay, when her front door opened. I halted, turning to admire the lilac bush at the corner of Flay's lawn. I wasn't quite certain why I did that. It was unobtrusive, something that would be unlikely to be noticed, and it let me watch the earth pony couple that exited Starlight's house without being obvious about watching them.

I wasn't sure *why* I wanted to watch them, but it seemed like the right thing to do. It was certainly better than going up to a pair of strangers and

asking them why they were leaving my friend's house.

It was another mare and stallion pair. They gave cheerful goodbyes and waves as they exited. I could barely make out what the mare said after the door shut.

"She's certainly the most promising of this lot."

In the corner of my eye, I could see the stallion nod as they walked toward the street. "That she is. If she loves this 'Whisper' as much as she seems to, we should be..."

I waited, listening in for a couple more seconds before I realized they weren't there. I blinked, looking around, but there was no sign of them. Even more strange, I couldn't quite place what had happened. I'd been watching them in the corner of my eye, and listening to them talk. I had seen them at one point, then a couple of seconds later I realized I didn't see them, but I had no memory of them actually leaving.

A creeping feeling ran through my spine. Something wasn't quite right, and my mind spun as I focused on this new problem, attacking it like some new puzzle. I couldn't just miss something like that while observing a pair of ponies. If one of them were a unicorn, I would have guessed they used some sort of magic on me. Instead, I was left with the possibility that my perception was compromised. I could recall how muddled my perceptions were after waking up from two hundred years in a cocoon, or the concerningly rising number of times I may have suffered a concussion.

Or maybe I was just more hungry than I thought.

I blinked. The creeping sense of wrongness grew even more as I tried to correlate these seemingly impossible flashes of memory. It was maybe twenty years since I hatched, not two hundred, and in any case, I'd never been in a cocoon. Strawberry would have never tried to kill me, and I absolutely, positively, under no circumstances, had ever been blown up. Not even a tiny bit. I'd had a nice peaceful life in Equestria, among friendly and loving ponies, and that had only gotten better once I had moved to Serenity.

I was losing my mind. That was the solution that came screaming to the forefront of my mind, until I shook the thoughts away. I'd just been sleeping for more than half a day. I must be remembering dreams. Yes, that's it. The gray skies, the barren, dusty land, the flashes of blood; it was all just a nightmare, and now I was awake.

Suppressing a shiver, I walked up to Starlight's door.

Moments after knocking, the door opened to reveal Starlight, and her expression lit up the moment she saw me. "Whisper!"

Her forelegs wrapped me in a crushing hug, and her mouth met mine, delivering an eager and energetic kiss that I, after a moment of surprise, happily returned.

It was a blissful moment, tempered only by a single flaw; while I could feel Starlight's love, it seemed surprisingly distant. Not weak, mind you; it was nice and strong, but it felt as if I were trying to feed from across a room.

One more factoid pointing to possible brain trauma. I was starting to think I should really go meet with those guests of mine.

I must have given away some sign of my inner thoughts, as Starlight stepped back from the kiss, a brow cocked curiously. "You, uh..." Her eyes glanced downward, and she smirked. "Trying out a new look, huh?"

"Oh!" I looked down at myself again. "Right, that. I guess I forgot to change at some point, and now I'm a little low on love..."

She chuckled softly, stepping back. "Well, why don't you come in instead of just standing in the doorway? I'm sure we can fix your little problem."

I gave a weak chuckle as well, stepping in and turning to shut the door behind me. The moment I did so, Starlight pressed against me, sending me staggering and falling onto the couch. She was above me in an instant, giggling, then lowered her head to nuzzle firmly against my chest. "Mmm, so fluffy!"

"This look does have its advantages," I said, raising a hoof to rub at her shoulder. "Though it may be a bit too warm for the current weather."

"Well let's get you some love before you overheat," she said, smirking as she slid up, her mouth meeting mine again. Her hooves gripped at my side, her breath quickening as her body pressed and rubbed against mine. It was exciting, exhilarating, and it took a force of will to press my hoof against her chest, gently pressing her back a bit.

She drew her head back, blinking in confusion. That confusion immediately turned to concern as she saw the fear that had overtaken my expression. "Whisper? What's wrong?"

"I... I think there's something wrong with me." I said, slowly shaking

my head. "I can barely feed. It's there, I just... I can't get at it." I shook my head, swallowing. "I've been getting flashes of memories that make no sense, and I can't even tell they're wrong, except they contradict everything else I remember. And then, just a few minutes ago, I... I must have zoned out. I was watching a couple of ponies, and I didn't even realize they'd left until they were out of sight. I don't even remember the time passing, I..."

"Woah, easy," Starlight said, her hooves gripping at my shoulders. I was shivering. "Take it easy. Maybe... maybe we should get you to the clinic? You've taken a lot of blows to the head, maybe you've got a concussion. That would explain things, right?"

The shivering stopped as I looked wide-eyed up at her. "...I have? The blows to the head, I mean."

"A bit more than I'd like, yeah," she said, giving an awkward smile. "Heck, last time you kinda got..."

She trailed off, blinking, and a weight dropped in my gut.

"Were you about to say 'blown up'?"

"Yeah," she said, sitting back and staring off into space. "I don't know why. You couldn't have been blown up. I mean, I know you play with explosives a lot, but—" She blinked again. "Wait a minute, when the hell did you get explosives?"

"We found them," I replied automatically.

She blinked a couple more times, then shook her head. "No, no. That's not right. It must have been a—"

"Dream," I finished for her, and she froze, mirroring my own look of concern.

I thought for a moment, scrambling for stray thoughts. My ears perked up. "A land mine. Do you remember a land mine?"

Her hoof moved to her neck, her eyes widening for a moment, but she quickly shook her head. "N-no. I remember a dream, but... no, where would we have ever ran into a land mine? But... but *you* remember it, too?" Her ears pinned back, and she looked around. "Oh, shit. Are we dreaming?" She looked back to me. "Wait, if I'm dreaming, are you even real?"

"We're not dreaming," I said, pushing myself up to a more upright position. "But something isn't right. Something's messing with our heads."

"Oh, Luna," Starlight murmured, her hoof moving to her head. "Am

I going insane? What's going on?"

"I don't know, but we need to figure it out." I sat up, reaching out to grip Starlight by the shoulders. "What do you remember? How did we get here?"

"Emerald's PipBuck," she answered. Then her ears drooped. "Oh, no. Emerald. Did she really..."

I swallowed around the lump that tried to form in my throat. My brain was telling me that what I remembered couldn't be true, that I could have never witnessed another pony dying like that, but it was clear I couldn't trust my own memories. My own mind was working against me.

That was a problem. I knew how good I was at telling a lie.

I shook off the thought. "And *why* did we come to Serenity?"

"Because it's such a nice place," Starlight said, shuddering. "And you thought you might find—"

She froze again, her eyes widening. "...Your family." Her shoulders heaved as her breathing accelerated. "Changelings."

I nodded. Yes, that sounded familiar.

"Changelings," Starlight murmured. "Changelings make themselves look like something they're not." She looked around the room. "Oh, Luna, goddesses, is any of this—"

She jumped and yelped loudly at the knock on her door. As she clamped her hooves over her mouth, a smooth-spoken stallion's voice called from outside.

"Miss Starlight? Are you okay?"

She lowered her hooves to shout back. "I'm fine!"

"Can we come in?"

Starlight scrambled to the window, peering out. "Just a second!" She leaned in close to me, quickly whispering. "It's the welcoming committee, again. I don't know why they're back. Are they changelings, too?"

I looked around, quickly trying to form a plan. I could practically feel my grip on the situation slipping as my mind told me everything was fine. "I'm going to hide. Let them in, see what they want. Just don't tell them I'm here."

She trembled, staring at me as if she feared she'd never see me again. "W-why?"

Giving my best reassuring smile, I reached up, holding her by the shoulders once more. "Sneaky bug stuff."

The look of fear cracked as she gave a timid smile, and she nodded.

She waited until I had slipped up the stairs and out of sight before opening the door.

"Hello." She sounded nervous. "I wasn't expecting to see you again so soon."

The stallion answered her. "We heard you shout. Is everything okay?"

"Uh... yeah, yeah, I'm fine. I, uh... the knock just kind of surprised me, is all."

"Is something wrong?" the stallion asked. I could faintly hear the sound of hooves as he stepped inside. "You know, we're here to help you. Why don't you tell us what's bothering you and we can help out."

"Oh. Yeah." The nervousness had vanished from Starlight's voice. "Sorry, I was just feeling a little freaked out."

A mare's voice spoke up. "Why don't you tell us what's bothering you? I'm sure we'll be able to help."

"I'm not really sure how to describe it," Starlight said. "It's like... I'm remembering things, but they don't make sense. Like, guns and fighting, and... ruins. And there were explosions, and... a land mine. And I remember Whisper was there."

I winced at my name, fearing what she might say next.

"And... and it all feels like a dream, but I know it wasn't. It was too real, but how could it be real? It doesn't—"

"It's okay," the stallion said, cutting her off. "You must be remembering your term in the Army. That's what it is."

"I... was in the Army?"

"For a very short while, yes. You were just given a medical discharge. It was nothing serious, but I guess you got knocked around a bit if you're having trouble remembering. It'll clear up on its own in a few days, but you might want to pay a visit to the clinic. A little medical magic will help speed up your recovery."

There was a moment of silence, followed by a faint chuckle. "Oh, that... that makes a lot of sense, actually. Sorry about that."

"No need to apologize," the stallion replied. "Stress can have a tremen-

dous impact on a pony, and especially our soldiers, but it's something we've become quite adept at diagnosing and treating. A couple days of confusion is completely normal. You can ask your neighbors. Several of them came from similar backgrounds, and they've gone through the same thing you have."

"That's a bit of a relief, yeah," Starlight said. "It's still, you know, just a little freaky not remembering stuff like that, but... but yeah, it's kinda coming back. Sorry. I feel a little silly now, freaking out like that."

"Please, don't worry about it. We're here to help you. Was there anything else bothering you?"

"No, that was it. Thank you. I... I think I'll head down to the clinic in a bit. Seriously, thank you."

The mare answered, sounding pleased. "It's what we're here for."

They said their goodbyes, and moments later the door shut again. I crept down the stairs, until I could see Starlight giving a slow, deep sigh. She turned and smiled as I made my way down.

"Are you okay?" I asked, and she grinned.

"Yeah. Sorry about all that. You know, you should have stayed. Ponies are going to think you're weird if you keep hiding any time somepony comes by."

She stepped in, nuzzling under my chin, but I leaned back. "I'd say we have more important things to worry about. We need to figure out what's messing with our heads, and I'm pretty sure those ponies are in on it."

"Don't worry about it," Starlight said with a chuckle. "Those two were with the welcoming committee, they were just here to help. And the whole 'head' thing was just stress messing with us."

I froze as she gave back the story those ponies had fed her, and she slipped in again, nuzzling. "Starlight, this isn't stress. Those memories, they're real, but they don't fit with everything else. Something is messing with our heads."

"It's just the stress," Starlight repeated, and chuckled. "I can't believe I'd forgotten we were in the Army, but that explains where all that shooting and explosions came from. It's all coming back now." She drew back, looking me in the eyes with a look of sudden realization. "That's where we met, wasn't it?"

I stared at her, heart hammering. The Army made so much sense; I could

remember fighting alongside her. Dusty and Strawberry were there, too. Were they in uniform? Yes, Dusty was. But I couldn't remember if the others were. Why else would we be fighting? The idea of serving, of following a mission, that sounded completely right. The Army was the only way that made sense.

With a shudder, I pushed away the thoughts. I already knew someone was messing with my mind. I couldn't trust my own memories. I couldn't trust my own *mind*.

To say that was a problem is quite the understatement. The mind is an Infiltrator's best weapon.

An Infiltrator. I wasn't a soldier. I was never in the Army. I did not serve Equestria. All of this was a lie.

I took a moment to evaluate my situation, to weigh my options. It was clear that something was messing with my mind. I seemed to be forcing past it, though it was still a muddled mess. Maybe, if I was lucky, I might be able to help Starlight get through it, but she seemed far too quick to latch onto those ponies' story. It would be difficult. I had no idea if Dusty or Strawberry could be brought around, though from the behavior I had seen earlier, I doubted Strawberry would take much convincing.

But what then? It wasn't just enough to know the truth. If they were messing with our minds, we were vulnerable. I had no idea what kind of troubles we might face outside of this lie. I was certain this place was a lie, but I had no idea how far that lie extended. I had no idea what to expect, and therefore, no ability to plan for it. Our captors—if that's even what was going on—had every advantage. We couldn't fight this.

And if I couldn't fight it, the only way to get through was to go along with it.

I put on a reassuring smile, lifting a hoof to tenderly touch Starlight's cheek. "Yes. Yes, that's exactly right."

Her expression brightened up, and she leaned in, giving me another kiss. I took a few moments to enjoy the sensation before gently drawing back. "I should get back home. I have a welcoming party of my own I need to talk to."

Starlight put on a mock-pout. "Aww."

"Don't worry," I said, still wearing that smile. "I'll see you soon."

The smile vanished the moment I had stepped outside. My heart hammered as I walked around the loop to my own house. Strawberry was nowhere to be seen, and a pair of ponies were floating a new fence into place where the old one had been. As I passed her house, I heard the clop of hooves trotting on the street. I looked back in time to see a pair of ponies, the same two I had first seen leaving Starlight's house, now hurrying back to her door.

As I approached the door of my own house, I could hear the muffled sounds of the ponies inside. They sounded like they were arguing.

The argument stopped the moment I opened the front door. The mare quickly set down the hoof she had been gesturing wildly with, and called out to me. "Oh, thank goodness! There you are, Whisper! You gave us quite the scare, there. Where did you disappear to?"

"I snuck out," I said. "But now I'm back, and I'd like to talk."

"Well, that's what we're here for," the stallion said. "But you know, there's no need to sneak around, here. Serenity is a nice, peaceful place."

"I'm sure," I said in a dry tone. Adrenaline teased at my senses as I took a calculated gamble. "Are you changelings?"

The mare blinked. "What? No, no changelings here. Why do you ask?"

The stallion beside her, however, effectively torpedoed her words. He stared at me, his eyes widening in dawning realization. He opened his mouth, gasping a single word. "Disconnect."

The mare's head turned, drawing my attention for just an instant. In that instant, I realized the stallion had vanished.

A moment later, I realized the mare had vanished, too.

I twisted around, looking this way and that, until the entire world went away.



Light and sound twisted around me in an incoherent jumble. The world turned, and hooves pressed against me. I tried to move my head against the pressure that tried to hold me as up turned to down, and something soft pressed against my side. Something tugged on my forelegs, and something warm wrapped around my hooves.

Among the jumbled colors, a pale-blue orb drew my attention, though

my addled brain made no sense of it until it turned to me and narrowed, mirrored by a twin just beside it. My view focused rapidly on the glossy black around them, until I could make out the expression of an angry changeling.

I jerked, adrenaline flowing. I tried to lift my head, only to find myself restrained. I tried to call out, only to produce a muffled moan; I was muzzled. More hooves gripped and pressed at my sides, and I twisted my head to see several more changelings. I was lying down, strapped to a gurney, with my legs bound with goo. The changelings were working over me. The green light of PipBuck screens shone from their forelegs. The jumble of sounds I heard were words.

“She’s regaining focus,” the angry one near my head said.

“Tertiary leads disconnected. That’s the last of it.”

“No, hold the sedative. I want her lucid.”

“Get those legs restrained. Lay it on, she’s waking up!”

“Get those guards in here.”

I twisted my head the other way. I couldn’t see much past the changelings over me. I saw one of the guards stepping up, clad in armor while a magical energy weapon floated beside her head.

“Move her.”

The gurney rocked under me as it started to roll, surrounded by changelings. I looked around with wide eyes, producing more muffled sounds as I tried to call out to them. So many changelings, so close. They were right there!

As we moved, I got a parting glimpse of the room. I was being wheeled away from a white contraption that looked as if it had split open. It took me a moment to place it as the white eggshell of a suspended animation pod, just like the discarded remains in the lab I had woken up in. More pods filled the wide room. There were dozens of them, maybe sixty in total, and I could see faces inside them.

With a lurch, I tried to search out Starlight and the others, but the door shut behind us, cutting me off.

I was rolled down a hall and into a small room, bare except for a pair of plain benches. It looked like a jail cell.

The group of changelings hauling the gurney parked me by the back wall, engaging the wheel brakes. Most stepped back, while the angry-looking

one returned to look me in the face. Her horn glowed brightly, grabbing my eyelids so I couldn't blink, and shined a light in my eyes. A few seconds later, she stepped back, addressing the pair of guards who flanked her. "She's fully responsive. Keep a close eye on her."

One of the soldiers grunted in reply, then addressed me, her large magical energy weapon leveled straight at me. "If you attempt any magic, we will immediately shoot and kill you. Do you understand?"

The straps made nodding difficult, but I managed.

I was there for several long, silent minutes, with only the pair of wary and suspicious guards for company. Unable to attempt conversation, I remained still. I didn't want to test their nerves, or their reflexes.

I found myself staring at one of the soldiers. A changeling, dressed in armor much like my own, with a PipBuck on her leg. I'd found changelings! But this changeling was standing ready to kill me at a moment's notice. As excited as I was to find changelings, I was still in an incredibly dangerous and uncertain situation.

And there was a room nearby with several dozen ponies—and other species—held in suspended animation. While I could think of a few reasons to do so, one stood out as the most likely reason a group of changelings would organize something like this, and it was a troubling one.

It would also explain why I felt so drained of love.

I must have been in that room for about five minutes before several guards entered. To my shock, two Enclave soldiers entered with them. A moment later, I realized my error. The soldiers were clad in Enclave armor, certainly, but I could see the fanged, chitinous muzzle below the armor's visor. They were changelings wearing Enclave armor, and I noticed then that the back-plate had been painted a dark, iridescent blue, as if to mimic a changeling's coloration.

"Move her," one of the power-armor soldiers ordered, and the guards rolled me out on the gurney.

This journey took quite a bit longer, leading me through many halls and an elevator. The construction was rugged but refined, with reinforced metal walls, hydraulic doors, and plentiful lighting. It looked like Stable-Tec construction.

Finally, we rolled into a large room. As we were coming to a halt,

a beautiful voice, rich and melodious, called out. "Release her."

My heart hammered, while the guards stepped in, undoing the straps that held me. Moments later I was floated off and set on the ground, and the goo that bound my legs dissolved away. I got a hoof under me to push myself up, and looked in the direction of that voice.

Some twenty feet away lay a large cushion, and lying atop it was a young changeling queen, her head held in a regal pose. Flanking her were a pair of soldiers in black-painted Steel Ranger armor, much larger and bulkier than the Enclave-armored soldiers I had seen before. They stood tall and proud like statues, sporting heavy magical weapons.

The queen's slit-pupil eyes were fixed on me, half-lidded as if bored with me. Her fanged mouth opened as she spoke again. "Lose the disguise."

I gulped, well aware of the many guards around me, and tugged at the strings of my magic. My flames stripped away my disguise, leaving me in my natural form—minus my armor, which I kept concealed for now.

The queen continued to stare at me for several long seconds, those bright green eyes silently judging me. Finally they twitched to the side, looking at the group that had brought me. "Leave us."

They bowed and left without comment. The two armored hulks beside her remained still.

Once the doors had shut, the young queen stood, advancing toward me in a slow, graceful strut. Her long mane fell across her shoulders, while those beautiful green eyes remained fixated on me. I tried my best not to stare.

She halted a couple of yards away, looking down at me. "Who are you?"

I swallowed again. "My name is Whisper," I said, then quickly bowed my head as an afterthought. "Your Highness."

She hummed quietly to herself as she considered me. Her posture tightened, her head rising slightly, proudly, before speaking again.

"I am Queen Chrysalis."

My gut dropped, and I completely failed to hide my reaction, eyes widening at those words. There was no possible good reason a changeling queen would adopt *that* name.

The situation had just gotten worse.

Her eyes narrowed, glaring down her snout at me. "Is there a problem?" "S-sorry," I stammered, allowing the fear to show for only a moment

before tightly constraining my expression to one of confusion. “I’ve heard that name before, but... I’m not very well-versed in history, but I thought Queen Chrysalis lived before the Great War.”

Her lip twitched, baring her fangs a little more. She spoke again, her voice darkening with irritation. “I am Queen Chrysalis the *Sixth*.”

I forced my body language to relax. “Oh. My apologies. That makes much more sense.” I gave a little twitch, then bowed my head. “Your Highness.”

She gave a faint snort. “It doesn’t matter. Now tell me, Whisper. Why are you here?”

I looked up at those waiting eyes, watching me like a predator, ready to pounce. My mind raced, scrambling to piece together an appropriate story. “I... I’ve been looking for other changelings. I learned that there might be changelings around here, so I came looking.”

The queen’s voice was sharp and demanding. “*Where* did you learn that?”

“F-from another changeling!” I quickly replied, suppressing a shiver. “Except I didn’t know she was a changeling. It was a pony named Emerald. At least, I thought she was a pony, until a raider shot and killed her. She had a PipBuck, and after digging around on it, I found that she’d come from here. I thought I might find some other changelings here, or at least clues to where they were.” I looked around, putting on a slow, awed smile. “I didn’t think I’d find a whole hive!”

“And *why* were you looking for us?”

I flinched a little, bowing my head again. “M-my queen and my hive are... are dead. I’ve been on my own for so long, I...” I slowly sagged, bowing my head again. “I didn’t know what else to do. I didn’t want to be on my own any more. When I learned there might be more changelings—”

“How did your hive die?”

I looked up, blinking, my ears pinning back. I gulped, covering for the moment of thought. “I think they starved. I was in a cocoon because we lacked enough love for everyling. When I woke up, they were all dead.”

She slowly walked to the side, looking off in thought. “Another hive. Noling has heard of another hive in at least a century. You must have been very good at hiding.”

"We tried to stay low-key," I said. "We didn't even have a proper hive, certainly nothing as impressive as you have. We had to hide among ponies."

"And yet, your hive failed."

Wincing, I ducked my head. "It was always difficult finding enough love. Ponies can be... paranoid."

She gave a slow nod, humming thoughtfully, then looked back to me. "So now you come here, hoping to... what? Join some *other* queen's hive?"

My eyes widened slightly as I looked up at her. "If... if you'd have me."

She frowned, and I prostrated myself, bowing my head until my nose touched the floor. "Please, Queen Chrysalis. I have nowhere else to go. I have no purpose on my own. I'll do anything you ask of me, without hesitation, just to have a purpose again."

Her head tilted as she looked down, towering over me. "You seem quite eager to cast aside your loyalty."

I closed my eyes, ears hanging low. "I will never betray my hive," I said, my tone firm despite the tremble in my voice. "But there is nothing remaining to be loyal to."

"So you're certain every member of your *former* hive is dead?"

I inhaled sharply, eyes opening to look up at those piercing eyes. "...My queen is dead, and my hive is shattered. I know most of them are dead. If any others did manage to survive... if they do not serve the same queen I do, then they are no longer of my hive."

The corner of Queen Chrysalis's mouth twitched upwards. "Hmm." She turned, slowly pacing to my side as she thought. I remained still, keeping my head bowed. "Then I suppose I have one more question," she said, turning to face me again. "What are your thoughts on ponies?"

I blinked in surprise. I hadn't expected a question like that. Here I was trying to convince her that I would be a loyal and obedient subject, and she instead wants to know my opinions on something completely unrelated? It made no sense, and I had nothing ready.

I considered what a queen who would adopt that particular name might want to hear, and cautiously offered it. "Ponies are necessary, but... problematic. They're the best source of love, but they can be dangerous and paranoid. And lately... since my hive fell, I've seen some of the worst ponies have to offer. I've seen what raiders do to other ponies, and they're

even worse with non-ponies..."

Noting that the corner of her mouth had risen in a faint, smug smile, I pushed just a little harder. "And I can't help but note that it was ponies who created the megaspells that put us all where we are now."

Queen Chrysalis smiled, revealing her sharp teeth. "Yes, it was, wasn't it?"

I nodded silently.

"Tell me, how did your *former* queen deal with ponies?"

"We hid," I said. "We stayed in the shadows, trying to steal what love we could find without drawing attention."

"And because of this," Queen Chrysalis said, "her hive now lies dead."

I winced, then nodded. "Yes, Your Highness."

She gave a pleased hum, turning to slowly strut back to her throne-like cushions. "You're right, you know. Ponies are a problem. They've always been a problem. We've had to hide in the shadows for centuries because of them, living like thieves and vultures. They've already tried to murder our entire species. They turned the world into a wasteland, and even then, they manage to find new forms of barbarism. Petty warlords, slavers, raiders."

I watched her, ears perked attentively; a good, eager, enraptured audience.

She turned and sat primly atop her cushion, her head held high and proud. "You have come to us at a great time, Whisper. The Grand Pegasus Enclave, the final bastion of the old world, is tearing itself apart. The great slaver army of the north has been shattered. The twisted Goddess behind the monstrous alicorns has been slain. Even the remnants of the Steel Rangers have turned on each other, decimating their numbers.

"Destroying the world wasn't enough for them. Ponies have had every opportunity to change their ways, but even in this wasteland, they continue to spread death and destruction, and we suffer for it. The queens before me have allowed this to stand for too long, but I will do what they never had the ability or courage to do. It is time for a change."

She looked down at me, seeing my smile. Her own grin grew, sharp-toothed and eager; I think she liked having an audience. "The ponies are divided, and their power is broken. A tremendous opportunity has presented itself to us. So, tell me, Whisper... what do you think we should do?"

I stared back, my heart hammering as I considered the question, knowing exactly what she had in mind. My eyes darted to the black-painted power armors flanking her, a small portion of what seemed to be a well-equipped fighting force, while I thought of the tremendous resources available to the hive. The expected answer was obvious. “We could rule.”

“The reign of ponies is over,” Queen Chrysalis said. She held her smug smile for a moment before turning to one of the motionless soldiers. “Call in Ocelli.”

The soldier nodded, the first time I had seen them move. Meanwhile, the queen turned back to me. “Answer all of her questions, and follow all of her directions. Do this, and you will be allowed to remain as a member of my hive.”

I grinned wide, and bowed my head, blinking as my eyes teared up. “Thank you! Thank you, my Queen!”

Ocelli was a small, lean changeling, but her body language was full of confidence, even as she bowed to her queen. She led me off to a side room, accompanied by a pair of guards. I followed, grinning like a loon and occasionally pausing to wipe away tears.

“Sit,” she said, indicating a chair beside a plain table, while she sat opposite it.

I followed her direction, giving a sniff and another wipe at my cheek, my wings fluttering a couple times before lying flat again. “Heh, sorry. I’m probably not making the best first impression, getting so emotional and all. It’s just... it’s been a long time.”

“So I gather,” Ocelli said with a faint smile, while she lay one foreleg across the table to view her PipBuck screen. “Which means we’re going to have a lot to talk about.”

She started in with the questions, which I answered dutifully. I told her of Queen Shadow, and how she had guided our nomadic hive around the edges of pony society, sneaking in to steal what love we could and scurrying off before any suspicion could be aroused. I told her of my incomplete training as a scout, cut off when I was placed in a cocoon to conserve my hive’s dwindling supply of love. I described my confused experience, waking up in the depths of a mine near Rust, surrounded by the remains of my dead hive, and wandering out to find the slaughtered raider camp above.

Then I described my time wandering the Wasteland. Meeting Starlight, Dusty, and Sickle. Our encounters with raiders and mercenaries while scouring for old-world ruins. And of course, though I was hesitant to mention it, my eventual uncovering.

"Wait," Ocelli said, her expression skeptical. "They know you're a changeling?"

I nodded. "I managed to hide it for a while, but I had no idea what I was doing. I guess it was probably inevitable, but... what could I do, really? I needed the food, and..." I slowly shook my head. "Hell, I was scared when they found out, but it worked out. Probably helps that they had no idea what a changeling was. I even managed to convince them to help me look for more of my own kind."

"Interesting," she said, tapping a couple buttons on her PipBuck. "Does anypony else know?"

"No!" I shuddered. "No, I was scared enough that they knew, and I think they were scared of other ponies finding out. I was more useful if nopony else knew what I could do."

"I see. So, what does that make them to you? Friends?"

I stared off into space, considering that question for a moment. "More like... pets, I guess? They were good food and decent company, and I'd rather not see them harmed if it's convenient, but I wouldn't consider them friends, no."

She hummed and nodded, reading something from her screen. "...That big one, Strawberry—"

"Sickle," I said, then smiled awkwardly. "Sorry. She hates that other name, and I learned not to offend the huge, short-tempered pony who could casually crush my skull." I raised a hoof, rubbing at the side of my head. "One concussion is more than enough, thanks."

Ocelli nodded. "Sickle, then. We've been having difficulty with her."

"I don't doubt it," I said with a soft snort.

A smile flickered for a moment on Ocelli's face. "It sounds like you were able to keep her in line and get love from her. How?"

"Well... keeping her in line is more like knowing when to let her loose and what direction to point her. She loves to fight and kill, and the best I could do is make sure she fights and kills the right ponies. She gets bored

when she can't fight, too. Drugs and sex help, but she still tends to be pretty aggressive."

"We obviously can't have her killing others in the simulation," Ocelli mused. "Sure, it won't actually kill them, but I can't imagine the extra work the simulation staff would have to put in to deal with the chaos that would cause. Drugs are out, too, unless she'd be content with a little alcohol and some cigarettes."

"A *lot* of alcohol," I said. "Though that only mellows her a little. Combine that with hard drugs or sex, and that could keep her pleasant."

Ocelli pondered that, tapping a hoof to her chin. "Sex we could manage. Maybe the sim staff could steer one of the stallions to her. Or does she prefer mares?"

"I think she's fine with either, but prefers stallions," I said. Then I clarified. "Um, stallions plural. Unless you've got one just as big and aggressive as her, she's not going to be satisfied by just one."

Ocelli frowned thoughtfully, then slowly shook her head. "Sounds like she's going to take more work than she's worth. Pity. The raider types can be tricky. The staff was planning on euthanizing her and being done with it, but they hoped you might have some insight."

"I'm afraid not," I said with a slow shake of my head. "I think she's too well-adapted to the Wasteland. I know the hive has employed raiders in the past, though. It's part of how I found my way here. If she isn't useful in that 'simulation', she might be useful as some sort of hired agent."

Ocelli hummed. "I'm sure it's under consideration. Now why don't you tell me what happened after they discovered you were a changeling?"

I continued on to tell her how I convinced the others to help me look for any signs of other changelings. How we'd followed a clue about a possible changeling hive in the badlands, only to find a gaping crater in its place. How we'd scoured old-world offices, looking for clues. How after Emerald had been killed, we had realized Lady Amber was a changeling, and came looking for Serenity. How we had seen Stable-Tec and C.L.T. offices there, two of the companies she had sent us looking for at Paradise Beach.

The whole way, she kept slipping in quick questions, clarifying little details. We must have spent three hours at it before she finally called it quits. "I think that's satisfactory. I'll pass this information on, then we can get you

situated. Come along.”

She led me out, and I followed her down a series of halls, while the guards remained behind.

The whole place was in excellent condition, well maintained, and full of changelings going this way and that. The hive was alive and thriving, and I grinned as I looked around. So many changelings, all carrying out their business, and I moved through them as if I truly belonged there.

I caught the faint smile Ocelli wore, and gave a sheepish smile of my own. “Sorry. I’d gotten so used to being alone.” I glanced to the side and quickly changed the subject. “Is this a Stable? I’ve seen pictures before, and the architecture seems pretty distinctive.”

“It is,” Ocelli said with a nod. “Ironic that the ponies should have become better than us at underground shelters, but thankfully, their wartime preparations could be repurposed to allow our hive to survive.”

We approached a door, flanked by a pair of chatting guards.

“...It’s still eight times I’ve killed you,” one of them was saying, grinning smugly.

“It’s random chance, could have happened to anyling,” the other guard said, giving a short snort, then cocking her head. “Wait, eight? The Thunderhead defense made seven.”

“I got you in the the convoy breakthrough, too.”

“The convoy—we were on the same side!”

The first guard’s grin grew a touch wider. “I shot, you died. It totally counts.”

The second guard started laughing. “That should count *negative* you—” She abruptly stopped on seeing our approach, straightening up and giving Ocelli a quick nod. “Ma’am.”

She didn’t so much as pause as she walked by them. “Friendly fire. I see your training is going well.”

The first guard’s grin had turned sheepish. “Ah, yes ma’am.”

We passed through the door the guards were flanking, and entered into a workspace. A few technicians were working over PipBucks, with at least thirty more PipBucks arrayed on shelves behind them. As we approached the technicians, I picked up the pace to move beside Ocelli and quietly ask, “What, are changelings immortal in this hive?”

"Oh, that?" She smirked, shaking her head. "They're talking about combat simulations. It's for training purposes, but many of the soldiers see them as nothing but a game."

"Ah. I see."

Ocelli had one of the technicians retrieve a PipBuck and make a few quick adjustments to its systems before presenting it to me.

"Every member of the hive gets one," Ocelli said. "Don't remove it unless absolutely necessary, and *always* keep it on you. This one is also heavily restricted at the moment. I'm sure you understand, it's just a precaution. I'm sure the restriction will be relaxed once you've been here a while."

It also gave them an easy way to track my movements, of course.

"Thank you!" I said, smiling as she clasped the device to my leg. Lights flickered before my eyes, quickly forming into the increasingly familiar E.F.S. readout. I wasn't surprised to see that S.A.T.S. was disabled. Then I looked at the compass, and blinked. "Should I be concerned about that cluster of hostile contacts?"

"Hmm?" She turned her head, looking in the same direction I was, then relaxed, chuckling softly. "Oh. That's the zoology department. They study Wasteland wildlife, and most of it is quite hostile. You learn to tune it out after a while."

"Oh, good," I said, relaxing with a soft sigh. "Sorry. First day here, and I thought I'd already offended someling."

"Don't worry about it," she said, smiling. "Also, you might see the occasional hostile contact along the west side of the hive. Some of the food-ponies flash hostile every now and then. In fact, do you see a hostile over there right now?"

I looked over, then shook my head. "All green."

"Hmm, well there's something," she said. "Your pink 'pet' has shown up as hostile to every other member of the hive."

I frowned. "Considering the number of times she's nearly killed or raped me, I question these things' definition of 'hostile'."

Ocelli blinked in surprise, her head tilting. "I... guess so." She slowly shook her head, and changed the subject. "Anyway, the equipment you and your companions had is also stored here. If there's anything you need, or that you think would be useful to the hive, I can see about getting it returned

to you eventually.”

“I think I’m good,” I said. “I can’t imagine needing any of my weapons in here.”

“No, I expect not,” Ocelli said. “Anyway, let’s get you a place to rest. You’ll be staying with me for now. Just a temporary thing, I’m sure.”

“Sounds good.”

Naturally, they’d want to keep an eye on the new ‘ling. The queen may have said I was accepted into her hive, but I knew that wasn’t quite true. I was allowed to stay and prove myself worthy of being a member of the hive, but they were going to keep a close eye on me until then. That, or they were hoping to get more information out of me. Either way, it was a sensible precaution.

She led me out and down new halls. “Speaking of equipment, that was quite the arsenal you walked in here with. You said you were a scout?”

“Training to be a scout,” I said. “I’d only gotten basic weapons training, but I’ve been learning quickly. Dusty, the yellow stallion, helped with that.” I gave a short chuckle. “A couple months ago, I’d have thought that gear I had was absurd overkill. After the experiences I had out there... well, overkill has a lot going for it.”

“Better than the alternative, I suppose,” Ocelli said with a momentary smile. “And the explosives?”

“That’s mostly new. I’m surprised how simple it is, though. Connect two wires to a blasting cap, put it in the explosive, hit the trigger when you’re far enough away, boom.” I shook my head. “Still a little unnerving carrying something that dangerous, though. Same for the grenades.”

“And the computer gear?”

“Basic computer intrusion training,” I said. “In case I ended up scouting out any old-world facilities. I was lucky enough to find some good equipment at Paradise Beach. Ended up making a lot of use out of that recently. Heck, it’s a surprisingly fun pass-time. Like... a puzzle, I guess?”

She nodded. “I guess I can see that.”

“Not that any of that helped us,” I noted. “I’m still not sure what happened, here. We went underground, hoping to follow some cables to a central server, and then everything just got... fuzzy. Was it gas?”

“It was,” she said, though she didn’t elaborate.

We exited the hallway, entering a public atrium. More changelings walked by, but others stood or sat around, talking or relaxing. As she led me along, she spoke again. “I know we just spent a lot of time with all the questions, but I’d kind of like to hear some more of your past. Maybe once we get back to my place, you could share some stories? It’s a good way to pass the time.”

Or in other words, maybe I could give her more useful information I hadn’t shared yet. “Sure,” I said, smiling, and she smiled back. It was a soft, pleasant smile. She turned back to watch where she was going, but I noted her head was turned ever so slightly, keeping me in her vision. Watching. Analyzing.

I avoided looking too close at her, letting her watch. Instead, I let my gaze wander over the changelings we passed. There were so many! Even the spacious Stable-Tec-designed atrium felt pleasantly crowded, filled with changelings traveling to and fro, relaxing on benches, chatting, and even snuggling up together. I caught bits and pieces of conversation as we passed.

“...for ten hours, but I’ve got the next two days off while we wait for the techs to do the final engine tests before...”

“...almost eight hundred yards, and with a carbine! I told you I’m a good shot!”

“Your team must have put a thousand rounds into those buildings. One of you were bound to get lucky. That’s not so...”

“...of the new armor. She ate dirt so hard! The whole requisition team was laughing their shells off, and she...”

“...cockpit is just weird. How do they even fly with their wings inside the vehicle?”

“I dunno. Magic?”

My mind raced as I fixated on a small group we were passing; most of the group was chatting happily, while two of them were cuddling up and nuzzling affectionately.

My gaze lingered just a little too long as we passed the group, and when I looked ahead again, I caught a glimpse of Ocelli’s sly smirk and look of amusement. My ears flicked back in embarrassment, and I quickly looked away again, rather obviously pretending to have not noticed.

As we continued down busy hallways and busy public rooms, I hunted

down a few similar scenes among the hundreds of changelings. A pair nuzzling in affection. A couple of changelings curled up intimately, legs intertwined as they dozed on a bench. A trio lying sprawled over each other, chatting while hooves rubbed at sides and flanks before teasingly slipping between hindlegs.

It occurred to me that there were certain aspects of a changeling hive Sickle might appreciate. For one, the close quarters and enclosed spaces tended to result in greatly diminished expectations of privacy. There were certain advantages to that.

I soon noticed that Ocelli's walk had changed, putting on a subtle but pleasant sway to her hips, her tail held a bit too high. I have to admit, she was rather pretty, with her near-perfect curves and uniform, glossy carapace. There was something very pleasant in the way her flanks shifted and flexed with every strutting step.

She noticed my lingering gaze, her eyes half-lidded as she looked my way. I quickly looked away again, tucking my tail down between my legs.

"So, you must have been on your own for a very long time," Ocelli said, her eyes watching me closely. She had seen an opening, and she was taking it.

I nodded awkwardly. "It's... been very lonely."

"Mmm, I bet." She smiled, taking advantage of the busy hallway to move closer and brush against my side. My ears perked up. She knew exactly what she was doing. "Well, you're not alone any more, and I'm sure we can make you feel *very* welcome."

I was breathing hard, and my tail crept up before quickly tucking down again. She merely smiled knowingly. I started to smile a little, then swallowed and looked away again.

A minute later, she purred beside me. "We're here."

A single guard stood by the door of her room, and gave us a nod as Ocelli opened it. "Come on in," she said over her shoulder, her hips swaying so nicely. Even the guard cast a quick glance out of the corner of her eye before pretending she hadn't noticed.

I followed Ocelli into a small room filled with a variety of furniture, adorned with various trinkets and pictures. The one detail that most immediately caught my attention was the single, decently sized bed. The heavy hydraulic door thumped shut behind her, and suddenly Ocelli was right

in front of me, her muzzle so close I could feel her breath. I halted, ears perking up, alert and excited.

"This is my room," she purred, moving in to gently brush the tip of her muzzle against mine. "I'm lucky enough to have a place of my own, so it's just the two of us."

My mouth parted, but the only sound that came out was a soft panting.

Her muzzle slipped to the side as she nuzzled along and under my jaw. "Mmm. You know, most changelings spend their whole lives in the hive. We've gotten *very* good at keeping ourselves entertained..." She gave a slow, teasing lick at my neck, and I responded with a shuddering huff of breath. "...But I'd absolutely *love* to hear about the outside world."

"Y-yeah," I huffed, her nuzzling working its way back up along my jaw, until her mouth was right by mine, lips parted just barely and so close to my own. Her eyes met mine with a sultry, half-lidded expression, sly and inviting.

I pressed forward, my mouth meeting hers, and she purred into the kiss. Soon I was gripping at her shoulders with my forehooves, ignoring the awkward balance as I pressed up to her. One of her hooves tucked around my shoulder, holding me close as she moved back, and a moment later we were on her bed.

I clutched at her sides, finally breaking the kiss to look down at her. We both panted softly for a few seconds before she smiled again, giving a soft, pleased hum.

That was sign enough for me. I pressed in again, kissing and nuzzling and licking with unrestrained eagerness, while her hooves teased along my sides and flanks. Moments later I was sliding down, giving only a few cursory licks and nuzzles across her underbelly before plunging my muzzle between her hind legs.

I played her like an instrument, every twist of my tongue producing a new melody, her voice rising to a crescendo and falling, again and again. Her hooves stroked across my head and horn, her hind legs wrapped around my shoulders.

We were both panting by the time I finally climbed over her again, muzzles brushing as our eyes met again. It lasted only a moment before her forelegs gripped around my shoulders, pulling me into another passionate

kiss. When she finally broke the kiss again, she licked at her lips, purring. “Mmm. We really must get you taken care of,” she said, a hoof slipping from my shoulder to tease down along my side and under my belly. “Alone all this time, I can’t imagine how pent up you must be.”

As the hoof traveled lower, I shuddered, a faint moan escaping my lips. I drew back just a little, ears flicking back. “Would you, um... mind if I turned into a male for...?”

Her grin grew, sharp-toothed and eager. “You have no *idea* how much I’d like that,” she said, finishing up with a slow lick across her lips.

I slid back, calling up a quick transformation, then slipping a hoof under her flank, nudging upward. She hummed softly as she followed my direction, rising to her hooves, and gave a sultry smirk over her shoulder. Her tail was held high and inviting, and I eagerly climbed atop her. Moments later, she was moaning again, while I nuzzled and nipped at the back of her neck.

Her voice rose again, her head tilting back and eyes shutting. I tilted my own head back as well—then snapped it forward, slamming a stunning spell down into the back of her head.

She gave a single twitch and fell limp, collapsing to the bed while I caught my balance, panting, above her.

Immediate appraisal: complete and immediate unconsciousness. She had been sufficiently distracted to not see the attack coming. There was no opportunity to throw off or avoid my attack, and certainly no time to get out an alarm or even cry for help. It was as perfectly executed a takedown as could be managed.

Still panting, I sat beside her, trying to calm my pounding heart and the various emotions currently flooding my mind. I focused on simply breathing deep, calming breaths, then turned to analyzing my situation.

I was alone, trapped in a guarded room without any equipment except a partially disabled PipBuck, my hidden armor, and whatever I could scavenge. I was in a Stable, deep underground, with likely only a single way out. My friends were trapped in a simulated world, unaware that they were even prisoners, and held in a reasonably busy area. I had an unknown amount of time before Sickle would be killed in her sleep. Our confiscated equipment was under guard. And lying between us and freedom was an entire Stable packed full of a thousand or more changelings, following a Queen that had

taken the name Chrysalis, and all equipped with arcano-tech devices that could detect hostile intent at a glance.

I frowned, looking down at the unconscious would-be interrogator, and came to a simple conclusion.

“We are so completely fucked.”

## Chapter Twenty-Six

# One Way Out

*I'm not going to hurt anyone.*

*I just want to go my way in peace.*

*I am not your enemy.*

I opened my eyes, looking down at the unconscious changeling laid out on the bed before me, then scanning slowly around. The wall of green contacts remained steady, save for the cluster of red Ocelli had warned me of. The weight of the PipBuck felt unusually heavy. I had no idea how they decide who is or is not hostile, or whether my own mental declaration of intent could possibly influence it.

One fact did give a measure of encouragement: despite having rendered one of their members unconscious, none of the other changelings were showing as hostile. This suggested that there needed to be some sort of active intent involved. So long as my intentions were not to cause harm, it was possible I would not show up as an enemy.

Or maybe they showed up as non-hostile because they didn't know what I had done, and therefore had no reason to consider me an enemy. I could be marked with a red pip to every changeling in the hive, and I had no way of knowing.

If so, then hopefully my mark would be lost in the sea of other contacts. Considering that it would be a lone red mark in an otherwise solid wall of green, that seemed unlikely.

Still, there were no guards coming in and no alarms sounding. I was in a precarious position, but I had not yet fallen. Now it was time to act.

I swapped my restricted PipBuck for Ocelli's, a task made simple with the latches they had been retrofitted with. If anyone did a tag search, they'd see "me" here in this room, even if "Ocelli" was elsewhere.

Next, I restrained Ocelli. This involved copious amounts of wax—or changeling goo, as many ponies call it. Her legs and wings were bound, her muzzle bound shut with just enough of a gap to breathe, and her horn covered. I laid it on thick enough that I felt thoroughly drained by the end of it.

With that more immediate necessity out of the way, I turned to her PipBuck and the information it contained.

It was a matter of moments to get information on Ocelli herself. She had recorded her title as “Infiltration Operations, Intelligence”. Kind of a big deal. Good news: I now had top-level security clearance and a high-ranking disguise. Bad news: she was important enough to be both well-known and for her absence to be swiftly noticed.

Her PipBuck also had a detailed map of the entire Stable, and I studied it intently. Tracing back our route, I found the “Equipment Depot #1” where I had been given a PipBuck, and where Ocelli had mentioned our confiscated equipment. Tracing further back, I found “Simulation Chamber #1”, which from the layout, looked to hold around fifty pods. Three simulation chambers of similar size filled out the rest of that entire level of the Stable.

The level above that appeared almost entirely military, with barracks and armories. Above that was the entrance.

I quickly traced out an intended route, a plan formulating in my mind. Soon, there was only one final thing to do before leaving.

Looking down at Ocelli again, I hesitated. I felt so conflicted about what I had to do, but it needed doing. There was no way I was going to do what I needed on the tiny amount of love I had.

I pressed a button on the PipBuck now clasped to Ocelli’s leg. “I’m sorry.” Another press ended the brief recording, and I focused on the unpleasantness ahead. I leaned in close, and pulled.

Ocelli twitched, then jerked, moaning out as she instinctively tried to cling onto the love I tore from her, but her unconscious mind was unable to resist effectively. Soon, her moans turned frantic and fearful before devolving into weak and pitiful whimpers.

When I was done, I carefully tucked her into the bed, as if trying to make up for the nightmares I had inflicted upon her. I doubt it did much good.

The first step in escaping Serenity was, simply, escaping this one room. There had been a guard outside the room, which made walking out troublesome. I couldn’t leave as myself, and if I left as Ocelli, it might lead to a conversation where I had to act out a personality I had virtually no experience with. There were too many pitfalls there. I also couldn’t leave as some other changeling without raising even more questions.

The only other way in or out of the room was the ventilation, which was far too small for a changeling to fit through.

In our natural form, that is. There was a good reason I had needed Ocelli's love.

I gave a quick search around the room, and thankfully found exactly what I needed: a picture. There were a small collection of framed pictures, about a dozen in total, but there was one in particular that fit my needs. It showed Ocelli and a few other changelings, including a couple of soldiers, posing atop the half-constructed office building I had seen above. Each of them was grinning or waving at the camera. Ocelli's smile looked particularly smug and prim.

The ventilation grate was easy to pry open. With that done, I focused on pulling up my magic, digging deep into my reserves. Green flames blotted out the world for a moment, and when it returned, everything looked huge. The world had grown to gigantic proportions. Even the bound changeling beside me on the bed was a giant, her head larger than me in my entirety.

I had disguised as a raccoon, easily small enough to fit into the vent, and with dexterous little paws. The addition of a changeling horn sprouting from the racoon's head certainly resulted in an unusual look, but I was hoping this form wouldn't be seen at all.

Between my grasping paws and diminutive magic, I was able to haul Ocelli's PipBuck and the "borrowed" picture up atop the dresser and into the vent, pulling the grate shut behind myself. I scurried down the tiny passage, passing more grates along the way. Most of these opened into other quarters, and I saw that Ocelli's was unusual in belonging to a single changeling. The first room had six changelings, though only three beds if one counted the worn couch. The next held only four, three of which were sleeping in a pair of beds, while the fourth was typing on a terminal. The third held seven changelings, four of whom were sharing drinks and conversation, while the other three were being quite intimate and passionate in the bed nearby.

Every room had multiple beds and a good number of changelings, mostly sleeping. Assuming these rooms were even remotely representative of the hive as a whole, it seemed likely that the hive was hot-bunking. There might be even more changelings there than I had initially estimated.

After passing several more rooms and a crowded hallway, I found myself looking into a small cleaning closet. It was perfect.

I pried open the grate and climbed out, dropping to the floor. A quick tug of my magic unravelled my disguise, and I clamped the PipBuck to my leg once more. Then I brought out the picture, studying it. Specifically, I studied one of the soldiers, and their armor. It wasn't entirely unlike mine, but there were a few details I would need to address if I wanted to pass without notice. Guards had enough authority to get away with more than an average changeling would, while from what I had seen, were still common enough to be somewhat anonymous.

With at least a thousand changelings living here, I hopefully wouldn't need to imitate any specific changeling. I just needed to avoid standing out.

I revealed what parts of my armor fit with this hive's armor, which to my relief, was all but the hoof-boots and helm. With those in place, I focused, taking my time with a particularly difficult change.

Assuming new forms is easy. Adding artificial accessories, like a hat or dress, was more complex. Adding detailed, intricate, and relatively bulky accessories, such as several pieces of armor, was particularly complex and difficult—and just to add insult to it all, it would be almost worthless as armor, though I at least had good cause to expect that detail to not matter.

A minute later, I had perfected the change. My armor looked spot-on for that of the soldiers in the picture. My appearance had been minutely altered to the point where I no longer looked like myself, without specifically imitating any particular individual. Nodding in satisfaction, I tucked the picture behind one of the racks of cleaning supplies, turned to the door, and stepped out.

I kept my mannerisms completely casual as I stepped out into the busy hallway. There was no hesitation or looking around. I simply stepped out, shut the door behind me, and walked down the hallway as if there was nothing unusual about it.

I understand the psychology behind it, but it's always amusing to me how readily people will accept something as being completely normal if you simply act as if it's normal.

I walked steadily through the crowd, my eyes watching my way through the hall without ever engaging with anything. Noling paid any attention to

me as I walked along. I was just one more anonymous face in the crowd. Adrenaline continued to tug at my nerves as I followed the route I had memorized.

I had spent years as an Infiltrator, passing myself off as a pony. I had been ready to undertake great personal risk in the service of my hive. I had even daydreamed of infiltrating one of the ministry hubs, or even Canterlot Castle, but in all that time, I had never imagined I would ever be infiltrating a changeling hive. Even the most experienced and capable Infiltrators might hesitate at such a task, full of danger and difficulty. The successful infiltration of a changeling hive was like a ghost story, some fanciful tale of suspense told to eager-faced young Infiltrators. Actually doing so was the stuff of legends; while such things would obviously be cloaked in secrecy, I knew of only three times a hive attempted to infiltrate another, and none of them ended well.

Yet there I was, right in the middle of some other hive.

I took a deep, steadyng breath just before rounding the final corner, and walked in through the door of the room I had woken up in just a few hours earlier.

I was able to get a much better view of it this time. There were a large number of pods, arranged in a pair of concentric circles, and brightly lit by the overhead lights. Most were full, and I saw a wide variety of ponies, as well as a small number of griffins and zebras.

Unlike the rest of the hive, this section was fairly quiet. There were only two changelings in the large chamber, having just pulled Sickle out of one of the pods and laid her onto a gurney. A moment of fear passed before I saw her side slowly moving. With the concern for her life alleviated for the moment, I was able to wonder how they had managed to cram her into that pod to begin with. It must have been an incredibly tight fit.

I quickly glanced around the rest of the room. Four more changelings lay in pods, as still as the ponies around them. An observation room was set above a set of doors in the back, overlooking the chamber, and a couple of changelings sat within it, watching instruments.

Among the dozens of ponies, Dusty and Starlight were easy to find, resting just beside Sickle's now-vacant pod.

The changelings around Sickle finally noticed me when I was only a few

steps away from them. The closest raised a brow. "Is there something you need?"

"Is she still alive?" I asked, nodding my head toward Sickle. Though I knew the answer already, it was a good lead-in.

"Sedated, but alive for the moment," the other changeling replied. "We're just getting her completely disconnected and ready to move first."

"Ah, good," I said. "Ocelli wants her kept alive just a little longer. She said to keep her sedated, but lightly enough that she can be woken up for questioning."

The changeling sighed, but nodded. "Great. Yeah, we'll put her in one of the holding rooms. When will Ocelli be getting here?"

"She said to tell you she's occupied for the moment, but will be here at nine. Will that be long enough for the pony to be regaining consciousness?"

She checked her PipBuck for the time; that was just forty five minutes away. "We might need to administer a stimulant when Ocelli gets here. Did she want anything else?"

"That was all."

"Very well. The pony will be ready for her." She gave a smirk. "Just tell her to not take too long getting to us. This pony was violent and destructive in the sim, even after we cranked up the pacification controls. I'd hate to see what she's like unrestricted."

"Just make sure she's restrained," I said. "I'll go inform Ocelli."

She nodded, returning to securing Sickle to the gurney, and I turned and left.

So far, so good. Sickle wasn't in immediate danger, and I had forty-five minutes, maybe a bit more, before the changelings in Simulation Chamber #1 started wondering what was up.

On to phase two. I consulted Ocelli's PipBuck as I made my way back to the equipment depot.

The last few steps involved passing a pair of guards. My heart hammered as I approached the most likely point of failure in my plans, but forced myself to keep a perfectly neutral expression.

I passed by without even a glance from them. I was just another anonymous soldier, one of the crowd.

I approached the first changeling I saw inside the depot, a technician

working over a banged-up and half-disassembled PipBuck. "Excuse me."

She looked up. "Hmm? What?"

"Ocelli sent me," I said, banking once more on the influence of her name. "I'm to retrieve the equipment from those ponies we caught. Is it all here?"

"She wants their gear?" she asked, her head tilting a fraction. "What for?"

"Heck if I know," I said with a wry smirk. "Probably looking for intel. Maybe it's something to do with the new 'ling."

"Yeah, what's up with that?" she said, resting her forelegs on the table on either side of the PipBuck. "They caught some changeling from another hive sneaking in here, and now she's just chilling here? There's some other hive out there?"

"All I know is that the queen has invited her into the hive," I said, catching the tiny flinch the other changeling gave. "Though I think Ocelli's keeping a close eye on her. Also sounds like her whole hive died off because they were too incompetent to feed themselves."

She gave a little snort. "Yeah, maybe."

"The equipment?"

"Oh, right." She gestured over her shoulder. "The two PipBucks are here. The rest of it is still in the back. It's all inventoried and awaiting inspection. Row eight, section B, um... I forgot which shelf."

She raised her own PipBuck to check, but I casually waved it off. "If that pink pony's armor is there, it'll be easy to find. Speaking of, do you have any carts or the like for hauling stuff? I don't think I could even carry that armor if it's as heavy as it looked."

"Yeah, got a set of carts and pallet jacks in the back. If you need someling to run the forklift, I can do that."

"The cart should do fine," I said, and after retrieving the pair of confiscated PipBucks, I headed back.

The equipment depot was impressive. Rows upon rows of shelves, stocked with all manner of tools, materials, electronics, armor, and other equipment. One entire row was filled with containers marked "bottle caps". It was an enticing hoard of wealth, but I resisted the urge to start picking out items to pilfer. For the moment, I needed to focus on the mission.

I made my way through the empty aisles to the rear of the depot. The carts the technician had mentioned were small things, good for fitting down

hallways, but they wouldn't carry very much. Fortunately, they also could hitch together. I connected a pair together, then hitched myself up to the first, guiding the pair back to row eight.

Sickle's armor made it easy to find our gear, laid out in a haphazard jumble across an entire shelf. Aside from the PipBucks I had already retrieved, everything was there, including weapons. Labels had been attached to almost every item, probably for inventory purposes, and like items were bundled together in bags and boxes.

I started transferring items over to the carts. It took only a couple of minutes. Sickle's armor was the hardest, weighing easily more than I did.

I hesitated as I picked up my holstered pistol, its suppressor detached and set beside it. It presented additional options and more flexibility, but there was no chance such a thing would not be read as a hostile act. Even considering the use of it might be enough for a PipBuck to decide I have hostile intent.

Reluctantly, I tucked the weapon, the suppressor, and the magazines of subsonic ammo into the lead cart. Plans could change, but for now, it wasn't an option. If it became an option, it would only take a few seconds to ready. That would have to do.

Once everything was in the carts, I pulled out a pair of blankets, draping them over the top to conceal the contents. I hitched myself up to the lead cart again, then paused to review the map on Ocelli's PipBuck. I analyzed the layout, picking out a route, and set off again.

As I reached the front of the depot, I halted just out of sight of the technicians. Fortunately, being essentially a warehouse, there were few changelings in this area. It gave me the opportunity to peek out, my magic reaching out to snag another PipBuck from the shelves behind the technicians. Another shelf held dozens of broadcasters, and four of them floated away in my magic.

Once I had them all tucked away in the cart, I continued on. The technician I had spoken with hardly looked up from the PipBuck she was working on.

I made my way out into the hall, changelings stepping aside to make way for my carts. I continued on, just another cog in the giant social machine. I was as good as invisible.

At least, I was as good as invisible until someone wondered where Ocelli was, or she woke up and freed herself. Neither gave me much time.

I returned to the simulator chambers through a back passage, the same way I had been wheeled out originally. I caught a questioning look from some random passer-by as I wheeled the carts down the back hall, but I didn't engage her by meeting her eyes, and she evidently didn't feel curious enough to impose upon a guard's business.

Sickle had been parked in the same room I had been held, strapped to a gurney that looked about ready to collapse under her weight. Another changeling, one of the ones who had been removing her from the pod, was standing beside the door, watching her. She looked curiously at me as I rolled the carts in. "What's all that?"

"Their equipment," I said. There wasn't much point in lying about that, especially if she decided to look. "Ocelli told me to bring it here."

She frowned. "Why?"

"I didn't ask," I said as I folded the blankets up again. "How's the pony?"

"Stable and sedated," she said. "Glamor had me stay to keep tabs on her in case she started to wake up. Apparently this pony has a bad combination of high body mass and high resistance that makes drug effectiveness unpredictable."

"I think I heard something about that," I said as I turned to look over Sickle. She looked healthy enough, though now that I looked closer, something caught my eyes. While she was heavily scarred all over, there seemed to be several fresh marks, all thin, straight, and pink. "Are those incisions?"

"Hmm?" The other changeling stepped forward, peering at Sickle before realizing what I was talking about. "Oh, yeah, those. The autodoc pulled about half a pound of metal out of her when we were getting her ready for the pods. Was a pain in the flank getting her in there, too. What a waste of time."

"Couldn't have known that at the time," I said, then leaned in closer. I lifted a hoof, pointing at her belly, just below the crook of a hind-leg. "Uh, what's this?"

"What's what?" she asked, leaning in past me as I made way. A moment later, my stunning bolt struck the back of her head. My magic wrapped around her body, halting her fall. With a quick heft, I tucked her into the

rear cart, draping a blanket over her unconscious form.

Phase three was on. Unfortunately, it was where the risk of failure started to skyrocket.

I returned to the lead cart and the several bags of confiscated drugs, separated by type. It made finding Sickle's collection of Dash inhalers quick and easy. Retrieving one, I returned to Sickle, sticking the inhaler nozzle into her open mouth and nudging her jaws shut around it. I waited until she started to inhale her next breath and squeezed, the inhaler hissing as it discharged its load.

Sickle immediately twitched, and I started gently stroking a hoof along her scraggly mane as her breathing grew deeper. A few moments later she produced a groan, ears flicking, and finally, her eyes fluttered open, looking blearily up at me and blinking as she tried to focus.

"I'm Whisper," I said quietly, continuing to soothingly stroke her.

"Whisper," she murmured, still blinking, and tried to lift her head only to be stopped by the straps. Her legs jerked, tugging against the bindings that held her down. "What the—"

"Relax," I said, magic lighting up the buckle of the closest strap. "We've been captured by a changeling hive. I'm busting us out."

She laid her head back down, blinking up at me for a moment. "We... that... wow, that was one fucked-up trip."

Once I'd undone enough straps, she pulled free, pushing herself up to sit on the gurney despite its whines of protest. "Ugh," she said, face scrunching up and sticking out her tongue. "I feel like I haven't had anything to drink since—"

She halted, a hoof touching her chest. Her expression quickly hardened as she bared her teeth. "Where the fuck is my—"

As she turned, she halted again, staring at the heavy, muzzled helm floating before her in my magic. She stared in surprise for a moment before breaking out in a toothy grin, reaching up to take the helm. "I knew you were a smart bug."

"Yeah, well you're not going to like the next part," I said. "You can't hurt anyling on the way out."

She gave a snort, setting down the helmet as she started pulling out pieces of her armor. "Uh, no, I'm pretty sure I can hurt them plenty."

"There are well over a thousand changelings here," I said. "They have power armor, magical energy weapons, and extensive combat training, while we're trapped in a Stable with a single way out. If we get into a fight, we all die."

"I'm still for killing every motherfucker here," Sickle said as she slid the massive breastplate over her head and settled it into place. "Guess I'll have to settle with just killing any dumb cunts that get in our way. This ain't your hive, right?"

"No killing!" I raised my leg, with its attached PipBuck. "Every changeling in this hive has one of these, and that means they can detect hostile intent. If we go out there with the intent of hurting any changeling, they'll all know it, soldiers show up, and we're back to us all dying."

"What if I only hurt them a *little*?"

"No!" I said. "I might need you to hold and subdue someling until I can stun them. It seems I can get away with that without being deemed hostile. But it's *vital* that we don't hurt anyling!"

Sickle considered that for a moment before weighing in again. "Okay, seriously, 'anyling' is about the dumbest word I've ever heard."

"Sickle!"

"Okay! I won't kill any of the fuckstains that kidnapped us, fucked around with our heads, and will probably try to kill us on our way out." She shoved her helmet into place before looking back to me. "Does it count if I accidentally kill them? Like, holding the little bugs a bit too hard and squishing them?"

"I'm going to assume that would be perceived as hostile," I dryly replied.

"Figures," she snorted, and let out a tired groan. "Fine, we'll do it your way. The fuck do we do now?"

"You stay here for a moment while I scout ahead. If anyling comes in, grab them, make sure they don't alert anyling else, but *don't kill them!* I'll stun them when I get back."

"Yeah, fine," she said, turning to root through the carts, and pulling out a bottle. "Don't be too long."

I frowned. To tell the truth, I didn't think there was any chance of getting her to not show up as hostile, but I didn't want to risk myself showing up as hostile by way of permitting the use of lethal force. I quickly shook

off the thought. "I'll be right back."

I slipped out, making my way back to the main chamber with its dozens of suspended animation pods. Looking in, I could see one changeling, the other one I had spoken with before, going around the various pods, a clipboard floating in her magic. I backed out, turning to the stairs nearby. As I expected, it led up into the control room overlooking the chamber. There were two changelings there, monitoring the various dials and terminal screens. One looked up from the console in front of her. "Need something?"

At least a cover story was easy to come by. "I was just wondering where you have the pony Ocelli wanted."

"Holding room three," she replied immediately. "Anything else?"

"No, that will do," I said, nodding. "Thank you."

I turned and returned down the stairs, quickly assembling a plan of attack. Engaging more than one at a time would be extremely risky, so it quickly became a matter of isolating them. The first one was easy.

I returned to the main chamber and approached the lone changeling there. "Excuse me."

She turned, looking back with a questioning expression. "Yes...?"

"Ocelli wishes to speak with you about that pink pony," I said, inclining my head back towards the rear door of the room.

"Oh! She's here already? We weren't expecting her for another twenty minutes or so."

"I guess her business concluded early," I said with a shrug. "Whatever the reason, she's here now and wants to speak with you."

"I see," she said with a frown, then lifted her clipboard. "If she'll give me about five minutes, I'll be done with my checks, and I can see her."

"It sounded urgent," I said, and she hesitated for a moment before sighing and setting down the clipboard.

"Fine," she grumbled, and turned to walk. "What's so important that it can't wait five minutes?"

"I didn't ask."

We returned through the back way, making our way to the holding room where "Ocelli" was waiting. The changeling I was following paused by the door, wiping away her frustrated expression, and gripped the handle of the door in her magic.

As the door opened, my stunning bolt struck, and she sank into my magic. Sickle stood beside the door, her head tilted as she watched me drag the other changeling in. "No killing, huh?"

"She's unconscious and uninjured, just like the other one in the cart." I stashed the new changeling beside the previous, then turned back to Sickle. "Two more, then we can get Starlight and Dusty."

Sickle grunted and nodded, and I slipped out again.

While my tactic worked well the first time, it ran into a snag this time.

"Sure," the changeling I spoke to in the observation room said, her gaze still playing over the readouts. "Give me a minute to get one of the immersion teams out so they can keep an eye on my station."

"Is that necessary?" I asked. "It'll only be a couple minutes."

"Yeah, it's been the rule in here since what happened last year. Always have to have two 'lings watching the systems at all times."

"Ah," I said, quickly throwing together a backup plan. "You know what? You stay here. I doubt Ocelli would want to interrupt your work. We'll be right back."

"It wouldn't be any trouble," she said, but I shook my head.

"No, don't worry. It'll only be a moment."

She looked questioningly at me, but didn't say anything and remained at her station. She was still sitting there when I returned a couple of minutes later, and looked up to greet me only to receive a bolt of magic to the face.

The second changeling looked over, both at the sharp grunt from her companion and the explosive clash of metal. She had only an instant to process the scene, jerking back at the sight of the armored monstrosity charging her. There was a loud crash and a shout of pain, then Sickle reared back and slammed the changeling down to the floor, pinning her under spiked shoes.

"Sickle!" I hissed as I scrambled over. "Don't hurt her!"

"She's alive," Sickle replied with a sneer. "I didn't even kill her a little."

The changeling's horn lit up, but Sickle's reflexes were quicker, and she delivered a painful swat to the glowing horn, disrupting the forming spell and eliciting another sharp cry.

I got in close. "I'm sorry about this," I said as my horn glowed. She started to cry out, perhaps for mercy, before falling unconscious.

A faint throb was starting to build in the back of my head. I shook it off. We quickly hauled the two unconscious changelings back to the holding room, then returned to the observation room. The controls for all the pods were there, and I had to figure out how to get Starlight and Dusty out.

If all else failed, I could just ask Sickle to do it, but I'd prefer a slightly more quiet way of opening the pods.

Fortunately, there was a set of operating manuals, giant three-ring binders worn with age, with all the instructions on the functions of the pods. The index quickly led me to the section dealing with emplacing or removing occupants, and I followed the instructions step by step. A red light came on over the two pods, accompanied by a loud buzzer that fell silent a second later.

As the system ran through the final preparations, I quickly scanned through the index, looking for anything that might help with the four changelings in those pods, which I assumed were the "immersion team" the other changeling had spoken of. I also assumed they were the "welcoming committee" inside the simulation, and if so, they could talk with the changelings outside the simulation, as well as disconnect themselves.

Which meant they were one casual call to an unresponsive "control" away from ruining my entire plan.

I found a lockdown command, and quickly enacted it. The lights over their pods turned to flashing red as I locked them shut. If I dug longer, I might find a more robust solution, perhaps even locking them in the simulation itself, but time had become a critical resource. There wasn't much traffic in and out of this chamber, but it would only take a single changeling showing up to start the situation deteriorating.

Starlight and Dusty's pods hissed open, and Sickle and I hurried down to retrieve them. She slashed through the leads connected to them, and we hauled them away to the holding room. Without sedatives, they woke as quickly as I had, groaning and jerking as consciousness quickly returned. Dusty's awakening was particularly violent, suddenly twisting around and lashing out, blindly slamming a hoof into the back of Sickle's head.

Sickle just chuckled. "Calm the fuck down, dumbass. You're being rescued."

"Rescued?" he blearily asked as we stepped into the holding room. "But..."

I was in my kitchen, how—”

“You were in some form of telepathic arcano-tech simulation,” I said, while Sickle set the pair of them down. “Short version, Serenity is a changeling hive, they captured us, and we’re in the middle of a breakout. It would really help if you both woke up.”

Starlight had managed to focus on me. “Whisper? Where did you...” Her ears pinned back. “You’re not Whisper.”

“I am, I’m just disguised.” I smiled. “Congratulations on picking out differences between two changelings, though. You’d be surprised how many ponies can’t do that.”

She was silent for a moment, slowly blinking at me. “...What?”

I shook my head. “Nothing important. Look, we need to move right now if we’re going to get out of here. I’ve got all our gear here. I need you to get your stuff and get ready to go, right now. Can you do that?”

Dusty wearily rose to his hooves, while Starlight continued to lie there, blinking and looking around. “But... what’s going on? And where are we? I just laid down on my couch for a nap, how did we—”

I placed my forehooves on either side of her head, holding her gently. “Starlight, that version of Serenity was all a lie. This is the real Serenity, and we’re in a lot of trouble. If we’re going to get out of here alive, we need to act right now. I promise I’ll explain everything once we’re out and safe, but we don’t have the time right now. Right now, I need you both focused on acting. Can you do that?”

She swallowed, her gaze dancing around, but she finally nodded and pushed herself up to her hooves.

“Good,” I said, taking a step back. “Your stuff is in the carts. Get any critical gear ready immediately. Those respirator masks? Keep them accessible; it was gas that got us on the way in. Everything else gets packed in bags and sorted through when we’re safe. I want to be moving in sixty seconds. Hurry.” Quick, concise, clear orders in a stressful situation; I felt a little like Dusty.

“Right,” Dusty said, staggering toward the cart before getting his balance, then quickly pulling out his bardings and weapons. Starlight was a little slower to get moving, but the sight of her Lancer motivated her into action. As they geared up, I started gathering my own equipment, while quickly

explaining our situation.

“Okay. We’re in the middle of a changeling hive established in a Stable. The guards are extremely well-equipped and trained, and there’s only one way in or out. If we’re lucky, we can hide you in the carts and get you out that way, but it’s going to be tricky. We might have to improvise along the way.”

Dusty slapped a magazine into his rifle and chambered a round. “So... this is Serenity?”

“Yeah, and we can do the whole ‘I told you so’ thing later,” I said. “We’ve got more problems. Number one? You’re not using that. We’re not killing anyling on the way out.”

“Avoid fighting if possible,” Dusty said, giving his rifle a final check before slinging it. “I’d say that’s standard escape and evasion, but I don’t think this situation is standard in any way.”

“Not ‘if possible’,” I clarified. “Period. We’re not going to hurt any changeling in Serenity.” Dusty’s head started to come around to voice some objection, but I cut him off. “And no, this isn’t a changeling thing or a hive thing or anything like that. It’s a PipBuck thing. Every single changeling in this hive has one. I assume you understand the difficulty that poses.”

He remained frozen for a moment, mouth hanging halfway open before recovering. “Oh, we are so fucked.”

“That was my appraisal as well,” I said, tucking the last of my electronics into my saddlebags, right alongside my pistol. “So we’re going out with the intent of *not* harming anyling, because we’re *not* hostile.”

“This is so weird,” Starlight murmured, while Dusty muttered to himself and returned to gathering his equipment.

I finished with my own belongings. My rifle was loaded and set alongside my bags, with a pair of spare magazines tucked inside the bags alongside the suppressor, having not even given myself the extra ten seconds or so it would take to attach it. I didn’t plan to use the weapon, but it wouldn’t fit in the bags. Maybe I could scare someling away from attacking us without actually shooting them?

“Okay, time’s up,” I said. “Everything else goes in bags. And keep those PipBucks powered off.” I pulled out one of the matrix disruption grenades, one of the pair I had in my own bags, and pressed it into Dusty’s hooves.

"If things start to deteriorate, trigger this. It'll kill any chance of stealth, but it'll also kill any active PipBucks and power armors around us. No E.F.S., no broadcasters."

"I'm familiar with these," Dusty said. "It'll probably kill Starlight's weapons, too."

Her ears perked up, forehooves tightening around her rifle. "Wait, we can't kill my Lancer!"

"It's only temporary," I said. "And hopefully we won't have to use it."

The last of our equipment disappeared into the bags, and I directed them into the carts, while Sickle ditched the pair of unconscious changelings hidden within the lead cart. The blankets came out again, and I draped them across the carts. "Okay. Be quiet and think happy, peaceful thoughts."

Sickle gave a discouraging snicker, but we had little choice. I hitched up the cart and set off, though slower than before.

Slower was something we couldn't afford, but the substantial extra weight was hindering progress. A little reluctantly, I asked, "Sickle, do you have any Buck on you?"

She snickered again, followed by rustling as she rooted through her containers. Several seconds later, the corner of the blanket flipped up to reveal a thick tablet resting on a spiked hoof. "Here."

I floated it over in my magic, tucking the blanket back in place, and downed the pill. Moments later, I grit my teeth and really put my shoulders into the harness, hauling it along at a brisk pace. Even pushing that hard, it didn't feel like I was straining myself, though I wonder now if that was from increased strength or altered perception. I found myself thinking I could probably plow through any guards that got in our way, and was already starting to smile at the thought before quickly wiping away those thoughts. Instead I reflected that taking a drug known for increasing aggression was probably not ideal, given my situation.

Soon we were making our way through crowded halls, and I put on my mask of bored neutrality. Inwardly, I was growing increasingly worried. While the changelings made way for a guard hauling a pair of carts, it still slowed my progress. I nearly jumped each time a changeling went buzzing overhead, suddenly paranoid that they'd land on one of the carts, only to find its contents rather more soft and squishy than they should be.

My heart was pounding furiously when we reached the freight elevator, and I found myself suppressing trembles as the adrenaline urged me into action. My body screamed at my attempts to still it, clamoring for action, while I did my best to appear calm. I also resisted the urge to look back; I feared that my companions might fidget, drawing attention, but there wasn't anything I could do about it either way. I stayed stock still for the agonizing wait.

A deep thump sounded from the elevator, and the hydraulic doors hissed open. I gave a quick sigh of relief and pulled the carts in, and quickly shut the doors. We were alone as I pressed the button that sent the lift up.

"We're on our way up to the entry level," I said as I lined the carts up, ready to move. "The lift goes to a freight-handling area. After that are security positions, the Stable door, and some underground storage rooms with ramps up to the surface. If we're found out, trigger the grenade and run for the exit."

In silence, I watched the needle of the elevator's dial make its way up to the '1' at the top, and the elevator thumped and rattled to a halt. The doors opened, and I walked out into a large room cluttered with a wide variety of equipment. A concerning amount of it was military. There were at least ten suits of heavily battered Enclave power armor stored there, one of which was being inspected by a pair of changelings. Dozens of magical energy weapons were stacked in a pile. Two semi-portable plasma-cannon turrets rested on pallets, with one bearing obvious fire damage. Containers of all sorts were stacked neatly, ranging from metal barrels to wooden crates, and even a small collection of metal-and-plastic containers with cloud locks.

Four more changelings were overseeing the loading of a heavy wagon, which was already carrying a literal ton of machinery. They paid me no attention as I walked by.

"...spark coils should be ready by the time the weather clears, but I'm not sure we have enough to get everything going."

"We'll make do. I'm more worried about raw materials. Parts we have, or can get easily. Structural steel is the limitation."

"Plenty of places to get more. It's just heavy..."

I wheeled our carts through the door and into the connecting hallway. It was a broad, reinforced strip with a high, vaulted ceiling. It was more like

a road tunnel than a Stable hall. You could drive a tank down it with room to spare.

At the end of the tunnel, I could see the Stable door, standing open and inviting.

Between it and us was the “entryway security” I had seen marked on the map, but it was not at all what I had imagined. They weren’t simple guard stations. It was a full-fledged fortress, with firing slits peering out from yards-thick concrete walls on either side of the tunnel. Two more plasma-cannon turrets sat by the sides of the fortifications, flanking the entrance to the tunnel, with cables leading back to wire into the Stable’s power. Further trench-like fighting positions crossed in front of the main positions, all overlooking the open kill-zone just inside the Stable door. I could see more than half a dozen soldiers in the forward fighting positions, all clad in black-painted Steel Ranger armor. I could only guess how many more were inside the fortifications themselves.

The adrenaline screamed at me to run as fast as I could. I instead focused on walking calmly, passing by the ominous, darkened firing slits, and overly conscious of my excessively hostile passenger. If one of those soldiers noticed that the ever-present red mark on their E.F.S. was actually moving, we were in trouble.

The soldiers remained standing and sitting by their fighting positions, talking with each other, and paying no mind to the cargo-hauling guard approaching them.

A klaxon blared out of nowhere. I jumped. The soldiers froze, their attention snapping up. An icy fear clawed at my gut, but they quickly spread out across their fighting positions, setting up and facing the entrance. Moments later a buzzer sounded, and a spinning light lit up above the giant Stable door.

I lurched and continued at a trot. I was passing the soldiers when they realized I was there.

“Hold up!” the closest one called out, her voice amplified and staticky. “You know the deal, lockdown means noling in or out.”

“I just need to deliver this!” I called back, picking up the pace. With a tortured shriek of metal, the door started to move, slow and ominous.

“I don’t care, rules are rules.” When I didn’t stop immediately, she broke

into a trot after me, her armored hooves smacking loudly on the concrete floor. It would take only an instant to use the heavy weapons at her side. “Hey, get back here!”

“Okay, okay,” I said, slowing my pace, and she slowed to a casual walk. “Dusty, you’re up.”

“Huh?”

Past the sound of her confusion, I heard the click of the matrix disruption grenade arming. A moment later, the edge of the blanket lifted, and the grenade clattered noisily to the ground.

“What the—”

A soft thump preceded the sharp discharge of the grenade, and all chaos broke loose. My vision was immediately filled with a flash of insanity across my E.F.S. as Ocelli’s PipBuck was overwhelmed, only to die an instant later. It felt like someone had smacked me in the horn. Even as I staggered from that, I was already pulling at the cart straps and shouting. “Run!”

My vision cleared to a scene of partial darkness and flying sparks. Several of the overhead lights had exploded with the discharge. The glowing lights of the plasma-cannon turrets were fading, and the soldier was frozen like a statue, teetering forward off-balance until she crashed face-first to the ground.

Sickle exploded out of the lead cart with a roar, spiked hooves clattering and scraping the concrete as she quickly looked for targets. I heard Dusty shout from behind her. “Go! That way!”

I’d just gotten the straps undone when Dusty came galloping past me, followed closely by Starlight. I grabbed my belongings in my magic and took off in the same direction, racing toward the spinning orange light, and Sickle growled and galloped after me.

I glanced back; I could see changelings stepping out of the fortifications. Weapons floated in their magic. I turned back and put everything into running, but no shots came.

The door was halfway shut as we reached it. Dusty and Starlight were out first, and I leaped out after them, emerging into a dimly-lit warehouse-like space with similar all-concrete construction. Sickle caught the edge of the door and tumbled, crashing to the ground, but safe.

I looked back past the steadily closing door. A few changeling soldiers

faced our way, still back by the fortifications. One was looking at her weapon, while others were quickly swapping out spark packs.

I reached into my pack with my magic, drawing out the second matrix disruption grenade. I only had a few seconds before the door would be fully shut. I armed it, dropping it just inside, and stepped back. The door had barely shut when the pulse went off, followed by a loud whine of machinery winding down. The external control panel let out a loud squawk, its lights flickering before going dark. The lights ringing the door flickered, all but one going out.

Panting, I stepped back, staring up at the monumental fortified door that we were safely on the outside of. Then I registered the numbers emblazoned across it: “112”.

I blinked, my ears lying flat. “What? That’s not... there are only...”

“Whisper!” Dusty called out, grabbing my shoulder with a hoof. “Come on, we’re not—”

Suddenly the hoof was gone. I was already turning to face him, which gave me just enough time to see his head snap around before his rifle blared. I cringed back, ears ringing and vision dazzled. By the time I recovered my balance and got a look in the direction he had fired, I saw a dark form scurrying behind a small storage container. An armored changeling lay crumpled on the ground beside it.

“Don’t!” I shouted, leaping to Dusty’s side. “No killing!”

“The situation’s changed!” Dusty replied, keeping his rifle leveled as he jerked a hoof to the side. “Move!”

“Damnit!” I slipped behind him and galloped past rows of pallets, loaded with machinery and scrap metal. There was no point in arguing it now; we were outside of the Stable proper, and there was no way that these changelings’ PipBucks hadn’t decided we were entirely hostile.

A flash of movement ahead drew my attention, and I swung my rifle around in my magic to aim on a surprised and unarmed changeling. “Don’t move!”

She replied by instead throwing herself back behind the container she had stepped out from behind, and while the action was technically contrary to my command, I didn’t object. Starlight and Dusty were already passing me, and I picked up the pace, with Sickle close on my heels.

We rushed past equipment and containers. The chamber split in two directions. A quick glance down one way revealed about a dozen changelings, scurrying about. I saw no weapons, but we ran the other way.

Two changelings in stained coveralls dove behind a partially loaded sky wagon as we galloped by. An armored changeling trotted around the corner ahead of us. Plasma and muzzle-flashes lit the dim space for an instant. Dusty tumbled to the ground. The armored changeling staggered back, her rifle swinging away.

I brought my rifle around, snapping off several shots; my light rifle sounded like a balefire bomb in the bare-concrete chamber, and the flash from the muzzle nearly blinded me. When I stopped firing, the changeling was on the ground, her hooves kicking out.

Dusty had rolled to his belly and snapped off a couple more rounds into the changeling. Her legs kicked again and went still.

Dusty leaped to his hooves, and we were galloping again. At some point, I noticed smoke wafting from Dusty's chest, but I didn't have the time or focus to examine it. My head was pounding, and the violent crashing of Sickle's spiked hooves on the concrete floor sounded muted in my ears.

A couple more changelings galloped for safety, their abandoned containers of packaged food fallen and spilled across the floor. We leaped over the spilled goods and continued on, passing a half-laden cart and running by a line of motorwagons.

We were halfway past when Starlight shouted out. "Wait!"

I skittered to a halt, looking back. Starlight had abruptly veered off, leaping up to the window of one of the motorwagons and nimbly sliding into it.

It was then that I recognized that these weren't some ancient, rusted-out hulks. They looked like the ones we had seen in the Trotsen convoy: armored up, worn from regular use, and by all appearances, fully operational.

We turned as one and scrambled after her. The vehicle she had claimed was a rust-colored amalgamation of armor plates, angular and sloping from the thick prow in the front to the heavy machine gun mounted to the roof. My wings flicked as I leaped up over the short rear-end, dropping into the narrow open space behind the gun that had once served as an open cargo bed, and which was now surrounded by armor plates sloping back from the roof. I was just perching my forehooves on the roof beside the gun when

Sickle's spiked hoof landed on my back, flattening me into the tiny back seat. The whole vehicle rocked violently as she settled in, occupying most of that rear space.

Twisting around to make room—and to avoid being crushed under her—I could barely catch the wild grin on her face. “Yeah! Let’s fucking do this!”

Dusty was hauling himself in through the window beside Starlight, in the row of full-sized seats in front of me. “How quick can—”

He was cut off as the vehicle roared to life, lurching forward and throwing me back into Sickle's chest. My helmet slammed into her breastplate with a loud crack, followed by a tremendous slam that threw me sideways into the armored wall of the vehicle. I couldn't tell what was going on outside; I was in a violently shaking can that roared and creaked and banged as it threw me about.

Starlight blurted out some unintelligible curse, and the vehicle lurched forward again, swerving wildly as I scrambled to brace myself. Metal scraped violently on concrete. Sickle roared with laughter.

Grabbing the back of the front seats, I hauled myself up. Dusty was twisting around to brace himself in the passenger seat, while Starlight gripped the motorwagon's steering wheel. Past them was the narrow front window, showing me a thin slice of the outside world just before Starlight jerked the wheel, veering around a concrete pillar. The engine roared, and I clung to the seat before me as she accelerated down the length of the large room. Between the forces throwing me around and the very restricted view, I was just barely able to see the upcoming offshoot.

“Starlight!” I shouted, pointing a hoof. “Turn right!”

The vehicle lurched, pitching forward with a loud squeal and pressing me against the front seats. Then the engine roared again, throwing me back into the rear seats before the whole world spun again, slamming me into the side of the vehicle, and then back against my seat as the whole vehicle pitched back.

An instant later, the reverberating echo of the spark-motor cut off as we emerged from the tunnel. The world brightened just in time to twist all around, and for an instant, I found myself floating weightless toward the ceiling.

Gravity reasserted itself with a tremendous crash and a sudden spray

of dampness. I landed heavily on the floor, wedged tightly between the two rows of seats, and chose to simply brace myself in place there. I was rewarded for my decision a moment later when the vehicle swerved and skidded sideways before slamming sideways into something with a deep, hollow drumbeat of metal on metal.

Dusty swore from somewhere up front. "Goddesses damnit, Star! Don't kill us!"

"Hey, I've never driven before!" she snapped back as the engine roared again. "It's a lot harder than it looks."

Sickle was still laughing.

I took the opportunity to scramble up and get into a seat properly. We were outside, and the spray of moisture wasn't blood as my mind was wanting to insist it must be, but the light rain coming in through the windows. The half-built office building was beside us, with a ramp leading down into the underground storage and parking area. On the other side was one of the abandoned bulldozers, right up against the window after our collision.

The wheels of the motorwagon spun in the mud, slipping uselessly for a second before starting to catch, and the whole vehicle shuddered and took off again. I focused on just staying seated, while we quickly tore out past several temporary structures.

Dusty grunted from the seat beside Starlight, grabbing a flying strap, then quickly pointed out the front window. "No, go for the high-ground! The low-ground's all mud, we'll bog down!"

The vehicle swerved again as Starlight oversteered, wavering a few times before settling on the correct course.

"And calm down," Dusty grunted, wincing as he pulled the strap across his chest.

I leaned forward. I could still see the edges of where the shot had impacted, with the outer layer of the barding scorched away to reveal warped metal. "Are you okay?"

He grunted and nodded, though I saw the tightness in his jaw. "Non-critical. The plate stopped it, just singed me pretty good." He finally got the strap in place and called back. "Sickle! If you're going to be on the gun, keep an eye out!"

"Yeah, no shit! Shut the fuck up and let me enjoy the ride!"

Dusty grumbled and sat back, hauling his rifle up to rest beside him. I suddenly realized I had lost track of my own; a quick search found it in the bed of the cargo area, between Sickle's hooves, and I floated it back to me.

"What about you?" Dusty asked as I set my rifle on the seat beside me. "You were going good, then you just froze up at the door."

My ears pinned back. "That was..." I quickly shook my head, turning to the other window to look back. "It's nothing."

There was a moment of silence from Dusty before he gave a quiet, "Umm..."

"It's just that the door said that was Stable 112, but the last Stable that Stable-Tec finished was 101. Stables aren't subtle things, and my hive had enough espionage on Stable-Tec to steal a Stable door and tons of equipment. They couldn't have made more without us knowing!" I frowned, glaring out the window as I tried to ignore the constant spray of rain. "Though I'm sure they were constructing more, even if 101 was the last one they had finished. Where else would we have gotten Stable parts from? And if this group had the same kind of resources my hive did... maybe they finished an incomplete Stable. Maybe their hive was the original Serenity, and this was a collab with Stable-Tec. Maybe like a... a licensed Stable?"

A thump sounded through the roof. "Holy fuck," Sickle called out past the roar of wind and motor. "We just snuck and fought our way through a hive-Stable full of a fuckton of changelings and tore out of there in a fucking armored motorwagon, and you're whining that the place had the wrong fucking *number*? Are you fucking serious?"

"Hey!" I shouted up at her. "Factual information is an extremely valuable resource, and—"

"Enough!" Dusty shouted. "Focus. We're not out of this yet."

I went quiet, though I grumbled under my breath. Of course Sickle wouldn't appreciate why that detail was so significant.

"That door," Dusty said, glancing back my way. "How long do you think you knocked it out for?"

I shrugged, glaring out the window. "Dunno. They could have it working again in a few minutes if they're lucky and know what they're doing. Maybe a few hours if we're lucky and they're incompetent."

"Well, that's a lot better than nothing," Dusty said with a slow nod. "Good thinking."

I grunted again.

It was less than two minutes later when the motorwagon skidded to a halt beside our partially concealed wagon. Dusty was already unstrapping by the time we stopped. "Everyone out! Get everything transferred over to the motorwagon. Quick!"

The vehicle lurched as Sickle leaped out of the back, landing with a great splash of mud, and I climbed out through the space she had vacated, taking a moment to strip away my generic-changeling-soldier guise. We quickly got to work, hauling equipment and dumping it into the cargo area of the motorwagon. After just a couple trips, Sickle got sidetracked, slowly walking around with a sway to her hips, a big grin plastered across her face.

Dusty noticed. "Sickle, what—"

"My ass feels *amazing*," Sickle declared, which drew a snort from Starlight.

Dusty merely paused, cocking his head with a questioning look. "...Are you high already?"

"Nah, this ain't drugs. I know drugs." Sickle slowly strutted along, which I can assure you is some of the most bizarre imagery I have ever encountered. "This just feels *good*. Ever since that mine went off under me, walking felt like I was getting fucked in the ass with a barbed-wire dildo."

Starlight winced. "Ugh. Thanks for *that* charming imagery. Fuck."

"You never said anything about that," Dusty said, and Sickle laughed.

"Well, yeah, 'cause I ain't some whiny little cunt." She paused, rolling a shoulder. "Oh, wow."

"One of the changelings tending you said they put you in an autodoc," I said while hauling several cases of ammunition between wagons. "Said it pulled about half a pound of metal out of you."

"Huh," Sickle said, twisting her head one way and the other, then stretching her back. "Mmm. Fuck me, I think I forgot what it feels like to not have a bunch of bullets rattling around in me. Ain't half bad."

"Good," Dusty said. "Then move your ass and help us get this stuff over... No, power armor last. We'll have to leave it behind if we don't have room."

"Ugh, fine," Sickle said, dumping the damaged power armor in the mud

and grabbing a water barrel. "Way to spoil the mood."

Though it was a tight fit, we got everything in, including the pair of ruined power armors. The last half of loading was spent with Dusty scanning the horizon behind us, peering out through the light rain for any sign of pursuit.

"That's all of it," Sickle said, shoving the power armor into place and climbing across it to sit behind the gun again. We'd made sure to have any cases and other solid items at the front of the cargo hold, protecting any loose equipment from being trampled by Sickle, and conveniently giving her a makeshift seat.

"Okay, mount up," Dusty said, hauling himself up to the passenger-side window; the lack of functioning doors was a bit of a hindrance, but the armor plates welded across the side of the vehicle rendered them useless.

Sickle snickered. "Mount *this*," she said, slapping a spiked hoof against her armored flank. We all ignored the comment.

I slid into the back seat, having gathered our collection of PipBucks. It was cramped, packed into the very middle of the vehicle, and the narrow windows beside me meant I had to either enter through the front seat and climb back, or enter through the cargo bed where Sickle stood. Fortunately, I had the small space to myself, which gave me enough room to lay out my equipment beside me.

As I was getting settled, Dusty looked back, then up at the roof. "Sickle, have you ever used a gun before?"

"Ain't like they're hard to use," she replied. "And before you say shit, I ain't fitting in there, so don't even fucking ask."

"You can have the gun if you're good with it," Dusty said firmly. "Otherwise, I want Whisper up there."

"Let her have it," I said, floating up Starlight's PipBuck. "I've got to get working on these before we can use them."

Dusty frowned, contemplating it for a moment before sliding back into his seat. "Fine, for now. If she doesn't cut it, though, you're swapping. Starlight, take us out, continue on southeast for now."

He had to point out the direction to her. "Sorry," she said as the vehicle accelerated. "I can't really tell southeast from west without my PipBuck." She cast a quick glance over her shoulder before turning back to where she

was going; the ride was already getting rough as we picked up speed. "It's not damaged, is it? It's fine, right?"

"It's fine," I said as I pulled out my portable terminal and cables, connecting the two devices. "But PipBucks have tags that let others locate them. I need to get into these and change those tags so they can't just follow us when we turn them on."

Not that I'd ever done so before, but Emerald had obviously managed, so it was possible. I simply had to work out how.

The vehicle rattled and rocked as it crossed a patch of rocky ground, then accelerated down the slope of the hill, jostling us again before hitting the flat ground below. I remained focused on my work, sheltering behind the front seat from the spray of rain splashing from the motorwagon's hood. I only glanced up on occasion, when the vehicle shook particularly violently from some minor dip or bump in the terrain. Even on the relatively flat ground, I could hear the creaking and groaning of the ancient vehicle, nearly hidden behind the deep thrum of the spark-powered motor and the cacophonous hammering of rain on bare metal.

Each time we hit a bump, I heard Dusty hiss softly under his breath. After a couple minutes, he finally called out. "Sickle? Keep a close watch out behind us. You're our eyes right now."

He settled back into his seat fiddling around with something. It wasn't until I heard him quietly hissing through his teeth again, despite the smooth ride, that my curiosity was piqued, and I poked my head up to see around the seat. He had opened up his bardings, and was in the process of slowly peeling it back from his chest. The flesh beneath it was pink and raw, with most of the coat singed away, and the fabric of his bardings clung to the wound.

"Holy shit," Starlight said, casting worried glances his way between looks back to where she was driving. "Do you need a healing potion?"

"No," Dusty said through grit teeth, and let out a groan of relief as he pulled the last of the bardings away. The wound was oozing. He retrieved a bottle of water, splashing it over his hooves. "We're low on potions. Save them for critical injuries. This is just a second degree burn. It'll be fine unless it gets infected. Whisper, do you still have that soap?"

I had kept one of the containers in my bags, as silly as it might seem, one

of those simple things I still held onto. I dug it out and passed it over. He quickly washed his hooves, then proceeded to carefully explore around the wound before gently cleaning the raw flesh. He managed to remain silent, though I could see the strain in his neck and jaw.

I sat back, returning to my own work. "...So I'm guessing I earned an 'I told you so'."

Dusty merely grunted at first. It was several more seconds before he replied. "You made your case. I made the call."

He returned to tending to himself. It seemed that was all he had to say on the subject.

The ensuing silence lasted until Starlight finally spoke up again. "So, speaking of... now that we're out of there, and we don't *seem* to have a whole army of shapeshifting bugs chasing us down, uh... think you can fill us in on what the *hell* just happened?"

So as we rolled across the rain-soaked Wasteland, I filled them in on everything they'd missed.

"Wait, Chrysalis?" Starlight said, the vehicle swerving a little as she looked back before straightening out again. "She was that evil old-world queen you were talking about, right? This queen named herself after *her*?"

"It sounded like all of their queens had done so," I said over the PipBuck screen; it was currently scrolling through data in a sort of debug mode while I double-checked my work.

"That's... that's like super bad, isn't it?"

I gave a quiet huff. "A changeling hive numbering in the thousands, with vast resources, advanced arms and armor, soldiers extensively trained in arcano-tech simulated environments, a stockpile of imprisoned ponies to feed their entire population, agents who have been secretly employing mercenaries and raiders, and a lot of equipment being moved in and out of their heavily fortified base. All led by a queen that was practically salivating over the opportunity to step forward and end 'the reign of ponies', and who has named herself after the most infamous pony-loathing changeling in all history." I snorted, pulling the cables from Starlight's PipBuck and holding it out. "Yeah. It's bad."

Starlight gently took her PipBuck. "Wonderful." Lacking the time to mount it on her leg, she set it beside the steering wheel, switching it over to

display the map.

I had hooked up the next PipBuck, ready to run the same process that I had just perfected on that first one, when I paused. “Actually, it’s even worse than that. Mind, I never met the first Chrysalis, but the impression I always got from others was that she was a selfish and sadistic megalomaniac. This Chrysalis didn’t seem that way. She spent time explaining and justifying her position. I don’t think she’s just driven by some simple lust for power or hatred of ponies. She presented good reasons to support whatever it is she’s going to do.”

“Good reasons?” Starlight said. “You don’t really think—”

“Hold up,” I said, raising a hoof, even though in hindsight Starlight wouldn’t see the gesture. “Don’t think for a second that her having good reasons means I agree with what she’s *doing*. I think her treatment of ponies is abhorrent, for one, and I don’t see that changing. But I’m still an Infiltrator, and that means I need to understand individuals I might find repugnant. I don’t have the luxury of simply dismissing their motivations as inherently flawed and unreasonable. This Chrysalis has some very good reasons supporting whatever it is she plans on doing, and that makes her hive considerably more dangerous.”

Dusty grunted as he finished strapping his bardings back on, covering up the thick bandage he had loosely packed over his wound. “What kind of reasons?”

“She blames ponies for everything that’s wrong in the world,” I said. “Ponies made the megaspells that turned Equestria into a balefire-blasted wasteland. Xenophobia still holds strong, even towards the zebras that are so much more similar to ponies than changelings are. Then you’ve got the pervasive violence and cruelty bred by the Wasteland. Warlords, slavers, and raiders, she said. Ponies that prey on other ponies, because the Wasteland isn’t cruel enough on its own. They’re fairly sound and convincing arguments, especially to a non-pony.”

Starlight snorted. “Yeah, okay, I hate raiders as much as anypony, but they ain’t exactly *normal*. Shit. And what the hell is she complaining about slavery? She’s got a bunch of ponies captive as... as food!”

“I imagine it’s easy to see a difference between slavery for economic gain and slavery for basic survival needs, especially when the slaves in question

belong to a group you already have cause to dislike. They could even make the argument that the ponies they've captured are probably a good deal healthier and happier than slaves out in the Wasteland."

"That's still fucked up," Starlight grumbled.

"I don't agree with her conclusions, either," I said. "But I recognize how the reasons behind it could be very convincing to others."

"You said this makes her more dangerous," Dusty said. "How so?"

"Not her," I corrected. "Her hive. If she took the time to explain all this to me, a newcomer to her hive that wasn't even fully trusted, then it's likely that many others in the hive had heard all those reasons. I don't think this hive is following a tyrant because she demands their unwavering loyalty. I think they're following an *idea*, and an idea is much harder to kill."

Dusty mulled that over for several seconds before slumping back in his seat. "Shit."

"So what do we do?" Starlight said.

She was answered with only the roar of wind whipping through the windows.

After a minute, Dusty finally spoke again. "We need to get away from here. They know who we are, and even with PipBucks, I doubt we'd be able to see them coming. As much as I hate to say it, I don't think we'll be safe anywhere around here. Maybe Trotsen is far enough away to be out of their reach." He looked up at the metal roof above him. "But I kind of doubt it. Maybe northern Equestria."

Starlight shot him a look. "Wait, you mean run away?"

He glumly nodded. "This is way too big for us to fight."

"On our own, maybe," Starlight said.

"And who else would we call on?" Dusty said, his voice rising. "Mareford has the most capable military force in the region, and they'd still be lucky to get past that entryway, not to mention they've got bounties out on our heads. Who else? Gemstone? Rust? We're talking a hoofful of semi-skilled fighters against an organized military force. They'd be slaughtered, assuming they haven't already infiltrated them. Hell, that's assuming it's even a stand-up fight! We don't even know who's already on their side!"

Starlight frowned, but said nothing.

"Look, I don't want to leave, either. Mareford is my home, but we're

running out of places we can go.”

“We can still go to Baltimare,” I said, looking up from the PipBuck. The second re-tagging was proceeding much more easily than the first, now that I knew what to do. “That’ll take some time. Maybe after that, we’ll have come up with a better plan.”

Dusty grunted. “It gets us out of the area for a while, at least. And yeah, still need to check up on that. Afraid this might complicate the search for your own hive-mates.” His expression shifted, hesitating before reluctantly adding, “Assuming these changelings aren’t their descendants.”

“Unlikely,” I said, as debug information flashed across the screen of the current PipBuck; the tag alteration was successful once again. “Not impossible, but there are many unlikely factors. This looks more like some other hive’s survival plan.”

“Still... this complicates things, especially if all your leads are in this region. If they’ve been scouring the Wasteland, they might have found any other C.L.T. facilities.”

I grimaced. “I know. But that doesn’t really change anything. I was already aware that I might be the last survivor of my hive. There was a chance I’d never find anything, anyway.” I pulled the cables, holding out the cleaned PipBuck to Dusty. “But we know there was one Cocoon site they hadn’t found. There still might be more.”

He looked at the PipBuck, sighed, and took it. “Baltimare.” He undid the flap in his barding covering his left leg, slipping the PipBuck in and securing it to his leg. He blinked a few times as the E.F.S. sparkled in his eyes, then settled into his chair again, slowly browsing through the device’s menus. “We never did deal with Big Gun.”

“We still can,” I said as I prepped the next PipBuck. “Just get me near Mareford, and I can take care of the rest.”

Dusty mulled that over for a long, silent moment. “How long would it take you?”

“Depends on the situation I find,” I said, eyes dancing across the screen. “Assuming he isn’t out of town, travel time plus six hours should give enough time and flexibility for almost any situation. Plus twelve would be almost decadent. Either way is a maximum; depending on the situation, it might be considerably quicker.”

He slowly nodded. "And you're sure you want to do it this way?"

I paused, looking up from my screen. "I would prefer a non-violent solution, but given all the factors involved, I believe killing Big Gun is the best option we have."

"Even over doing nothing?"

*"Especially* over doing nothing."

Dusty looked at me intently. Eventually he nodded once more. "Okay. We'll get you to Mareford."

I nodded as well, returned to my work, and started to plan.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

# The Brief Mercenary Life of Lemon Tart

Lemon Tart arrived at Mareford in the late afternoon. A large caravan was just arriving, and he fell in behind them, following them into the town. The Militia guards gave him only a cursory look. The light yellow unicorn carried no weapons and wore no barding, carrying only some worn but sturdy bags and a thin cloak. They waved him through, continuing their inspection of the caravan.

Mareford was busy, as was expected. The day was steadily making its way towards night, and ponies were all about, finishing up their business for the day. It was a lively place.

Lemon Tart wound his way through the thin crowd of ponies as he navigated old, half-remembered streets. Patched-up buildings passed on either side as he made his way further into town, until he finally reached his destination: a small restaurant, just across from the town hall.

With an eager smile, he approached the owner. A minute later he was counting out caps to the kind stallion, while the cook started pulling out ingredients.

As the grill started to sizzle, Lemon Tart kicked back at one of the rickety tables out front, popping the top of an ancient Sparkle-Cola and taking a long swig.

It was a nice enough place. Ponies passed by on the street, and Lemon Tart watched them going about their business. There was an elderly couple, carrying bags freshly loaded with food. Several younger ponies ran by, laughing and calling out to each other. A pair of armed ponies, mercenaries by the looks of them, stepped out from the town hall, glancing around before continuing on to the street.

Lemon Tart took another sip, content to simply kick back, enjoy his drink, and watch.

When the meal came, he ate slow and casual, taking his time to enjoy it, while chatting with the restaurant owner.

It was just random, idle conversation, such as the weather...

"Oh, yes. Heck of a storm. The roof of my apartment finally gave in, flooded me and my wife's bedroom. It's okay, we've just been staying here at the restaurant while we get everything dried up."

...and business...

"Yeah, meat's always been a bit hard to come by, but I've got some friends in the caravans, made some good deals with traders. No, the real hard part is fresh veggies. Ever since the whole fiasco with Hayseed, it's been harder to get what I need. Big Gun paid a bunch of farmers to grow more cotton. Don't know why, guess it brings in more caps, but it means the food the others make goes for a premium, and the preserved stuff ponies dig up just doesn't cut it."

...and recent events.

"Such a horrible thing. Sure, you hear about ponies getting killed all the time, but first the water caravan, and now this? It's just a bit too close to home. Hell, half the town heard the explosion. Sandy, the new boss, she's been trying to get anypony who'll sign up, but I guess ponies ain't too eager to throw in with them after a massacre like that. And then there's the Rangers. Lots of good ponies died out there that day."

"It's a shame," Lemon Tart said, and took another drink.

Time passed, the sun slowly crept toward the horizon, and before long the food was all gone. Lemon Tart gave his thanks to the stallion, as well as a few extra caps in tip, and walked across the street. Another trio of mercenaries passed by as he made his way across the courtyard and up to the steps of town hall.

He opened the doors and stepped through, walking briskly through the wide lobby. A pony sitting at a desk looked up questioningly, but Lemon didn't look over. He simply carried on with his business, walking across the lobby with the sharp clip-clop of hooves on polished stone. The other pony returned to his work; obviously, the yellow stallion knew where he was going.

Lemon trotted up the marble stairs and turned, following the well-worn carpet leading to Big Gun's office.

He drew short. The doors were open, and he could hear the voice of a mare speaking with him. Instead of continuing on, Lemon turned and

claimed one of the chairs nearby. He could wait until Big Gun's business was concluded.

The conversation lasted only a couple of minutes before going silent, and moments later Lemon heard a door open and shut. He stood and walked over to the doors again.

Stepping through, he found Big Gun sitting behind his desk, typing on his terminal. He looked up as Lemon Tart stepped through the door.

"Mister Gun," Lemon said as he shut the doors behind him. "I brought something you need to see."

Big Gun sat back in his chair, frowning. "And you are?"

"Lemon Tart," he said, quickly approaching the desk. "I work for Sandy. A couple of us found something and... well, it's about Banger, sir."

Big Gun's expression tightened slightly, his brows lowering. "Is that so?"

"Yes sir," Lemon Tart said with a quick nod, and turned to his saddle bags. "We thought you should see it right away."

As Big Gun watched, Lemon Tart pulled out a PipBuck. His eyes widened in interest, ears perking up. "Where did this—"

His gaze rose to see the next item Lemon Tart had pulled from the bag: a pistol with attached suppressor, presented muzzle-first.

The sharp metallic clack of the pistol echoed in the room as Big Gun jerked, then dropped. His face smashed against the edge of the desk as he collapsed to the ground, emitting only a momentary, gasping gurgle as the breath left his lungs.

Lemon darted around the desk, pistol tracking Big Gun as he checked on the older stallion. The shot had been calmly made and well-placed, and Big Gun hadn't had the time to process the threat. The subsonic hollow-point bullet had struck just inside the left eye, shattering the orbit as it punched into the cavity of the skull. There was no exit wound. Despite the small twitches and the curling of Big Gun's leg, the pony was very dead.

Tucking the pistol away again, Lemon grabbed Big Gun's body in his magic, sliding the limp pony under the desk where it would be better hidden. Blood seeped from the wound, but he laid the body face-up to keep it from all draining out. Then he stepped back.

With a flash of green flame, Lemon Tart ceased to exist.

I was now Big Gun; mayor, industrial leader, and back-room schemer.

I hunted down and snatched up the spent shell casing, tossing it into the open bag, then shed my cloak and tucked it in as well. Next, I returned to the desk. Pulling out a cable, I connected Emerald's PipBuck to the terminal, then slid the PipBuck out of sight. To any pony entering the room, there would be nothing out-of-place. Just me, Big Gun, typing away at my terminal.

The transfer was done in moments, and I loaded up the text editor I had prepared, sending it on a search through the files for any mention of a small set of words. Banger, raider, water caravan, Quicksilver, Silverline, and a few others. In-depth analysis would have to wait, as time was critical here, but I needed to know if the information we wanted was here.

Nothing leaped out as an obvious smoking gun. The only mention of Banger was a week before the water caravan was hit, but that was simply a list of personnel assigned to the caravan rather than anything incriminating. Silverline was mentioned only twice. The first was simply listing her and Quicksilver as survivors of the water caravan massacre. The second was a brief commentary from two weeks after her return in what seemed to be a personal planner crossed with a diary.

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*Silverline continues speaking out re: caravan raid.  
Loud, no support. Ignore.*

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Hardly incriminating. A simple tweak would improve that. I skimmed through a few more entries to get a brief understanding of his typing style, then returned to the entry in question.

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*Silverline continues speaking out re: caravan raid.  
No evidence, but loud. Ponies getting curious. Need  
silence. Send WR to visit daughter?*

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I saved the file again, and left it up on the screen, scrolled to the current day. Hopefully anypony investigating would be curious enough to look into it, perhaps to find any suggestion of who might have killed him.

Yeah, okay, as far as planting evidence goes, it was pretty pathetic. I was working with what I had, and I didn't have time to do anything more

thorough. If it convinced anypony, that would be a nice side benefit, but it wasn't why I was here.

I tucked everything into my saddlebags and pushed Big Gun's chair up to the desk, better hiding the body tucked beneath it. With that done, I turned to the door at the back of the office.

As I had hoped, the door led to Big Gun's personal apartment. The room I emerged into was a living room, filled with an assortment of furniture. My initial impression was mixed; For most of my life, seeing a room with such a mish-mash of styles, all thoroughly worn out through centuries of use, would have come across as jumbled and poor. Compared to the places I'd seen since then, it came across as a declaration of wealth and luxury. Neither were terribly good impressions.

But it did mean I was unlikely to run into any ponies other than Wild Runner. As she wasn't in the living room, I took the moment to prepare. The PipBuck came back out, and I latched it onto my leg. The E.F.S. flickered to life as I pulled out my pistol again. Then I continued on, moving past the small kitchen and dining area and into the hall beyond.

One door revealed a small bathroom, dimly lit but meticulously cleaned. The next was a spare room, cluttered with a variety of weapons, tools, and diagrams.

The final door opened to a bedroom. Wild Runner was there, kicked back at the foot of the bed with a disassembled rifle. She looked up to see Big Gun entering, an unfamiliar pistol clutched in his teeth.

"Gun?"

S.A.T.S. kicked in as I advanced briskly, tonguing the trigger. She started to jerk back in surprise, but at such close range, all three rounds struck her squarely in the chest. She gasped and fell back, her legs kicking out and sending several parts of her weapon tumbling. Her hooves shot out, whether to scramble away or grab one of the other weapons nearby, but all coordination had already left her limbs.

I took no chances, advancing to just outside bucking range and placing two more rounds into her chest, then taking a moment to line up on her head. The fight had left her, and she tried to mouth something as I pulled the trigger again. Her head jerked.

A flash of green fire ripped across her, revealing the very dead changeling.

I staggered back, wide-eyed. So many thoughts ran through my head in that instant: recognition that I had just killed a changeling who might not have deserved to die, concern that the situation was drastically different than I had believed, and of course, all the scenarios that could be the cause and result of a changeling replacing the second-most-influential pony in Mareford.

After a moment of shock, I shelved all those thoughts to focus on the present. Focus, adapt, proceed.

There were only two immediate needs: get out of there as soon as possible, and hide any evidence of changeling involvement. I still relied on the secret of our existence at least as much as Serenity did, assuming this was one of their Infiltrators.

Hiding the evidence was easy. I quickly added a horn to my current form, then focused my magic. A moment later, the other changeling's body was burning away to ashes.

As the fire rose, I darted around the cluttered room, looking out shuttered windows. While the living room and office windows looked out over the street, still moderately busy in the failing light, the bedroom windows looked over the enclosed courtyard behind the town hall. It was perfect.

The body had been reduced to ashes by that time, and the carpet and end of the bed were starting to smolder. I quickly appraised the room. With the amount of furniture, the room would probably burn quite well, but the stone construction should limit its spread. I let it continue as I changed again, this time taking the form of a dark-blue pegasus, lean and lithe except for the powerful wing muscles. It was a form built entirely for speed and agility.

Tucking my pistol away in my bags, I hoofed through the small collection of not-Wild-Runner's weapons, selecting a small submachine gun, much like the ones I had seen in the mouths of raiders. I loaded a magazine, chambered a round, and leveled it at the wall beside the door.

A quick tongue of the trigger and a twist of my head sent out a painfully loud barrage of shots and blew off chunks of plaster and wallpaper from the walls. With the alarm thrown, I tossed the weapon into the smoldering ashes, threw open the window, and darted out.

A quick half-loop brought me low over the roof, and I banked sharply as I took off, wings pumping, toward the ruins of Dodge City and the crater

within. I skimmed low over roof-tops, visible for mere moments whenever I passed over a street.

If I was lucky, nopyony would see me. Even if I wasn't, seeing a pegasus fleeing the scene would point any investigation in the completely wrong direction.

Buildings flashed by beneath me as I sped away. Only the town walls stood in my way, and not so much in the physical sense, but in the armed guards that would be there, watching for attacks.

Fortunately, that meant that any ponies nearby were looking outward. I didn't even see any on the section of wall I slipped over, though I assumed the tower just a hundred yards away was probably occupied. If they saw me, they didn't try to shoot at me, and a few seconds later I was low over the ancient, debris-filled streets, winding between ruined buildings.

I continued like that for almost half a mile before slowing, flying a little higher along a long, main road. A faint ache was already building in my wings, and I had a ways to go.

The ruins passed below me, and every now and then, a red pip would show up on my E.F.S. before quickly sliding away behind me. I caught a couple glimpses of feral ghouls or very sickly ponies, and once, to my concern, saw a manticore sleepily poke its head up over a ruined wall, tracking my flight for a few moments before settling in to nap again.

As I approached the faintly glowing Dodge City crater, I banked again. Staying low, and screening myself from Mareford by the ruins of the city, I flew off in a completely different direction. Even if the Rangers tried to follow me, they would have no idea where I was going.



Half an hour later, I caught sight of the rocky formation we had made camp at. I skimmed low over the surrounding hills, popping up just enough to be visible. As I drew closer, I could already see Dusty, his binoculars up and watching me, in my natural form, flying in.

Starlight got to her hooves, walking toward me as I landed, though her downcast expression and slack stance made her look every bit as worn out as I was. Past her, Sickle lay still and dozing, sprawled out across the motorwagon's cargo bay. Last I'd seen her, she'd been aggressively pestering

Dusty for sex.

My wing-muscles ached.

"How'd it go?" Dusty asked.

I simply stood there. I'd been thinking about it the whole flight back, and still had little idea how to answer that. "That's a surprisingly complicated question to answer."

Dusty's ears flicked back. "What went wrong?"

"With the mission?" I asked. "Nothing. It went perfectly. If anything, it was almost anticlimactic. It couldn't have gone much smoother." I sat beside my belongings with a weary sigh. "And a few days ago that would have been fine, but I think you'd be concerned if you saw just how easily a changeling Infiltrator can walk straight into a well-defended town and kill the most influential and powerful pony there."

He was frowning. "You're thinking of Serenity."

"Of course I am." I dug through my possessions as Starlight stepped up to sit beside me. "Though I guess, despite how smoothly it went, it could also be said that I didn't accomplish my mission."

I waited for the inquisitive looks that followed before clarifying. "I didn't kill Wild Runner. I killed the changeling that had replaced her."

Starlight's ears fell back. "Oh. Oh no."

"What do you mean?" Dusty said, stepping in. "Serenity is spying on Mareford?"

"Assuming it was Serenity," I said as I pulled out a package of veggies; despite the large dinner, I was feeling hungry again. Starlight's proximity was taking care of the other hunger I felt. "Which is probably a safe bet, at least. I suppose it's not even surprising that they'd be getting into local leadership. It's just another thing to be concerned about." I looked over to Dusty. "If they've infiltrated Mareford, they might have infiltrated the Militia. If they've infiltrated the Militia, then they hold an uncontested majority of the military power in the region."

Dusty grumbled. "Shit."

"Yeah." I threw back a couple soggy pieces of broccoli, mashing them up before swallowing.

"Well at least you're okay," Starlight said, reaching a foreleg around my shoulders to give a hug. I leaned into her. "So... I guess you're the expert on

changeling infiltration. What do we do?"

I sighed, slumping a little. After a few moments of silence, I shook my head. "I don't know. Keep pressing on, I guess."

Her ears drooped. It was a little painful to see that expression from her. "There has to be something we can do, right?"

"I don't know." There was one thing, but I wasn't willing to consider that just yet. "Maybe we'll come up with something. Right now, I have nothing."

She sat silently, her gaze turned down.

After a few moments, Dusty gestured back to the motorwagon. "You two turn in. It's a long trip to Baltimare, even with the wagon. Get some sleep."

Despite feeling so drained and tired, I didn't sleep well that night.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

# On the Road

Starlight was gone when I woke up.

She'd been lying right next to me the whole night, cuddled up close. Despite lying awake for most of the night, and sleeping fitfully even when I did drift off, I'd somehow missed her slip away.

I pushed myself up, looking blearily around in the dim morning light. Dusty was sitting a short distance away, drinking slowly from a cup and looking as weary as I felt. I didn't get the chance to speak before he gestured with a hoof, already figuring what was on my mind.

I struggled to my hooves and slowly staggered my way in the direction he had indicated.

Starlight was sitting almost a hundred feet from camp when I found her. She was staring down at her PipBuck, her hoof resting gently atop it. She remained like that until she noticed my approach, her hoof slipping away as she looked back at me.

I drew up beside her. Despite my fatigue and the relentless worry that refused to leave my mind, I asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she said, looking back to her PipBuck. "Just thinking."

I sat beside her with a quiet groan. "Oof... about what?"

"This," she said, lifting her PipBuck a fraction before lowering it again. "And everything else I have, and *us*, and... yeah, pretty much everything."

I grunted softly. "Sounds familiar," I said, reaching up to habitually rub at my eyes. "I was so caught up thinking about everything that I hardly slept."

"Yeah," Starlight said, slowly nodding. "It's just... we almost lost *everything* there. I mean, I've almost died a few times now, but this..."

I nodded and reached out a leg, gently looping a foreleg around her shoulders.

"Shit, we didn't even know," she continued. "We could have been stuck there the rest of our lives and not even known it. And..." She turned her PipBuck slightly, her hoof once again touching beside the screen. "And they took my PipBuck, and my Lancer, and... a-and I didn't even remember

them. I just... I forgot..."

Her breath caught, tears welling up in her eyes, but she fought them back. I gave a reassuring squeeze.

She sniffled, wiping at her eyes. "Just... the more I think on what those changelings did, the more... scared I am. These are all I've got from my mom, and I almost *forgot* them! It's like I almost forgot *her*." She shuddered, leaning into me, her eyes fixated on her PipBuck. My own concerns felt a little small at that moment.

"...Sorry," she said, her voice raw. "It's just, everything's going to crap and I don't have a clue what to do about it." She paused, a frown touching her expression. "You know how when we met, I was working as a guard for that caravan?"

I nodded, thinking back to the ill-fated group.

"I was there because, you know... I wanted to protect ponies. I thought it was something my mom could be proud of."

I could see where that thought was going, and gave another squeeze.

She let her forehooves fall, looking out across the rolling terrain. "How many ponies were in Serenity?"

My ears drooped. "Dozens. Some zebras and griffins, too."

"Dozens," she echoed. "Just as clueless as we were. And who even knows what Serenity is going to do next? How much worse..." She fell silent again, as if deep in thought. After several more seconds, she slowly drew in a deep breath and exhaled. "...I wish I was more like my mom. She always had a plan, knew exactly what to do. Hell, she recorded a message for me years before I was born. I don't have that kind of... I dunno, foresight, whatever."

"It's a difficult situation," I said, nodding. "Though to be fair, looking like you know what you're doing in a difficult situation is often as simple as remaining calm and level headed when you have no idea what to do."

Starlight was still and silent for several long seconds. I had just started to worry that I had offended her when the corner of her mouth crept up a hair, followed by the soft exhale of an almost-silent chuckle. "Okay, I know you're trying to cheer me up in your weird buggy way, but did you seriously just say my mom had no idea what she was doing?"

I replied with a soft chuckle. "I'm saying that, from what I've heard from you, she knew *exactly* what she was doing." I smiled. "Even when she

didn't."

She gave a slightly more audible chuckle, and pushed my side lightly with her shoulder. "Thanks, I think."

The smile slowly slipped away, until she was staring silently at her hooves.

"So... I guess the first part of that would be moving on instead of just sitting here moping, huh?"

I nodded again. "It's a start, which is better than doing nothing. We've got a lot of traveling to do. That means a lot of time to think."

"Wonderful," she grunted, then heaved a deep sigh. "Sorry. Done mopping. You think you'll come up with something?"

I resisted the urge to grunt, myself. "Maybe. I'll certainly be thinking about it the whole time."

She stopped and looked at me, *really* looked at me, as if she had just realized that I had been a part of the conversation. "...Yeah, I guess you would be, huh?"

"Yeah." I forced a wry, half-hearted smile. "Like I said, it's a difficult situation."

"Yeah," she agreed. We stood in awkward silence for a few more seconds. "I guess we should get going."

"Probably."

We returned to our tiny camp. Minutes later, we climbed into the motorwagon. I had the back seat to myself. I strapped myself in, and Starlight started driving.

Despite the jostling, I fell asleep within minutes.



The motorwagon tore across the wasteland.

I could easily fly faster than it, but I lacked the endurance of the tireless machine. As such, it traversed the barren land more swiftly than I could have done by wing, and far faster than my land-bound companions could have managed. Miles rolled by as the vehicle creaked and groaned and rattled, leaving a long trail of dust drifting away behind us.

After my nap, I spent most of the time sitting silently in the back seat, gazing out the narrow gap in the armor beside me. For most of the trip, I was far too lost in thought to register the landscape passing by.

For all my thinking, I had come up with nothing. I slumped against the side of the vehicle, continuing to stare without really seeing, thinking without reaching any conclusions. I know Dusty and Starlight had both tried to strike up conversations, though that information barely registered with me at the time. I think I might have offered a few half-hearted replies, but I couldn't tell you now what they had been. It seemed so unimportant at the time.

The only thing that did register was information that had some significant importance. In this case, it was Starlight during our short stop for lunch, when she checked on the power in the motorwagon's spark batteries. They'd been fully charged when we took it from Serenity, and according to Starlight, should hold enough charge for two more days of operation. The spark packs we had in the cargo bay would probably be enough for a full charge, perhaps with a bit spare. Dusty mentioned wishing for a spark generator.

Then we were driving again.

The evening proved no more productive than the morning. Ideas formed, only to be immediately discarded. By the time the skies started to darken with the onset of night, I was probably spending more time mentally grumbling than I was on anything useful.

I mostly tuned out what happened around me as we settled in for the night. I know Starlight laid out her bedroll beside mine. I also know Sickle sat on top of Dusty; her improved health seemed to have enlarged her already significant libido, and further cemented my desire to tune out everything around me.

As we settled in for the night, I tried to comfort myself that we were at least making progress towards finding the remains of my hive. My mood led me to note "if they are still alive" with an extra helping of cynicism.

It wasn't the best note to go to sleep on.



It was still dark when I woke, and Starlight was gone once again.

I could see the lump of Dusty and Sickle through the darkness, sleeping a few yards away, which meant Starlight must be on watch. Normally, that would have been the end of it. I would have closed my eyes and eventually

drifted off again.

Instead, I heard the sound of her voice, barely carrying through the still night air. She was talking.

I lifted my head, looking to the nearby lump, just to make sure. Sure enough, that was Dusty half-hidden under Sickle's foreleg and thoroughly dwarfed by the larger mare.

Which raised the question: who was Starlight talking to?

Thoughts of sleep were forgotten as I pushed aside my thin blanket. I quietly made my way toward the faint sounds of Starlight's voice, my ears perked alertly to capture any sound, my eyes plucking details out of the darkness of night under the cloud cover.

I found Starlight kicked back atop a rock a short distance away, close enough to watch over our camp—at least, as much as pony eyes could do in that darkness—without disturbing our sleep. The soft glow of her PipBuck underlit her face with green. She was speaking into it.

“...was pretty impressive. But, well, it’s more than that. She’s helped me a lot. This last... what has it been, like, two months?” A pause as she pressed buttons. “Wow. Forty days. Heh, it’s been pretty crazy. But, yeah, I don’t think I would have gotten through it without her. I mean, she can be kinda weird at times, but, you know, ancient changeling super-spy. It’d be weird if it *wasn’t* weird. But she’s... she’s nice.”

I paused by a scraggly bush, watching and listening intently, and not daring to make a sound.

“It’s almost inspirational, you know? All these horrible things she has to deal with, but she’s still always there to help. She’s nice, and she’s smart, and she’s really good at what she does. She’s an amazing friend.” A long pause. “Yeah, I don’t know what other ponies will think of changelings, but Whisper’s a good one.”

Another pause. “...She’s also a nosy little sneak that likes to eavesdrop on ponies.” Her head turned, shooting a look of mock disapproval in my direction, though the look was spoiled by her smirk.

I winced, then slowly stepped out from behind the bush, giving an awkward and embarrassed smile, despite my concern over the situation.

Starlight held her smirk for a second before turning back to her PipBuck. “Anyway, I guess that’s a good start. I’ll have to record some more next time.

So, until then... goodnight.”

She pressed a button on her PipBuck, a faint click sounding in the night. With that concluded, I spoke up.

“What was that?”

She gave a soft chuckle and shrugged. “I dunno. It’s silly.”

I continued to slowly approach, trying to force myself to relax. At least I kept my voice level. “Oh?”

“Yeah,” she said, leaning her head back. “...I was thinking of my mom, you know, because of all that stuff earlier. I got thinking about my PipBuck, and the recordings she made for me, and I just thought I should record *something*. You know, leave something of me there.”

She gently stroked a hoof along her PipBuck, then shrugged. “I tried doing like she did, but, I dunno, it didn’t feel right. Not like *wrong*, just... maybe a little cheesy, I guess? I couldn’t do it like she could. I couldn’t really figure out *what* to say, but I wanted to record something, so I figured, just start talking, see what happens. I guess it kinda turned into a diary pretty quickly.”

“A diary?” Of course that’s what she was doing. I let out a silent sigh, relaxing, though I did my best to hide my reaction.

“Yeah,” she said, setting her hoof down and leaning back. “Just kinda going over things, talking about what happened, you guys, stuff like that. I dunno, might just delete the whole thing later, or try recording it again a little more planned-out like, but...” She cracked a smile. “I think it helped. Like I feel better, just recording all that. Kinda like... I’m not my mom, but I’m doing my own thing, right?”

“I suppose that makes sense,” I said, stopping beside her rock. “And talking about things is a good way to deal with them.”

“Yeah,” she said again, then fell silent in thought. Eventually, she turned to me. Her expression had turned serious, maybe even concerned. “Maybe you should do that, too.”

“What?” I raised a brow questioningly. “A diary? I’ve never really seen the point. Besides, it’s kind of a bad idea for an Infiltrator to keep records of all their actions. Maybe in a secure location like the hive, but not a PipBuck anypony could take from me.”

She fidgeted a little, looking away for a moment before turning back. “I

don't really mean like that, just... I've been thinking..."

I frowned a little. Something about that seemed ominous. "About what?"

"Wellll..." She paused, biting her lip, before finally speaking. "This whole Serenity thing. Ponies have no idea what's coming. They're never going to see it before it's too late, unless..." She must have seen my ears drooping, because she quickly added, "And I know, the whole secrecy thing helps you, too, but... I mean, 'ending the reign of ponies'? How many are going to suffer because of that?"

I sighed and sat down, slowly shaking my head. "I know, but... it's not just me. It's *hopefully* not just me. If there's any more of my hive out there, any decision I make will affect them, too. I can't just do that to them."

"And what if Serenity takes over?" Starlight asked.

My ears were already hanging low. I felt like curling up in myself, but I didn't speak.

"And how much worse is it going to be for your hive," Starlight continued, "if all that ponies know about changelings comes from Serenity?"

"It'll be bad," I murmured.

"Yeah," she said. "So... maybe it'd be better if you were the one to tell ponies about all that."

"Look, I... I know. I'm trying to figure out some way of helping everyone, but... I don't know how. Ponies..." I sighed. "...Yeah, they probably need to know. About Serenity, anyway. I just don't know if that's going to help."

We fell silent for several long seconds before I added, "I'll think about it. We've got until we're done with Baltimare before it matters. I'll... have something by then.

She slowly nodded, and after another moment of silence, glanced to her PipBuck. "I've got another half-hour on my watch. Get some more sleep, I'll wake you up when it's time."

"I might as well take over now. You've got to drive. I'll just take a nap in the back again." I heaved a deep sigh. "Besides, I don't think I could get back to sleep before you'd be waking me up again."

Starlight slid down from the rock and stepped up to me, her expression concerned. Finally, she nodded. "Okay."

She slipped in, wrapping me in a tight hug. We held that for a couple seconds before she drew back, her face passing right before mine, and kissed

me softly on the mouth.

Between the weight on my mind and the unexpected action, I didn't have the time to return the gesture before she was drawing back again. She looked to me with a soft, almost sad smile. "See you in the morning."

"See you," I weakly echoed.

She slipped by me, slowly picking her way back to the camp. I watched her go, until she settled into the camp itself. Then I turned, wings fluttering as I lifted up, landing atop the rock she had just vacated. I rolled to my side, laid down, and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

The night was seemingly empty, leaving me with nothing but my own thoughts, which was little comfort. I simply lay there, eyes scanning out across the desolate and uneventful landscape, barely visible even with my night-adapted eyes.

Guard duty was always dull, but this was by far the worst it had ever been.

I made the mistake of checking the clock on Emerald's PipBuck. Only half an hour had passed. I suppressed a sigh and laid my head back. One fifth of the way there.

A couple minutes later, I raised the PipBuck again. I stared at the screen for a long time, my thoughts stuck in a formless haze of indecision.

I could come up with so many arguments for or against it, but to tell the truth, the deciding factor was that I simply didn't have anything better to do.

I lethargically pressed a few buttons, creating and naming a new directory, and starting up a new audio file. The final press started the recording, and then... nothing.

I stared at the timer slowly counting up as I tried to come up with what to say. It was at thirty seconds when I finally managed to come up with something. "...Dear diary? Ugh, no." My hoof stabbed at a button, ending the recording, and I quickly deleted the aborted attempt.

Soon I had a fresh file. Once again, I watched the time slowly work its way higher and higher. It got to two minutes before I stopped it again. Again, I started over.

This time, I just stared at the screen, the file waiting for me. I stared, and thought, trying to figure out where to even begin. Finally, reluctantly,

I pressed the button to start recording.

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



So that's how I came to start making these recordings. A simple, reluctant tale recorded on my PipBuck in the middle of the dark and silent night. I didn't do it all at once, of course. I didn't even finish my first day in the Wasteland during that watch, and I ended up going back to touch-up some parts later on, but I got the bulk of it down.

There I was, stuck in a bad situation that was only likely to get worse, feeling lost, confused, and maybe even a little depressed, and I was re-telling what was probably the single worst moment of my life.

And you know what?

It helped.

Recalling how all of this started highlighted a perspective that I had allowed to slip away into obscurity, but which seemed particularly relevant now. It was the perspective of facing some monumental challenge that I felt too small to handle. While that first recording hadn't gotten past the first day, it sent me thinking on the day that followed; my brutal first introduction to the horrors of the Wasteland.

I had been practically helpless. I had little idea of where I was going. I had only enough love to survive a few days. I had no way to protect myself, and nearly ran myself to death trying to flee a band of homicidal psychopaths.

Starlight saved my life.

She gave me a source of love to stave off the hunger. She gave me knowledge of the Wasteland. She gave me a measure of protection, strength, and versatility.

With another pony at my side, I could survive in the Wasteland. The two of us together were stronger than either of us alone.

Then two became three. With Dusty, we could thrive in the Wasteland.

Then three became four. With Sickle, we wiped out multiple raider gangs, ones far exceeding the group that had sent Starlight and myself fleeing for our lives.

Now there was a new threat looming. A threat vastly beyond us, one

great enough that it was hard to even conceptualize of how to deal with it. One that might put every pony *and* changeling in danger. One that knew all about us, and had every reason to destroy us. The four of us wouldn't survive Serenity.

But what about five?

And if not five, how about six? Seven? Eight?

With enough friends and allies, any threat becomes that much smaller. Of course, Dusty was right; it wasn't that simple. We had a distinct lack of allies to call upon. The largest settlement in the region had a bounty out for us. The settlements that were friendly to us would probably be eager to help their fellow pony, but be quite short on the resources to do so directly. This didn't change any of that.

But it did highlight that this wasn't some insurmountable challenge. It was simply a challenge we could not *currently* face. That could change.

Especially if we were to, say, find an ancient facility holding a group of experienced pre-war changelings in suspended animation.

Now that was a cheering thought.



The next day was spent traveling at a much more sedate rate.

We came across the first clumps of scraggly trees barely an hour after dawn. Another hour later, and the terrain had changed completely. We came rolling down into a valley to the sight of trees, clustered densely around a thin, muddy creek. Grass dotted the slopes, often yellow or faded, but still clinging to life in the rocky earth. As we followed the narrow ribbon of water, more spots of green stood out.

An hour later, we stopped. Green filled the horizon in a tangle, wild to a degree I had never seen before the megaspells. Plants grew everywhere, and though they often looked twisted and sinister, perhaps even warped by the magical energies of the megaspells, they were still green and alive. Long stretches of water crisscrossed through the foliage, splitting up the land into isthmuses and islands and producing a maze of water and plant-life.

According to our PipBucks, we had reached the edge of the Hayseed Swamps.

We spent most of the day driving along the edge of the wetlands, search-

ing out the best route. Dusty spent most of his time with his nose to his PipBuck, navigating for Starlight as she slowly picked her way through the dense terrain. Several times we turned around, driving back a few miles to try a new route.

"We want to drive as far as we can get," Dusty said, when Sickle inevitably protested turning around yet again. "A single hour of driving might be worth a whole day of travel on hoof."

As evening arrived, we rolled along a low ridge that protruded out across the swamp like a peninsula. Starlight drove until we were well below the canopy, stopping in a patch of rocky ground. Dusty said it would be a good place to conceal the motorwagon.

We settled in for the night. Starlight laid her bedroll out near me, likely expecting me to lay my own beside hers, as usual, but I didn't. Instead, I surprised her by lying down with her, snuggling in close and nuzzling into her chest. She was tense at first, caught off-guard and likely a little self-conscious, but she relaxed, gently resting a foreleg across my shoulders and tucking her head in close against mine.

In the morning, we started to pack.

"This is going to be a long trip," Dusty warned as we gathered around the motorwagon's cargo bed. "The terrain is rough, line of sight is short, and you can bet there's going to be wildlife. We've got PipBucks, so at least nothing will sneak up on us, but we'll have to stay alert."

He lifted his foreleg, undoing the flap covering his PipBuck so we could see the screen. He showed the map of the swamps ahead of us, and beyond it, our destination. "We're looking at probably a week to get through to Baltimare, maybe more. Worse, we have no idea what we're going to find there. It could be completely intact, or just a glowing crater infested with raiders and ghouls. We don't know if there's going to be any safe-haven out there, much less any place to get supplies.

"The good news is, there's plenty of water for the taking. I've got a little canteen filter, it's not perfect, but it'll get the worst crap out of the water. We might even luck out and kill some wildlife we can cook up. Starlight, you used to be a hunter, right?"

"Yep," Starlight said with a quick nod. "I can clean and cook anything we come across."

"Good," Dusty said. "Hopefully we can make use of that, but we can't count on it, and I don't plan on testing whether the plants are as poisonous as everypony says. Search through the food we've got, grab the most calorie-dense foods you can find. Plan for at least three weeks worth, four if you can carry it. That takes priority over everything, even extra ammo."

By the time we were done, I felt like a pack-mule. My saddlebags were about ready to burst. We'd managed to cram more than half of the food we had stockpiled into our bags. We started with dense foods, mostly oats and other grains, with a few happy finds like some tins of nuts, a package of dried fruit, and even some jars of peanut butter. Those ran out quickly, and soon we were back to the same canned and packaged food we'd been eating the whole time. The weight grew rapidly.

Even more troubling was how curtailed the rest of my gear was. At least the PipBuck served every portable-terminal need I would have, so the only other mission-critical gear was my collection of cables and one of the mini-toolkits. Almost everything else got left behind, including, much to my unease, the datastore and all but one of the love crystals my queen had left for me. That one stayed with me; it was purely sentimental, but small enough that I figured it would make no difference.

Most of the remaining weight was made up by my weapons and ammunition. I was even tempted to leave my pistol behind to save weight, but it was too valuable of a tool to go without; I kept it strapped on, with its two spare magazines, and made up the weight by shedding explosives until I carried only a pair of grenades and a single explosive charge, plus the detonator and some spare blasting caps. I even went light on rifle ammo, with only a hoofful of loose rounds to complement the loaded magazines.

It was by no means an insignificant loadout, but I still found myself concerned at the prospect of possibly going for weeks without being able to rearm. I had learned well just how quickly ammunition could go in a firefight. Hopefully we wouldn't need it, and if we did, hopefully whatever we needed it for would provide us with alternate equipment to get us through whatever came next.

I hefted my bags, testing the balance. After a moment's consideration, I called up my magic. In a flash of green, I turned into a pony, broadly similar to my typical disguise, but with additional muscle mass, particularly in the

legs and back. Mindful of the terrain we would be passing through, I also shortened my mane and tail, styling them much like Starlight's.

I shrugged at my bags, feeling the weight shift much more comfortably. Then I looked over to see Starlight weighed down by her own bags.

"You are such a little cheater," she said with a poorly hidden smirk.

I merely grinned in reply.

"Don't get too attached to that form," Dusty said. "I want to make use of those wings. We've got the PipBucks for general navigation, but the foliage is going to cut sightlines to nothing. If we can get you up and scouting for us, it should make it easier to find a good path through here."

My grin vanished, and I shrugged my shoulders to shake my packs. "You expect me to go flying with all this?"

"Short jaunts," Dusty said. "You can leave the packs on the ground. We'll just need you to pop up every mile or so to get a good eye on the area around us."

I considered it a moment, and finally nodded. "Okay, I can do that." It still meant more work for me, but I could hardly argue against the advantages. I was the only one of us who could fly, so of course I would get the job that required flying. Sensible enough, and it took only a tiny bit of love to add wings to my current form. I also returned to the gear I had stowed in the motorwagon, retrieving my binoculars.

Dusty took a bit of extra time to camouflage the motorwagon. An army-green tarp formed the base, and he gathered sticks, leaves, and vines to layer over it. He noted that most of them would wilt before we got back, but they would at least break up the silhouette.

With that, we set off.



The swamps stretched on, seemingly without end. My brief flights showed me a sea of twisted green stretching off to the horizon, broken up by tiny hills and larger lakes.

Below the canopy, we traced our way through narrow strips of dry land. Sickle ended up leading the way, plowing straight through any brush and trampling a path for the rest of us to follow. It started drizzling on the third day, and would continue off and on for the rest of our journey. My PipBuck

clicked frequently, warning of the trace amounts of radiation carried in the rain that fell on us, or the minute amounts in the poorly-filtered water we drank. It was minor, small enough to not be a concern over our journey, but enough that we might want to find some anti-radiation medicine when we had the chance.

And then the red pips showed up on our E.F.S. displays.

Dusty organized us quickly. Starlight came forward, just behind Sickle, with her Lancer and Recharger at the ready. Dusty and I took up the rear, protecting their flanks, and hoping we wouldn't need to use our limited supply of ammunition.

A minute later, a trio of dark, insectoid forms flew out from the brush just twenty feet from us.

My first thought that these were changelings we were seeing, but even as Sickle roared and lunged forward, I realized they were not. They were bloated, massive flies, almost as large as a pony's head.

Sickle smashed one with a kick of her hooves, and flashes of blue dazzled my vision as Starlight's S.A.T.S.-aided shots plucked the other two out of the air. The whole encounter was over in a split second. The only sound that followed was the echo of the shots and the sizzle of a charred bug lying half-submerged in the shallow water.

Scenes like that repeated themselves endlessly over the next few days. We were constantly on-edge, our eyes glued to our E.F.S., waiting for the next attack. There were more of the strange bugs—some sort of mutated parasprite, according to Dusty—as well as a wild radhog, a badly decayed ghoul, some mutated plants that tried to eat Sickle, and a cluster of mutant vines that tried to entangle and crush her to death, only to find that their intended victim was stronger than them.

At least the radhog gave us some fresh meat to stretch out our supplies.

Guard duty, which had been so uneventful over all the time we had traveled with Dusty, now became a necessity. Instead of relaxing while keeping an eye out, we spent the whole time sweeping our view around, waiting for red pips to show up, and flicking on the flashlight once they had. I couldn't even work on my recordings.

While the swamps seemed quieter after dark, only a single night passed without us waking to the sounds of gunfire. Even accounting for the amount

of ground we covered, it seemed like an impossible number of predatory creatures.

It was like that for an entire, gruelling, nerve-destroying week.

Then it got worse.

As we neared the coast, dry land had become more and more scarce, and our progress slowed even further. There were times we stopped for an hour while I flew around, trying to find a way for my companions to proceed. Any thoughts of swimming were adequately quashed when something several times the size of a pony quietly cut through the water, the jagged shapes across its back sending out ripples before disappearing beneath the surface once again. Once the ripples had faded, the only sign of its presence was the red pip in our E.F.S.

It followed us.

Throughout the day, as our dry paths narrowed, it lurked at the edge of detection. Every time we thought it was gone, that red pip would return a few minutes later, in a different direction.

I was convinced it was hunting us.

Then, late in the evening, it appeared in front of us.

The lone path I had found us crossed a narrow isthmus of dry land, only twenty feet across and obscured with vines and brush. The water beside it was choked with reeds, pond-scum, and even a fallen tree. If we hadn't known to look, we might have not seen the pair of eyes lurking just above the surface, surrounded by jagged scales.

"It's a cragadile," I said.

Dusty had his rifle leveled at the tiny part of the creature that was visible to us. "What in Tartarus is a cragadile?"

"A big aquatic lizard, basically," I said. "Tough hide, predatory, lives in swamps and rivers."

"Well it can just stay in the water," Sickle said as she strode forward.

"Sickle, wait!" I called out, stumbling after her. "They're still big and—"

Of course Sickle hadn't stopped. The creature judged that she was close enough, and surged forward. Immediately, everything was wrong. It didn't run low to the ground to snap at her. The water seemed to explode as it surged upwards on powerful hind-legs, terrible claws flashing as it lunged forward.

The air split like a thunderclap as a dazzling line of red struck the creature in the side. It stumbled, its side torn up and smoldering.

Then it regained its balance, raising its claws again. Granted, it had been a glancing blow, but it had shaken off a hit from Starlight's Lancer and kept coming.

Sickle met it mid-windup, ducking her head to slam her helm's horn into the creature's chest. It grabbed at her with its huge foreclaws, and Sickle bellowed out. Then they were both on the ground, twisting and thrashing.

Starlight finished reloading her Lancer and leveled it, but had to hold her fire. Any miscalculation would strike Sickle, instead.

Blood was starting to flow heavily, and Sickle was cursing. They rolled over several times as the creature tried to haul her back into the water, but Sickle fought back. One of her forelegs rose and plunged down, striking at the creature's side again and again. By the second strike, her hoof-blades came back bloody.

The pseudo-cragadile quickly lost strength as she continued to stab. When the claws finally fell from Sickle's side, she reared back, jerking the blade-like horn from the creature's chest. She snarled incoherent obscenities as she placed one hoof on its chest, and started stabbing and hacking at its neck. Blood ran down her sides; the creature's claws had pierced through her armor, leaving deep rents in the steel.

"Whisper." Dusty's commanding voice drew my attention away. He stood beside me, but facing our rear, his rifle raised and his eyes alert. "Get airborne. Find us high-ground for the night."

"Okay," I said as I shrugged off my packs, then glanced back. There were two red marks on my E.F.S. "Are those—"

"Yes," he replied. "One by the tree-roots, one by that thick patch of reeds."

Looking closely, I could see the eyes protruding over the surface some thirty yards away, narrowed and staring at us. They were waiting, evaluating.

I found us a small hill that put a small distance between us and the water. Dusty took the time to clean and dress the wounds across Sickle's sides.

"I've had a lot worse," Sickle grumbled, not even flinching as Dusty sutured one of the deeper cuts.

"Claws, swamp-gunk, and who knows what else," Dusty had said. "You might be big and tough and stubborn as all hell, but it'd be a pretty sad end

to go out to an infection."

She grunted, as if agreeing. When Dusty was done, he roamed around our campsite, cutting away brush to open our sightlines. Sickle, meanwhile, spent a short time pounding out the damage to her armor before kicking back to sleep, using the mutated cragadile's head for a pillow.

When Starlight woke me for my turn at watch, she met me with a serious look, and silently pressed her Lancer into my hooves. I nodded.

That night was spent looking in every direction at once.

The red pip appeared, and I flicked on the flashlight. The beam seemed feeble in the oppressive darkness that surrounded us, and illuminated only the closest trees. I couldn't see whatever lurked out there.

I glanced around, sweeping my E.F.S. around to make sure nothing was approaching from some other direction.

A minute later, the red pip disappeared. I turned off the light once more.

Some time later, the pip would return, and the cycle repeated again.

I don't know if I've ever been so happy for the muted gray glow of a Wasteland sunrise as I was that morning.



A few hours after dawn, as I scouted the terrain ahead, I saw the ocean.

We pressed on, eager to finally be near our destination and away from the waterways, with their lurking dangers that continued to trail after us. I think Sickle was the only one not concerned; she still carried the creature's severed head on her back, a gruesome trophy and, if we were very lucky, a warning to dissuade any further attempts.

The smell of salt grew in the air as we traveled.

That afternoon, we emerged from the foliage into a narrow strip of sand, filled not with plants but with the great, skeletal remains of ancient ships. Most had rusted away to scrap, or had perhaps been stripped for salvage. Only one, a warship, remained upright and relatively intact. The small turrets had been stripped bare. Only the larger cannons remained, though they looked like they had rusted to uselessness long ago.

But what really caught my attention, as we cautiously moved past those great hulks, was the wreckage of smaller boats. Tiny things, completely unsuited for long trips on the sea, and incredibly simple; plain metal troughs

with an engine at one end and a ramp opening at the other end.

Dusty caught my look of curiosity. "What are they?"

"Landing craft," I said. "Which is a little odd. I thought Equestria stopped using them after the Raptors entered service, but this looks like they were conducting a landing. Perhaps some sort of exercise?"

"Unless these are zebra boats," Dusty pointed out. "Did they use anything like these?"

"That would have made the news for sure," I said as we walked by one of the craft in question, canted slightly in the shallows and eaten through by rust. Any markings had long since been lost to the elements.

Passing a couple more landing craft, and rounding a small, sandy ridge, we finally caught a glimpse of Baltimare.

The silhouettes of ancient towers broke the horizon like giant skeletons of the old world. I raised my binoculars, peering out at our destination. From that distance, still many miles away, I could just make out debris hanging from the tall structures. Thin strips hung between the towers, like great vines.

A giant bay lay between us and our destination, and around its rim, the tangled vegetation grew from flooded land, as if the end of the swamp and beginning of the ocean was more of a vague suggestion than a real, tangible thing. That continued right on to the city itself; what had once been streets were now water, leaving the towers that broke the surface as monolithic islands.

"What happened here?" I wondered aloud. I had expected burned-out buildings, but not a half-flooded city.

Dusty stepped up, scoping out the city with his own binoculars. "I wonder if the zebras hit it with a seismic megaspell? Something like Trotsen? Though I would've thought that would take down the towers."

I merely grunted. For having been alive when they were created, I found I had fairly limited knowledge on the variety of megaspells that might have existed.

"This might complicate things," Dusty noted. "Hopefully those offices you're looking for are above the surface."

"I can turn into something aquatic, if necessary," I said, though I frowned as I said it. "Given the colorful wildlife we've already found in the water, I'd

prefer to avoid that."

Dusty gave a dry chuckle. "Well, we'll know soon enough. We're almost there." He looked to me. "Find us a path."

I nodded, slipped off my pack, and took to the air.

Progress was even slower from there. Almost everything was water, with few stretches of dry land to be found. Eventually, I guided us a bit further inland to a faint, plant-choked ridge that ran almost the whole way to Baltimare.

We were about three miles away from the city when I flew up to get one final view of the terrain ahead, hovering just above the canopy. It looked simple enough; simply follow this ridge all the way down, and a short trip across a narrow isthmus that connected to a portion of the city still above the surface.

It was only then that I caught glimpses of something out-of-place. In the chaotic tangle of wild plants, the geometric shape of straight edges caught my eye. I raised my binoculars, peering out at it.

Just visible between the trees was a palisade of decaying wood and rusted metal. I followed the line it suggested, catching glimpses of the structure through narrow gaps in the foliage. The roof of a crude building poked out beside a dead tree, gray and sagging. Then I saw the tower, simple and rickety. Inside, a pair of binoculars were pointed straight at me, clutched in the talons of a griffon.

For a long moment, nothing happened. I just hovered there, as if, by not moving, I might disappear.

Then the griffon moved one of its taloned hands from its binoculars and gave a slow, hesitant wave.

Uncertain of the situation and lacking any better idea of what to do, I gave a tentative wave of my own. Then I tucked my wings in, plunging below the canopy once again.

I landed heavily enough that Dusty immediately looked my way. "Trouble?"

"Not yet," I said, before realizing how ominous that must have sounded when coupled with the speed of my return. I quickly clarified. "There's a settlement ahead. Couldn't see much, but they've got a griffon on watch, and they saw me. So, from here on, I'm a pegasus. Other than that, same

cover story.”

Dusty arched an eyebrow. “Cover story?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Remember? Grew up on a farm, read lots of books, parents died, etcetera. Hmm. And all I knew about the Enclave is that they’re bad ponies. That should work.”

Starlight hummed. “So, like, were your parents *from* the Enclave, or did they always live here, or... or what?”

I started to quickly piece together a backstory, but within a few moments I realized the main problem with it: it was too much detail in too short of a time. “We’ll say my parents were pegasi, but let’s leave it at that. If they ask something about my past that isn’t already covered by my previous story, just say you never asked or direct them to me. Keeps things simple.”

“Assuming they’re not outright hostile,” Dusty said. “You saw a griffon, right? Just the one?”

“I could only see a watch tower and the outside of some walls,” I said. “Could be any number of ponies or anything else in the settlement.”

“I’m tempted to bypass it.” Dusty rolled his head to gesture to his bags. “We’ve got plenty of supplies to make the trip.”

“Except they know we’re out here,” Starlight said. “Besides, I could use a real bed for once.”

“And I could use a good fuck,” Sickle chimed in. “Since Dusty’s gone all super-prude again.”

“Somepony had to be on watch and *un-distracted*,” Dusty shot back. “And I’m not planning on walking into potential danger just because you want to have sex with half the wasteland.”

“Only half?” Sickle said with a grin, followed by a chuckle. “And shit, Dusty, you really think anypony’s dumb enough to fuck with us?”

“Wouldn’t be the first time.”

Sickle laughed. “Yeah, and how many of those fuckers are still alive, huh? You worry too much.”

Eventually, it was settled that we’d at least approach the settlement and see if it looked friendly.

It was almost an hour later when we arrived. From just inside the treeline, our E.F.S. highlighted almost a dozen contacts, none of which were hostile. Poking forward a bit, we finally laid eyes on the decrepit little settlement.

The crude walls were in terrible disrepair, with rotting wooden poles crudely lashed together with rusty wire. A few places were reinforced with metal signs tied onto the poles. Many sections of the wall bore heavy scarring from blades or claws. It was hard to tell if the way the wall bowed and sagged was due to shoddy construction, the wear of elements, or from patching places where the wall had been breached.

The tower itself, a simple box lashed to a long-dead tree, was directly over the gate. The griffon I had seen from before was still up there, and was joined by a trio of zebras poking over the wall. All appeared armed, though only half of those arms were guns. One of the zebras held a spear, while the other carried a bow.

They saw us almost immediately as we stepped out from the trees. The griffon sat up a bit straighter, then raised her talons to wave. "Ho, there!" she called out, though the rifle leaned against the side of the tower shifted as her other hand gripped it. "Who the heck are you?"

"Travelers," Dusty called back. "We—"

"Travelers?" the rifle-armed zebra cut in, his accent thick. "No pony travels here. Why have you come?"

The griffon frowned down at him for the interruption, but said nothing.

Dusty called out again. "That's kind of why we're here. I'd always heard npony comes this way because of the swamps, so we thought the place might not have been scoured clean like everywhere else. Didn't expect to find any folk out this way."

"And we didn't expect to see any travelers," the zebra replied. "Are you telling us you came all the way through the swamps to get here?"

The bow-armed zebra had stiffened, then leaned over and urgently whispered to the rifle-armed one. They conferred a moment, casting glances our way.

"We did," Dusty said. I noted that he hadn't advanced any further. "It's not the most friendly of places, but manageable with some caution." He paused, looking down at the wall. "Looks like it's pretty rough around here, too."

The rifle-armed zebra turned his full attention back to us. "It is," he said, his tone quite serious, and raised a hoof to point. "Metal pony. Is that the head of a swamp-claw?"

Dusty opened his mouth to speak for her, but Sickle ignored him. "Is that what these fuckers are called? Then yeah, guess so. Bitch tried to claw me up, so I cut its fucking head off."

The zebra stared at us silently, while the two beside him whispered to him, eyes wide and ears perked. Finally, the zebra who had been speaking to us relaxed, his rifle lowering to rest against the wall. "I think we might want to talk. Come in."

"Thank you," Dusty said, though he hesitated a moment before advancing.

The other two zebras continued to watch with a mixture of fear and excitement. The gate rattled and thumped as a pair of zebras, clearly visible through the gaps, unlatched and dragged it open. Up above, the griffon grinned happily. It was a little unnerving, but my E.F.S. ensured me that none of them were currently hostile.

I could see Dusty felt the same. Though he kept his posture mostly relaxed, even turning his head to look around, I noticed that his muzzle remained low, close to the grip of his rifle.

Beyond the gate were a meager hoofful of shacks, made from whatever scrap they had scrounged up and clustered around a muddy central clearing. By now, the entire place was easily within range of our PipBucks, which revealed maybe twenty beings living there. Many had turned out to see the visitors approaching the gates; thin, weary zebras, watching with wary eyes. Children peeked out through vacant doorways and past parents. A few of the adults carried melee weapons, mostly spears. Most were unarmed. Everything smelled of dampness and decaying wood.

Dusty continued to look around as we passed through the gate, but his expression had lost its hardness.

The griffon had started climbing down the ladder from the tower, her weapon slung across her back. I could see it clearly now, a crude but powerful-looking large-bore pipe gun. More interesting was the rifle belonging to the zebra who had been speaking to us. The zebra guard had hopped down from their platform, and as he approached, his rifle slung across his chest, I could see it was a zebra military rifle. It was old, patched up, and adorned with trinkets, but in apparently good condition.

The zebra in question stopped before Dusty, looking him square in the

face for a second before sighing. His ears drooped a little as he raised a hoof, offering it to Dusty. "Welcome to Dawn," he said. "...or what is left of it."

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

# The Sunken City

“You are guests in our home,” said Seroon, the zebra carrying the adorned rifle and, as it turned out, the closest the tiny settlement had to a leader. While not quite the oldest of the tribe, he was well up there in years, and it was impossible to miss the way the other zebras looked to him. “We should extend every hospitality we can.”

Despite the wariness he had shown at our sudden appearance, he was certainly a gracious host. While the tiny settlement had little in the way of comforts, he and a few other zebras laid out mats in the tiny central clearing for us to sit upon, and moments later, brought out food.

Dusty looked down at the plate that had been set before him. It was a decent meal of cooked meat and vegetables which, from what I could see, must have represented a significant portion of what the settlement had available. The younger zebra who set a similar plate before me was barely an adult, and from the prominence of his ribs, could have used the food far more than I could. I could tell from Dusty’s expression that he felt as uncomfortable as I did about taking food that these zebras clearly needed, and just as uncomfortable about any offense we might give by spurning the show of generosity.

“Hell, works for me,” Sickle said, already halfway through her own plate; bits of half-chewed food flew from her lips as she talked around a full mouth. “Shit’s pretty damn good, too!”

While Dusty shot her a scowl, I tried a diplomatic approach. “Thank you for your hospitality,” I said, smiling and nodding to Seroon. “I was wondering, would you permit us to offer you some gifts for your kindness?”

The question distracted him from Sickle’s poor table-manners. “It is generous of you to offer, but that is not necessary. We offer our hospitality freely to those who would come in peace into our home. We do not expect any physical reward.”

I was already opening my packs. Though they were not as bulging as when we had set out across the Hayseed Swamps, they still contained a substantial amount of food; the abundant and aggressive wildlife had at

least provided a good deal of food to supplement that which we had brought with us. "I understand it is not necessary, but I'd still like to offer this," I said as I pulled out several cans, bags, and boxes, including the package of dried fruits I had been saving. I set them before Seroon, smiling. "I've always believed that kindness brings kindness."

I felt so very much like Emerald.

Seroon stared down at my offering, a silent war of emotions underway behind his expression. Finally, he sighed. "You remind me of my grandmother, young pegasus. She would say similar things. Our tribe has always strived to live up to those ideals." He gently touched the package of dried fruits, and gave a slow, sad shake of his head. "But times have grown harsh. It becomes hard to believe in kindness when the world tries so hard to punish it."

I held my smile. "And I would say that is when kindness is needed the most."

He looked up, his eyes locking with mine, searching. It was several long, silent moments before his expression cracked, a faint smile showing. "It does seem to have worked well for you." He drew in a deep breath and waved a hoof. "Please, excuse my melancholy. You are our guests, and deserve better. If times were more kind, I would never wish to bother you with our problems, but I feel as if the spirits of our ancestors must have brought about this meeting. The arrival of a kind-hearted band of warriors, capable of walking this poisoned land and braving the most fearsome beasts within it, it is too portentous to believe it to be chance. What fate has brought you here?"

Sickle snickered. "Kind-hearted, heh." She elbowed Dusty in the side, while he scowled back and hushed her.

As for myself, I pondered how to reply. Starlight was looking to me, worried. Even Dusty chanced a glance my way. After all, we were here for me, so it seemed only fair that I be the one to decide how much to share.

I looked back to those expectant eyes and settled on my answer.

"I'm looking for my family," I said. Seroon's reaction was surprising. His eyes widened, his ears drooping; he looked as if he had just been told someone had died. I quickly continued. "There's a company that had its regional headquarters in Baltimare. I believe the information there might

help me find them.”

Seroon still looked stricken. “This... this family of yours,” he said, his voice suddenly quiet and hesitant. “Would they be a unicorn mare and earth pony stallion?”

I shook my head, giving a questioning look at the curious specificity of the question. “No, they were... like me.”

He let out a soft sigh, relaxing. “That is good to hear. Given the timing of your arrival, I... I feared the worst.”

“Why is that?”

“Because there were two ponies who used to live with us,” Seroon said. “They arrived a few years back, on a foundering boat. We took them in. I know our kind may have a reputation among ponies, but we have always been welcoming of anyone, regardless of their species. We’ve had many ponies live with us over the years, and many others, too.” He gestured to the griffon, who gave a happy nod. I don’t think she’d stopped grinning since we arrived, though she politely remained quiet as we talked. “Though I’m afraid they were the last. They were killed two months ago. When you said you were looking for your family, well...”

“Killed?” Starlight asked.

Seroon hesitated. Some of the other zebras exchanged glances, looking uncomfortable. A few others tensed, jaws tightening. “...Yes,” Seroon said. “We are not the only tribe in these lands. There is another. Long ago, we were kin, but now they see us only as their enemy. They drove us from our homes among the ancient towers, and into the waiting claws and teeth of these swamps. There used to be many ponies in these lands, but they hunted them down relentlessly. I’m afraid you four are the only living ponies that remain.”

While I silently contemplated the situation, Starlight spoke again. “Why would they do that?”

“Because they were deceived,” Seroon said, his expression downcast. “They still see ponies as evil. Corrupt. They don’t see that it was our own leaders who succumbed to madness and brought about the will of the stars. They don’t see that our own people were as much the stars’ pawns as ponies were. They call themselves the Legion, claiming to still be soldiers of a dead nation, and they blame ponies for every wrong the world has suffered.”

We exchanged uneasy glances before I spoke again. "I've heard talk like that before," I said. "Blaming all ponies for things done hundreds of years before they were born. I'm guessing from the look of things here that they consider you to share in that blame."

Seroon gave a dry snort. "Our ancestors were comrades, once upon a time. Now they call us traitors for opening our eyes. Our tribe took in the ponies who emerged from their underground shelters, trying to build a better world. Their tribe tried to tear it all down, bringing the death and destruction the stars call for. Our friendship with the ponies of this land made our tribe strong, but they hid in the wilderness, slowly picking away at us before slipping away again. They are tenacious in their madness."

He heaved a sigh, his head sinking. "We have tried to live a better life, to bring some light to the world. Our ancestors named our tribe The Dawnbringers. We would seek to end the nightmare of the stars, just as the dawn brings an end to the night. Now that light is on the verge of being extinguished." He paused, then looked up, his expression full of caution. "So it is that I must humbly beg of you. Please, kind-hearted warriors. We need your help."

I looked over to Dusty. He looked back for a moment, contemplating the situation, before speaking. "What did you have in mind?"

"We can't continue on like this," Seroon said, his voice weakening. "The swampclaws harass us relentlessly, and we have already lost several tribemates to their attacks. It's only a matter of time until we can no longer mend these walls. The only refuge from their attacks is the safety of the ancient towers of the city, but we can not contest the Legion. They outnumber us manyfold, and have already killed most of our tribe."

"How strong are they?" Dusty asked. "How many are we talking about?"

"A great number," Seroon said. "A hundred, maybe more."

Dusty gave a faint grimace. "And how many of them can fight?"

"All of them," Seroon said, his tone grave. "They consider themselves to be soldiers, one and all. They live to fight. The only ones who can not fight are those who are too young or too old to carry a weapon."

Dusty thought on that for several long seconds before looking at me again, his expression silently questioning.

"I hope you're not wondering what I think you're wondering," I said to

him, my ears folding back. "That's a lot of zebras."

Seroon was staring at me, his eyes appraising.

"But possible?" Dusty asked, and I sighed.

"Theoretically," I said, slow and hesitant. More firmly, I added, "But it would be extremely dangerous. Slow, too. Even if we had all of our resources, it would be difficult, but I only have thirty rounds for my pistol and the single explosive charge. That's not much to work with." I shifted uncomfortably, feathered wings shuffling at my sides. "...Not to mention, that's a lot of lives to take."

Dusty looked thoughtful; I could practically see him sliding pieces into place as he worked out a plan.

As he did so, Seroon spoke up, his voice quiet. "You must be an incredibly dangerous pony."

I blinked as I realized he had spoken to me.

Sickle laughed around a mouthful of food before speaking. "What, Whisper? Hah! Shit, I guess she is!" This only seemed to make her laugh harder.

"Not really," I said, trying to ignore Sickle's laughter. "More like... situationally dangerous, I guess."

Seroon nodded, his eyes never leaving mine. "You are an assassin."

"No," I quickly said, even as I thought of Big Gun and the not-quite Wild Runner. "...I just do a passable impression of one. Reluctantly. I prefer diplomatic solutions."

"I understand," he said. "I too would prefer another course, but the Legion seems determined to leave us no choice. We tried a diplomatic solution, after they drove us from the city. My predecessor went to reason with them. I know not what words were exchanged. We could only watch from a distance." He grimaced. "They spoke for less than a minute before the Legion seized him, cut his throat, and dumped his body into the sea."

I frowned, but nodded.

It was Dusty that spoke next. "How well armed is this Legion?"

"Well enough," Seroon said. "They have at least twenty or thirty working rifles, and now they have all the emplaced guns our ancestors had scavenged from their ships. If they had any idea we had only two rifles, I imagine they would have come to finish us off for good, instead of leaving us for the

swamp to devour.”

Dusty was slowly shaking his head. “I... I don’t know. It’s a bad situation.”

Seroon nodded, but I caught the subtle way his expression fell, and how his ears no longer stood quite so upright.

“We need to go into the city for our own business,” Dusty said, his eyes focused on the food he had still not touched. “We can at least get a closer look to appraise the situation. See what we’re facing.”

“Thank you for considering it,” Seroon said. “And I don’t intend to ask you to do this without compensation. I don’t know what we could offer you, but if it is within our means, you shall have it.”

Dusty gave a dismissive wave of his hoof. “Don’t worry about it.”

Seroon hesitated, then nodded again. “As you wish. Again, I’m sorry for disturbing this greeting with such talk. Please, eat. We can discuss this further once you have completed your search.” He turned to me. “And if there is anything we can do to help you find your family, you need only ask.”

“That’s very kind of you,” I said. “Thank you.”

Seroon left us to eat, even stopping to divert the approaching griffon, who pouted before turning to climb the rickety watchtower once more. A zebra mare brought around a pitcher of water, but mostly, they kept their distance. I assumed they weren’t certain what to think of us. I saw many hopeful looks, chanced when they thought we weren’t looking, but they seemed wary of engaging with us.

Personally, I considered my lessons in practical psychology. The implications of their behavior left me even more hopeful that there was something we could do to help them. These were people on the verge of giving up hope.

Dusty quietly slid up to me. “Whisper, I’d like you to run some recon as soon as it gets fully dark. I’m not sure when the best time will be to move into the city, but I’d like to get some idea of what we’re walking into. Something we can start planning with.”

“Of course,” I said. “Let me finish eating, then I can head out. I can scope things out from a distance while there’s still light.”

“Sounds good,” Dusty said, turning to rummage through his bags. “About time we got around to getting these hooked up, too.”

He drew out one of our broadcasters, presenting it to me.

We spent a couple minutes setting up the broadcasters and testing that they worked. I was a little uneasy that they sent voice traffic in the clear, for anyone to listen in on. Dusty assured me that we wouldn't be transmitting any sensitive data, and in any case, it was unlikely that anyone would be listening on the specific frequency we used, especially if we kept transmissions brief and to-the-point. I reluctantly agreed. Besides, the thought of coding up a real-time audio encryption spell that could interface between a PipBuck and a broadcaster was enough to give me a minor headache. It certainly wasn't something I would be able to just slap together on the fly.

I finished up the last of the meal, which was actually quite good after a week of mostly old oats, and set out. I flew below the canopy, weaving my way between trees, until I reached the edge of the overgrown forest. A quick scan around revealed no hostile contacts on my E.F.S., so I settled in between the bushes, pressing forward enough to see out through the clearing ahead.

The land opened up as it led into what was once a teeming city. The ruins on the outskirts were small and crumbling, overgrown with vines and other plant-life. Those ended where the water of the bay had overcome the land. Only a few broken roofs pierced up through the water, leaving the bay dotted by tiny artificial reefs and islands, until one finally reached the core of the city, where the skeletons of ancient towers thrust high into the sky. Even after the megaspells and the centuries of wear, a dozen towers still stood, like unyielding sentries.

I remained hiding, using the fading light to scope out the towers and approaches in my binoculars. What had looked like vines growing between the towers now showed to be bridges, cobbled together from cables, scrap metal, and other debris. While the windows of the great towers had long since been destroyed, many on the lower levels were now sealed over with scrap. More scrap, mostly signs and fallen trees, formed rickety walkways between the islands of rooftops, leaving a narrow and exposed path from the shore and the cluster of towers. Two similar paths crossed the gap on the other sides, and all ended in reinforced gates at one of the towers.

Walkways and wasteland fortifications overlooked those paths, with small clusters of zebras standing guard. I could see a pair of machine guns mounted in the lower levels of a tower beside the nearest path, and above

the gate itself stood a turreted energy weapon. It must have been taken from one of the ships, and was fairly small for a cannon, but it would still make the entire approach a deathtrap.

Most of the construction seemed centered on the lower levels. There was a bit of construction along the top of the tallest tower, and a few bridges from it, but otherwise the activity seemed constrained to the first few floors. That made sense to me. There was no reason to climb high up in the tower if you didn't have to, and even if they had well over a hundred zebras, they had a tremendous amount of living space in those towers.

After scanning over the towers some more, and tracking a group of spear-and-rifle-armed zebras patrolling around the fortifications, I turned to my map. I had the address of the C.L.T. regional offices, thanks to the other facilities I had visited, and now that I could see the city clearly, I could try to narrow it down further.

I located the submerged ancient streets on the map. The map gave the option to place a navigation marker, and I did so, with a similar mark appearing on my E.F.S. compass. Looking between the remaining towers and the map itself, I finally narrowed in on a mid-height tower, just to the west of the tallest tower and near the middle of them all. I only had to hope that they'd had their office in one of the upper levels.

The sky rapidly darkened. Somewhere, out past the western clouds, the sun had set. The gentle sea breeze rapidly turned icy, and dots of light started sparking from within the towers as the zebras lit fires and turned on lights. Almost all of them were in the lowest few levels, closest to the paths in and out. Only a single point of light shone from the tallest tower, flickering in the distance.

I waited another half-hour before closing my eyes and channeling my magic. When they opened again, they were the pupil-free eyes of a changeling, soaking in every bit of available light. With that, I rose up, spread my wings, and took to the air.

In the darkness, I was as good as invisible, while my eyes took in everything. From where I flew, roughly even with the middle of the towers, I could see how they all connected, the defenses over the approaches, and the gaps where they thought nobody could possibly come from. After all, they faced other zebras and ground-bound ponies. The sky and sea were safe.

I arced away, flying back towards Dawn.

I was descending toward the tiny settlement when faint flickers of light flashed beneath the canopy. A second later, the distant popping of gunfire reached my ears. I put on the speed, wings beating as I slapped the button on my broadcaster. “Dusty? What’s going on? I hear shooting!”

There were two seconds of gut-wrenching silence before my earbud crackled and Dusty’s distorted voice came from it. “Situation’s under control”, he said, his voice muffled, presumably from the grip of his rifle. “What’s your position?”

“I’m flying in right now,” I replied. “I’ll be there in twenty seconds.”

“Copy. Come in high, stay clear of the fire.”

“You got it.”

As I came in over the trees, I saw the swampclaw staggering away from the broken palisade. Dusty was methodically putting rounds down-range as it started to lop away.

A blinding flash of red dazzled my vision, and I swerved, suddenly disoriented. I quickly reverted my minor alteration, regaining a bit of vision as I leveled out.

Dusty had released his rifle, supporting the muzzle with one hoof. “Friendly coming in high!” he shouted, then repeated the call. Even with his warning, a couple of the zebras jerked and spun my way as I landed before realizing who I was.

Past him, through the ruined gap in the palisade, I could see the swampclaw lying some fifty yards away, while the last of the red embers cast off by Starlight’s shot faded around it. It let out a pained bellow, clawing at the ground with vicious foreclaws, while its hindlegs and tail remained still. A deep chunk of its lower back had been burnt away by the shot.

The resident griffon bound up to the teetering platform beside the wall, grinning widely. “Holy crap!” she called out, in a surprisingly high voice. “You weren’t kidding about that thing.”

Starlight was calmly walking up to the gap in the wall, swapping the dull crystal from her Lancer with a fresh, faintly glowing one. “I’m still annoyed that these things are so durable. I’ve taken out power armors with less difficulty than these things.”

“Took it down with one hit,” the griffon cheerfully observed. “Cut the

spine. It's dead, it's just too stubborn to know it! Cool!"

"Yeah, well..." Starlight shut the chamber of her Lancer, leveling it again. There was another flash and crack, and half the swampclaw's head vaporized. "I'd rather make it clean instead of... that."

"Killing ain't clean," Sickle rumbled as she walked up to the gap. There was a fresh cut in the plating across her chest, but no blood. "Sides, probably be boring if it was."

Starlight scowled. "Can still kill without making 'em suffer. That just isn't right."

Dusty dropped his rifle to its sling, and nodded to the wall. "We need to get that hole patched up."

"Don't worry," the griffon said, turning from Starlight. "We'll get it all fixed up nice and quick. I don't think they'll be quite so eager now that you lot killed one of 'em!"

"Eh, let 'em come," Sickle said, grinning under her muzzle. "These fucks are kinda fun."

"We've got a job to do," Dusty said. "I'd like to make sure their defenses are going to hold while we take care of that."

"It'll be fine," the griffon said with a cheery grin.

Seroon caught our attention as he walked up. "She is right," he said, slowly slinging his trinket-adorned rifle across his back. "The swampclaws are aggressive, but patient. They take their time. We will not see another attack before morning."

"Are you sure?" Dusty asked, his expression concerned.

"Sure enough," Seroon replied with a nod. "And if they were to return earlier, we can hold them off, even if I have to spend the last of our ammunition. We will survive until you return."

"Yeah," the griffon said, and turned her grin to me. "And you better come back, too! Starlight was telling me stories, and I'll bet you've got some good ones! Oh!" She bound forward, offering her talons in a friendly gesture. "I'm Bloodbeak." She immediately rolled her eyes, chuckling. "Don't mind the name. It's a griffon thing."

"I'll take your word on it," I said as I offered my hoof, and we shook.

"Good!" she said, then gave me a firm pat on the shoulder. "Now go find your family."

Eventually Dusty led us off to the side, while several half-awake zebras patched up the wall. "So," he said, sitting before me. "How's it look?"

"The Legion they spoke of is holed up in the towers that were the heart of Baltimare," I said in a quiet voice, and sat down as well. "It's well-fortified, with a few narrow and exposed paths watched over by emplaced weapons. The towers themselves are connected by bridges a few levels up. I may not be well-experienced in tactics, but it seemed to me like it would be an extremely defensible position. On the plus side, their activity seems concentrated around the lower levels, and they have to use those same exposed paths to get out of their territory. I didn't see any boats."

Dusty grunted, slowly shaking his head. "Sounds bad. How about the C.L.T. offices?"

"I found the building," I said. "A tower, about halfway into their territory. I have no idea what level it's on. I'd have to go in to find it, and I wanted to at least talk with you first."

"Good," Dusty said. "I'd prefer to not send you in alone, if possible. Did you find a way in?"

"The easiest way in is flying into the middle levels of the tower, but that isn't really an option for all of you." I frowned. "And the front door is obviously out."

"Makes me miss Vulture," Dusty said. "Seems like a perfect time for a roof insertion. She's not exactly subtle, though."

Starlight gave a soft snicker. "We could hear that contraption from a few miles away."

"A skywagon might work, though," Dusty said. "I know there are wrecks all over the place back around Mareford. Baltimare must have had a few. If we've got a pegasus, we should take advantage of it."

"Key word there: wrecks." Starlight shook her head. "Half of them fell out of the sky when the megaspells went off, and the others have been rusting and picked apart for centuries. There aren't any pegasi below the clouds, so nopony ever had a use for them. A working skywagon is probably more rare than a working motorwagon. Even if we did find one I could fix up, I have no idea how long it'd take to get it working."

Dusty frowned, thinking for a moment. "Is there any other way to get us in?"

Starlight hummed thoughtfully. "Maybe a boat? This was a harbor city, right? Must be some boats still around, and that should be an easy patch job."

"It also has us going in where the zebras are the most dense," I pointed out.

"Oh no," Sickle said with an exaggerated roll of her head. "We might have to kill some of the zebras we have to kill anyway."

"A hundred-plus zebras is too much for us to fight," Dusty said. "We might be able to take on the zebras in our way, but it takes just one loud noise or one little mistake for all of them to come pouring in, and we die."

Sickle shrugged. "Eh, I think we can take 'em. Can't be any worse than thirty mercs, and Whimper took them out all on her own."

"How many are in the building?" Starlight asked, and I shook my head.

"I don't know," I said. "Given the number of towers and the number of zebras, I'd guess less than twenty, but it could be quite a bit more. It's one of the smaller towers, but there's still a lot of room on the levels they're occupying, so it could be more. I'd have to get closer and count markers to get a better idea."

Dusty was looking off into space and slowly shaking his head. "Inserting by boat is a possibility, but I don't like it. We can cut the bridges, but that would only delay reinforcements. It still leaves a lot of zebras between us and our goal, and getting out on a boat would be much too exposed if they're alert and shooting at us."

"Still better than a skywagon we don't have," Starlight said with a frown.

"I don't think we're all getting in," I said. "I know, you probably won't like the idea, but unless we can find and patch up a skywagon before dawn, we don't have a way to get all of you safely in and out of that tower."

Dusty mulled it over for several seconds before slowly shaking his head. "I know you're the one with all the stealth and infiltration training, so I'll leave the final call up to you, Whisper. I just don't like the idea of you going into an area like that on your own. You remember what happened at Paradise Beach."

"Flying away wasn't an option for me back then," I said. "It is now. Still, I'd rather have Starlight there. It's very unlikely that any servers are still powered and running, and while I could probably get them working again, she's much more experienced at that. I can't carry all of you, but I can carry

her there and back.”

Starlight cocked her head to the side, eyes distant. “Huh. That could be cool. I’ve never really gone flying before. I mean, there was the time you lifted me into the wagon, but that was like five feet. That doesn’t count.”

Dusty slowly nodded. “I suppose that might work.”

“And it leaves you and Sickle free to help defend Dawn,” I noted.

“It does,” Dusty said. “Though I’m thinking we might be able to support you some. Or at least, I can.” He uncovered his PipBuck, switching to the map screen. “Which tower are you going to?”

I pointed it out, and he pointed to the shore on the opposite side. “Then I’ll set up here. If you need a distraction, give me a call on your broadcaster. I’ll draw their attention my way so you can get out.”

Sickle snorted. “And I get to sit on my ass being bored while you cunts do the fun stuff. Wonderful.”

Starlight rolled her eyes. “I’m sure we’ll find another swampclaw for you to fight or something.”

“Eh.” Sickle shrugged. “We’ll see.”

“If we’re going to do this,” I said, “we should do it soon. I don’t even know what level the C.L.T. offices are on, and if there isn’t a directory listing anywhere, that means we’ll have to search the entire tower.”

Starlight nodded. “And if they’re down where the zebras are?”

“If that’s the case, we’ll have to come up with a plan to deal with that situation,” I said. “Even if it means backing out and coming back later.”

“I still don’t like how much of a disadvantage we’re working under,” Dusty said, “but unless Seroon knows of a skywagon in good condition, it sounds like this might be our best option for getting it done.”

Unsurprisingly, he did not.



Starlight and I approached the bay from the west, nearest to our destination. We kept a keen eye on our E.F.S. display for threats, but the wildlife seemed to steer clear of us.

We traveled light. Our bags were almost empty, carrying only the tools we might need and a single healing potion each. Despite that, we still carried our weapons. It was like a stark, physical reminder of what could happen if

we were discovered.

We slipped out from the treeline and between the ruins of old buildings, overgrown and crumbling, while ancient rubble crunched quietly under our hooves. Most of the structures were so decayed that they would offer no real shelter, but supplied plenty of shadows to hide a lurking pony or zebra. Even with our E.F.S., we stayed alert.

Several tense minutes later, we reached a long line of debris, mostly wood and other light materials. It was the high-water mark, and several yards beyond it, the water of the bay lapped lightly at the cracked road. The street beyond was completely flooded, leaving a canal between the ruined buildings. In the gloom of the night, they perfectly framed the nearest tower, still a quarter of a mile away.

We crouched behind a weather-worn driftwood log. "Check your gear," I whispered. Several seconds were spent checking the straps on bags and weapons, securing pouches, and otherwise ensuring nothing would be lost or rattle during our flight. PipBuck maps were consulted one final time before turning off their screens. Finally, I pressed at my earbud, ensuring it was seated securely in my ear, and raised my hoof to my mouth.

"Radio check," I murmured into the broadcaster. "Dusty, do you hear us?"

The reply came a couple of seconds later, only slightly distorted. "I read you loud and clear," Dusty said.

Starlight raised her own PipBuck. "How about me?"

"Loud and clear," Dusty repeated.

"Okay," I said, heaving a slow, deep breath, and exhaled. "Let's get hooked up."

Starlight's horn lit up, her magic lifting the crude harness of weapon slings and belts. While she remained crouched, I stepped over her, and she fastened the harness around the pair of us. It took only a few seconds. "Okay, give it a test."

I stood up as high as I could, her weight bearing down on the straps across my shoulders and back. A quick pump of my wings gave the whole thing a good shake, but it held snug.

Starlight shook faintly. For a moment, I thought it was nerves. Then I realized she was trying not to laugh.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"Sorry, sorry," Starlight said, unable to help snickering quietly. "I'm just *really* glad Sickle isn't around right now to get the wrong idea about this."

I was suddenly very aware of her back pressing snugly against my chest and belly, with her tail right between my hind-legs. "I suppose this is a somewhat compromising position."

Her snickering grew, and she quickly shook her head. "Sorry. Serious mode now. Focusing. Right."

I chuckled softly, giving a gentle nuzzle at the back of her neck, then turned to my broadcaster again. "Okay, Dusty. We're heading in now."

"Copy that," Dusty replied. "Update me when you're hooves-down, and good luck."

"Will do," I said, and lowered the PipBuck again. "You ready for this?"

Starlight's expression tightened up, and she gave a firm, determined nod.

My wings beat, lifting the weight from my hooves. I hovered just long enough to wrap my forelegs firmly around Starlight's barrel, then began my ascent.

We cleared the rooftops, slowly arcing away to keep our distance as I gained altitude. Starlight tensed, but remained silent, her head twisting to look around. I could see our destination clearly, the tower rising some twenty floors above the waterline. I set my sights on the middle of the tower, several levels above where the Legion had built up. I continued to climb until we drew even with it, and then continued on just a little higher.

Once I judged our altitude to be high enough, I banked in. My beating wings stilled as I entered a glide, giving the muscles a much-needed break. We closed quickly, while I balanced speed with altitude, aiming for the gaping holes that had once been windows.

We sailed into the darkness, and I quickly back-winged, cutting our speed and coming to a halt just as our hooves touched the ground. Bits of debris crunched underhoof once more. Once we had stopped, everything fell into complete silence, save for the soft moan of the sea breeze and the occasional faint groan of the ancient tower.

My E.F.S. was filled with hostile contacts in every direction. I silently cursed the two-dimensional mentality behind its design. Clearly, there hadn't been many pegasi on the design team.

I undid the harness, freeing Starlight. Once I stepped away, she stood, panting softly, legs trembling. I was worried until she turned to me, her smile beaming in the darkness, and quietly hissed, “That was *awesome!*”

I had to suppress a laugh, despite the adrenaline already burning at my nerves. I quickly held a hoof up to my grin, signaling for quiet, and she nodded, taking a seat to catch her breath.

While she did so, I raised my PipBuck, whispering quietly into it. “Dusty, we’re in.”

A hint of static overlapped his voice. “Copy. Update me if anything comes up. I’ve got eyes on the area. I’ll let you know if I see any activity.”

I lowered my hoof again, tucking in the loose straps of the harness as I looked around. The space we landed in might have been an open workspace at some point, or perhaps a large meeting room. Whatever it had been, now it stood completely vacant, save for the detritus of fallen and crumbling ceiling panels and the glittering pebbles of glass. The entire interior of the tower had been mostly open, with at least half of the walls being floor-to-ceiling windows. Their remains lay scattered about in dull fragments that were more dangerous as a source of noise than potential injury.

“Okay,” I whispered as I moved in close to Starlight. “This is more your area of expertise. Where can we find what floor C.L.T. is on?”

She rose to her hooves, hiding her grin again. “Right. We need a directory. Main lobby is out, so we should find the elevators. They usually have a basic directory. That should tell us what’s on the current level, at least.”

I nodded. “Lead the way.”

We carefully picked our way through the debris on the floor, working our way toward the center of the building. Soon, we were far enough in that Starlight turned her PipBuck screen on again, its faint green glow much more subtle than the harsh light of our flashlights.

Her tail flicked against me as she came to a halt. We’d reached the end of a hall, which opened into a small lobby. The doors of two elevators opened into vacant shafts along one of the walls, while the broad greeting desk opposite them stood in decaying silence, warped and ruined by centuries of sea air.

After a moment to look around the room, Starlight stepped forward, and we got to searching. She first went to a placard by the elevators themselves,

while I went to the desk. In addition to open drawers with decayed papers, there was a terminal, its case pitted with corrosion. Naturally, the power button didn't work. I turned to shuffling through the papers until Starlight got there.

She slipped up close to me when she returned. "I could barely read the sign," she whispered, "but C.L.T. isn't on this level."

"See if you can get the terminal up," I whispered in reply. "This was probably a secretary's station. Maybe they'll have something."

"On it!" She slipped around behind the terminal, prying off the back of the case while I continued searching through the papers. Most were illegible. I gave up when she finally got the terminal working. It continually complained about a lack of connection to the server, while I skimmed through what little data it contained.

To our relief, one of the files was a building directory, and I smiled as the name Crystal Life Technologies popped up. "There we go. Floor eight." I scrolled up. "And we're on... floor fourteen." I frowned, running the math and trying to recall the exact layout I had seen from the air. "I think that's one floor up from the built-up area."

"Oh," Starlight said, grimacing. "Wonderful."

She led us around until we found the stairs, and we slowly made our way down. As we neared the lower levels, we traded places; I led, pistol ready, while she trailed just behind me. We stepped slow and careful, producing hardly a sound.

We reached the door to floor eight. I took a slow, deep breath, readying myself. Then I cracked the door open, slowly opening a tiny sliver to peer through. Only darkness met me. With a brief moment of relief, I opened the door, and we slipped through, letting it shut quietly behind us.

It was easy to find the C.L.T. regional offices, with the name emblazoned in badly faded and flaking letters above the doors. We silently made our way in, overly conscious of every faint sound we made. I knew, intellectually, that the thick floors of a high-rise tower should muffle anything we do, short of throwing around furniture or gunshots, but every little click of hooves or tiny crunch of crumbling debris made me fear some keen zebra ear detecting our presence.

Once we were in and the door was closed, Starlight leaned in close,

whispering in a barely audible voice. "Okay, we're here. What exactly are we looking for?"

"Anything that would have a list of C.L.T. facilities in the region," I whispered back. "Shipping data, company registries, mailing lists, anything like that."

She nodded, and we got to searching.

The offices were in even worse condition than those above. Anything wooden was halfway rotten through after the years in the sea air, and most things made of metal were badly corroded. Desk after desk turned up nothing but decaying, water-bleached papers, all illegible. Many desks held terminals, their cases badly corroded, sometimes so badly that you could see the internals of the devices. We ignored them; if the papers turned up nothing useful, as proved the case, there was a better place to look for digital data.

The server had been somewhat protected from the elements by the room it was in, but it had still fared poorly over the years. The outside was pitted and stained. I had to hope the inside hadn't corroded.

"Think you can get it powered up?" I whispered.

"Maybe." Starlight paced around it, eventually turning to a device at the back of the room. "It's got a backup power source, but it looks shot. Not sure how long my batteries would last."

"If you can get it up and running, I can copy everything over to my PipBuck."

"Yeah," she said, looking more closely at the server itself. "Still, I'm having flashbacks of Paradise Beach."

"I doubt there are any power generators to kick on," I noted. "Still... maybe you can disconnect it from external power?"

"Exactly what I was thinking," she whispered with a nod. "Okay. Give me a few minutes. Let's see what I can do."

She spent several minutes prying apart the backup power system, disconnecting power leads and testing connections. She pulled out and spliced wires, probed leads, and finally brought out one of her own spark batteries, hooking it up to the rewired system. She paused, the last wire hovering just over the battery. "I have no idea how loud this will be."

I looked up from my PipBuck, already connected to the server. "If it's

too loud, pull the battery, and I'll fly us out. We can always come back later and pull the hardware out. Might be a pain to access the data, but it's an option."

She nodded, then looked back to her work. She took a deep breath.  
"Okay."

The wire connected with a soft pop, and the backup power system thumped, then hummed, a green light flickering to life on its side. A moment later, the server gave a long, quiet beep as lights lit up, followed by the quiet whine as the device came to life. The screen of my PipBuck flashed as data streamed across the cable.

Starlight sighed in relief. "So far, so good."

"Well done," I said, watching the boot sequence progressing. "Stand lookout. This shouldn't take more than a few minutes, but we don't want any surprises."

"You've got it," she said with a quick nod, and slipped off to the front of the offices.

The server was not a happy, healthy machine, but it struggled to life. It was an older Stable-Tec brand, and those ponies evidently made things to last. After two centuries in salty, humid conditions, the primary hardware still functioned. Better yet, C.L.T. had shown foresight in their server hardware. While the system reported the failure of fully half of the data storage systems, redundancy meant that all the data was still intact.

I initiated a transfer, copying over the contents of the server's drives; looking at the tiny PipBuck hooked up to the giant server, it was hard not to reflect on how much computers had advanced in just a decade. Part of me wondered where we would be now, had the megaspells never happened.

While the files transferred, I started looking over what was there. Mostly, it was records of messages sent across various C.L.T. sites. I would have skimmed over the entire directory and continued on, but a single word in one of the subjects caught my attention.

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*Subject: Permafrost, Sweetdreams, and Serenity*

---

Serenity.

I glanced over at the file transfer. There were still a few minutes remain-

ing. I opened the message.

---

*Skyfrost,*

*Despite the progress that has been made, I'm afraid we can't give Permafrost the kind of prioritization you're asking for. We do appreciate the strides your team has made, but we're still too far from a feasible product. Yes, the tests have shown great promise, but the role body mass plays in survival rates is far too dramatic to expect ponies to accept. Ponies aren't going to care if we claim that the data shows the process to be completely safe for infants or small pets. They're going to see the projected double-digit mortality rates among full-grown subjects and decide that, if it's not safe for them, it's clearly too dangerous for their foals. You know how protective parents can be.*

*Meanwhile, Sweetdreams has produced a viable alternative, and one that's passed every safety test. It's something we can deliver now, and it's been subsidized by the ministries. If we're going to compete with Stable-Tec, we need a product that ponies can trust, and that means as few doubts as possible. Because of that, and because of the state of the world we live in, we have to shift our focus to rapid implementation of Sweetdreams. It's not only the best choice for both projects, it's our best shot at helping as many ponies as quickly as possible.*

*Please, don't think that we're sidelining your project. Permafrost has shown great progress, and if the mortality issues can be rectified, it promises great improvements over the Sweetdreams project. This is a purely temporary matter; getting*

*Sweetdreams up and running will expand our resources and allow us to commit more heavily in Permafrost.*

*If that's not reassuring enough, I can offer a tidbit that hasn't been circulated yet: with the Serenity collaboration nearing completion, and with Stable-Tec's lead designer incorporating our technology into the Ministry-led Single Pony Project, Stable-Tec has opened the possibility of direct collaboration between our companies. We're very close to working together as partners, rather than competitors. While Serenity insisted upon strict confidentiality agreements for their project, Stable-Tec has said they see their own involvement as a proof-of-concept of licensed and collaborative projects. For all of Stable-Tec's expertise in construction and protective structures, the Stables will only ever be a refuge for a tiny, privileged percent of ponies. Now imagine all those Stables incorporating our life-sustaining technologies.*

*Think of how many lives we could save, should the worst come to pass.*

*Permafrost is not in any danger of being shut down or sidelined. It carries far too much promise for that. Keep up the good work, and by next fiscal year, we should be well on the way to increasing your funding well above its previous levels.*

*Respectfully, Gleaming Facet, C.E.O.*

---

I closed the message, disappointed. Serenity was hardly even mentioned, and it told me nothing I hadn't known before about that name.

But the message did contain one thing of interest, tucked away in the file data. After following a short trail of digital breadcrumbs, I tracked back to find the message sorting matrix, and from there, it was a short hop to find the company's entire routing information, both digital and physical.

I had the location of every C.L.T. installation in the world.

Smiling, I raised my hoof and whispered into my broadcaster. "We've got what we came for."

Static overlaced Dusty's voice in my earbud. "Good to hear. I'm not seeing any activity out here. Come on back."

Starlight slipped into the room. "You found it?" she whispered as she huddled in close.

"Yep," I said, watching the transfer for the final few seconds. The moment it stopped, I pulled my cables and turned the screen off. "Kill the power, then let's get out of here."

"Sure thing!"

While I stowed the cables, Starlight pulled a single wire, and with a plaintive beep, the server powered down.

With that, we headed back the way we came, eager to leave. We back-tracked to the stairwell, cracked open the door, and slipped in.

The door had just shut when another opened below us, and the sound of hooves echoed softly in the narrow space. Two options immediately presented themselves: hide and hope they didn't come up to where we were, or continue up the stairs to get away and hope they didn't hear our movement.

I pressed Starlight back into the corner of the landing and crouched before her, drawing my pistol. My ears stood perked, listening intently, hoping for the hooves to grow more distant.

They didn't. I waited, my pistol leveled. With Starlight's PipBuck hidden and mine turned off, the stairwell was pitch black until a soft light rose from below, casting feeble, dancing shadows across the wall. It was barely enough to silhouette my pistol's sights. I aligned them as carefully as I could, and waited. The single set of hooves slowly drew closer.

The exotic mane of a zebra poked into view, followed by the rest of him. The light flared in my eyes. He held a lantern in his teeth, the flickering flame casting off a weak, warm light. A rifle lay across his back.

As his lead hoof stepped onto the landing, I engaged S.A.T.S. Two sharp cracks, like a hammer on rock, echoed in the chamber, and the zebra made a grunt of surprise, twisting and dropping the lantern as he fell to his side.

I was already up and advancing, the soft glow of Starlight's PipBuck

lighting the room as the lantern's flame guttered and died. The zebra lay on his side gasping, his forehooves alternately scratching at the ground or clutching at his chest. I'm not sure if he recognized my presence. He was still alive, but he was out of the fight.

I lined up and put a single round into his head. The zebra stiffened and went still.

I immediately stepped back, keeping my pistol leveled. "Starlight," I said around the bit, keeping my voice quiet. "Magic. Grab him."

"W-what?" she said, her wide eyes jerking away from the body to look at me. "Why?"

"We're bringing him with us," I said. "We need to hide the body for as long as possible."

She hesitated, but her horn lit up, and with a grunt of effort, lifted the zebra's body. She held it at a distance as we climbed the stairs. I could tell she was uncomfortable with her gruesome cargo, but she did what she had to.

When we reached the level we had entered from, I had her set his body down in a small closet well away from the stairs. We stripped him of his rifle and its single magazine of ammunition before shutting the door.

Starlight looked to me. I could still see the discomfort in her eyes, but she nodded. She understood.

At the edge of the building, we strapped ourselves together and stepped out through the window, gliding silently away in the night.



"So, what've you got?"

I sat beside Dusty, in the center of Dawn, and brought my PipBuck-clad hoof up. "I looked through every C.L.T. installation in the region. Mostly it's clinics and some administrative offices, nothing that would be useful to my family." I didn't want to be too specific with so many ears around. "There were a total of five research and testing sites in the region, if you include Serenity as one. Paradise Beach was another. That leaves the three experimental sites. We've been to Alpha." I flipped to the map. "Beta is here," I said, pointing to a spot well west of Rust, then moving to point to another spot just south of Mareford. "And Gamma is here."

"I think I know that Gamma place," Dusty said, switching to his own

PipBuck. "Rangers were called in to hit some bandits operating out of some ruins right about there. Looked like it had been some lab. There was a sealed section, had been shut for decades, maybe since the war. That was... almost ten years ago, I think."

I frowned. Being known increased the chance that someone had already gotten in there. "And you didn't open it?"

"No need," Dusty said. "Like I said, had been shut for years. We were just there to clean out the bandits, and they obviously weren't in there. We filed a report, but I doubt anypony investigated further. There's enough in Dodge City to keep the salvage teams occupied without trekking days out into the desert."

I nodded. "Well... hopefully nobody else came along to disturb it." I set my hoof down again. "So we know where to go. That just leaves the question of what we're going to do here."

"Yeah," Dusty grumbled, shaking his head. "That's the question, ain't it? I don't like it. Fighting the Legion seems like a losing bet."

"I can pick them off from a literal mile away," Starlight said, shifting her Lancer on its sling for emphasis.

"Yeah, you could do some damage," Dusty agreed, though without any cheer. "And Whisper could pick some off at night. Still... Whisper's right about how long it'll take. This isn't a fight we're going to win. Not quick enough to save these folk."

"So what are we going to do?" Starlight asked.

"Right now?" Dusty shrugged. "Right now, I'm going to sleep. In the morning... I'm going to have to ask Seroon to make a difficult decision."



The morning sun rose on the horizon, casting a brilliant glow across the sea and the underside of the clouds. It was a beautiful sight, and as we gathered for a shared breakfast, many of the zebras paused to look out at the colorful scene.

Seroon, however, looked concerned over Dusty's plan. "Why would you ask this?"

"Because I'm afraid I don't see any other options," Dusty said. "Even if we were able to track down and kill every single swampclaw in the entire

swamp, the Legion would still have to be dealt with. We can pick them off at range, and we can infiltrate behind their lines to take out some more, but that's the kind of thing that agitates folks. Most likely, all we'd do is provoke them into attacking sooner rather than later. We can hurt them, but we wouldn't win that fight. I hate to say it, but if you stay here, it's going to end badly for you."

Seroon's ears had fallen. "To abandon our home again..."

"I know it's hard," Dusty said. "Hell, I know just how hard it is, but sometimes..." He sighed. "As long as you're alive, you can always make a new home."

Seroon slowly looked around at the huts and patched walls that surrounded us. The silence lingered for several long seconds before he spoke again. "We have already been forced from our homes once by the Legion." His eyes fixed on Dusty. "Our ancestors were stranded here, to never again see the land of their childhood. They forged a new home here, because events forced them to... and because a home is more than simply a patch of land."

He solemnly nodded. "If you can lead us safely through the swamps, we will follow."

## Chapter Thirty

# Exodus

The tribe was ready to move by noon.

They accepted Seroon's decision with surprisingly little resistance. A few voiced concerns or hesitation, but a few gentle words and a little reasoning from him was all it took to unify them.

With that, the tribe set to gathering up all of their possessions and preparing for the journey. Starlight and I remained on watch while the tribe worked. Bloodbeak joined us a few minutes later, climbing up to the tower with her thin bags. She and Starlight immediately fell into chatting again. Mostly, they talked about food. Every now and then, Bloodbeak would cast a glance my way.

It took less than two hours for the village to pack. Even the most heavily laden zebra carried less than I did.

"The land provides," a younger zebra said as she strapped on her bags, a spear resting across her back.

"Most of the plants here are poison," Seroon added, "but not all. Our ancestors learned which are safe to eat. It is not food that concerns me."

We gathered in the center of the town. The faces around us were full of concern. We were heading out into no-mare's land, where monsters lurked. Most of the zebras had nothing more than a sharp stick to defend themselves with. Children huddled close to parents; there were a half-dozen of them, most of whom didn't appear to understand what was going on, only that their parents were worried. Those parents tried to put on a brave face, but it only did so much. This was the second time they had to leave their homes, and the children were quick to pick up on what was happening.

"Stay close," Dusty said. "Sickle and I will be in the lead. Starlight, Whisper, you'll be near the middle, covering the flanks. I want that Lancer ready to respond to a threat in any direction. Seroon, I'd like you and any other skilled fighters or hunters watching the back. Everyone else, especially the children, stay in the middle. No matter what happens, nobody wanders off alone or gets isolated. Okay?"

There were nods and grunts of agreement, and Dusty turned to Sickle.

“Let’s get going.”

“Bout fucking time,” Sickle muttered under her breath, and began plodding along.

We slowly streamed out through the gate. Many of the zebras paused there, whispering a few words and touching the gate one last time before leaving it behind.

As we departed, Dusty slipped back to the middle of the group. “Hey, Whisper.” He glanced back, motioning to Bloodbeak. “You too.”

The griffon trotted up to join us with a curious tilt of her head. Once she was walking alongside Dusty, he continued. “I want us to keep moving as much as possible. Hopefully without more than a couple short breaks each day. I’d like to have one of you up in the air, scouting ahead for paths and wildlife.”

I winced; Dusty had evidently not noticed that Bloodbeak had been using a ladder, or at least not made the same realization I had.

To my surprise, she chuckled. “Oh, I can’t fly,” she said, and lifted her right wing. Her expression tightened as she stretched it as far as it would go, which ended up being hardly at all. While it looked intact enough lying against her side, the wing was a useless knot of muscles and feathers. “Legion bullet got me in the wing, and it healed up all wrong.”

“Oh,” Dusty said, his expression ashen despite her apparent cheer. “Sorry, I hadn’t realized.”

“Nah, it’s okay,” Bloodbeak said, relaxing her damaged wing. “I got used to it years ago.” She glanced my way. “Not to say I don’t miss flying! But hey, could have been a lot worse. At least I crashed where these guys found me. It’s how we met!”

Starlight cut in. “They couldn’t fix it? I thought zebras were really good with alchemy and healing and stuff?”

Bloodbeak chuckled awkwardly. “Eh, turns out, not so much.”

“Zebras in general, perhaps,” Seroon chimed in from behind us; he was with a few other armed zebras at the rear of our column, including one carrying the new rifle we had brought back. “But our ancestors were soldiers, not shaman. The skills they brought with them were of a very different sort.”

“Mareford has some good doctors, even a surgeon,” Dusty said. “I don’t want to get your hopes up too much, but they might be able to help.”

"Woah, wait," Starlight said. "We're going to Mareford? Aren't we kinda, uh... you know...?"

"Is there something wrong?" Seroon asked.

Dusty shook his head. "Nothing wrong, no. It's the largest settlement in the area, and they're generally good sorts. They'll take care of you just fine. Just, we're not welcome there right now, thanks to a certain pony."

"Why not Gemstone?" Starlight asked.

"Too small," Dusty said. "I'm sure they'd want to help, but a group this size would probably strain them to the limits. Same for Rust or any other place. Mareford's the only settlement that can take on a group this size." He turned to me. "Anyway, we need that scouting."

I sighed and shrugged off my bags. Bloodbeak immediately snatched them up, smiling. "I can't help with the scouting, but at least I can carry your bags while you're out!"

"Thanks," I said, offering a smile in return, and took to the air.



The first attack came barely an hour after leaving Dawn.

The swampclaw lurked in the overgrown shallows just ahead, unaware that I had seen it on my E.F.S. as I flew overhead. When it charged, Starlight was waiting. A S.A.T.S.-aimed shot to its face sent it into a limp tumble, ending in a twitching heap at Sickle's hooves. The pair in the shallows further to our side remained still, watching.

A small flight of mutated parasprites came across the group later in the afternoon. In the evening, a young zebra mare was barely able to warn Sickle before she wandered into the reach of a carnivorous plant. Naturally, Sickle continued on anyway, and when the vines grabbed at her, she tore the plant apart. The zebra that had attempted to warn her looked on in awe.

As dusk approached, Dusty found a patch of dry and relatively clear ground. We spent some time clearing out some more of the brush, opening up sightlines, and preparing for the night.

The roaring started just after dark. The swampclaws kept their distance, calling out. Trees rustled and cracked. Red marks would show on our E.F.S., circling around, and rarely, indistinct forms would move just beyond the reach of our lights. We alternated guard shifts, with one of our group and

two zebras at a time, keeping a keen eye out for encroaching threats. When not on watch, we tried to sleep.

Every time I started to drift off, another roar bellowed out across the swamps. My heart lurched, adrenaline pounding as I jerked to life, only to find the situation completely unchanged. Then I would lie down again, trying to force myself to sleep, only for the scenario to repeat itself.

I don't think I ever properly got to sleep.

I was surprised at how calmly the zebras took it, particularly the children. They'd wake up to the sounds, eyes peering out in the darkness for a few seconds before closing again. The only sound made was a young infant who would cry when woken until his mother gently calmed him.

There was a miasma of lethargy over the group when we set out that morning. I forced my way through it, focusing on my scouting. As I wearily circled around and skimmed over the tree-tops, I could see the swampclaws still lurking, moving with our group. Only a tiny bit of their head and the occasional jagged back-plate broke the surface, leaving thin wakes in the water. Every now and then, one would rise up, scurrying over a patch of dry land to plunge into the water on the opposite side. While our group slowly picked their way through dense vegetation and wound their way through patches of dry ground, they lazily floated along nearby.

A sharp crack and dazzling line of red light sent a spray of mud and steam flying as one of the swampclaws darted across another patch of ground. Down below, I could see Starlight silently curse as she reloaded. Her ears sagged, her eyes as tired as mine were.

The swamp noticed our passage. It seemed every bit of hostile wildlife in the region was drawn to us, as if we had led a buffet out to meet them.

While the swampclaws hung back, hardly an hour went by without running into some kind of danger. Most were the mutated bugs that were so easy to deal with.

As I flew ahead of the group, a trio of mutated bats, which Dusty later identified as bloodwings, darted up at me from the treetops. My tired wings barely responded in time, banking sharply to the side to avoid their initial attack, then wheeling around and beating hard for the rest of the group. Warned by a quick call over the broadcasters, my companions were ready when I flew overhead, trailing the three vicious little beasts. Two fell in

the first pass, one to Dusty's bullets and another to the spectacular overkill of Starlight's Lancer. The third was too dimwitted to not follow me on a second pass.

Worse was the pair of timberwolves, their wooden bodies charred and smoldering with balefire. I was banking over the group as the beasts charged into the rear. Several rifles snapped and cracked, and with the aid of S.A.T.S., I was able to wheel around and put a few rounds into one before it closed. The rifle fire seemed to do nothing to the magical creatures. Starlight's Lancer was significantly more effective. The line of angry light struck the lead timberwolf low in the chest, blasting several pieces of charred wood to splinters, and the rest of the beast fell to pieces in a tumble. Then she was reloading, and the second one lunged at the zebras in the rear.

Seroon stumbled back, as did the other rifle-armed guards, while a pair of spear-armed zebras met the timberwolf's charge. The impact was tremendous, as hundreds of pounds of charred wood slammed into their tiny spears. One zebra fell, his spear snapping in half, while the other desperately jammed her own spear into the beast's chest, staggering with the impact but holding the beast back for a single crucial moment.

The timberwolf bit the spear, the haft igniting as it tore it from her grip, but that moment of delay had been enough for Sickle to cover the distance. She met the beast head-first, smashing her armor's horn into its chest—and then bellowing in pain as the green flame enveloped her head. She jerked and tore away, ripping away several pieces of the timberwolf as she staggered back.

The creature lashed out and writhed for a moment, and was just getting its claws under itself again when Starlight finished reloading. A moment later, all that was left was a heap of smoldering, shattered wood.

Sickle tore off her helmet and plunged her face into the shallow water nearby. I swooped in to hover over her, leveling my rifle and putting a single shot into the water some twenty yards away. The pair of eyes ducked beneath the surface again, the water rippling as the swampclaw turned around and backed off from its potential meal.

"Fuck off," Sickle snapped when Dusty spoke with her, but he was insistent.

"Drink it," he said, holding the healing potion out. "Burns are bad enough for infection even in clean conditions, and this is as far from clean

conditions as we can get."

She grumbled a bit more, but eventually relented. I didn't get a good look at the wounds while I kept watch. The best look I got was that evening, when we stopped to eat. Even after the healing potion, her muzzle was a knot of scarred and inflamed tissue, without even a trace of hair.

By the time night fell, I was exhausted. As we made camp, the swamp-claws resumed their taunting. Roaring, splashing, tearing at vegetation. This time, I fell dead asleep.

I woke to the ear-pounding sound of gunfire. I lurched upright, grabbing at my rifle as the hammering blasts of Bloodbeak's rifle lit the area around me like snapshots, the flash overpowering the flickering light of the low fire. There were shouts all around. I scrambled to my hooves in a maelstrom of chaos, with just enough clarity of mind to keep my rifle pointed at the ground until I had made sense of the situation.

A shout drew my attention, and I spun around. A light swung over, illuminating the hulking grey-green hide of a swampclaw as it barreled into a pair of dazed zebras. The towering beast reared back, raising its massive claws to strike, only to flinch back as Dusty's rifle hammered at it. By then, I had brought my own rifle up. I switched straight to automatic and keyed up S.A.T.S. before tonguing the trigger. My rifle chattered, and I held the front sight over the creature's chest as well as I could. The suppressor did little to quiet the weapon, but I later realized that it was the reason I had no muzzle-flash obscuring my view.

The beast was already loping away by the time my magazine ran empty. In the gloom and confusion, I couldn't even tell if it was hurt.

A crack and red flash lit up the area for a split instant, followed by the agonized howl of a wounded swampclaw. I spun back around to see the scattering embers of Starlight's shot as the swampclaw she had shot floundered at the edge of the light.

More screams sounded to my side, and my head snapped around. There was a third swampclaw! It had made use of the distraction to dart in, and I watched in horror as its jaws snapped down around a stumbling zebra's flank. I fumbled through reloading as it reared back, the zebra giving a cry of pain as he was hauled off his hooves. Another zebra bravely charged forward, trying to sink her spear into the beast's belly. It snapped the spear with

a swing of its claws, sending the would-be rescuer staggering back.

Then it turned and ran into the darkness.

Several zebras were yelling and snatching up weapons, but Dusty bolted forward.

“Stop!” he shouted, stepping in front of the zebra with the broken half-spear. “Stay in the camp, or they’ll pick us off one-by-one! Form a perimeter!”

To their credit, the zebras stopped. Even in that emotional moment, they recognized the needs of survival. Dusty was completely right; the only way they would survive was to be practical and consolidate.

That was little comfort when the agonized scream echoed through the foliage. Tears glistened in the firelight, but the zebras held their ground.

I spread my wings, darting up into the air. “Starlight!” I called out as I swung over, coming to a quick hover beside her. “Lancer!”

She immediately levitated it up. I dropped my rifle at her hooves and snatched the Lancer’s bit in my teeth, then turned and bolted towards the treeline.

Past the edge of the camp, the world was almost pitch black. I turned up my PipBuck screen as bright as I could as I flew after the pair of marks on my E.F.S. I didn’t have far to go. The swampclaw had thrown the zebra down on a patch of dry ground. As my PipBuck lit up the scene, it revealed the beast towering over its prey. Even in the monochrome light, I could see the blood glistening on the zebra’s mauled body, and could hear his pained groans as he twisted in on himself.

The swampclaw backed away as I came to a hover, skulking back several steps from its catch, as if trying to lure me in.

I wasn’t playing that game. I leveled the Lancer, my eye lining up on the telescopic sight. S.A.T.S. had recharged, and I hit it again.

Trying to line up a telescopic sight on a target some twenty yards away was more difficult than I had expected. It was probably only a few seconds, but even with the aid of S.A.T.S. it felt like an eternity before I lined the crosshairs over the dim green image of the swampclaw’s face.

I tongued the trigger. A sharp hum discharged beside my head, followed by a blinding flash and powerful crack as the weapon blasted its way through the atmosphere to reach its target.

The muzzle jerked down as I fired; despite conceptually understanding how such weapons work, witnessing the Lancer at work had established the fact that it was exceptionally powerful, and my mind had instinctively decided that exceptionally powerful weapons must have exceptionally powerful recoil. Still, despite my best efforts to throw the world's easiest shot, my vision cleared to show the swampclaw spasming on the muddy ground. The entire front of its head, from the eyes forward, was missing.

I quickly looked around as I slung the now-useless Lancer. Seeing no other hostile contacts, I dropped down.

The zebra was in horrible shape. His flank had been torn open to the bone, and his entire underside was covered in blood. The green light made it hard to make out the details, but I could still see the pair of deep gashes along his chest and belly, dark holes in the stark lighting. The silhouette of his belly was all wrong. He twitched slightly, making a weak groan through clenched teeth.

I wrapped my hooves around him, wings pumping as I lifted off and flew back to camp as quickly as I could. He hung limply beneath me, giving only a couple more weak groans.

The entire camp was awake when I returned, with the armed adults forming a circle around those who couldn't fight. A few scooted to the side, making a clearing for me to land. I set the wounded zebra down and landed beside him.

He was completely still. Another zebra, an older mare with tears in her eyes, sat by his head, cradling it.

"He was just breathing," I said, moving as if to treat his wounds, until realizing I had no idea what to do. I could see his ribs laying bare, and bits that should be inside hanging on the outside. The wounds were beyond my limited ability to treat. They were beyond even the power of our remaining healing potions.

I still fumbled about, trying to do something, anything. My hooves went to his wounds, as if trying to stop the bleeding. "He was just breathing," I quietly repeated. The zebra at his head made no move to help. Instead, she stroked along his muzzle. He was completely still. Even the bleeding had ceased.

My hooves slid away as I sat back.

A hoof gently touched my shoulder. I looked back to see Seroon's face. His face held firm, but I could see the sadness in his eyes.

He gave a tiny nod. "Thank you for bringing him back to us."

I swallowed. "I'm... sorry."

He simply shook his head, and turned to the mare opposite me. They shared a brief, silent exchange of looks, and then he was walking away, returning to the circle of guards. With that, the mare turned and called on a few of the other zebras forward. They were arranging a funeral.

Feeling a little out-of-place, I slipped away. It was only as I left that I saw the children looking on. There was sadness there, but not the fear or anguish I would have expected. This was not the first time they had seen such a thing.

Starlight took one look at the blood staining my coat and led me to a shallow patch of water just outside the camp. While I watched with flashlight and E.F.S., she cleaned the blood from me.

Somewhere behind me, I heard Dusty's voice. "I'm sorry."

He was speaking to Seroon, who softly replied, "You do not need to apologize. Only a fool would expect this journey to be without danger. I am saddened by Zeren's loss, but that is not on you. If we had stayed, he would have died just the same, and many more would join him. You have given us the opportunity for a better future."

Dusty was quiet for a moment before replying. "That's a very practical outlook."

"We may strive for peace," Seroon said, "but we are descended from warriors. We understand. As do you, I expect."

They fell into silence again, and my attention returned to Starlight's hooves, scrubbing the blood from my coat. A few minutes later, I was clean, though wet and cold. I just sat there for a while until Starlight spoke.

"Are you okay?"

I sighed. It took a few seconds to articulate my thoughts. "I'm becoming far too familiar with death for my comfort."

Starlight didn't say anything. She just slipped her foreleg around my shoulder, giving a comforting squeeze.



The swampclaws still followed us the next morning, but they kept their

distance. Starlight took pot-shots at any eyes she saw peeking out from the water, but the aquatic environment protected them well. Only a single shot scored a solid hit, vaporizing the top of a beast's head. Most shots just sent up sprays of water and a cloud of steam.

By mid-day, we'd had enough. As the group paused for a quick break, Starlight passed me her Lancer and the charging pack for its crystals. I flew around the perimeter, hunting down red marks. I'd fly in over lurking swampclaws, hover, and send a blast straight down at them. Shooting accurately while in a hover is much harder than it sounds, but I managed to kill at least one, and wounded another. The rest scattered.

I returned Starlight's weapon when we set out again, but kept up my patrols. The swampclaws tried to draw near the group a couple more times. The sight of me swooping over them was enough to send them under again.

There were no more attacks. That night, we rested in silence. We never saw the swampclaws again.

The rest of the wildlife wasn't quite so considerate, but were also much less of a threat. One zebra managed to get herself bit by a mutated parasprite, but the laceration was easily treated. Another zebra was wounded after a slippery bloodwing darted in and attacked him. It was only on him for a few seconds before Sickle tore it away and slammed it to the ground, but that was enough to leave the young stallion weakened and semi-conscious.

While Dusty fed the zebra a healing potion, Sickle tore the wings off the squealing bloodwing, letting it squirm for a while before tossing it out into the nearby shallows.

Still, while we handled the threats, it was tiring. I think Starlight handled it the worst. She was constantly alert, looking for new threats, until the physical and mental fatigue left her exhausted. Dusty handled it the best, naturally. I suspect a career as a soldier had left him well-equipped in that regard, even better than my own experiences as an Infiltrator. I had to struggle a little, mentally connecting the similarities of being hunted in the wilderness with living a hidden life among ponies. Dusty, meanwhile, seemed to just "switch off" and relax as soon as he was no longer on watch. I don't think I've ever been so jealous of a pony being able to go to sleep at the drop of a hat.

Though I suppose Sickle handled it just as well, if only because she

didn't seem to care about anything.

Not that she was exactly relaxed and casual. She was gruff and snippy, and more than one zebra got shoved aside when they unwittingly got in her way. "Shit, we're saving these dumb cunts," she grumbled as she tore into a meal that, I silently noted, the zebras had prepared for us. "They got like ten stallions, too. You'd think these fuckers could give a mare a good rutting as thanks." She muttered obscenities under her breath as she slapped back a couple of pills and downed an entire bottle of beer. None of us were surprised to see the bottles included in her "essential" traveling supplies.

"Or, shit," she continued, "that little bitch I saved. Got half my face burned off doing it, too. Least she could do is show some thanks."

Starlight grumbled quietly, and after a moment of chewing, decided to speak more clearly. "You ever try, I dunno, *not* being a horrible pony? I mean, hell, I saw some of 'em looking at you like you were Luna herself, until you started treating 'em like shit. Seriously, if you'd stop acting like a giant bitch all the time, they'd probably love you."

Sickle snorted. "I don't give a shit what they think of me."

"What?" Starlight raised her head from her food, cocking her head to the side and leveling an unbelieving look her way. "But you... you *literally* just —"

Sickle sneered, made extra grotesque by how the bare skin of her muzzle bunched up. "I want 'em to fuck me, not write me a love letter."

Starlight stared for a second before shaking her head. "You know, ponies—zebras too, I imagine—are a lot more likely to... *have sex* with someone they don't hate."

I raised a hoof as I contributed my share. "Speaking as someone experienced in manipulation and applied psychology, Starlight is correct."

Sickle gave a dry chuckle as she turned back to her food. "And that's why I've had more sex than all of you cunts combined."

I decided to not argue that point. She was probably correct, if by a more narrow margin than she imagined.

Starlight turned back to her food as well, though I caught the forming smirk. "...Yeah, but we've had *better sex*."

I wanted to sigh, but instead snickered.

"That's brahminshit," Sickle said matter-of-factly. "Cause I know Whis-

per ain't done the hellhound thing."

Starlight's expression tightened, and for a moment I thought she was embarrassed, until she hissed, "Hey, quiet about that!"

I appreciated her concern, but with how the conversation had turned, I couldn't help adding a little fuel to the fire. "Yes. You know that because I told you so." I smiled. "And we all know that a pony such as myself would never tell a lie."

Sickle stared at me for several seconds, the thin glint of her eyes narrowing inside her helmet. Finally, she snorted, turning back to her food. "Nah. No way the runt's going for that."

I knew even at the time that I probably shouldn't taunt her like that, especially when she was already expressing frustration, but it was too entertaining at the time. It was somewhat less entertaining later that night; while she had no partners, she also had no shame, and thus no problem about relieving a little of that tension right in the middle of that night's camp.



Our progress through the swamps was slower, with an entire group in tow. I wouldn't say it was uneventful, as there were plenty of animal attacks. I might, however, say it was relatively uninteresting. After the twentieth time Sickle smashed some over-enthusiastic wildlife, it began to lose its life-or-death response. At least it gave her some outlet that didn't involve alternately leering at or threatening our traveling companions.

Finally, as I took one of my regular scouting flights, my eyes caught the edge of the swamps.

It was just after dark when we left the dense vegetation behind. Our PipBucks had led us unerringly right back where we started, and there was a feeling of resolution as Dusty pulled back the dirty tarp, revealing our motorwagon. There were a few impressed murmurs from the Dawnbringer zebras, and particularly from Bloodbeak. Myself, I just felt relieved at the return of normalcy it signaled. It was, in retrospect, a little strange to feel so attached to a vehicle we had only owned for a few days prior to leaving it.

Though I have to admit, it was also quite relieving to be able to shed some of the supplies I had been carrying, while also replenishing my half-depleted ammunition.

The next morning, the zebras looked to the east, murmuring quietly about the lack of sun. We prepared to set off.

"We don't have room for everyone to ride," Dusty said, "but we can load all the supplies into it and travel light. We've still got a good distance to travel, probably most of a week on hoof."

Seroon had turned to look west, into the increasingly sparse ground of the Wasteland. "Is the entire land bare?"

"Mostly, 'fraid so," Dusty said. "There's enough for folks to get by on, but proper farms are few and far between. Don't worry, Mareford has plenty."

"But I assume there will be little along the way." He frowned a little, looking back to the motorwagon. "Most of a week, you say? Our supplies should be sufficient."

"We've got plenty to spare if they're not," Dusty said. "Still, we'll want to travel fast. Starlight, Whisper? You two take the motorwagon. You'll be on scout duty."

Starlight looked up from her PipBuck. "I don't think we've got the charge to keep her running circles around the group."

"Don't need circles," Dusty said. "You just hop from one bit of high-ground to the next along our route. Get good eyes out, and fall back immediately if you find any hostiles. I just want to make sure no raiders see a group walking the wastes and decide to pay a visit."

Seroon spoke up, once again reminding us of how isolated the Baltimare area must have been. "What are raiders?"

"Ponies like me," Sickle said with a cruel grin. "Only without all the charm and etiquette."

Dusty grimaced. "And it's sad that she's pretty much right."

"I'm surprised she even knows that word," Starlight said.

"Yeah, see?" Sickle said, looping a very unwelcome hoof around Seroon's shoulder, and flicking her head in Starlight's direction. "If I were still a raider, I'd be over there stomping her face in for being disrespectful. Then, I dunno, maybe see how much of her gun would fit up her uptight ass before pulling the trigger."

Dusty glared icily at her. "Sickle, knock it off, right now."

"Oh, fuck off, Dirt," she said, though she released Seroon, who eyed her

warily. "They need to know this shit if they're going to survive."

"And they'll get it," Dusty replied, "but not from you, and not like this. Knock it off."

Sickle's head lowered, and she practically growled in reply. "You know, I'm getting really fucking tired of you telling me what to do."

"You're a big mare," Dusty said, unflinching. "Deal with it."

She leaned forward, and they stared into each other's faces for several long, tense seconds. Then Sickle cracked a smile. "Well, shit, look who finally grew some balls." She reached up, giving him a body-jarring but otherwise friendly slap on the shoulder before turning and strolling away. "Just don't baby 'em, Dusty." He waited until she had walked off before rolling his shoulder, wincing slightly.

We got moving shortly afterwards. After more than two weeks of tromping through overgrown foliage and flying endless patrols, it was a wonderful luxury to kick back in the worn seat of the creaking, jostling motorwagon. Even the blast of dusty air as we rolled across the valley was a welcome relief.

When we reached the top of a hill, Starlight and I would crawl out and climb onto the vehicle's roof. I sat against the gun, sweeping my binoculars around, while Starlight peered through the scope of her Lancer. Down in the shallow valley, the narrow line of zebras, ponies, and a single griffon made their way across the land. When they drew even with us again, we crawled in through the motorwagon's windows and rolled off for the next ridge, bouncing and rattling across the uneven terrain.

After a week of unrelenting tension, it was more than just relaxing. It was *fun*. I'd have gladly driven around those hills and valleys all day long, not to get somewhere, but just to enjoy myself.

Even the increasingly barren terrain didn't dampen the mood. Instead, it made things easier. From the top of a hill, we could see everything for miles. After weeks of stress, we no longer had to worry about something sneaking up on us with no warning.

Suffice to say, we had the easy job. While we still kept an eye out, we relaxed and talked. When the conversation ran out, we fell into a comfortable silence, leaning gently against each other. I even eventually got to doing more recordings, after the long hiatus of our journey through the swamp. I'll admit, I was a little self-conscious of doing so with someone listening in,

and especially so when that someone was one of the key players in the events I was documenting, but I'd made a point of honesty with my companions. Especially Starlight.

"‘Sneaky little Whisper’ indeed,” she said in echo of my dictation, and shot a smirk my way. “So you were really trying to steer me around, there?”

“Yes,” I said, with a somewhat guilty smile. “I know Dusty was a bit rough and quick to leap to judgment, but you have to admit, you did antagonize him.”

“Yeah, because he was being a jerk!”

“Yes, because he was being a jerk,” I agreed, then added, “but he also had good reason to be suspicious. I just wanted you to go a little easy on him until he finally accepted us. I’ll note it worked, too. He’s much more welcoming, now.”

Her smirk had turned into a thoughtful frown as she considered my words. “Well... yeah, but, you know, you could have just said that at the time.”

I gestured to my PipBuck, as if pointing to the recording I had just made. “I did.”

“You... well, I mean, I guess, but...” She stopped, cocking her head to the side as she tried to find the right words.

I filled them in for her. “But it’s probably a little different hearing the precise logical reasoning behind a conversation, especially where one party is trying to convince the other party of something. When you get to a fine enough level, the difference between ‘convincing’ and ‘manipulating’ is essentially all semantics.” I gave a wry smile. “The joys of an Infiltrator’s training.”

“Weird bug things,” she said, with a weak snort of amusement. Then, more seriously, she asked, “So, you’re always thinking like that?”

“To some degree, I suppose. Even if I’m not intentionally doing so, I’m aware of the mechanics in action during any social interaction. It’s not something I can just forget.” Not exactly the most reassuring thing I could say, I suppose. I added, “If it’s any better, those mechanics are like tools to assist with one’s intent, and I do have good intentions.”

“So... you’re manipulative and sneaky and sometimes weird, but you do it with good intentions.”

I couldn't help chuckling. "And right there, you've pretty much summed up an Infiltrator's profession."

"Urg," she said, sticking out her tongue for a moment before concluding, "I think I'd go insane trying to think like that all the time."

"Handling of stress is one of the big selectors for Infiltrator training," I said. "It can be an extremely restricting life, at times. I don't think you'd enjoy it. You are... much too free and open in your emotions." I smiled, leaning over to nuzzle her. "Speaking as our resident emotional gourmet, I mean that as a compliment."

Starlight shook as she quietly snickered, ending with her elbowing me in the side. "You really know how to be *incredibly* creepy, you know?"

"I can't help it," I said, leaning back against the gun-mount, and feeling her weight shift against my side. "It's fun. Most of the time, I have to hide myself away and play a role. I may be good at it, but you know, there's always something so relieving in being able to relax and be honest and myself for a while."

Starlight gave a soft, thoughtful hum at my side. A moment later, she snuggled in closer, resting her head against me. She opened her mouth to say something, but seemed to think better of it. Instead, she gave me a gentle nuzzle. The warmth of her affection flowed freely.

Much of our trip was spent in such a way, quiet and relaxing. Bloodbeak begged to go with us after our lunch break, and we allowed her, unable to say no to the enthusiastic griffon. She perched on the back of the motorwagon as we drove, laughing and cheering, her wings spread as much as she could manage with her injury. Her enthusiasm continued even after we stopped.

"That thing is awesome!" she said as she hopped down to join us. "It's so fast! Like flying on the ground! Are there more of these things? Does Mareford have them? Where can I get one? Where did you get this one?"

"We found it," Starlight quickly replied, and shot me a glance. I nodded in reply.

"Cool!" Bloodbeak said, grinning as wide as a griffon could. "Where could I find one?"

We had to explain the rarity of the vehicles to her, which left her disappointed for merely a moment before she enthusiastically launched into exclamations and questions about other interesting machines the motor-

wagon carried, such as the minigun and two sets of damaged power armor. Soon she had changed gears again, branching into other subjects and prying for information about our adventures. I'm afraid I can't really recount all of it, as it rapidly turned into a blur of words and topics ranging all over the place, and I quickly lost track of it all. Considering my field of expertise, I think that says a lot.

I hope it doesn't sound unkind, but I'm glad she only asked to come with us a couple of times. Her exuberance was a little exhausting, and I liked having the time alone, with just Starlight and my recording. Still, there was something uplifting about watching her perched atop the speeding motorwagon, grinning and carefree. There was a simple joy to it, which seemed to shine all the brighter against the bleak backdrop of the Wasteland.



It was on our third day when our scouting paid off.

While I was still idly scanning the horizon, my attention was mostly on my recording. I was trying to work out how to describe our "recruitment" of Sickle when Starlight's ears pinned back.

"Shit," she said, loud and clear, still peering through her Lancer's scope.

I hit the button to stop recording. "What?" I asked as I brought up my binoculars, trying to find what had caught her attention.

"That alicorn," she said, her voice tight. "It's back."

The distant flicker of motion caught my eye from across the valley below, looking almost black at that distance. It was only as I finally got my binoculars in place that I could make out the purple coloration. Her wings beat a couple more times as she flared and landed, then folded neatly at her side. Her ethereal mane continued to flow behind her.

I dropped my binoculars to their strap, raising my PipBuck and depressing the button on the broadcaster. "Dusty! The alicorn is back."

There was a moment of silence before my earbud crackled. Dusty's voice was firm, almost taunt. "Say again."

"The alicorn is back," I repeated. "To your... southwest, she just landed on a ridge."

Another pause. "Shit. Eyes on. Mount up and get back here. Make it quick."

"On it," I said. Starlight was already slipping in through the vacant front window, while I dropped into the cargo bay. "Go!" I called out, rapping a hoof against the roof for emphasis.

The vehicle thrummed with arcane energy as the spark-driven motor engaged. The vehicle lurched and shot forward, the wheels grinding in the dry ground and sending a spray of pebbles and dry dirt out behind us. Moments later, we were careening down the slope of the hill, bouncing and rattling like mad. I clutched the grip of the machine gun with one hoof and the edge of the bay with another. It felt dangerously precarious as the vehicle rocked under me, but the big gun was oddly comforting.

If the alicorn hadn't seen the rag-tag group we were escorting, she needed only to follow the cloud of dust we left in our wake.

We skidded to a halt near the group, the vehicle shuddering and sliding beneath me before coming to a halt so abruptly that I fell back atop our supplies. I was already upright when Dusty hopped onto the side of the motorwagon. "Starlight, keep pace beside the group, between them and the alicorn. Whisper, you're on the gun. Keep it ready, but don't fire unless she tries to attack us."

"Understood," I said as I resumed my position, with a bit too much adrenaline pumping through my veins to feel embarrassed at my fall.

He slid forward to be more even with Starlight. "Keep track of how much juice this thing uses keeping pace with us. Every hour or so. I want to make sure we're not going to run her dry."

"You got it," she said.

As soon as he hopped down, Starlight had us moving again, circling around the rear of the line to position us between the line of zebras and the distant alicorn.

She simply stood there, unmoving, watching us slowly pass through the valley below.



"What is she?" Seroon asked us that evening, when we had stopped for the night. The sun had set somewhere behind the clouds. The fading light left only a subtle difference between the ground and the sky beyond, as the silhouette of the distant alicorn steadily faded into the growing darkness.

"They're called alicorns," Dusty said with a shrug. He was more focused on his food, though his eyes regularly rose to scan around. "Like the princesses of old, only... not. Beyond that, I couldn't tell you. Radio said they used to be the... servants, I think, of some so-called goddess. Sounded like monsters."

"It said some of them were nice," I said, thinking back to the radio broadcast we had heard in Mareford. The alicorns had been a minor element of the transmission, especially when contrasted with the news of Celestia's survival, but our own passing encounters with this alicorn had led to it sticking in my memory. "I'm not sure what she's doing, or why she's following us."

"It's been following us for a few weeks," Dusty said to Seroon. "I guess we lost it going through the swamps. Was hoping it wouldn't find us again so soon. Damn thing creeps me out."

Seroon slowly nodded, staring out into the night. "So you do not know what her intentions are?"

"I watched that alicorn turn a pony inside out," Dusty said, following up with a snort. "I don't plan on taking chances."

Starlight grunted before swallowing a bite of food. "Ugh, don't remind me of that, I'm eating."

"Blood and guts everywhere," Sickle said gleefully. "Just tore their chest right open, ripped everything out, made the guts dance around in her magic!" Then she leaned over to Starlight, grinning. "You going to finish that?"

Starlight muttered and hunched over her food, eating with renewed determination. Sickle snickered, returning to her own meal.

"To be clear," I said, "the pony was already dead. Not that it makes it any less gruesome, but it is ever so slightly less concerning than if she had done that to a living individual."

"Assuming that alicorn even sees the distinction," Dusty said. "Only ponies I've ever seen do anything like that are raiders."

Sickle gave a laugh. "Nah, raiders ain't anything like that. They'll cut you up and laugh when they do it, 'cause it's fucking fun. It's all violent and messy, and all like, I'm alive and you ain't, hah hah! You know, enjoying the moment." She chuckled, gesturing with the blades on her legs before setting her hoof down again. "That big bitch, though? She wasn't having

any fun with it. It was like..."

She stopped for a moment, trying to find the wording, then suddenly pointed at me. "It was like how Whisper talks. Was all thinky like and shit." She lowered her hoof, returning to her food. "Not like a raider at all."

I frowned, while Dusty very succinctly summed up my own concerns. "So it calmly and deliberately butchered a dead pony," he said, frowning as well. "That doesn't much reassure me, Sickle."

"Hey, at least you don't have to worry about her making you play jump-rope with your own intestines," Sickle said with a shrug.

Dusty snorted. "I don't plan on giving it that chance. I'd rather go down fighting."

"Yeah," Sickle said, grinning again. "Lots of ponies talked tough like that."

Seroon had remained silent, still staring out into the darkness. When our conversation died off, he finally spoke again. "It is hard to believe anything could survive in this desolate land," he said, his voice quiet. "So empty and lifeless, and yet, there seem so many determined to make it even more lifeless."

"Mareford is a safe place," Dusty said, looking up from his meal. "You don't need to worry about any of this stuff, there. No raiders or—"

"I'm sorry," Seroon said, holding up a hoof. "I do not mean to sound as if I doubt your words. You seem an honest stallion, and you have put much effort into helping us. I am sure this Mareford is as you say. My concern is more... general. The state of the world as a whole, rather than our small part in it."

"Ah," Dusty said, leaving it at that.

"It's not that bad," Starlight said, then quickly amended herself. "Well, I mean, it kinda is, but there's plenty of good parts, too. More than there are bad parts, at least."

Seroon considered her words for a moment, and slowly nodded. "I assume you've seen a good deal of those 'bad parts', then?"

"More than I'd like," Starlight replied, and shrugged her shoulder, her Lancer shifting against her back. "But that's why I have this, so I can help ponies."

"Same reason I joined the Militia," Dusty said. "And why I left it."

It seemed like a good time to chime in. “My life has always been about helping others, even if it put my own life in danger. There are lot of horrors out there, but there are good people, too. I know how far the world has fallen, but I honestly think things are improving. It’s certainly better than I once thought it was.”

I know, I’d planned on using the same “isolated farmer” backstory, but a good act requires flexibility, and given the mood, this bit of optimistic honesty felt far more appropriate. Besides, Seroon already thought I was an assassin, or something close to it, and given the zebra history of assassins, I expected he might understand better than most ponies.

Sickle had paused to look around at us, then grinned at Seroon. “Fuck, I’m just here ‘cause I get to have fun killing ponies, and I get paid for it. I mean, sure, being a raider had its perks, but I think this wins out.”

“Don’t mind her,” I said. “She enjoys provoking people.”

“I enjoy fighting and fucking more,” Sickle replied, kicking back with yet another bottle of beer. “But since I ain’t getting any of that right now...”

I smiled a little. “She also complains more than anypony in our group.”

“Oh!” Sickle started laughing. “You mouthy little cunt. Don’t forget that I can stomp your whole fucking head in!” Despite the suggestion of violence, there was no anger to her voice.

So I turned my smile to her. “You can try.”

Sickle froze. For a moment, I worried I had pushed the ‘playful banter’ too far. Then her laughter returned, and she flicked her empty bottle at me. Despite my best effort, and the fact that the bottle was actually aimed at the ground by my side, I still flinched. That just made Sickle laugh more. “Oh, yeah. So scary!” She fell into snickering as she returned to the final scraps of her meal.

I relaxed again, satisfied in my reading of Sickle. Seroon was still watching her, as if still trying to decide what to make of her. I offered an observation.

“She could go wherever she wants, do whatever she wants, and pretty much nobody could stop her. Out of all the things she could be doing, she fights raiders and travels with us.”

Seroon considered that for a moment longer before offering me a small smile and a nod, as if to say, “I trust your judgment.”

Sickle, meanwhile, turned to leer at a couple of the other zebras. "So, hey, speaking of fucking..."



Traveling at a walking pace truly highlighted just how much faster a motor-wagon was for long distance travel. Days passed to cover the same distance we had covered in one.

Starlight and I had it easy, her driving while I stood by the gun. Everyone else walked, and the toll was starting to show. Everyone looked worn down and tired, except for myself, Starlight, and Dusty.

The alicorn was persistent. She remained at a distance, standing atop a hill alongside our course. She stood like a statue, her hair flowing in the breeze as if it were weightless. The only time she moved was for the short flight to the next hill.

Once or twice a day, she flew off in a different direction, away from us. At first, we thought she had lost interest, but she always returned, less than an hour after leaving.

The first day was tense, images of a rapidly dissected pony dancing in my memories, as we waited to see if she was going to attack.

By the third day, she was simply a feature of the terrain. We still kept a wary eye on her, but the nerves and adrenaline had gone. She seemed no more interested in closing the distance than we were.

Sickle kept up her crude behavior, and it was with only a little surprise that one night's rest was interrupted by the sounds of her *aggressive* copulation. It turns out that one of the younger stallions lacked a mate and had no significant prospects, and Sickle had discovered this. I'm not sure what methods she had used to seduce him, though knowing her, I'm sure they were fairly direct. I worried for a bit that they might have been *too* direct, given her past, but I doubt he would have tried to hush her if that were the case. Not that his efforts were terribly effective.

He walked with his head low and ears pinned back the next day, while a few of his peers lightheartedly teased him. His embarrassment was broken only by the occasional smile or chuckle, though he mostly kept quiet and tried to avoid attention. He also seemed to make a point of staying away from Sickle.

Sickle, of course, strutted along quite happily. I wouldn't say she mellowed out, as I'm not sure she ever would, but she was at least less obnoxious in her behavior.

We continued on through the dusty, empty land, until the jagged line of ruined skyscrapers peeked out over the hills.



We came to a halt on a low hill, overlooking the wide, flat valley. A few farms dotted the land, wherever a small patch of fertile land could be found. Beyond them lay the high walls of Mareford. We were just two miles away; close enough for Seroon and his company to easily finish their journey, far enough that we wouldn't be seen and identified.

"Hardwood can probably help get you settled," Dusty was saying as he helped unload the last of the zebra's belongings from our motorwagon. "I don't know if he's in charge of anything, now, but he's always been a good sort, willing to help ponies out. Cinder Block might, too. Most ponies should know where to find them. If nothing else, you can always go to the town hall. I have no idea who's in charge now, but there'll probably be some pony there that'll help."

While he helped unload, I sat on the roof beside the gun. Mostly, I watched the final preparations for our departure. Every now and then, I'd look back, away from Mareford. The alicorn stood on a hill a good mile away from us, watching.

"Thank you again for this," Seroon said, smiling softly as a younger stallion helped him strap on a pair of packs. "This is an unfamiliar journey we find ourselves upon, but you have started us off better than we could have hoped for."

"Heck," Dusty said with a quiet chuckle. "We were going this way, anyhow."

"And we are better off for our paths having crossed," Seroon said, offering a hoof. "I hope our paths cross again, someday."

"So do I," Dusty replied, giving a friendly shake. When they were done, Seroon turned to help another of his tribe, and Dusty quickly spoke up again, reaching into his bags. "Just one—well, two more things, I guess."

Seroon turned back to him with a curious raise of an eyebrow, and Dusty

pulled out a small sack, which looked to weigh a few pounds. It clinked and rattled as Dusty passed it over to Seroon. “This should help out some. At the very least, it should help keep you on your hooves for a while as you get settled.”

Seroon’s eyes widened in surprise at the generous gift, and a couple other zebras murmured happily. Then Seroon peered inside the bag, and his expression changed to one of confusion. “Are these... bottlecaps?”

Dusty blinked. “Oh. Right.” He glanced my way, cracking a smile as he caught my eyes, then looked back to Seroon. “Ponies use them as money around here.”

Seroon had followed his gaze to me, and I shrugged. “I thought it was weird, too.”

He smiled, closing the sack again. “That is very generous of you. I hope there is some way we can repay this gift in the future.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Dusty said, and Seroon nodded.

“And the second thing?”

Dusty hesitated, his smile slipping away. “Yeah. It’s... probably best if you don’t mention our names.” He glanced awkwardly our way. “Most of the ponies there are good folks, but we’ve had some misunderstandings. I don’t even know if it’s still an issue, but I wouldn’t want you to get caught up in that just because somepony heard our names.”

Seroon fell silent for a long moment, his head tilting ever so slightly as he considered Dusty’s statement. Finally, a small smile creased his lips. “Our tribe has always been willing to endure hardships in order to do what is right. You have given our tribe a chance to survive, and for that, we are in your debt. The least we can do to repay that is to be honest about how you have helped us.”

“I just don’t want—”

Dusty halted as Seroon raised a hoof to silence him. “I understand,” the older zebra said. “I appreciate it, as well, but it is as you said.” He glanced my way, his smile growing just a hair. “Kindness brings kindness.”

Dusty shut his mouth, still for a second. Finally, he smiled, giving Seroon a nod.

Minutes later, the small tribe started the final stretch of their journey. Most of them passed by us and our motorwagon, taking one last opportunity

to thank us. Bloodbeak was practically bouncing as she called back to us. “Come visit! I want to hang out and hear more stories! And maybe get another ride! Bye!” Then she hustled to the front of the line, her eyes turned to the tall walls ahead with just as much eagerness.

We watched them set out, while Dusty leaned against the side of the motorwagon, smiling silently. Starlight balanced atop one of the armor plates as she walked up to sit on the hood beside him. After a moment of silence, she tilted her head toward him. “You know, for someone who can be such a dick, you’re a big softie, ain’t you?”

Sickle snorted, then started laughing, managing to slip in something about a “soft dick” between laughs.

“Oh, grow up,” Starlight said, although she didn’t quite suppress her own snicker.

“Yeah, yeah,” Sickle said between chuckles, the dry ground crunching under her spiked hooves as she walked off behind us.

Dusty shook his head, giving a short huff of amusement before switching to business. “How are our supplies?”

I lazily kicked one of my hind legs, dangling over the cargo bay. “We’ve still got a full drum of water, we won’t have to worry about that for a good long while. I’d guess a month or so. Food’s getting low. Hard to say precisely how long it’ll last. A week, maybe a little more.”

“With our ride, we’re only a couple days from pretty much anywhere,” Dusty noted. “Speaking of, how are we doing for power?”

“Enough to top off the wagon’s charge,” Starlight said, tapping her hoof on the hood. “Might have a few spark batteries spare after. He’s kind of a hungry thing.”

Dusty nodded. “We’ll have to look into getting more spark batteries when we get food, but nothing’s critical just yet. We can take care of other things, first.” He looked back to me. “That Gamma site is maybe an hour or two away. You ready for this?”

My heart lurched. I nodded. Only a couple of hours, now.

Somewhere behind us, Sickle bellowed out a shout. “Hey, purple bitch! Why don’t you bring your giant cunt ass over here instead of just staring all the time!”

“Damnit!” Dusty shouted as he spun around, trotting over to her.

“Don’t provoke the damn alicorn! We don’t even know what it can do!”

Sickle wasn’t listening, however. She simply grinned. “Oh, hey, it worked.”

“What?” Dusty’s head snapped around as I looked out past them. Sure enough, the alicorn was rising up from where she had stood, her broad wings pumping as she lifted up into the sky. She was flying straight for us.

“Shit!” Dusty spat, then spun. “In the wagon, now!”

“Oh, come on,” Sickle said, still grinning as she lazily followed after us. “It’s been boring since we left the swamps. This could be fun!”

Starlight slid nimbly through the window, already starting up the motorwagon as Dusty scrambled in through the side. He shouted back at Sickle. “Get in or we’re leaving you behind!”

“You can’t leave me. Some of that shit in there’s mine.”

Despite her protest, she still climbed in, the vehicle rocking under her weight. The whole thing shook as she sat heavily behind me, but she seemed content to leave me with the gun, as cramped as the arrangement was.

The moment the vehicle settled, the motor hummed loudly, and with a lurch, we shot off down the hill, leaving a rising cloud of dust in our wake.

I leaned to the side, tracking the alicorn’s flight, to see if she was following us, or if she diverted to follow the Dawnbringers. Either would have been bad.

Instead, she descended in a slow glide, eventually back-winging to touch down on the hill we had just abandoned. She remained there as the distance rapidly grew.

We continued on, the motorwagon bouncing and rattling as we tore across the dry landscape, until she was finally out of sight.

## Chapter Thirty-One

# Searching

Change is a strange thing.

One of the earliest lessons taught to a prospective Infiltrator is that you do not focus on making a perfect disguise. There is no such thing. No matter how much research you invest in a role, there will always be information you lack. Some small detail will always be off. There will be closely held memories shared only with rare individuals, subtleties of behavior that only someone with a lifetime of experience would recognize, even some hidden subtlety of physical form from some decades-old injury.

It's easy to stress over these tiny differences, and it's easy to be consumed by it. The majority of those who washed out of Infiltrator training were due to being unable to handle the stress. Obsessing over the impossible task of creating a perfect disguise, or paranoia over the inevitable shortcomings, was the most significant source of that stress. While we could aim for as much accuracy as possible, the end result was only ever "good enough".

A successful Infiltrator was one who recognized that it truly was good enough.

When it comes down to it, our perceptions are incredibly limited and flawed. Sometimes, this can be directly manipulated by an Infiltrator. Memories are malleable, and the right comment at the right time can significantly alter what an individual remembers. More often, Infiltrators benefit from a more passive but prevalent quirk of perception: our brains are constantly filling in periphery information with assumptions and extrapolations. A consequence of this is that, so long as someone isn't aware that something has changed, their brain tends to fill in the details as if it hadn't.

This change blindness is a great boon to an Infiltrator. It's not infallible, hence the amount of research an Infiltrator will put into their impersonations, but so long as you get the majority in place, your mark's own brain will work to help you.

As we cut across the Wasteland in our rattling motorwagon, it would have been easy for me to not notice how things had changed. Yes, there was hardly any plant-life, but the area was a desert since long before the war.

If I had woken in the middle of the Wasteland, absent the significant and direct evidence of the passage of time, I might have simply thought it was an overcast day. Even now, it was interesting how little had changed in this little part of the world.

Change became much more apparent when we rolled up the slope of a hill, cresting to look out over the valley beyond. The distant cluster of buildings were worn down by the wear of centuries, only to be patched up by crude repairs and broken-down fortifications. There was an outer chain-link fence, reinforced by bits of scrap and piles of debris in some places, and fallen and broken down in others. A gatehouse, just large enough for a single pony, now lay collapsed and ruined beside the broken-down gate. Beyond that, a pair of old huts sported crude scrap-metal ramparts, and the supports of a skywagon shelter stood in isolation, long since missing the roof they had once held up.

Past that was the chipped and scarred concrete of a bunker, with a sloped ramp leading down into the ground. The outermost door gaped open.

"Looks about like I remember it," Dusty said as we looked it over through binoculars and scopes. "I don't see any signs of repairs. That broken-down section of fence on the north side is where my squad breached, and it doesn't look like anyone fixed up any of the battle damage. Not seeing any signs of life, either."

Regardless, we didn't head straight in once we'd gotten back in the motorwagon. Instead, Dusty directed us to a small rise, about a quarter mile from the gate. When we rolled to a stop, he again surveyed the site for a minute.

"I doubt there's anypony there, but let's take it careful anyway," he said. "Sickle and I are the assault element. Starlight, Whisper, you're our base of fire. Your job is to stay here, and if somepony opens up on us, hit them hard. Suppress with the machine gun, pick off exposed targets with the Lancer. Keep them from shooting back while we get to cover."

"You got it," Starlight said, sitting beside the motorwagon with her Lancer ready. I gave the machine gun a quick check, ensuring the belt was in position and unobstructed, and that one of the gigantic rounds was chambered. With a sharp *clack*, I disengaged the safety lever, freeing the trigger.

Dusty had opened the flap covering his PipBuck to look at the screen.

“Call it... five hundred yards to the gate, about six to the bunker.”

I reached up, nudging the dial on the side of the machine gun’s sights to “5”, and let the tip of the front sight post hover over the intact building closest to the gate.

He’d already re-secured the flap, and gave his own weapon a quick final check. “Okay. We’ll call when it’s time for you two to move up. Sickle? Let’s go.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Sickle rumbled, lazily walking after him. Despite the precautions, she wasn’t expecting a fight.

Neither were the rest of us, but I certainly didn’t mind the precaution. We were so close, now.

I watched their progress in the edge of my vision, keeping my eyes fixated on the building, ready to shoot, and painfully conscious that I’d never fired this weapon before. I’d never even seen it fired. I had no idea what to expect. Judging from the size of the rounds, I could only expect it would be incredibly loud.

A few minutes later, they reached the gate. Dusty halted by the collapsed gatehouse and the reinforced fence, leaning around the corner with his rifle. After a moment, he sat back, fiddling with something. My earbud crackled.

“Bring it up. New base of fire here at the gate.”

Starlight picked herself up, stashing her Lancer in the passenger seat as she slid in behind the steering wheel. Moments later, we were rolling forward. I kept the muzzle of the machine gun elevated a bit as we bounced and rattled across the dry ground; the last thing I wanted to do was accidentally shoot one of my companions because we hit an unexpected bump.

We rolled to a stop just behind the fence, and Dusty waved us forward. “Pull up until you’ve got a clear line on the huts and the bunker entrance.”

“Say when!” Starlight called out before creeping forward.

The nose of the motorwagon was poking out past the ruined gatehouse by the time I called out to stop, having just cleared the built-up fence. It offered me a narrow view of the two huts and the bunker beyond. I once again fixed the closest hut in my sights before realizing they were well within E.F.S. range, and nothing was showing. I swung over to aim at the gaping black entrance of the bunker.

“Keep overwatch while we move up. Don’t forget to adjust your range.”

I quickly reached up to the range dial, annoyed that I hadn't thought to do so myself. I doubted it would make much difference at such a short range, but I could use every bit of help I could get.

He was moving by the time I settled into a firing position again. He and Sickle headed out, looking as different as could be; while Dusty moved with his weapon up, ready for a fight at a moment's notice, Sickle plodded along, looking almost bored.

When they reached the bunker and its wide entrance, Dusty took a moment to look inside, first with his rifle, then with a flashlight. Finally, he called us up. We were halfway to the bunker when the first marks appeared on my E.F.S. Non-hostile, at least for the moment. Still, the tension suddenly ramped up. I could hear my heartbeat.

As we pulled up, Dusty directed us to the side of the bunker, telling us to park there and hop out. I made sure to engage the machine gun's safety before dismounting.

"We'll go in together," Dusty said as we gathered around. "There's only a few rooms this side of the sealed door, if it's still shut. Front one was the biggest, looked like loading and unloading. Then a hall, two side rooms, not sure what they were for. Lots of junk all over the place. Made rooting out the last few bandits a bit of a chore."

"It's occupied," Starlight noted, and Dusty gave a small nod.

"We don't know what by," he said. "Could be radroaches. Could be hellhounds. We'll take it slow and careful. Just as a warning, when we hit this place, we found the remains of some ceiling turrets. Some of those contacts might be more, and I wouldn't trust them to stay non-hostile."

"Turrets," Starlight grumbled. "Wonderful."

Dusty nodded. "If we're lucky, Whisper can get into their controls and shut them down."

"And if not?" she asked.

"Then you get to float a rifle around a corner and try to take them out without exposing ourselves. Anypony got a mirror?"

"I do," Starlight said, nudging one of her packs. "Part of my salvage gear. It's useful for working in tight spaces."

"Good," Dusty said, then turned to me. "Hop back to the wagon, grab all the grenades you can carry. They'll probably be mediocre against turrets,

but they'll be great for everything else."

My bags hung heavy by the time I finished loading them, and I'd only put a small dent in the haul we'd taken from Boomer's crew. We certainly had grenades to spare.

I returned and, almost as an afterthought, stripped away my disguise. My armor lay flush against my carapace, snug and comforting. A small modification to my form blunted my fangs, allowing me to grip my rifle's bit.

PipBuck screens were turned up, while Starlight and I held flashlights in our magic. Dusty gave us a quick look-over, nodded, and rounded the corner.

It was almost slick and professional, how we spread out on the ramp, advancing at a steady walk with weapons leveled. Lights cut through the darkness to illuminate lumps of trash and debris as we made our way down the ramp. It was wide and tall enough to easily fit our motorwagon, and descended about thirty or forty feet before opening into a wide room with thick supporting columns. Old crates and scrapped skywagons were arranged to form barricades at the bottom of the ramp, and semi-private rooms along the side.

The signs of a battle were clear. Several sections of the barricade were broken and askew. Divots in the concrete floor, walls, and ceiling marked where bullets had struck, sending out a hail of debris that now crunched underhoof. Larger divots and scarring marked where grenades had detonated, tearing up large chunks of the ground and nearby walls.

Dusty advanced to the barricade and halted, keeping himself mostly in cover as he swept the muzzle of his rifle around the room. Still no hostile contacts on the E.F.S.

As I swept my light around the room in time with my own rifle's movements, I could see the dark stains on the ground. They lay in thick splotches and lines, long since dry and faded with the years until they were barely visible. Bloodstains.

A quiet squeak broke the silence as one of the non-hostile marks on my E.F.S. abruptly moved. I quickly swung my rifle over to it as the light glinted in the eyes of a rapidly scurrying creature. It took me a moment to realize it was a rat, darting into the safety of one of the crude shelters.

Dusty spoke up. "Whisper, Starlight, sweep the left side of the room.

Sickle, with me.”

He stepped past the barricade, and after an exaggerated roll of her head, Sickie followed.

I followed through the same gap, but cut the other way. The debris scattered around the room made progress slow, and even with the knowledge our PipBucks gave us, I couldn’t help but note just how many hiding places there were, if someone had been waiting for us.

We picked our way through the debris of the first room, confirming that the chamber truly was unoccupied, aside from a few rats that did their best to hide from us. A quick check of the side rooms beyond revealed them to have been converted to living spaces, all ruined by the fighting that had taken place there.

Then we were at the door, a heavy piece of metal that would have risen into the ceiling to open. Now its weight held it shut as much as its own machinery did, as if it had been designed to be hard to open. We tried the button beside it, but it remained still.

Dusty turned to Starlight. “You’re up.”

With a nod, Starlight started breaking out her tools, while we backed off. A minute later, her cutting torch lit up, throwing sharp, vivid shadows across the walls as she cut into a panel beside the door.

I sat beside Dusty, looking out into the outer room with its dancing shadows. “So you fought your way into here?”

It wasn’t so much a question as it was a conversation starter, and Dusty nodded. “Yeah. My squad of Rangers, plus two squads from the Militia for support. It was pretty brutal. In a good way, I mean.”

“The defenses here kind of remind me of Serenity.”

Dusty gave a dry, humorless chuckle. “Not even close.”

“Smaller scale, certainly,” I said. “But still an underground compound with a single entrance watched by defensive positions.”

Dusty lifted a hoof to point toward the glow of sunlight coming down the ramp. “You saw those barricades, right?”

“Yes?”

“Half-inch plywood and... I don’t know, maybe sixteenth-inch sheet-metal? Hell, I think those signs are aluminum, even. Your rifle will punch straight through that. Might lose a little power on the way, but it’s still

plenty lethal. It might stop a pistol round or fragments, but that's about it. The bandits? If one of them had armor, it was scrap metal and other junk, no better than the barricade. Weapons? Some shotguns, submachine guns, smoothbore pipes, and a bunch of pistols. Only two bolt-action rifles, and the ponies carrying those died outside.

"Us? We were straight-up better. We had body armor that would stop anything but the bolt-actions. We had assault rifles and machine guns, all top-notch weapons. We had grenades and grenade launchers. We had our PipBucks. We had the better ground, more numbers, and started the fight on our terms.. And most of all, we had our training. Even the regular Militia grunts all had hundreds of hours of training each, and spent a small fortune in ammo. Us Rangers had even more. The bandits? They bullied traders, maybe had some small skirmish with scared folks trying to fight them off with the old family rifle. They might have gotten into some regular fights, but I doubt a one of them had ever been in a *battle*.

"And their nice defensive position? They were stuck down there. They couldn't run away. Their only option was to sit and watch that entrance, ready to cut us down when we charge in. We knew that, pretty obvious, so we didn't. Instead, we stepped back and lobbed grenades down the ramp. Put probably twenty or thirty down there. That many explosives in an enclosed space, shrapnel kicking around everywhere? That'd take the fight out of just about anypony.

"We followed it up with some smokes to blind whoever was left, then set the machine guns at the lip of the ramp, firing down it. Put some flares down when the smoke started to thin out, but everypony who'd tried to hold the barricade was dead. From there it was just pushing up under cover of the machine guns, putting frags into every space, then following them in. Eight bandits managed to make it into the bunker, and not a single one of them managed to fight back."

I eyed the rubble and wreckage. "I see what you mean about brutal."

"But Serenity?" He shook his head. "Power armor, energy weapons, and heavy concrete fortifications. It's like this place on Buck—"

"Buck and Stampede," Sickle helpfully interjected.

"Point is, it's a completely different level than this," Dusty said. "You know how the Rangers would have dealt with something like that?"

I continued to stare.

"We'd take one look at it, say 'fuck that shit', and blow the entrance."

I blinked, contemplating his words. "...That might work."

"It's an option," Dusty said, slowly nodded, "but it only puts the problem off for later. Probably not even that long."

"Yeah."

We fell into silence as Starlight continued to work. There was a certain familiarity to the process. Several minutes were spent cutting, followed by peering inside the hole. A few more minutes of cutting followed that, to get to the exact mechanisms she needed to work on. More minutes were spent working on those, getting them to disengage and free the massive door. Then it was our turn to help, working the prybar until the door lifted enough for her to wedge the screw-jack under it. From there, it was a matter of slowly cranking the door higher, the sound of metallic squeaks echoing softly in the hall.

"Hold up a second," Dusty said, once the door was almost a foot off the ground. "Let me see that mirror."

When Starlight passed it to him, he laid down, using the mirror to peer under the door. He turned it back and forth, then moved it in further, tilting it up. The motion stopped. "Yep. There's a turret about thirty feet past the door."

Starlight looked up, staring straight at the door. "It's not showing as hostile."

"And I don't plan to give it the chance to change its mind," Dusty said, rolling to lay on his side as he brought his rifle around. He stuck the rifle under the door, and had to scoot forward enough that his muzzle was almost under the edge before he could elevate the rifle enough. He fired twice, the sharp crack echoing in the space beyond the door like a drum. One of the E.F.S. contacts disappeared.

"There we go," he said as he slid back and stood, then gestured toward the jack. Starlight resumed cranking.

A couple of minutes later, it had reached as high as the jack would go, about two feet up. Plenty of room for Dusty, Starlight, and myself to crawl under. Another quick check with the mirror confirmed there were no more turrets, and Dusty led the way, sliding under the door.

Starlight was just getting to her hooves on the far side when she staggered.  
“Oh, shit.”

“Like I said,” Dusty quietly, his rifle leveled down the hall.

I scurried under the door to join them, raising my own rifle as well.  
“What’s wrong?”

“Those red marks,” Dusty said, his rifle remaining steady even as he spoke around the bit. “I’m guessing the turrets don’t want us trespassing.”

I looked around, eyes on my E.F.S. “I don’t see any red marks.”

He spared a glance my way before focusing down the hall again. “Huh.”

Starlight looked my way. “Maybe it’s because you’re a changeling?”

“Maybe,” I said, trying not to sound too hopeful. While it would be promising if they had been programmed to not shoot at changelings, it could also be that they were programmed to only shoot at ponies.

There was a loud clatter of metal as Sickle stuck her head and neck under the bottom of the door, her shoulders jamming against it. With a deep growl, she pushed against the floor, the door squealing and grinding as she forced it upwards. Soon she was standing, the massive door opened almost all the way.

“Hold it there!” Starlight called out, and slipped past Sickle. She went to the panel she had cut open, fiddling with something for a moment before a soft *thunk* sounded from the wall. “Okay, let it down, *slowly*.”

Sickle did as she asked, letting the door slide down an inch before another thump sounded, and the door held in place.

“Perfect,” Starlight said, grinning as she retrieved her jack. “There’s a ratcheting brake system to hold the door open. It won’t be able to shut without power now. That, or someone taking a sledgehammer to the brake.”

“Good,” Dusty said with a nod, then stood and started slowly advancing down the hall. I followed behind him, my flashlight floating above us to light the way.

The hall reminded me of the ones where I had woken up, a stark concrete corridor with metal-grate floors and exposed conduits and pipes above. The darkness loomed ahead, as if consuming our light. Only tiny glints of reflection shone in the distance. We advanced, peering into the doorways we passed to reveal desolate rooms that had long ago fallen into decay. Lights hung askew, cables fell draped across furniture, and stagnant water pooled

in corners.

"No power here, either," Starlight noted. "I don't hear the sound of machinery or electronics anywhere. The turrets must be on independent power."

Still no power. That wasn't good.

When we reached a corner, Dusty held out a hoof to stop us. "Looks like a turret around the corner, unless it's on a different level. Starlight, use that mirror to check."

She did as he asked, floating the mirror and a flashlight out past the corner, then turning the mirror to search the neighboring hall. "Um... there! Found it. Another ceiling gun."

"Good," Dusty said. "This might be a little tricky, but..."

He trailed off; Starlight was already floating her Lancer up to the corner, poking it around as she lined it up with the mirror.

"...I guess you've done this already," Dusty concluded.

"Yeah," Starlight said, squinting as she tried to aim the weapon with the tiny view the mirror offered. "The hazards of scavenging old-world sites. Hidden turrets, psychotic robots, and whatever else moved in. Turrets were nasty, since they can be so hard to find." Her Lancer discharged, filling the hall with a flash of red.

Starlight drew her Lancer back, smiling. "On the plus side, they're dumb as hell."

We passed a few more rooms, including a kitchen and a cafeteria. All the equipment was where it had been left two hundred years ago. At the next corner, we paused while Starlight repeated her mirror-trick. This time, the shot was followed by sudden screeching and fluttering, and I cringed back as several bats flew by, scattering from the loud noise and flash. Pips swung and darted on my E.F.S. as the creatures passed us.

"Must be an opening somewhere," Starlight noted. "Probably something small, some burrowing critter or the like. That's... not a good sign."

A minute later, a cluster of non-hostile E.F.S. contacts turned red, accompanied by a skittering sound. We halted instantly, ready for a fight. I almost laughed when the radroaches started scurrying out of the nearby doorway and toward us. Starlight calmly vaporized several with her Repeater before Sickle shoved her way past, smashing the rest under her spiked hooves.

Most of the non-hostile contacts ended up being rats, who simply avoided us as we swept through the area. A few were turrets, only showing as hostile to my companions.

We made our way through the underground facility, quickly looking over rooms as we passed. The food stored near the kitchen had long ago been destroyed or consumed by the wildlife that had broken into the place. Labs contained equipment, and while most had been destroyed due to time, moisture, or the attention of animals, there was still a good amount that looked like it would still work. Such devices might have once cost a small fortune. Now, most of them were good for little more than scrap.

One room held the maneframe for the facility. More radroaches had made their home in the midst of its arcane circuitry. Once they had been crushed under hoof, I examined the devices. The damage was extensive: gnawed wiring, missing gems, destroyed and eroded connections. The data-storage arrays were filled with droppings and corroded wires, utterly ruined. Even if we had restored power, or had pulled the arrays from the maneframe, I couldn't have recovered the data. I could get something out of damaged or degraded information, but I lacked the tools and skill to extract that information from such catastrophically damaged hardware.

We kept searching. Starlight scoured devices to find more spark batteries, finding a fair number. A small medical station had once been well-stocked, but only a couple of healing potions had survived the animals' intrusion. Ministry of Peace medical boxes turned up another four, protected in the metal shells, along with several bandages, both magical and non, painkillers, splints, and other simple first-aid supplies.

I was following Starlight as she stepped up to another doorway, only to halt, her ears drooping. My heart fell as she glanced back to me, her expression full of concern and sadness.

I swallowed and stepped forward as she stepped back, looking through the doorway with my flashlight held high.

The room was one of the larger labs, and was in complete disarray. Equipment had been moved around, with much of it crammed in the back corner of the room. The tables had been shoved to the walls, and wiring and medical gear was strewn across them. Cables dangled from the ceiling, and hanging from those were ragged, organic strips, translucent in the light of my

flashlight. I knew immediately what they were: the remains of changeling cocoons, the same sort of altered chrysalis that I had woken up in all those weeks back.

I cautiously stepped forward. The floor of the lab was covered in an inch of murky water, with cables running through it to the various pieces of equipment. Closer still, and I could see the few wires that were still caught up in the remains of the cocoons. My flashlight tilted downward, to cast its light across the jumble of thin exoskeletal plates that lay below. They were all dead.

I stared at the remains. The rational part of my mind noted that the exoskeletons were disassembled. They'd likely been eaten by the vermin that had broken into the place, their parts scattered. My light swept around, finding more remains in similar states, roughly corresponding to the tattered ribbons of destroyed cocoons.

I trudged out of the room, slumping to sit against one of the walls of the hallway. I just needed a moment to sit, absorb the information, and sort out my thoughts. My throat felt tight, but my mind was relatively calm. At least part of that was the lack of surprise; between the facility being powered down and the animal infestation, I had already recognized that the chances of anyling surviving was virtually nonexistent. It was still painful, finding another group of my sisters, long deceased.

Still, despite the rational logic behind it, I worried that I was feeling too *little*. That, rather than being rational and healthy, I was simply becoming numb. That finding another dozen or so dead changelings had lost its significance after the hundreds of dead changelings I had come across before.

And then I started worrying that having such concerns suggested self-doubt and other failures at coping, followed by a somewhat cynical recognition that my own practical psychological knowledge was possibly creating a feedback loop of concerns, like an inverted and self-destructive rationalization. Essentially, that I was descending into the mindset that anything that could be wrong absolutely was, and that delving so deeply into those concerns was a sign that I wasn't thinking as clearly and calmly as I should.

It was all muddled and confused thoughts, circular reasoning, and irrational concerns. I focused on setting them aside, trying to think calmly and clearly.

The moment of clarity came when Starlight's hoof settled gently on my shoulder. I looked up, blinking the blurriness from my eyes to meet her gaze, her expression both concerned and comforting. I swallowed past the lump in my throat, focusing on her.

She opened her mouth and paused for a moment, likely trying to work out how to gently ask a potentially uncomfortable question. "...Should we gather them?"

"Yes," I said, my voice weaker than I had expected. With that, I had a direction. I recognized that as a coping mechanism even as I used it to sideline the other concerns, but that was fine. Coping mechanisms can be useful things if done right, and one that helped me focus on what needed to be done instead of pointless self-doubt was quite useful. "Thank you."

It was a slow and unpleasant affair, gathering the disjointed remains from the muck-covered floor. Parts of shells had been scattered around the room, and had to be fished out from beneath tables or behind equipment. It took about half an hour, full of painful moments, but it was progress.

We moved the remains into a neighboring lab with a dry floor. Soon, we had yet another funeral pyre going. Starlight quietly checked that we had the respirators and air bottles we had scavenged from my hive. I'm sure she was trying to be subtle about it, during a sensitive time, but I appreciated the concern and attention to detail.

The magical flames burned hot, swiftly reducing the remains to a fine ash.

Dusty stood quietly at my side, watching. "Sorry about this."

"It's—" I caught myself; I'd almost said 'okay', one of those reflexive platitudes that was so expected in casual conversation. I shook my head as I rephrased. "It's not unexpected."

He nodded, silent.

"There's still another experimental facility," I said, quietly. "And even if that's no better, there are other C.L.T. facilities."

He gave a quiet grunt, as if he wanted to point out how much the last statement sounded like grasping at straws. I couldn't argue with him on that. It absolutely was. Even as I said it, I was already thinking of what was coming. The chance that the final experimental facility held any still-living members of my hive was minimal. The chance that some other C.L.T.

facility held any was essentially nonexistent. Pinning my hopes to that was merely setting myself up for disappointment.

I had to recognize that the odds were increasingly on the side of me being the only member of my hive to have survived, and that I had to start planning what I would do next. That was troubled by the knowledge that Queen Chrysalis (the sixth) was leading her hive on some form of offensive, whether covert or overt, and I was likely to be caught up in that one way or the other.

Very few options presented themselves. Two, in fact.

The first was simple: run. Serenity's influence would be limited, likely not extending beyond the local region. I could leave, flee to some other place in Equestria or beyond, and try to live out the rest of my life as best I could.

The other was to fight back. Face the threat Serenity posed to the ponies of the region, and work to combat that. Counter-Infiltration, armed intervention, or even the simple disclosure of information. It would be a difficult struggle, a fight against a force that could easily become dominant in the Wasteland, where I would be exposing myself to a great deal of danger. There were a great number of ponies, and others, who were at risk, and there was a chance I might make a difference.

The safe option was to run.

But being an Infiltrator was never about taking the safe option. It was about taking a measured risk for the sake of others. It was about putting my own life on the line to accomplish something important, something that would benefit so many other lives.

Fighting back, helping ponies, that was something that would give me a purpose. Something to live for beyond myself.

Those were the thoughts that ran through my head as we checked over the rest of the facility. Dusty had offered to leave right then, but while I appreciated the gesture, I refused. We could use whatever salvage Starlight found, and she did turn up a fair amount, gathering a large collection of spark batteries and some of the more valuable parts from some of the ruined scientific equipment.

Between that distraction and the number of contacts already showing on the E.F.S., none of us noticed the addition of one more.

It took perhaps half an hour to scour the rest of the facility, pausing at

intersections to allow Starlight to destroy turrets from around the corner. She also spent some time looking over the spark generators, in case anything could be salvaged and used with our motorwagon, but she shook her head. The few that hadn't failed catastrophically and burned out were corroded from decades of moisture.

We made our way back to the entrance, the door that had originally been sealed. Once we were on the other side, Starlight called out clearly. "Cover your ears."

We did so, and she jabbed inside the mechanism with her prybar. The gears whined as they spun free, and the door dropped to the ground with a heavy thud that reverberated right through our hooves.

With the facility sealed once more, we turned to leave, returning to the main chamber. From there, we started to pick our way through the debris, starkly lit in our lights and silhouetted against the darkness beyond.

As we progressed through the cluttered room, none of us noticed that one of the lumps hadn't been there before, until it rose up, giant wings spreading to block out the light of the ramp.

I lurched, heart hammering in surprise, and grabbed for my gun.

There was a dazzling purple flash, and my teeth closed on thin air.

My head snapped up again, immediately spotting where my rifle floated in midair, wrapped in the purple glow of magic. My pistol was right beside it, as well as all of Dusty and Starlight's weapons and all of our grenades.

Between us and our weapons, a matching glow surrounded a long horn, illuminating the unicorn who stood imperiously before us.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

# Echo

The ways that fear influences an individual is a complex subject.

The common adage describes the reaction as “fight or flight”, but I consider that to be overly simplistic. In both cases, the individual is still taking an action. Fear can, after all, be a great motivator, although it’s equally capable of motivating one into making bad decisions as it is to make good ones. For example, fear might convince a pony that their only chance of survival was to charge the powerful and terrifying alicorn standing before us, with all of our stolen weapons arrayed behind her.

I find a spectrum of action-to-inaction to be a better way of classifying the reactions to fear. When an individual chooses fight or flight, it’s typically because the action was one that immediately presented itself as the solution to their problem, and they took it, possibly without fully considering the actual merits of that action. When no good options present themselves, or too many compete all at once, individuals tend toward the other side of the spectrum: inaction. They freeze up, question themselves, and fail to take any decisive action to save themselves.

Neither extreme is a good response to fear, and both can be thoroughly deadly. Given an option of the two, however, I felt some measure of relief that our group fell more into the “inaction” side of the spectrum.

Except for Sickle, who I don’t think was actually afraid. If anything, I think she was amused by this development.

The alicorn wasn’t attacking. She stood tall, her wings spread in an upright fan that I had always associated with the princesses and other royalty, as if making themselves seem larger than they were. Her head was held high, with her muzzle tilted slightly upwards, and her eyes hard as she stared back at us.

Given the lack of attack, I took just a moment to quickly appraise our options. That was a fairly simple appraisal, given how limited our options were. We couldn’t flee, as even if we hadn’t sealed the door behind us, that would still leave us with the alicorn between us and freedom. Not that I expected we’d even make it to the door, if she decided to stop us. Fighting

struck me as exceedingly long odds, between our lack of weapons and how swiftly I had seen her casually *disassemble* a pony.

It was a strange situation, being uneasy with the conclusion that talking was the best option.

Dusty evidently came to the same decision I had, but was quicker to act upon it. He was also rather more indelicate than I would have chosen to be. “What do you want?”

The alicorn’s head turned to fix him with a stare, her head tilted ever so slightly. There was a long second of tension before she spoke. Her voice was strong but elegant, her enunciation precise. “Understanding.”

As vaguely creepy single-word non-answers went, that was certainly up there.

While I was thinking that, Dusty spoke again. “What’s that got to do with us? Why have you been following us?”

“Because you are intriguing,” she replied, before taking a few slow, casual steps, her movements precise and elegant. Regal. She stepped smoothly across the debris-strewn ground, without having to look where she placed her hooves. Instead, her eyes turned to me. Something about the intensity of her stare struck me as a predator hungrily eying its prey. “Especially the insect.”

My ear gave the tiniest twitch, and I took a half-step back. I don’t like to be “intriguing” to dangerous individuals. Surprisingly, her expression immediately changed. Her head tilted slightly once more, her expression softening into something more contemplative.

She hummed softly, almost absently, before speaking. “So there is a difference in implication between ‘bug’ and ‘insect’. Interesting.”

That wasn’t the direction I had expected the conversation to take, and while I couldn’t say that ‘thoughtful and inquisitive pony-disassembling alicorn’ was unthreatening, it was at least less so than ‘regal and imperious pony-disassembling alicorn’.

“...It’s mostly about correlation with their common use,” I said, my voice coming out in a low creak. I cleared my throat and, as she had yet to reply, continued. “They both carry diminutive connotations, but ‘insect’ is almost always used in a condescending manner. ‘Bug’ is more varied in its use.”

She had looked away, staring off into space as she gave a tiny nod. She

seemed lost in thought. "Hmm. I see. Yes, that makes sense..."

I was tempted to allow the silence to continue as long as she would allow it, but I couldn't see how that would do anything but delay whatever was coming. At least if I spoke up, I might be able to guide the conversation.

Unfortunately, I only saw one easy way to steer the conversation, and it was a concerning topic. At the same time, it was also a topic of conversation that I was, for better or worse, very curious about. "You find me intriguing?"

She blinked once, her attention snapping back to the here-and-now, her eyes returning to me with their previous intensity. "Part of that interest lies in your uniqueness. Changelings are a rarity in the Wasteland. Prior to coming across you, we remember only two other changelings."

My ears perked up at that, and not only for the change of pronouns. Perhaps it was optimism, or perhaps it was just reading too much into a simple statement, but I had the feeling she wasn't speaking of Serenity. "You know of other changelings?"

"Knew. One was dead, and we assisted in their dissection. The other we worked alongside, and only briefly."

I swallowed, silently hoping that she had nothing more to learn through dissection. "The one you worked with, where is she?"

"Dead, I expect," the alicorn replied with a dismissive flick of her wings. She started to slowly walk again, circling me as if to get a better view of me. Despite the apparent attention, her expression was haughty almost to the point of boredom. Her mane and tail trailed unnaturally through the air behind her, almost as if it were floating underwater. "It was over two hundred years ago."

I added 'ancient' onto the growing list of troubling descriptive terms for this alicorn. There was the added concern that she would have been my contemporary, yet I had no knowledge of her. It did fit with my earlier impression that the Ministry of Arcane Science had progressed further than I had thought. The possible M.A.S. connection fit unpleasantly well with the whole 'dissection' comment, as well.

Cautiously, I asked, "And the other part?"

She frowned, coming to a halt beside me. I stayed still, hoping she couldn't hear how much my heart-rate had kicked up with that simple expression. "At first, you were simply a curiosity, a single specimen of

a species that had been seemingly exterminated. A changeling, near death, feeding on a pony.”

Her eyes flicked Starlight’s way before returning to me. “We know very little of your kind, but it was enough to make you very intriguing. Much of what we remember is nothing more than rumor and speculation.” She paused, her frown returning for a moment before she spoke again. “For example, there was one rumor that your species shared a telepathic hive-mind of some form. Is there any truth to that?”

I blinked, a bit surprised by that, then shook my head. “No.”

Her frown deepened as she looked away. “No. No, of course not. Foolish.” She slowly paced away, wings folding at her side as she muttered quietly. “...Grasping at straws... focus...”

*Great, I thought. Now the powerful, terrifying, vaguely creepy ancient alicorn is talking to herself.*

And she was still between us and all our weapons.

“So,” Sickle rumbled from behind us, “are we fighting, or am I in for another long and boring talk?”

The alicorn replied almost absentmindedly. “A fight would imply some degree of parity.”

Sickle’s armor rattled as she cocked her head to the side, then turned to look at me.

I translated. “I believe she’s saying that any violence between us would be too one-sided to be accurately described as a fight.”

“That is precisely what I intended,” the alicorn said, turning back to face us once more, or more specifically, me. She was in regal mode once more, her head held high. “But we are getting sidetracked. I have yet to fully answer Whisper’s question.”

She stared at me for a couple of seconds, until I cautiously nodded. She gave a prim nod in reply, and spoke. “While we knew very little of your kind, it was enough to catch my interest. I have been seeking an understanding of many things, but you offered an understanding of the most significant. I decided to follow and observe you. I have watched your interactions with ponies, both honest and dishonest, and I have listened in on your conversations and recordings. Those observations led me to two significant conclusions.”

Her head turned, scanning over us. “One: you, as a group, with the possible exception of the former raider, are motivated to help ponies in general.”

Her gaze fixed on me, hard. “And two: you, specifically, know what it is like to be a part of something greater than yourself, only to have that torn away.”

I tensed, though my exoskeleton made that much less obvious than it would have been otherwise. *Oh shit, I thought. She sees a connection between the two of us.*

On the plus side, I was pretty sure she was less likely to kill us outright. On the other hoof, that was because she *expected* something from us. From *me*.

“...I suppose that would be accurate,” I said, concealing the nervousness I felt over this development.

“I have been trying to make sense of things,” she said, her voice softening. “This world is... chaotic. Without direction.” She paused, frowning slight as she thought. After a moment, she spoke again. “You know of my kind.”

It was a statement, not a question. All the same, I nodded. “Very little.”

“The radio said you were servants of the Goddess,” Dusty said.

The alicorn went rigid. Her mane and tail flared slightly in the intangible currents. “She was our mother.”

Thankfully, Dusty shut his mouth rather than continuing on that vein.

The alicorn shook her wings out before tucking them neatly against her side once again, and the regal demeanor returned. “We have heard many things said about our mother. Some called her, and her daughters, monsters.” Her eyes fixed on me. “They see only the surface, but not beyond. They clung to their short-sighted fears, and failed to see what we were attempting to accomplish.”

I slowly, cautiously nodded. “I can appreciate how appearances and first impressions can be misleading,” I offered. “What was it that you were hoping to accomplish?”

“It *should* be perfectly obvious,” the alicorn said, staring down her muzzle at me. “We sought to *help* ponies.”

Somehow, I didn’t find that statement terribly reassuring. “I’m afraid I know very little about you,” I said. “How did you seek to help ponies?”

Her wings spread abruptly, her mane flowing behind her. "By making them like *us*," she said, her voice filling the space with her declaration. "Perfect, immortal beings, combining the strengths of every tribe. Untouched by age, disease, and radiation. We would have elevated ponies above their meager life of scavenging. We would have turned this wasteland into a paradise, and brought forth a new society that could thrive and prosper."

She folded her wings again, her expression hard. "And for that, one of the ponies we would have saved murdered our mother."

"I'm sorry for your loss," I said, hoping it wouldn't be taken poorly.

"Hmph." She looked away, her expression still hard. After a few tense moments, it started to relax. "I would say you have no idea what I have lost, but I suspect you're one of the few beings in the Wasteland who might be capable of conceiving it." She sighed, staring off into space. "We had everything. My sisters, our mother, our purpose. We were one. Our thoughts were legion. They were always there, in Unity. Now?" She slowly shook her head. "Now there is only silence. I can no longer hear them."

I'll admit, that was a little creepy. Not so much for the suggestion that she had been hearing voices, as I could assume from that statement and her earlier question that there must have been some form of telepathy involved. More concerning to me was what might have happened to the mental state of an extremely powerful individual who was suddenly deprived of that.

How would I have responded if my own sisters had been a constant presence in my own mind, like a conversation always going on in the background, only to wake and be met with crushing silence? If I was reading her earlier inquiry about a telepathic hive-mind correctly, it suggested significant reason to be concerned.

She shook her head again, as if clearing her thoughts, and I thought I heard her murmur something to herself before speaking again. "That pony may have destroyed our best chance at a better world, but I am still a daughter of the great and powerful Goddess, and some of that greatness lives on in me. I will find a way to use that power in honor of her memory, to accomplish that which she died for." Her eyes locked onto mine. "And you will help me do this."

Sickle gave a quiet snort of amusement, and out of the corner of my eye, I caught Dusty's glance toward where our weapons floated.

Myself, I tried to remain steady under her gaze. “How are you expecting us to help you?”

She turned, slowly pacing with precise, graceful steps. “I have been thinking of how to carry on our mother’s work ever since she was cruelly murdered. The means of our ascension were destroyed by that short-sighted pony, which left me uncertain of how to proceed. But then, I came across *you*.”

She paused, looking my way for a moment before returning to her pacing. “A changeling, with the magic of transformation and a keen knowledge of what it is to be a part of something greater than themselves. A creature that could help resurrect our plans for Unity.”

“Changelings can’t change others,” I said.

“Of course not,” she said with a dismissive flick of her ethereal mane. “But your kind’s transformative magic is more advanced than any unicorn’s. We remember much of the study and creation of magic, and we remember its unlimited potential. We remember many experiments, delving into magics once thought impossible. I will dissect your magic, figure out exactly how it works and how to replicate it, and with that, we will finally have a means to raise ponies above this downtrodden life.”

Starlight spoke suddenly. “You’re not *dissecting* her!”

The alicorn halted, shooting her an annoyed look. “It’s a metaphorical dissection, and in any case, the subject of the statement was her magic, not her. I probably won’t need to do any invasive physical examination to understand her magic.”

“Probably,” Starlight echoed, clearly no more relieved than I was.

“If all you want to do is study my magic, then—”

“It’s hardly the *only* thing I want to do,” the alicorn said. “But it will suffice to start with.”

“...Okay. If all you want to do *right now* is study my magic, then I think we can accommodate you. We’re in the middle of going somewhere, though, so you’ll have to do so while we travel, and of course we’ll need our equip—”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “Studying on the move is too awkward and unproductive.”

I swallowed, hoping this wasn’t going where I thought it was going.

"Then I'm afraid you'll have to wait for us to finish our own tasks."

"No," she said again. "I am working to save all ponies. That is more important than your tasks. We will stay here."

Yes, it was going where I thought it was. "You said you're immortal. I'm sure you can afford to wait a few days or weeks until we've taken care of what we need to do."

"And how many ponies will die while you pointlessly delay their salvation for your fruitless search? What if you die? It would be almost impossible to find another changeling that cares for ponies enough to help. No, this is more important."

"So, what, fuck changelings?" Starlight abruptly said, her voice sharp with anger. "Whisper's trying to save her kind, too, you know!"

"I have yet to decide about changelings," the alicorn said with a shuffle of her wings that seemed to approximate shrugging. "On the one hoof, they are undeniably versatile creatures, and I might even describe them as more fit for survival if not for the crippling emotional dependency. I would consider incorporating some of their capabilities into our ascension, if possible. On the other hoof, changelings are a parasite that feeds on ponies, and from what I have observed, are currently one of the greatest threats in the Wasteland. If allowed to continue, they are likely to become the single most significant obstacle to our Unity. I am left undecided as to whether they should be integrated or destroyed."

Starlight stared, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, as this alicorn casually contemplated the genocide of my entire species.

Metal rattled as Sickle plodded forward. The alicorn turned to face her, a wary glare flashing before settling into an imperious display of condescending indifference. She stood tall, looking almost bored as she stared down her muzzle at the armored mare.

Sickle halted just a couple feet away, staring right back into the alicorn's eyes. It's easy to forget just how big Sickle is, having gotten used to her being around, so it was a bit surprising to realize she stood eye-to-eye with the alicorn. With her bulk for comparison, Sickle managed to make the alicorn look small, if only just.

Sickle just stood there, staring at the alicorn, her expression unreadable under her helm.

After a couple of seconds, the alicorn gave a derisive snort. “I do hope you’re not attempting to intimidate me.”

“Nah,” Sickle said. “Just thinkin’.” She went silent for a moment before continuing. “Yeah. I wouldn’t normally do this, but I’m wondering. Your mom. You anything like her?”

The alicorn’s head rose just a hair higher. “I would like to believe so.”

“Yeah, I thought so,” Sickle said. A touch of a smile crossed her lips, half-hidden behind the bars of her muzzle. “I think I see why that pony killed her.”

The alicorn’s eyes widened, much as I’m sure everyone else’s did. Then she bared her teeth in a snarl. Purple magic flared, throwing Sickle into the wall with a tremendous crash of metal. “You *dare!*”

To my side, Dusty twitched, almost launching into action, but the alicorn still stood between us and our weapons.

I hurried forward, hoping to do what I could; if we couldn’t fight and couldn’t flee, then words were the only way we were getting out of this intact. “Wait! Please!”

Her glare turned to me, and I nearly staggered back under the withering look she gave me. “Just... please listen. I’m sure you’ve noticed Sickle can be a bit blunt, but I think she actually had a good point.”

“Of course I had a good fucking point!” Sickle called out. She didn’t even sound angry, despite being pinned to the wall in a field of purple magic. Well, no more angry than usual.

The alicorn kept Sickle pinned in place, but her attention remained on me. “And exactly what point would that be, *insect?*”

I knew I was taking a gamble pressing this, but what option did I have? I took a steady breath, and began. “Your approach needs a lot of work.”

She blinked. I could only imagine Starlight sharing a similar reaction behind me. That was perfectly fine with me; surprise and confusion was much preferable to righteous anger. I continued. “We said we were willing to help, but instead of accepting what help we were willing to offer, you’re pushing for more, until we aren’t—”

Her head drew back in surprise. “You do not *want* to help?”

“I do,” I said, firmly. “But with your approach, you seem determined to turn potential allies into actual enemies. We have things we need to

accomplish, things that are important to us, but rather than work in a way that helps all of us achieve our goals, you were insisting on only solving your own goals while hindering ours. If that's how you're planning on approaching your Unity, then there are going to be many who don't like that. They'll fight you, and if they can kill a goddess, I'm sure they can kill one of her children. You're putting your own goal at risk by approaching it this way."

Her expression turned distant, her head tilting again. She murmured quietly to herself. "Logical. Fits the data. Possible problem. I don't..." She blinked and shook her head again, and with another crash of metal, Sickle fell to the floor.

She laughed as she picked herself up. "What, tired already?"

"Goddesses' sake," Dusty muttered. "Are you *trying* to get yourself killed?"

"I ain't scared of her."

"You're too dumb to be scared."

Starlight thumped a hoof against Dusty's shoulder. "Guys, seriously, could you *not* do this right now?"

I watched Sickle as she stood, rolling a shoulder as if stretching, but she didn't seem any worse for wear after the unicorn's treatment. In fact, she was smiling.

The unicorn was looking at me again. "I do not appreciate the implication that my mother's death was her own fault."

"I wasn't commenting on whether it was right or wrong," I said. It was a nicely diplomatic answer, I thought. "I merely intend to show why others might act as that pony did."

"Hmm." She frowned, but after a moment, slowly nodded. "You are more experienced in dealing with ponies than I am. That is one of the topics I seek understanding of. You will help me with this."

"Okay. First lesson: ask me to help you."

She blinked. "Did I not just do so?"

"You did not," I said. "You *told* me to help you. It's an important distinction."

"Hmmpf." She stared at me for a second before speaking again. "Fine. *Will* you help me?"

"I already am." I stepped up, as if to take charge of the conversation, while trying to ignore the huge size difference. "There are many different ways of convincing someone to help you. So far, you've been using demands and the unspoken threat of your intimidating nature, but that's one of the poorest long-term options. They might help you, but they're not motivated to do so. They're motivated to protect themselves, and the moment they find a better option to do so, they'll take it, whether it's abandoning your work or turning on you."

It was my turn to start pacing as I spoke, and despite the alicorn's imposing nature, I noticed that she watched intently, almost like a student listening to her teacher, if that student were twice as tall and significantly more powerful. "Furthermore, it's going to be complicated by the moral judgement of your actions. Forcing others to work for you looks like extortion at best, and slavery at worst. Many will have strong feelings on that. There are many who might be amicable to your goals, but who strongly and even violently oppose you for your methods.

"And if that isn't reason enough, seeing such things will lead people to question your motives. You made some impressive claims, ones which will be hard for people to believe. If they see you taking unscrupulous means to accomplish those claims, it's going to make others doubt your honesty. If all they see is you using the threat of force to get others to do as you wish, with unverified claims of noble goals and benefits for them, it's going to be hard to believe you."

The alicorn's brow creased. "Are you saying you do not believe me?"

"To be honest, I do have some reason for skepticism," I said. "I don't *disbelieve* you, but your forceful demands and complete lack of compromise or negotiation suggests a disregard for the concerns of others. That's enough to make some question whether your concept of an ideal world will really be what *they* consider an ideal world, and that's especially true when you're willing to even *consider* the genocide of *my entire species*."

I ended with a pointed look at her.

"I did say there were good arguments against it," she said, though her ears flicked back as she did so.

"A willingness to exterminate innocents does not speak well of your ideal future," I said, my eyes holding firmly to hers. I could hear my heart

pounding in my ears, but I stood steadily.

Her ears had pinned back, and she held my stare for a few long, uncomfortable seconds before her gaze wavered ever so slightly. “I... can see how a non-pony might find that disconcerting.”

Dusty snorted. “Yeah, plenty of ponies, too.”

“Hell yeah,” Starlight said. A glance their way showed me that she was glaring daggers at the alicorn.

“I see,” the alicorn said, frowning. After a moment, she nodded. “Very well. I shall avoid mentioning such things again.”

“No,” I said, meeting her eyes once more. “You’ll need to do more than that. Whatever your ideal future is, genocide needs to have no place in it.”

“I can understand why you would have personal feelings on the matter,” the alicorn said, “but I am working to create a better world for as many as—”

“No,” I said, more firmly. “Any future that necessitates the genocide of innocents is insufficiently good. It would still be causing death and suffering, you’re just moving it around. We can do better than that. If you really want to make the world a better place, then we *have* to do better than that.”

Another long moment of contemplation. “That does sound good in theory,” she said, although her voice was cautious, “but I am concerned with the difficulty of taking such a course.”

“You said you wanted to honor your mother. Do you really think taking the easy way out would be the best way to do that? Or do you perhaps think that striving for something better, regardless of the difficulty, would honor her more?”

She looked to the ground in thought, silent and frowning, with only her eerie mane and tail slowly drifting in the still air. I remained still as well, tense as I awaited her answer.

Finally, she spoke. “You are very clever and talented at manipulating others, changeling.” Her eyes looked up to me, my heart pounding a little harder at the intensity of her look. “All the more so for how logical your arguments are. Yes, I would prefer the best possible outcome. I am concerned with the practicality of achieving such a goal, but... if you have any ideas, I would be willing to listen.”

I huffed out a quiet sigh of relief. I felt that the hard part was passed,

and now I was on to the much simpler matter of working out a convincing plan to save the world, and maybe convincing her that genocide was wrong.

Somehow, this was an improvement.

“Okay. Good. The basic plan is pretty simple. Actually, it’s pretty much exactly what we’ve been doing this whole time. The short version is, we go out and help others. Stop raiders that are hurting others, help people get what they need to survive and prosper, that sort of thing. Make the world better for them. Go from there.”

“That sounds like such a petty effort,” the alicorn said, though her tone didn’t carry the scorn I might have expected of the statement. “I intend to improve life for *all* ponies, not just a few dozen.”

I held up a hoof. “Okay, first off: all *people*. Not just ponies. Zebras, griffons, donkeys, and yes, even changelings. They’re all worth saving.”

She slowly nodded. “I suppose that is a worthy goal, if it is possible.”

“It certainly is,” I said. “Second, this isn’t about solving the world’s problems in one fell swoop. It’s about setting things up so that’s even possible. It’s like building a house. You need a good foundation to build on.”

“That’s a simplistic metaphor.”

“That’s what metaphors are for,” I said. “But the reasoning is solid. Try this: imagine that you were an ordinary pony.”

Her frown deepened. “Hmph.”

“Now imagine how that ordinary pony might react to somepony like you. Don’t think about what you know, think about what they see. Imagine they see you, using threats to force others to follow your orders, maybe even following through on those threats if they continue to refuse. Then instead imagine if their experience of you is seeing you save ponies from raiders, leading them to safety, maybe even giving up a generous share of your own food and supplies so they can get back on their hooves. Which one do you think is going to motivate people more to help you?”

“It seems to me that both would be very well motivated to assist me,” she said. Then her ears flicked back. “But yes, I believe I understand what you are attempting to say. We... we remember our first reactions to alicorns. To our Unity. There was much fear there, so many ponies who didn’t understand what was happening. If only there had been some way for us to understand how wonderful that change would be.” She stared off into

space, her voice quieting. “We remember using time-altering magics. If only I understood how they worked...”

The thought of time-manipulation sounded like trouble on a colossal scale, not the least of which for the very tempting possibilities that immediately leaped to mind. “I’m guessing these changes you’re speaking of were not voluntary.”

She was frowning, still looking away. “No, they were not.”

“But if ponies saw alicorns as benevolent and helpful, and had the opportunity to see what benefits come with it, perhaps it could have been.”

“Yes, I was paying attention to what you had said,” the alicorn said with a flicker of a glare, though she looked away again just as quickly. “And... yes, I can see the benefits that would bring. It would certainly be slower, but...”

“But is less likely to have people actively opposing you,” I said.

“Yes,” she said, a smile touching her lips. She was regaining that regal stance once more. “And more likely to understand that I am saving them.”

“Which leads us to another question,” I said, taking a step forward to take charge again. “How will you respond if someone decides they don’t want to be like you?”

She scoffed, but followed it with a grin. “They will see the benefits offered to them, and with this plan, they will have no reason to fear it. They will not refuse the opportunity.”

I shook my head. “I can tell you now, if you’re expecting ponies, or anyone else, to be of a unanimous mind on something, you’re only setting yourself up for disappointment. I can assure you, there will be those who see what you’re offering, understand it fully, but still not want to take part in it. I want to know how you would respond to them.”

She simply waved a hoof. “Nonsense. Who would turn down such a gift when they aren’t blinded by petty fears?”

“I mean no offense,” I said, “but I would.” Her head snapped back as if I had struck her, and I quickly continued. “I’m no stranger to change, but I’d rather stay what I already am than become an alicorn. If you’re truly immune to the effects of radiation, disease, and aging, I might want to see if I could incorporate such alterations through my own shapeshifting, but it wouldn’t be the sort of change you seem to have in mind.”

She stared wide-eyed at me for another moment before blinking, then

shaking her head. “No, well, that is hardly surprising. You are a changeling, you can achieve such a change on your own without my interference. Ponies do not have that option. They will gladly accept this gift.”

I could have glanced back at the rest of my group, hoping for backup. I expected that, of the three of them, at least one would be willing to decline. Despite how helpful it would be, I didn’t want to put them on the spot like that.

Fortunately, I didn’t have to. In the moment of silence that followed her statement, Dusty spoke up. “Uh, yeah, I think I’ll pass, thanks.”

The alicorn’s head snapped around, eyes wide, her reply sharp with surprise. “*What?*”

“Hell, it’s a nice offer and all,” he said with a shrug. “I kind of like myself how I am, thanks.”

The alicorn’s ears had fallen, her expression sagging like a little filly that had just seen their ice cream fall into the dirt. “But... you...”

Dusty quickly held up a hoof. “Hey, it’s okay, I get it. Ain’t like I couldn’t find a lot of benefits to magic and flight, but I’m fine without. Who knows, maybe when I get older I might change my mind, but for now... yeah, I’ll pass.”

“Same here,” Starlight said. “Flying was fun, but... no. Plus, uh... well, I’d rather not be quite that big. Sorry.”

Then they both glanced to Sickle.

Sickle wore one of the most delighted grins I’d ever seen on her. “You want to give me wings and magic? Are you fucking stupid?”

I quickly stepped in before anyone could answer that question. “I’m sure there will be those who would gladly take what you’re offering, but there will be others who do not. They’ll still need our help, too.”

“But...” Her gaze wavered, her stance off-balance, as if her whole world was crumbling around her. “If they will not accept my gift, and you claim I should not force them to accept it, then...”

I stepped up, unnoticed in her apparent existential crisis. I was close now, my horn level with her neck. So many options presented themselves.

I raised a hoof, gently touching it to her chest. I offered a small, comforting smile. “Then you give your gift to those who do accept it, and find another way to help those who decline.”

She absently brushed my hoof away, seemingly before realizing I had stepped in close. Her gaze focused on me, her confusion clear in her expression. “But how?”

“You’ve been watching us. You’ve seen us help ponies, and others as well. None of us are an immortal alicorn. You could do a lot of good simply by spreading Generosity and Kindness.”

Her ears flicked back. “Magic. Laughter. Loyalty. Honesty.” Her expression went abruptly still. “We remember these.”

“They’re all things that the world could use much more of,” I said.

She remained still and silent for several long, tense seconds. I considered saying more, nudging her in the right direction, but I expect that wouldn’t have worked any more than the reassuring touch had.

Slowly, her stance straightened once more, her head rising and her expression setting, looking bold and confident as she declared in a firm, clear voice, “I have come to a decision.”

A little melodramatic, I thought, but I certainly wasn’t going to say so to her. “And that is?”

“I will accompany you,” she declared. “I will study your magic for any way to implement my plan, while assisting you with yours, until I have gathered enough data to make an informed decision as to which course is best for all—” I caught the momentary hitch as she changed words. “—people.”

Once she had finished, a flicker of a frown broke the confident image she was projecting. Her eyes darted towards me. “Would that be acceptable?”

I looked back. Starlight looked tense, but gave no reply. Sickle looked like she didn’t care about anything we were talking about. Dusty merely looked back with a level look, and gave a tiny shrug.

I turned back. “I suppose that could be acceptable, yes. That is, assuming that talk of genocide is no longer in consideration.”

“I believe the data will speak for itself,” she said, the frown vanishing. “I will not refuse a course of action without giving it due consideration, but you have already provided good arguments against it. Unless I make some discovery that directly contradicts that, I expect it will prove to be an unnecessary or even inappropriate action.”

Progress, I suppose. “I guess that will have to do.” I drew in a deep

breath and sighed. "Very well. If you wish to accompany us, we can do so, though there will have to be some conditions."

A hint of a frown appeared. "Conditions?"

"Yes. The main condition is that, while you're traveling with us, if we tell you to not do something, then you can't do that."

The frown deepened. "If your decision is well-reasoned, then you hardly need such a rule. If it is *not* well-reasoned, then I should hardly be expected to obey it."

"You seem to be reasonably logical and have listened to my arguments with an open mind, which is why I'm willing to consider this arrangement. You're wanting to travel with us, and that means whatever you do, you'll have done with our assistance, however small. That means we're at least partially responsible for what you do. If you're asking us to take on this responsibility, then you will have to make some concession to that fact."

Her head tilted slightly. "Even if you consider yourself responsible for any action I undertake while in your company, do you truly believe I would do something objectionable?"

I couldn't help giving her a flat, 'are you serious?' sort of look. "You're open to the idea of exterminating an entire species of intelligent beings. That does raise certain concerns about what else you might be willing to do."

She scoffed, waving a hoof dismissively. "We have already discussed that. I think your personal stake in the matter is clouding your objectivity."

Dusty gave a sharp, humorless laugh before I could even reply. "Shit, lady, I thought you'd been watching us. If you think Whisper's not happy with it because she's a changeling, you weren't watching very close. That changeling isn't the only one who doesn't like all this talk of mass murder, but she's the one that's actually giving you a chance."

*Thank you, Dusty.* I nodded in agreement. "And I'm not saying you have to do exactly what we tell you to do, forever. It's just while you're traveling with us. If you find the arrangement too constraining, then you're welcome to part ways with us, though personally, I hope you'll find enough value in what we do to stay." *You're less likely to go off and do something terrible that way.* "I think we have a lot we could learn from each other."

She hummed softly. "Mmm. Yes, I believe we could." She considered it for another moment before giving a sharp nod. "Very well. If it will ease

your mind, I shall agree to take no action that you explicitly forbid so long as I remain in your company.”

I could read all sorts of loopholes into that statement. “So long as you make an attempt to follow the spirit of what we say, then that is acceptable.”

A flicker of a frown appeared again, though the tilt of her head made it look more confused than offended. “I... shall try.”

“Good. Which comes to the second, and I think final, condition, which is the same condition that falls on all of us: if we end up in any combat-related situation, and I expect we will, then Dusty’s word is law. When he tells you to do something, you do it immediately and without question. You can object afterwards, even leave if you decide to, but not in the middle of a fight.”

“Hmmph.” The frown had returned once more. “I would question that, but I have seen your group in many fights, and have witnessed its efficiency. It is hardly what my sisters and I shared, but I suppose such an arrangement of authority is the best that a collection of disjointed minds can come to approaching a true unity. Very well. I shall accept this restriction.”

“Good,” I said. “I guess that’s it. Well, I suppose I should include the return of our equipment in our agreement.”

“Yes, of course,” she said, floating our weapons back to us. As my magic reached out for my equipment, she spoke again. “I do hope this displays at least some indication of goodwill on my behalf. I am not ignorant to the fact that you are a deceptive creature, and could very well be attempting to convince me to return your weapons only so you could turn them upon me.”

I slung my rifle, trying to look as casual as possible as I did so. “If I wanted to kill you, I would have stabbed you in the neck with my horn. I was close and you were distracted. And then, given your size and plainly obvious magical nature—” I gestured a hoof at her eerily flowing mane. “—I probably would have followed up by hitting you with magical bolts until I was drained of energy or convinced you were completely dead. I assume you have seen how I’ve dispatched threats in the past?”

“Yes,” she said. “Enough to know that, if you were of a mind to kill me, you would give absolutely no indication of that fact before striking, and you would do so with ruthless and cold-blooded efficiency. I must admit, it does make your objection to my earlier comments seem somewhat hypocritical.

Still, you passed up an opportunity to try, so I suppose I will extend a measure of trust. Not that it truly matters. Your tiny horn and weak magic could not kill me any more than those weapons you use.”

*Noted.* Despite that little tidbit, I did feel the need to clarify something. “It’s not hypocrisy. I’ve killed individuals who have caused direct and intentional harm upon others, or who were trying to do so. You were talking about killing individuals because of what someone else of their species might do.”

She stared off into space for a few seconds, considering this. “Hmm. I think I see. Most species lack the Unity we shared, so I suppose it only makes sense to judge them separately.” She abruptly scowled. “I certainly wouldn’t want to be judged off the actions *some* of my sisters have chosen after our Unity was... disrupted.” She quickly shook her head, then looked to me. “This whole conversation would have been much simpler if you had just presented this argument to begin with.”

I blinked. “I hadn’t thought it would be quite so effective,” I admitted. “I take it you’ve decided against genocide as an option.”

She gave a sharp, imperious nod. “Yes. Unless some critical new piece of information turns up, I believe it would cause more harm than good.”

“Well... that’s good.” I looked back to my companions. Starlight had a thoroughly mixed expression, somewhere between surprise, amusement, and confusion. She met my eyes and gave a helpless shrug.

“Okay,” I said, retrieving and stowing the rest of my small arsenal. Dusty had already finished, still eying the unicorn warily. “Then I guess there’s just one final thing we should address before traveling together.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly. “What is it now?”

“Do you have a name?”

Her expression immediately relaxed as she stared off into space. It took a couple of seconds before she replied. “We remember many names,” she said, her voice distant. “Many names, but none of them are... mine.” She stared for another moment before blinking, her attention returning to me. “I have chosen a name for myself: Echo. I feel that name befits me.”

“Echo,” I said, and raised a hoof to gesture to the dim glow coming down the exit ramp. “Shall we go?”

“Oh, good,” Sickle rumbled. “You dumb cunts are finally done talking.

I was about to nod off.”

Echo frowned, looking sideways at Sickle. “I understand you prefer to put on an abrasive front, but while we are traveling together, I would appreciate if you showed at least some fraction of the respect I am due.”

Sickle laughed. “Respect? Right. And *I’d* appreciate it if you ate my ass, you retarded purple bitch.” She even turned, shaking her armored flanks at the alicorn, her tail raised high to give a clear view.

“Okay, knock it off,” Dusty called out, stepping between them.

Echo had grimaced at Sickle’s reply. “Surely you can’t be serious.”

“Nah,” Sickle said, chuckling. “Doesn’t have to be the ass. I ain’t that picky. As long as you put that snout between my legs and get to work, it’s all good.”

My wings fluttered as I took off, interposing myself between the two of them and gently nudging Echo away. “Okay, yes, Sickle got her crude comments in again, let’s move on, shall we?”

Echo scoffed, then raised her head and walked on as if it was all beneath her notice.

Behind me, I heard the metallic rattle of Dusty thumping Sickle on the shoulder, followed by a quiet but angry, “The hell is wrong with you?”

Sickle’s reply was much less quiet. “The fuck are you talking about? What, because I’m not playing all super-nice with her? Hey, you cunts want to be little bitches, lick her hooves and suckle her teats, you go right ahead. If she’s just going to act like she’s got a colossal fucking log rammed up her ass, then yeah, she gets treated like the uptight cunt she is. If she wants to pull that log out, hey, we all win.” I could practically hear the sneer that followed. “Sides, ain’t like I wouldn’t return the favor. Big bitch like that? I bet we could get some good rough fucking in, even if she *is* a mare. Been a long time since I wrestled with a pony my size.”

I quickly ushered Echo away, moving up the ramp and into the outside world. After the darkness of the underground facility, even the overcast skies were surprisingly bright.

Hoping to distract from Sickle’s crudeness, I got down to business. “So! We’re still planning on doing some traveling, but our motorwagon is a bit crowded. With Sickle taking up the rest of the room in the back, I’m afraid the only open space would be the back seat, which will probably be a little

cramped."

"That sounds quite unpleasant," Echo said, looking over the vehicle as it came into sight. "Also, unnecessary. I will simply follow you from above."

I nodded, pleased with her decision. Seeing as I sat in the back seat, it would have been cramped for me, as well. "I assume that means you can keep up with it?"

"Of course," she said, walking up to the vehicle. "Though if we have the time to spare from analyzing your magic, I would enjoy the opportunity to examine this vehicle. We remember a good deal of the working of arcane technology, but we do not remember ever working with a motorwagon. A simple disassembly and reassembly should answer any questions I have."

"Maybe if we're going to be in one place for a while and don't need to travel," I said, while hoping such an opportunity didn't present itself. I had only a vague idea of how complex such a machine was, and I had no idea if she'd actually be able to reassemble it. Then, as an afterthought, "but you should probably ask the others, as well. Dusty's kind of in charge, and I think Starlight considers the vehicle to be hers."

"I will do so," she said. There was a flicker of a frown, and she added, "I must admit, I prefer machines over ponies. They are... simpler."

I nodded, feeling a little more comfortable with this topic. "Very true. Machines are built for a clear, defined purpose, and produce entirely predictable results from their input. Ponies—or any other people—are much more complex. While their behavior can still be predicted if you have the correct information, the amount of complexity makes it much harder to get all the information you need." I gave a little shrug. "It becomes easier with practice."

Echo had stopped, her head high as she stared off into space. "Hmm. Yes, I suppose that does make for a very good metaphor, even if I had not originally intended it to be one." Her focus returned. "I simply meant to say that machines are much simpler in their function, mechanically. I can disassemble even a complex machine and reassemble it into working order with ease. So far, doing so with ponies eludes me."

And we were right back down to creepytown. "I can't say I'm surprised," I said, cautiously. "Most living things do not respond well to being disassembled."

She dismissively waved a hoof. “I am not concerned with that. The goal is not to perfect disassembling ponies. That is trivially easy. The goal is to perfect reassembly, so that I can repair damage. I can repair a pump or skywagon that has not functioned for two hundred years. It... frustrates me that I can not do the same for a pony.”

“I don’t think it’s possible to bring back the dead.” Other than necromancy, anyway, but I wasn’t going to suggest that to an already morally-ambiguous pseudo-goddess.

“Of course it’s possible. It’s simply more complex than I had initially thought. My efforts to reassemble ponies has been incomplete. Superficial. It’s like...” She paused, cocking her head to the side for a moment before giving a sharp nod. “Like a computer, yes. Repairing a pony is like repairing a computer that is still running. Damaged hardware can damage the data in the computer. Disassembling it while it is operating, in an attempt to repair it, can also do so. A pony is the same, with the hardware being the body and the software being their brain and thoughts. I simply need to figure out how to repair that hardware in a way that preserves that software.”

“If you’re talking about healing living ponies, I’m sure there are healing spells that—”

She scoffed. “Of course there are. We remember them quite well, even if I do not understand them well enough to use. No, I am looking for more in-depth knowledge, a proper understanding of how ponies function, so as to better aid them. Cures that go beyond simply knitting flesh and bone.”

I considered that, and nodded. “I suppose that’s a noble enough of a goal,” I said, if a little reluctantly. “But I think we’ll have to say no more disassembling people. Ponies aren’t going to take that well.”

“I doubt they will care much,” she said with a shrug. “I have been making use of raiders. Many of them were ponies that you four have killed.”

“No, that’s... well, yeah, it might help a little, but there’s still going to be plenty of ponies who find the idea of dissecting other ponies to be rather creepy. Not to mention disrespectful. No non-raiders, at least. And definitely no living people.”

“I do not—” She cut herself off, her mouth shutting. Then, more slowly, she said, “I suppose there were two raiders who were alive when I disassembled them, but seeing as I was going to kill them anyway, it hardly

makes a difference.”

Okay, that was one I had to put my hoof down on. “It *absolutely* makes a difference. What you’re talking about is essentially torture. It’s that sort of thing that makes raiders so despised, and while you might have better intentions, it doesn’t change that the means are horrific. If you truly want to make the world a better place, you need to start by *being* better.”

“I *am* better,” she grumbled, and when I went to speak again, she quickly cut me off. “Yes, I understand what you are saying. It is simply a lot to think on, and a lot of complication added into an already complex situation. It seems as if all these restrictions simply get in the way of doing what needs to be done. I have to wonder if the world would already be a better place if we didn’t have the absurd restrictions constraining our actions.”

“Just the opposite,” I said. “I might have missed the last two hundred years, but I’ve caught up quickly, and I understand ponies rather well. As far as I see it, the world is still so badly off because people *do* take those shortcuts. They do horrible things in the name of survival or personal interest, or even occasionally for some greater good, but in the process, they keep spreading this misery around. If you pursue your own noble goals through such horrible means, you’re simply continuing the same process that has kept the Wasteland going for centuries.”

Echo had fallen silent, staring at the ground, deep in thought. I continued. “You recited the Elements of Harmony just a few minutes ago. You understand what they are, correct?”

Her ears pinned back. Her voice was quiet, distant. “We remember them very well.”

“Then you should know that Equestria was at its greatest when the ponies there embraced the values the Elements represented. Those were the values that made Equestria such a wonderful place. It was only when ponies started to compromise them, forget them, that things became so bad.”

Echo frowned, silent.

“If we’re going to make the world a better place, we need to bring those values back.”

Her eyes returned to me, staring. “And you think this would be sufficient?”

I nodded. “I’ve seen it. You probably have, too. You’ve been watching

us, right? Did you watch Emerald?"

"The innkeeper," Echo replied. "Yes."

"Someone who embraced the ideals of Kindness and Generosity. She made Gemstone into a wonderful place, one that is already on its way to being what Equestria once was. That's what one pony—one changeling, even—can do. She made a small part of the world a better place, and she's inspired others to do the same. That's the only way the world is going to get better than all of this."

"By embodying the Elements," Echo murmured, as if to herself. After a moment of thought, her gaze hardened, glaring at me. It was hard to read the intent behind those eyes. I couldn't tell if she was angry, suspicious, or something completely different.

"Is there something wrong?" I asked, almost fearing the response.

She didn't answer. Instead, she held her stare for a long moment, until her ears flicked and her attention turned back to the ramp. My companions were walking up to join us.

Echo abruptly spread her wings to their full extension, her head rising. "I shall follow you from above," she declared before turning her hard glare back to me. "We will continue this discussion later."

She immediately beat her wings, lifting into the sky, while I staggered at the volume of air she displaced. As I caught my balance, Dusty trotted up to me. "Problem?"

"I don't know," I said, looking up to watch Echo ascending. "I think I might have upset her, but I'm not entirely clear why, or why she immediately broke off the conversation instead of talking. Maybe she just wants some time to think. I've thrown rather a lot at her."

"Well that sounds ominous." He sighed, shaking his head, while Sickle walked past us to the motorwagon. Finally, Dusty fixed me with a look. "Okay, what's the plan? Are we really taking her with us? Or is this just delaying until we're sure of a way to kill her safely?"

"We're not killing her," I quickly said. "She's not malicious. She's just... unguided. She seems like a child, in some ways."

"Oh, great," Dusty said, clearly not comforted by the comparison. "Have you been around children? I saw a little colt throw a shitstorm of a tantrum because he ate all of the filling out of his birthday snack-cake and that made

it ‘broken’. Now you’re saying this alicorn might be like that?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “Foals do stuff like that mostly because they have no sense of cause and effect. Many times they don’t even have a concept of object permanence. She clearly understands these things, and she seems quite intelligent. When I said she was like a child, I don’t mean that her mental faculties are limited. I mean that she lacks the experience necessary to understand why something might be moral or not.”

He grimaced. “No concept of morality. Yeah, *really* not selling me on this.”

“Consider that she’s trying to get help with that,” I said. “She’s been listening to me, and I think we’ve already made some good progress. She’s *looking* for guidance. I think we can help each other.”

“Assuming she doesn’t decide we’re part of the problem and kill us. Or decide that changelings really *do* need to be exterminated, and kills you. Or decides that us not wanting to be ‘perfect’ alicorns is unacceptable and forces us to change. Or just kills us, because why not?” He shook his head. “Look, I get that you want to help her, and yeah, she’d be pretty damn useful, but she’s a fucking ticking bomb, and I don’t like the idea of keeping her around waiting to see if she blows up on us.”

The motorwagon shook as Sickle flopped down in the back with a grunt, followed immediately by calling out, “A bomb, huh? Bigger or smaller than the balefire eggs I just sat on?”

He turned to her. “You know what I mean.”

“Sure, sure,” Sickle said, lazily waving a spiked hoof. “It’s just that what you mean is stupid.”

“Look,” I said, drawing his attention back. “I said a lot about ideals to her, about the Elements of Harmony, and that applies just as much to us as they do to her. I think she’s hurt and lost, and we need to help her because it’s the right thing to do.

“And yes, if she does decide to hurt others, we’ll do what we can to stop her from doing so, but we’re not going to do so preemptively just because she *might* become a problem later on. We have to be better than that.”

Dusty grunted, looking away. “I don’t much like it, but... hell, you’re the whole psychology expert, I guess.” He looked back. “Fine. It seems like a dangerous gamble, but this one’s your call. But if she does try to hurt

somepony, I'm doing what I can to stop her."

I nodded. "Of course. And while I hope it won't come to that, I will help. I don't intend to sit back and let innocents be hurt if there's anything I can do about it. The thing is, I think she's one of those innocents, right now."

Dusty frowned, silent for a moment before sighing. "Yeah, maybe. She's just a lot more dangerous than most."

"So is Sickle," I said. "Hell, apparently so am I."

"Yeah, yeah," Dusty said, waving a hoof. "I get it. Shit. I won't kill the alicorn, 'less she does something bad enough to force my hoof."

"Good enough," I said. "Not that I'm entirely sure we could stop her, even if we wanted to. I'm not sure what alicorns are capable of, but she seemed confident in her safety."

"I know they can be killed," Dusty said. "Heard that much on the radio, at least."

I nodded. "Hopefully we'll never have to find out," I said. With that, I turned to the motorwagon. Starlight was already inside, watching us through the side window.

"As an aside," I said casually as I approached the vehicle, "Echo's observation of us apparently included conversations, even fairly private ones. It's quite possible she has some form of magical eavesdropping that's letting her listen in on every word we've said."

Dusty froze, one hoof on the side of the motorwagon. "...Shit, you mean she just heard me talking about... that? You think you could have told me that a little earlier?"

"If she heard you considering it, she also heard why you've decided against it. Consider it to be a demonstration of morality."

"Hmmph." He pulled himself into the motorwagon, grumbling. "Still could have told me."

I said nothing as I hovered up beside the window and slipped in. In the front seat, Starlight gave a quiet chuckle. "Sneaky bug," she murmured, before turning to me. "Also, *holy shit that actually worked!*"

I groaned softly as I sank into the rear seat. "So far. We've got a good ways to go before we can really say it 'worked'."

"Hey, we're all still alive, and it sounds like she might kinda maybe sorta

help us.”

I shrugged, though I did give a thin smile. What had started as a particularly dangerous situation was now... a somewhat less dangerous situation with more potential. It wasn’t perfect, and it could still collapse around us at any moment, but we had made progress. A better outcome was in sight.

Starlight had turned to Dusty. “Where to?”

“Start heading out west,” he grumbled. “*Somepony* has been complaining about the lack of adequate company, so we’re stopping by Rust to see if that shuts her up for a bit. Not that I’d mind a real bed, for a change.”

“Rust it is,” Starlight said, and the motorwagon started off. Soon we were rolling along at a good clip, with Starlight casting the occasional glance to her PipBuck’s map, and the strange alicorn trailing us in the sky above.

We continued on across the dry, dusty desert, and thick plumes of dark smoke rose from the horizon before us.

## Chapter Thirty-Three

# The First Blow

I'd seen many horrible things since waking up in that ancient facility.

Chief among those were the death and devastation at my hive, the deaths of so many of my sisters, and of course, the sight of my queen lying dead.

While it wasn't so painful as those events, seeing the ruin brought upon Rust was certainly up there. That simple little settlement had been the first place to offer me some sense of security after my tumultuous first few days in the Wasteland. It was spartan and run-down, but it was still a place where ponies banded together, refusing the decay and destruction of the Wasteland.

Now, the town lay dead. The walls were scorched, with embers still smoldering in places. Some of it had collapsed, including the main gate itself. The central structure, with its machine-gun armed tower, was a burnt-out shell. Despite the metal construction that was abundant in the town, little was still standing. Some of those still-standing walls sported ragged holes, and in some cases, it looked as if the metal had softened and sagged. I was pretty sure I was seeing the signs of magical energy weapons at work.

Just outside the gate lay the emaciated form of a dead pony. They were blackened from the flames that had burned away flesh, leaving them practically skeletal.

Above it all, smoke hung like a towering column of clouds, a beacon announcing the destruction that had taken place here.

I followed closely behind Dusty as he moved forward, our weapons ready. I'd retaken my pony guise in anticipation of our arrival, but now I was tempted to strip it away once more. I held off for the moment; my armor was just a thought away.

Dusty didn't say anything, but I saw where he was leading us. We were moving to a small rise that ran along one side of the small settlement, and which approached it near a section of collapsed wall. It would give us a good vantage point and a point of entry.

I'm sure none of us expected to find the individuals responsible still here, but I imagine many of us hoped to be proven wrong. Even Sickle had

gone quiet, her mouth drawn into a thin, tight frown.

Echo had rejoined us, though she had said nothing. She strolled along behind us, seemingly unconcerned. I'm not sure if she was bored or simply observing, but there was something detached about her demeanor. I didn't really think on it much at the time; I had more immediate concerns.

We paused for a moment on the ridge, maybe a hundred yards from the walls, but there was nothing new to be seen. As we were getting ready to move out again, a distant clang of metal striking metal echoed across the gap. Dusty cast a quick glance to us, cinched his rifle's stock in tighter against his chest, and advanced.

Pips started appearing on my E.F.S. as we approached the gap in the wall. Dusty halted at the edge of the opening, peering in briefly before looking back to us. "I count five contacts. They're showing as non-hostile, so hold your fire unless they give us a reason. Could be survivors."

We nodded, except for Echo, who simply watched in silence.

We were moving again. I followed off Dusty's flank as he advanced down what had once been a narrow alleyway. The building to our left had been partially wood, and had collapsed into a smoldering heap, leaving the air thick and hot with smoke. To our right was a fully metal building, and appeared reasonably intact until we reached the corner and could see the front of it, riddled with dozens, if not hundreds, of bullet holes. The mangled corpse of a pony lay in front of the building. The thick metal armor the guard had worn had not protected her, as every bit of exposed flesh had been shredded by whatever had opened up on her.

I was starting to get a better grasp on our position, trying to match the ruins I saw now with the settlement as I had last seen it. We were crossing the street when I realized that the ruined building in front of us had been Mustard's inn. Now, what walls remained were almost universally pierced or crumpled, and much of the supporting structure seemed to be entirely missing. It looked as if something gigantic had torn through it, scattering the remains. The burnt remains of tables, chairs, and beds were scattered among the wreckage. I spared a glance at a charred bed-frame as we passed it by, distantly pondering whether it might be one I had slept in.

Another clang of metal interrupted my thoughts, followed by a groan of metal shifting, and finally, a distant voice. I couldn't make out what was

said, only that it was said firmly.

We advanced carefully down the street, past a scattered pile of ashes, a discarded pair of saddlebags, and the scorched, barely legible "Stuff" sign. From the direction of the pips, it appeared the unknown entities were at the town workshop.

At the corner, by a half-collapsed shack, we paused again. The heap of metal and charred wood stood about shoulder-high, giving decent cover as we crept up.

Dusty carefully peeked his head up.

The moment he cleared the top of the wall, his eyes went wide, and he lowered his head again, staring at the wall in front of him.

I peeked my head up to see what had alarmed him.

Perhaps fifty yards away, I could see two ponies, with glimpses of movement beyond them. They were clad in Enclave armor, though the backs were painted blue, and one of them appeared to have a small, thin rainbow painted across her armor's flank.

Neither were looking in my direction, but I still crouched down to hide again. This posed a problem. I had no idea why the Enclave would be here, but I didn't imagine the reason was anything good. Fighting would be problematic. Starlight's Lancer was the only weapon we carried that could reliably harm them, though I imagined Sickle might do some damage if she got her hooves on them. Dusty and I would have to rely on volume of fire to get some rounds into the few places the armor didn't cover.

Though, we also had Echo with us. I had no idea how capable she would be against them. I didn't even know if she'd join in a fight. She still stood back, watching us, but otherwise unconcerned.

"What the fuck?" Dusty muttered before turning his head towards us. He spoke quietly. "Fall back. We don't want this fight."

I nearly jumped when Echo spoke in a clear, firm voice, her conversational level of volume shockingly loud. "I do not believe these ponies will fight. Even if they did try, they can not harm me."

A stallion's shout echoed between the buildings. "Shit! Marks south-east! Lots of 'em!"

Dusty cursed under his breath. I could hear another pony, a mare this time, and while I couldn't make out the words, the tone of giving orders

was clear. After a few quick orders, she called out clearly, voice amplified by her armor. “We are investigating these ruins. Show yourself and state your intentions.”

Dusty cursed a couple more times before shouting back. “I’ll stay right here, thank you very much. As for—”

Echo had stepped forward to look at the pegasi, prompting a fresh shout from the distant stallion. “Shit, it’s that creepy-ass alicorn!”

“Hold fire!” the mare snapped, and at the same instant, Echo’s purple magic flashed outward. I flinched back; for just an instant, I had thought she had exploded in magic, but I quickly realized she had put up a magical shield, a perfect sphere of energy that surrounded her completely.

The pegasus mare barked a few more sharp commands before calling out again. “We didn’t come here for a fight. We were on patrol when we saw the smoke, so we came to investigate. Do you know what happened here?”

Dusty shouted back, “We were coming here to spend the night, except we get here and find the place burnt down and you guys picking through the ashes. The damage sure as hell looks like Enclave-issue weapons.”

I expected her to argue that, but I was surprised. “Could be,” she replied. “But not us. I don’t know how up-to-date you are on current events, but the pegasi aren’t quite as united as we used to be. Look, we’ve found a survivor, and we’re trying to dig them out. It’s hard enough going, but this little standoff is delaying us. I don’t mean to be rude, but I need you to either come out and meet face-to-face, or back off until we’re done here.”

Dusty sat back, considering how to reply.

Echo’s hum was nearly muffled by her shield, and I almost would have missed it if she hadn’t stepped forward a moment later.

I lurched. “Echo, wait!”

She didn’t. Instead, she kept walking, while shooting a sharp look my way. “If we are to help ponies, then we shall do so now.”

“Crap,” Dusty muttered, and after a final moment of consideration, lowered his rifle. “Okay, we’re coming out.”

“Wait, really?” I said, ears perking up in surprise. It seemed rather incautious for Dusty.

“There’s nowhere to run or hide,” he grunted quietly. “If they wanted to kill us, there isn’t much we could do about it either way, and not much

reason for them to hold their fire. Plus, this gets Sickle in close.”

“Am I going to get to pluck a birdie?” Sickle asked with a grin.

Dusty ignored her and stood, keeping his rifle low. Reluctantly, I followed suit.

Echo’s shield stood between us and the pegasi, though it was translucent enough to see through. One of the pegasi, the stallion, stood with his head down, the twin gem-tipped barrels of his mounted guns tracking Echo as she advanced. The other, the mare, stood in a slightly more relaxed posture. She looked to still be alert, but not tense, even as the alicorn advanced.

“Just keep the weapons lowered,” the mare said. “We’re not interested in a fight.”

“Neither are we,” Dusty said, though it was perhaps less convincing when said around the bit of his rifle. At least he kept it pointing downward, though it would take only a moment to bring it up to a firing position. It’s not as if I could really criticise him on that point; I was holding the bit of my own rifle, too.

As we approached, I saw the other two pegasi among the ruins of the workshop. One had gotten himself under a support beam and was holding it up, while the other stood guard nearby, watching the scene unfold. They, too, had the curious blue paint on their armor, though I could see now that it wasn’t uniform in its application. While the first two had their backs painted, the one under the support beam had a simple stripe along either side, while the fourth pony had her chest painted blue and bands painted around her legs.

The nearest stallion stepped back, still tracking Echo as she approached. “Uh, Sergeant? You sure about this?”

Echo continued to walk forward, right past him, as he backed up. His head swiveled, as if trying to decide whether to focus on her or the rest of us, and settled on her. I was quite fine with that, though I hoped her defenses were as good as she claimed they were.

The mare—a sergeant, apparently—watched her as she stepped past, then turned back to us. “I appreciate the gesture of trust. I know this is an awkward situation. If you’ll give us a few minutes to finish our rescue efforts, I’d like to ask you—”

“That will not be necessary,” Echo stated, her horn lighting up. The stal-

lion started to shout something, and my own gut lurched as the adrenaline hit once more. Then I saw the purple glow of her magic wrap around the ruins of the structure. Metal groaned and shrieked as she lifted away what must have been several tons of ruined structure.

“Downdraft,” the pegasus mare said, her voice tight. “Please stop pointing your weapons at the unicorn.”

“It is not as if they could harm me,” Echo said as she continued to tear open the structure, metal bending and cracking under the force of her magic. “Though it is rather impolite.”

“Right,” the stallion, Downdraft, said, taking another step back and standing a little more upright.

The pony who had gotten under the support beam stepped back as it was lifted away, but he remained close by, peering into the space that was opening up. “I see her,” he said, and as a piece of bent skywagon was torn away, he slipped in again, climbing over the remaining debris. I craned my neck, trying to see. I only caught a glimpse of an ash-caked flank.

“She was bleeding, but it’s stopped,” the pony said. He quickly unlatched and removed his helmet, his long blue mane spilling out across his shoulders. I couldn’t help but consider how awkward that must be to tuck away inside the helmet, as well as how starkly his pale pink coat contrasted with the black armor. Those thoughts were interrupted as he spoke again. “I’m getting minimal response. Might be internal damage. Might just be dehydration.”

Starlight pressed forward. “Here, let me see her.”

The sergeant’s attention snapped to her. “Are you trained in medical care?”

“A little,” Starlight replied, “but I’ve got plenty of experience and some healing potions.”

“So does Soaring Heart,” the sergeant said. “Don’t worry, she’s in good hooves.”

The tension seemed to have broken. Dusty let his rifle hang from its sling, and I followed suit. Echo finished moving the last batch of debris, and as she set it down, her shield vanished. Even Downdraft relaxed a bit more, seeing the “creepy-ass unicorn” helping them.

The sergeant looked over the scene before turning back to Echo and giving an appreciative nod. “Thank you for the help.”

"It was a trivial task," Echo replied, her head held high, while her eyes remained fixed on the injured pony. We all moved in a little closer to get a better view.

The pony lay across a toolbox, and was contorted at an angle that made me concerned for the state of her spine. A few cuts, none serious, were covered in dried blood. Pale ash was caked in her coat, hiding all but a faint hint of red. It was only then that I connected that frail form with the energetic and enthusiastic pony I had met here before: Singe.

Soaring Heart was carefully moving his hooves along her body, examining for further injuries. "I'm not finding any major broken bones, though a couple of her ribs might be fractured. No signs of internal bleeding. I'm a little worried about her spine, but I think it's intact."

"Why don't you give her a healing potion?" Starlight said. "Or hell, I've got one."

The sergeant answered for him. "We have limited supplies. We need to make sure it's needed before administering healing potions. If we use them for somepony that doesn't need it, we might not have any when somepony does."

I immediately thought of Emerald. I tried to push the thought away, but it held its ground. Fortunately, it did lead into another thought. "I think we can help with that," I said, and turned. "Sickle, do you still have that spare PipBuck?"

"Hmm? Yeah, I got it in one of these cans. Just a 'sec.' She popped open the metal cans strapped to her side and started rooting around, grumbling a bit. "Woulda been a good fight, too."

She eventually pulled out the PipBuck and tossed it to me. I caught it and climbed over a ruined table to get to Soaring Heart. "Here, use this."

"I don't have the tools to—" He stopped as he saw the clasp, then smiled. "Oh, that'll do nicely."

While he tended to Singe, Dusty struck up a conversation with the mare in charge. "Dusty Trails, former sergeant in the Mareford Militia Rangers." He offered his hoof.

She took it, giving a friendly shake. "Sergeant Hail Burst."

"Good to be talking," Dusty said. "So what exactly is the Enclave doing here, patrolling the Wasteland and rescuing civilians? Not to put too fine of

a point on it, but last time I saw Enclave soldiers, they were gunning down unarmed ponies.”

She grimaced. “Not our Enclave,” she said, practically spitting the words. “It’s the politicians. The whole damn Council. They betrayed us, started a coup, and a bunch of featherbrains in the military actually listened to them. Now it’s a damned civil war. You want the politics, talk to our commander. Far as I’m concerned, you see somepony in Enclave armor doing shit like that, you’ll be doing us a favor if you take them down. Fucking traitors, the lot of them.”

There were grunts and nods of agreement from the other Enclave soldiers.

“Is your commander around here?” Dusty asked.

“She’s back at camp,” Hail Burst replied. “You’re welcome to come back with us. She’s had us out doing goodwill flights, trying to make contact with the locals on top of the usual patrol duties. I’m sure she’d want to speak with you.”

Dusty sighed, looking back over his shoulder. “We might have to take you up on that. We were going to stay the night here, but...”

There was a moment of silence before Hail Burst spoke again. “If we find out who did this, our whole unit will come down on them. We’ve seen enough of this shit already.”

Dusty grunted softly and nodded.

“She’s stable,” Soaring Heart said. His head was tilted at an awkward angle to read from the PipBuck’s screen without moving Singe’s leg. “No internal bleeding, and the spine is intact. She does have an incomplete fracture of the left foreleg, some fractured ribs, and extensive contusions. The most immediate concerns are a minor concussion and moderate dehydration.”

“Okay,” Hail Burst said, turning her attention to him. “Treatment?”

“Treat for shock and get some fluids in her. Not much else to do. Fluids are going to be a little tricky. If she wakes up in the next few hours, we’ll need to get her to drink something. If not, we’ll have to hydrate her another way. We could set an IV, but I’d rather get her back to camp and get a feeding tube in place. Should splint her leg, too, but that’s low priority. Administering a healing potion isn’t necessary at the moment, but if her condition doesn’t improve, it might become necessary.”

"Got it. She's good to move, then?"

"Yes. Give me a few minutes to get her ready and on the stretcher."

"Do it." She turned back to us. "Our camp's not far to the east," she said, then her armored head shifted as she looked at Dusty's side. "...Well, not far by wing. Can't say how long it'd take on hoof."

"We have transportation," Dusty said. "Can't say we'll keep up with pegasi flying all-out, but we can cover a day's worth of hiking in an hour or two, depending on terrain."

"Impressive," she said with an approving nod. "In that case, we can escort you there. At least that way there won't be any tensions over a group of well-armed ponies approaching the camp."

Though the helmet obscured her face, I caught the way it turned slightly in Sickle's direction.

"I appreciate it," Dusty said, "but I think you'd better get her to some care. We're not leaving just yet. I saw several bodies on the way in. I'd like to do something for them before moving on. Doesn't feel right just leaving them lying there."

Hail Burst paused for a moment before turning back to her team. "Soaring, Downdraft. As soon as you get the civvie ready to go, take her back to camp. Sunfire and I will stay and help these ponies."

"You got it," Soaring Heart replied, his focus remaining on his patient as he strapped her into the folding stretcher.

While I was quite thankful for Hail Burst's gesture in offering to help, it proved to be entirely unnecessary. Echo strolled casually through the ruins, plucking bodies from the dirt and ash, and even tearing open the ruins of a building to retrieve the occasional half-concealed corpse.

It didn't help that the sight made me think back to Paradise Beach.

Minutes later, we had a funeral pyre going. As the flames rose, we stood around, staring into the fire. It was a long time before Dusty broke the silence. "I know somepony's supposed to say something at these kinds of things, but I've never been good at it. Not the type, I guess."

"Yeah," Sickle rumbled from behind us. "They're dead. Talking ain't going to do shit."

"Charming," Starlight muttered.

"The talking isn't for the dead," I said, "so much as the ones still alive."

"Eh, I prefer doing over talking," Sickle said with a metal-rattling shrug. "Though you know, even though I thought half the ponies here were a bunch of dumb cunts, I think I'd like to find the ponies that killed 'em."

"I hear that," Dusty said, nodding grimly.



It was just after sundown as we rolled up to the Enclave camp.

Hail Burst and Sunfire flew just above us, along with Echo, both guiding us to their camp and giving a clear signal to any sentries that we were not some hostile force.

Despite that, there was something unnerving about entering an Enclave camp. Even without the stories we had heard and the rare sighting, it was a military encampment with a large number of power-armor clad troops. The black armor had been designed to be intimidating, and while the aesthetic was probably less effective on me than on a regular pony, the intent was clear.

The splotches of blue paint and the occasional rainbow did little to dampen that effect.

We followed Hail Burst's directions as we pulled up past some simple earthworks and scrap barricades, and parked in a small clearing, surrounded by tents. The camp itself was a compact square, consisting of several tents neatly clustered around a few buildings made from scrap, with a small tower at each corner. Despite the structures being made of scrap, they looked almost professionally made, and more impressively, the obvious bolts made it look like each shelter could be rapidly dismantled and moved. There was little else in the way of equipment, aside from a few suits of power armor receiving maintenance in a makeshift workspace beneath an overhead tarp.

Several soldiers peeked out from tents or from the outer fortifications to get a look at us, and while I'm sure our motorwagon drew some interest, the real focus of their attention was Echo. They watched her warily, and several weapons tracked her, even as she landed alongside our escort.

Most of the soldiers I saw were clad in power armor. Despite the number of them, there was just one that really caught my attention. Her armor was more thoroughly painted, with the helmet and torso a solid blue, and a broad stripe of rainbow ran across her back. She walked toward us with

a pair of armored ponies trailing at her flanks, and with her confident stance, she gave the immediate impression of being the pony in charge.

"So you're the ponies Soaring Heart told me about," she said in a clear but slightly scratchy voice. Dusty stepped forward to meet her, and she stopped to extend a hoof. "Commander Aurora, former XO of the *Cumulonimbus* and current commanding officer of this unit. It's good to meet you."

"Dusty Trails," he replied, before taking a moment to introduce the rest of us.

She greeted each of us in turn, ending with Echo. "You've been giving my sentries some concern," Aurora said, looking up to the alicorn. "And I've got to admit, I've got some questions. You've been watching our camp for a few weeks, even after multiple relocations, and now we find out you're not alone. Why?"

"Our collaboration is a recent development," Echo replied. "I have been observing these individuals since before your vessel was brought down, but did not make contact with them until this afternoon. As for why I was observing you, the reason is the same as the reason I was observing them; you intrigued me."

Dusty cut in. "The *Cumulonimbus*, wasn't that the Raptor that went down a month or two back?"

Aurora grunted softly. "It was. Seems half the Wasteland saw it happen, too. Now we're here, and caught up in everything going on below the clouds. Speaking of, I've got an injured civilian, and I hear that a local settlement has been attacked and razed. Do you have any insight into the attack and who was responsible?"

"I'm afraid not, ma'am," Dusty replied. "Whoever did it was well-armed and ruthless. Not many groups could bring that level of firepower. With Big Gun dead, I doubt it was Mareford or his former mercs; even if they had attacked, they would have taken the town for themselves. Given that the place was razed, my first instinct would have been raiders, but with the amount of magical energy weapon strikes I saw, I find it unlikely. Second instinct was Enclave, but I suspect you'd know more about that than I would."

"Yes," Aurora said. Her helmet lacked the mask that most of the other helmets had over the muzzle. It let us see her frown. "We do have a reputation, don't we?" She sighed. "And not undeserved, I'm sad to say. But

no, it's unlikely that this was a Council attack. They've got bigger concerns than what's happening below the clouds, and even if they decided this one lonely settlement needed to be removed, it's unlikely they'd get groundside without our patrols seeing them. The Council has learned to keep its forces concentrated." She shook her head. "You said it's only *unlikely* that it was raiders?"

"Very unlikely," Dusty said. "Magical energy weapons are too rare for the damage we saw. Not many places they could get them." His ears flicked back, his jaw tightening. "...Unless they hit Gemstone, too."

Aurora gave a small smile. "That, at least, I can say has not happened. We've been in contact with the settlement of Gemstone. Nice place, good ponies. We have a patrol fly by a few times a day. They haven't been hit."

"Good to know," Dusty said, as we both relaxed again.

"I can nearly guarantee it was not raiders," Echo said. "I have destroyed every raider camp I could find in the area. As far as I am aware, there is not a single raider alive within fifty miles of Rust."

"Then I take it that was your hoofwork we've come across on our patrols," Aurora said. "I know raiders aren't as prevalent as we had been led to believe, but I had been thinking their numbers seemed particularly low around here. You did this all on your own, then?"

"These ponies have destroyed three raider encampments in recent months," Echo said with a nod, "and I have personally destroyed another half-dozen."

Aurora eyed her for a long moment, clearly uncertain about the strange alicorn, before turning back to Dusty. "Getting back to the attack, I'm hoping we'll find something. I've already ordered several more patrol flights over the area. Unless the ponies responsible have wings or a vehicle like yours, they'll be moving slow, and my scouts should locate them. In the meantime, I'll see that you have a place to stay for the night, and I'd like to talk some more with you, get a better picture of local events, if you don't mind. I also understand that the medics were getting the civilian casualty settled, if you'd like to see her?"

"Is she awake?" Dusty asked.

"Not last I heard, but she hasn't been there long. I was giving the medics time to look over her and start treatment before intruding. Follow me."

Aurora led us to their medical post, set inside one of the scrap-built buildings. It was cramped inside, and far from the standards of a pre-war hospital, but it was still reasonably clean and cluttered with basic medical gear. I recognized Soaring Heart, now without his armor, along with a few other unarmored ponies. One was leaning over Singe.

They had cleaned most of the ash from her coat, though that improvement contrasted with the plastic tube that had been inserted into her nose and taped into place, and several bandages covered much of what wasn't hidden under the blanket.

One of the pegasi turned to Aurora as she approached. "Commander." "Lifeline. How's the patient?"

"Stable, but in poor shape. We set a nasal tube to get her hydrated. Blood volume is good. Brain activity is mostly good, with only minor irregularities from the concussion. We're holding off on medication for the moment. Fortunately, she has a PipBuck. It's making diagnosis and monitoring significantly quicker and easier, so I'm confident with a more conservative treatment. I don't think we'll get any more brain swelling, but we're standing by with meds and potions if necessary."

"Good," Aurora said. "When do you think she will regain consciousness?"

"Soon," Lifeline said. "She's already partially responsive. She was tracking lights when we opened her eyes. I could try waking her up now, if you'd like."

"If it won't complicate her treatment," Aurora said, but Lifeline was already moving over to Singe.

"Thank you for caring for her," Dusty said. "Don't take it wrong, but having the Enclave come to the rescue was the last thing I expected."

"No, I understand," Aurora said, watching Singe. "Given recent history, I couldn't blame anypony for being wary of us. The Council has caused a lot of damage."

"You've mentioned this 'Council' a couple of times, now," Dusty said. "Not really sure who you're talking about. We don't know what's going on above the clouds until something falls on us."

Aurora gave a reaction halfway between a chuckle and a grimace. "The Council. They're the ponies that were in charge of the Enclave. Top elected officials, generals, the like. I could go on for hours about what they've done,

but the short version of it is, they lied to us, betrayed us, and murdered innocent ponies all for the sake of their own privileged positions. Worse, they used good ponies to do it. I've got soldiers under my command who have nightmares of the things they did, all because the Council lied to them about the situation."

Dusty grunted. "That sounds uncomfortably familiar."

"Fucking politicians," Aurora muttered, then took a deep breath, sighed, and straightened up again. "In any case, we're done with their lies. The pegasi that remain loyal to the Enclave, the *real* Enclave, are fighting to bring the Council to justice."

"And that's why you're here?"

"Indirectly," she replied with a shake of her head. "No, we're here more by chance. We had a little mutiny on our cloudship. It ended badly. We all ended up in the brig or locked in our quarters. We probably would have been executed as traitors, but our ship was brought down shortly after that, and some of us managed to escape before it crashed. We don't really have a safe place to go above the clouds, so we set camp here. I sent some scouts above the clouds to try to find a safe place or other Loyalists, but so far, no luck." She shrugged. "In the meantime, if we're stuck groundside, we might as well make ourselves useful."

"And I take it those markings are to visually distinguish your side from the pegasi on the Council's side?"

"Yes," Aurora said. "Though I wouldn't depend on it. I don't know if other loyalists are doing the same thing, but it seemed appropriate."

Across the room, Lifeline had been murmuring something. I hadn't been paying attention, until I heard a weak groan.

"She's waking up," he said before leaning over her again. "Can you hear me?"

I leaned to peer around him. Singe lay with her mouth hanging halfway open, giving slow, shallow breaths. Her eyes were barely open, wavering as if it took a monumental effort to open them even that far. Her mouth moved, producing a weak and indistinct mumble.

"You're in a medical center," Lifeline said, a hoof resting gently on her shoulder. "You were in an incident, but you're safe now. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Her eyes wavered, struggling to focus on the face before her. Her mouth opened, croaking out another groan. Then her eyes closed again, clenched tight, as her groan deepened.

"It's okay," Lifeline said, reaching into the pouch at his side. "I'm going to give you a mild painkiller."

As he was talking, her eyes opened, blurrily fixing on him. I could see her chest moving as her breathing picked up, and her eyes darted around, fixing on various ponies.

The last one she looked at was an armored soldier, standing guard nearby. Her eyes widened, her body tensing. The expression was clear: recognition and fear.

Aurora's head turned slightly, tracking Singe's gaze, and she gave a tight frown.

Singe moaned out a weak, alarmed groan and tried to flail out, but in her injured state, she was barely able to lift her legs. Lifeline gently put his hooves over her forelegs, speaking calmly to another medical pony. "Restrain her legs. No, higher up, that's the injured leg. Good." He turned back to Singe. "Ma'am, you need to stop trying to move. You'll worsen your injuries."

"Nnnno," Singe groaned, finally forming coherent words as she tried to struggle. "Ge'way. Let... let me go!"

"Calm down, you've been injured. We're trying to help."

She groaned louder, ignoring him.

Lifeline looked back. "You ponies! Any of you friends or family? Does she know you?"

Starlight answered. "We traded with her a few times."

"Worth a try," Lifeline said. "Get over here, try to calm her down before I have to sedate her."

Starlight and I stepped forward, slipping past a couple of Enclave ponies to get close to her bed. Starlight spoke softly. "Hey, Singe, right? Do you remember us?"

Singe's struggles slowed as she slowly focused on us. She looked confused as she looked at Starlight, and even more when she looked at me. Her struggling slowed down.

But then her eyes widened more. "N-no," she groaned, tears running down her cheeks as she struggled with renewed vigor. "You can't... can't

trick me! You're not real! You're not ponies!"

My blood ran cold.

"This is the opposite of helping," Lifeline grumbled, holding onto her. "Soaring, get the sedative."

I ignored them, pushing in close. "Singe, we're trying to help you. What did you see? Who did this?"

"You did it!" She blurted, her head lolling as she tried to look around for an escape. "All of you did it! I know! You can't trick me. I-I saw what you really are! Let me go! Please, just... please, let me go..."

Her struggles ended, and she closed her eyes, chin tucking to her chest as if trying to shut out everything around her. She went silent, except for the occasional weak sob.

Soaring was approaching with a needle, but halted when she went still.

I raised a hoof, earning a sharp glance from Lifeline as I reached out to gently touch her chest, but he didn't stop me. "Singe," I said, keeping my voice quiet and soft despite the tension rising inside me. "What did you see? What did they look like?"

Her eyes cracked open, fearfully meeting mine. She shivered faintly, swallowed, and spoke in a hoarse voice. "Th-they looked like ponies, but... but some of them... changed. I-I saw what they looked like underneath. They were... monsters. You could be, too. Just... just leave me alone..."

I swallowed before quietly offering, "Bug ponies?"

She cringed, nodded, and closed her eyes again.

I looked over my shoulder, meeting Dusty's eyes. After a moment, he turned away, snorting. "Shit."

Aurora looked to him, then to me. "Is she talking about changelings?"

My ears perked up at that. "She is," I said, stepping away from Singe. "I'm surprised you've heard of them."

"Military history is a standard part of Enclave officer education," Aurora replied. "Though I'm surprised that *you* have heard of them. I would have expected changelings to have died out. They don't seem very well-suited for the way things are groundside."

I sighed. She was right; this was hardly a love-filled land. "We've had some encounters with changelings."

Echo snorted. "She is severely understating her 'experience' with

changelings.”

I tensed in alarm, shooting a glance her way. Her expression was hard, her eyes narrowed accusingly at me.

This was going to be trouble. My options were rapidly dwindling.

“We should discuss this outside,” I said, returning to Aurora. While most of her face was hidden, her frown and general bearing seemed suspicious. “Given what she’s been through, I think it’d be best if we don’t force her to listen to this discussion.”

Aurora’s frown held, but after a moment’s consideration, she nodded.

We exited into the open air of the camp. Aurora followed behind, still flanked by a pair of soldiers, and even with the lenses hiding her eyes, I was acutely aware of her attention.

I halted, heaved a deep sigh, and turned to take the only remaining course of action I had available. “What Echo was so *indelicately* suggesting back there is that I am a changeling. I’m from a different hive than the ones responsible for this attack, and in fact, am directly opposed to them.”

I really, *really* didn’t want to share this, but of the few options available, it was the one course of action that offered a reasonable chance of success.

Aurora’s attention remained fixed on me. To her side, the soldiers posture shifted. It was subtle, but it was enough to show they were prepared for a fight. When Aurora spoke again, the tone was neutral but firm, a combination that immediately struck me as dangerous. “You’re a changeling?”

“Yes,” I said. “And given that Singe just saw other changelings wipe out her home, I didn’t want to say so in front of her. She’s been through enough already.”

“How considerate,” Aurora dryly replied before looking around at my companions. “And the rest of you?”

“All ponies,” I said, “and all aware of what I am.”

“I see. I have to say, I don’t like individuals coming into my camp without telling me about such a dangerous secret.”

“It isn’t any danger to you,” I said. “On the contrary, sharing this information is dangerous to *me*. You’re military. I’m sure you understand the need for operational secrecy.”

“Hmmpf. Well, now your little secret is out. So tell me, what *exactly* is it that you’re doing here?”

“Right now? Trying to get back on-topic to deal with the changeling hive that’s quietly declared war on ponies, rather than the changeling that’s trying to help fight back.”

“And who has already lied to us.”

“Who hid a detail that was unimportant at the time, and who told you the moment it became important.” I raised a hoof, gesturing to her. “I know my kind doesn’t have the greatest reputation, but given what you’ve said of your own conflict, I’m sure you can appreciate what it’s like to be saddled with a reputation due to the actions of others.”

Her mouth snapped shut, head drawing back a hair. I couldn’t know for sure if the tactic I took would provoke or soothe her, so I continued on to smooth things over.

“I don’t generally tell ponies what I am, partially because most will see me as untrustworthy simply for being a changeling, and partially because it is the one meager advantage I have in a world that is particularly harsh for my kind. The best I can do is let my actions speak for me, instead. That’s why I try to help ponies where I can, and why I’ll offer any information or assistance I can give to combat the changelings who did this. They need to be stopped.”

While Aurora regarded me in silence, Dusty spoke up. “I almost shot her when I found out,” he said, “but it didn’t seem right after she revealed herself and risked her life to save us. She’s helped ponies and fought alongside us, even against the changelings that attacked Rust. She’s on our side.”

Starlight stepped in close, her side pressing to mine. “She’s good.”

Aurora was still frowning as she looked around at us. After another moment, she sighed. “Now this is an awkward situation, isn’t it? I can’t say I trust you—”

“I’m not asking you to,” I quickly said, “but I can give you information on this hive, and offer my help in dealing with them. All I’m asking you to do is listen.”

She considered that a moment longer, then slowly nodded. “Fair enough. Let’s see what you have to say.”



We sat in Aurora’s tent. It was larger than the others, likely to accommodate

meetings such as this, but it still felt slightly claustrophobic, especially with Echo, Sickle, and three power-armor-clad ponies in the space. I felt particularly exposed; Aurora had asked me to show what I really looked like, and I had complied, leaving me sitting in the midst of them in my natural form.

Aurora sat behind a makeshift desk, considering the few details we had been able to provide. She had removed her helmet, letting us see her face, as well as the short, multicolored and almost neon green-and-yellow mane, which contrasted with her purple-blue coat. Her expression was concerned. “This does seem like quite the mess, doesn’t it?”

I nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

“A dangerous and potentially genocidal faction, based in a heavily fortified underground position, with significant resources and some substantial tactical advantages.” She shook her head, sighing. “And we have only a vague idea of their intentions. I’m curious about this attack. What does it get them? Was it merely a warm-up, a real-world operation to test their preparation for large-scale operations? Or did they have a specific reason to attack this settlement?”

“Rust was one of the primary sources of water in the area,” Dusty said. “Taking it out is going to be a big problem for some settlements. Mareford lives off of Rust’s water.”

Echo scoffed behind us, her first contribution since effectively outing me. “If they are quite done telling you what they know, then it is time for me to share what *I* know. These changelings left the water pump undamaged and unguarded. If it were their intention to deprive the region of water, then they are doing a terribly inefficient job of it. Water was not the only material Rust provided. As I understand it, they were the largest provider of good-quality metal, and it appears that several portions of the buildings were simply removed rather than being destroyed.”

Aurora looked her way. “Really? How sure are you about that?”

“As sure as I could possibly be, without having physically examined the structures prior to their destruction,” Echo replied. “We remember a good deal of engineering experience, and I can confidently say that those buildings would not have withstood their own weight with the materials that were present. The multi-story buildings showed signs where supports

had been removed, and the damage was consistent with the use of cutting tools rather than weapons fire and demolitions. Further, there were marks on the ground that appeared to be produced by at least one heavily laden skywagon, and at least one place where intact metal plates and supports had been removed from the wreckage and set aside.”

That keyed a memory in my mind. “When we were escaping from Serenity, I overheard one of the changelings there say something about needing to find a source of structural steel.” I gave a weak shrug. “I have no idea what for.”

“That should be perfectly obvious,” Echo said, raising her nose. “Their efforts to repair the *Cumulonimbus* require a substantial amount of materials. More, I expect, than they were willing to strip from their own Stable.”

Aurora’s eyes had widened, her ears pinning back. “They’re doing *what*?”

Echo frowned and spoke with a slight but deliberate slowness. “Repairing the *Cumulonimbus*. ”

Aurora gaped at her for a few moments—an expression at least partially mirrored by several other ponies in the room—before abruptly blurting out, “They took the *Cumulonimbus*? How? There was at least a company of Council forces holding the wreckage! My scouts didn’t report any fighting there!”

“There was no fighting, and these Council forces never held the *Cumulonimbus*, ” Echo said. “It seems they are either unaware of the vessel’s location, or are convinced that there is nothing worth recovering.”

“But—” Aurora stopped, shutting her mouth. There was a moment of silence as she glanced at me, then returned to Echo. “Are you telling me that those were changelings?”

“Of course,” Echo said.

Aurora sighed, sitting back heavily.

Echo continued. “I have been observing many activities in the region. The crash of your cloudship was quite dramatic, and I observed everything that happened afterwards. There was considerable traffic to the site, but I noted that these Enclave imposters were not traveling above the clouds. Instead, they were traveling to a location on the ground.” She gestured a hoof to us. “A location that was eventually identified as Serenity.”

Aurora pondered the situation, frowning down at the maps and papers on her desk. "I can't say I like the idea of some third party getting ahold of a cloudship, much less the *Cumulonimbus*. On the other hoof, at least this keeps it out of the Council's hooves."

I spoke up. "We can't let Serenity have a Raptor. You saw what they did to Rust. A Raptor would let them do that to any settlement in Equestria, without any chance of reprisal."

"I'm quite well aware of a Raptor's combat capability, and I can assure you, you'd be mistaken if you think they're impervious to what the ground-bound ponies can throw at them." She slowly shook her head. "I have a very limited force, with no prospects of resupply. I have to conserve what strength I have." She picked up a piece of paper. "According to the latest reports from my scouts, the defensive force at the *Cumulonimbus* is larger than mine, and several of the Raptor's cannons are operational. We couldn't retake it without crippling losses."

"Allowing them to have that much firepower is going to be even more crippling to the ponies down here," I said. "This isn't just some power grab. If you know your history, you should know what the original Queen Chrysalis thought of ponies. Serenity's queen is every bit her namesake, if not worse. She doesn't simply not care for ponies, she *despises* you. To her, you're the reason for everything wrong in the world. She holds the belief that the only thing a pony is good for is food, and I don't doubt for a moment that she will happily exterminate any pony that isn't useful to her!"

"I agree it's a problem," Aurora said, frowning as she fixed me with a firm stare. "If I had the ability, I would stop them, but I don't. We're a hoofful of ponies with limited resources. Trying to retake a well-defended cloudship from a superior force would be throwing away my soldier's lives. I'm trying to help as many ponies as possible, but there's a limit to what we can do. I have to prioritize, and I'm sorry, but the fight against the Council has to be my priority. Once they've been defeated and the Enclave is stable once more, we can easily take down a single rogue Raptor."

I sat back, ears drooping.

"I'm sorry," Aurora said, her voice softening. "I've seen too many innocent ponies die already. All of us have. Some of us even bear some responsibility for it and are trying to make up for that. Every single one of

us is fighting to put an end to such things. We'll do what we can to help the ponies of the Wasteland, to maybe make up for some of the things that have been done in the Enclave's name, but we can't be everywhere at once. Fighting this Serenity head-on just isn't an option for us right now."

She was right, of course. Even with the arsenal they had, and the few dozen soldiers, they couldn't take on Serenity directly. Besides, they had their own fight. I sighed and nodded.

"I wish we could do more," Aurora said. "We'll keep our patrols flying, and if the opportunity presents itself, we can hit supply runs and raiding parties. And I can promise you this: when the Council is finally put down, we'll be back. The Enclave isn't going to turn its back on ponies ever again." She raised a hoof, touching her armor's blue-painted chest. "It's why we took up these colors."

Despite my disappointment at the situation, that caught my attention. "An expression of Loyalty?" I guessed.

Aurora's expression brightened just a fraction. "You've heard of Rainbow Dash?"

I nodded. "The mare in charge of the Ministry of Awesome, and the bearer of the Element of Loyalty."

"Ah, someone knows their history," Aurora said with an approving nod. "Yes, Rainbow Dash. The Enclave's greatest traitor."

I blinked, my surprise and confusion obvious on my face.

"Guess you didn't get that story down here," Aurora said, smiling. "We heard it plenty. Had it drilled into our heads. The Council said she turned her back on us after the Great War, abandoned us, and even tried to bring down the Enclave herself. Her name became synonymous with betrayal. *Dashites*, they call us. They'd even take traitors and brand her cutie mark over their own, so everypony could see how disloyal they were."

Starlight drew back half a step, her expression horrified. I might not have a cutie mark myself, but I could certainly see the significance. A cutie mark was something immensely personal and significant to a pony. Destroying it was like destroying a part of what made them a pony. The closest comparison I could think of for a changeling was the loss of my hive.

Aurora scoffed quietly, shaking her head. "Ends up, she was just the first pony to see what was *really* going on. She saw what the ponies in charge

were doing, even way back then. She didn't abandon us. She was refusing to abandon *other* ponies, and the Council, or what passed for them at the time, saw her as a threat to their power. She wasn't a traitor. She was their first victim. They banished her, cast her down to the surface, maybe even killed her." Her hoof returned to her chest. "So now we wear her colors, to honor her memory as we finish what she started."

To her side, one of the soldiers was faintly nodding in agreement.

I managed a weak smile; while the prior conversation still weighed heavily in my mind. I liked the sentiment. "If nothing else, I imagine she'd be pleased to see so many ponies wearing her colors."

Aurora gave a soft laugh. "I imagine she would." She lowered her hoof, regarding me for a moment as her smile faded again. "I've got to admit, I hadn't ever expected to have a friendly conversation with a changeling."

That drew a dry, humorless chuckle from me. "The last few months have been rather exceptional at providing unexpected experiences."

She nodded. "Very true. That said, I'm curious how many more of you there are. You've said a lot about this other hive, but not much about your own. If there's a friendly changeling hive, I think I'd like to meet them."

I grimaced. "I'm afraid I'm it, at the moment. My hive was destroyed. I'm still looking for survivors, but I haven't found any."

Her smile faded. "I'm sorry. I hope you have luck in finding them."

"Thank you."

A silence followed, and after a moment, she spoke again. "Well, I think I've kept you long enough. We have a spare tent cleared out if you're planning to spend the night. Vapor can lead you to it." She gestured to one of the armored soldiers beside her. "The rules might be a little loose at the moment, but this is still a military encampment, so I'm going to have to ask you not to wander without an escort." She looked my way. "And no impersonating my ponies."

"Of course," Dusty said, standing. "Thank you for your hospitality, and I hope things go well for you."

We said our goodbyes, and I retook my disguise before exiting her tent. It seemed like such a token gesture; no doubt the story would have spread across the entire camp by the morning, if it hadn't already. Still, I could at least put on some pretense of having some degree of control over my

own secrets.

And on that note, there was a certain pony I needed to deal with.

The tent Aurora had provided was the same size as her own and the other large tents, and without the extra power-armor-clad ponies, it gave us enough room to relax, if not quite enough to call it spacious. Echo strolled along behind us, as usual. She had just entered the tent when she staggered to a stop; I had turned, blocking her path.

“When we agreed to allow you to accompany us, it was under certain conditions,” I said, my voice firm, but as neutral as I could manage. “It’s obvious that you’ve taken issue with me, but if you’re going to stay with us, you will not try to harm any of us like that again.”

She scoffed, glaring icily down at me. “I did not harm—”

“There are plenty of ways of harming people other than direct physical injury,” I said, as her ears flicked back in agitation at being interrupted. “You tried to undermine me, attacked my credibility, and deliberately exposed me to harm. If you have some issue with me, or anyone else here, then bring it up with us, but so long as you’re traveling with us, you will not try to hurt anyone like that again. Do you understand?”

Her mane had grown, flowing in agitation in the still air. “You spoke a lot about ideals and their importance, but as soon as—”

“Honesty is not just about telling the truth,” I said. “That’s what this is all about, isn’t it?”

She blinked, her head tilting slightly as she processed my interruption. “...That is quite literally what the word means,” she replied, still glaring.

“It’s a lot more than that,” I said, refusing to back down even under that intimidating glare. To my side, Starlight was watching with wide eyes and a magical grip on her Lancer, and I couldn’t help but notice how Sickle had moved to the side, still relaxed, but with her attention clearly focused on the alicorn.

“It’s as much about intent as anything else,” I continued. “What I said might have been misleading, but it was not something that would cause any harm to anyone. What you said was *intended* to harm me, and I suspect was done without any consideration to the real damage your statement could cause to others.”

“Damage to *others*? ”

"You didn't just try to hurt me," I said. "You undermined the credibility of everypony here, and potentially exposed them to real harm. I missed the worst of the changeling paranoia, but we all studied it. Some ponies had their lives destroyed just because someone *thought* they might be a changeling. Some ponies who had been *victims* of changelings were treated with suspicion and ostracized. When you outed me, you didn't just say I was deceiving them. You said that every pony with me was trying to deceive them, too. If these soldiers decided that I was a threat that had to be dealt with, do you really think they would stop with just me?"

Her ears flicked. "If you hadn't been trying to mislead them, none of that would have happened."

"*And*," I continued forcefully, "you tried to out me in front of Singe, who had just seen changelings wipe out her entire settlement. She was already terrified that we were all changeling imposters intent on hurting her, and you didn't even consider how that information would hurt her."

She frowned. "While I most certainly did *not* intend to distress her, that hardly compares to the lies you have told. You *are* a changeling imposter. You intend to lecture me on the values expressed by the Elements of Harmony, but you flout the very nature of one of them."

"Not as much as you seem to think. I prefer honesty."

She scoffed again. "You are a professional liar."

"And that's *why* I prefer honesty," I said. "I know how damaging a lie can be, but I also know how much *more* devastating the truth can be if it's used as a weapon. That's why intent is important."

"Nonsense. The truth might be unpleasant at times, but ponies deserve it."

"You almost put Sickle through a wall because of a cruelly delivered piece of truth."

Echo flinched, ears flicking back. "...She was being intentionally insulting. That is hardly the same thing as simply being *honest*."

"And I then delivered the exact same truth, with different wording and intent. Same message, but it's no longer insulting."

She silently considered this, still frowning.

With her protests halted for the moment, I took on a more conversational tone. "Ponies like to imagine the truth is nice and simple, but it's

very complex. An incomplete truth can be as misleading as any lie, if not more. If you went up to Singe and told her I was a changeling, that would be technically factual, but the impression you would give her is far from the truth. She wouldn't know every other piece of information that would be necessary to see the truth. She wouldn't know anything about my history, who I am, or what I've done. She'd have every reason to think of me as being like the changelings who attacked Rust. Trying to tell her the truth like you did would mislead her *more* than any deception on my part."

She remained silent, thoughtful.

"The Elements aren't about being perfect," I said. "Applejack, the bearer of Honesty, told the occasional lie. Rarity could be self-centered. Pinkie Pie had her sad days. Sometimes Rainbow Dash let her friends down. Even Fluttershy had the occasional temper tantrum. And Twilight... well, I'm not quite sure what the opposite of Magic is, but I know there were times when she was a bad friend, especially when she was younger."

Echo's eyes had widened, once again staring off into space with a vacant expression.

"You remember this," I asked, "don't you?"

"We do," she quietly replied, eyes unfocused.

"I might be an Infiltrator, but I try to be honest. No, I'm not perfect. I've told plenty of lies, of course. I try to make sure they help others, but sometimes I've failed at that. There are lies I shouldn't have told." I raised a hoof toward Starlight. "It's almost cost me friendships, nearly gotten me killed, and caused all manners of problems. I'm trying to be *more* honest, but I'm not going to be perfect. Nobody is perfect. What matters is our *intentions*. I don't try to mislead ponies in ways that will harm them, I don't cheat them, and I keep my promises. That's what makes me different from ponies like Big Gun or this Council Aurora was talking about. I may have to lie, both directly and through omission, but I still try to deal honestly with ponies."

She thought on that for several seconds. "This seems... very counter-intuitive."

"It doesn't have to be," I said. "The simplest distinction is whether your actions help or hurt others."

"That does not clarify anything," Echo said, turning to look at me again.

"You have all killed many ponies. That seems like 'hurting', to me."

"Ponies who were directly trying to hurt others," I said. "There's a big difference between being imperfect and intentionally trying to harm others. The ponies we've killed were ones who murdered and tortured other ponies, or who were trying to do so. We did so because we wanted to help others, not because we wanted to hurt them."

Sickle chuckled from across the tent. "Well, I wanted to hurt them. It's fun."

"You should probably ignore anything Sickle says in regard to morality," I said with a frown. "Though I should note that she goes after raiders that hurt other ponies, rather than innocents."

"Of course I do," Sickle said. "Raiders give a better fight. More fun. Plus, I get paid more."

Echo looked critically at Sickle. "Many of the arguments you have presented seem... familiar, but the result still seems hopelessly muddled. Perhaps you could clarify, Whisper; given that Sickle enjoys hurting others, and has admitted to have tortured, raped, and murdered many ponies, why should I not kill her for the sake of helping others?"

"For the same reason we haven't," I said. "It's not necessary. She changed her ways, even if only a little. Now she goes after raiders and such, rather than innocent ponies. If she does start going after innocent ponies, then we'll stop her, but I doubt it will come to that, and I doubt we would need to resort to killing her to do so."

"I'd like to see you try," Sickle said, rattling as she flopped down on her side. "Might be funny."

Echo hummed softly, considering her for another moment before nodding. "Yes, I think I understand."

"Good," I said, nodding as well. "Then, while I won't ask you to lie for me, or even to support any mistruth I might give, I need to ask that you won't directly call me out on any misleading or incomplete statements like you did in there."

"Unless I believe you are attempting to bring unnecessary harm upon an individual."

I smiled as she made that connection. "Yes, exactly. Very good."

She smiled as well, mane flowing a little more actively, as if she were

energized by the recognition of her success. “Good! Now that we have resolved that... small misstep, we should begin studying your magic. We have much work to do. Hmm. I should find something to take notes on. I wonder if these ponies might have some scrolls and quills I could make use of.”

I sighed as the moment of satisfaction passed. “If you don’t mind, I’m exhausted. The last six hours or so has been one stress after another, and I need some time to rest and recover. On top of that, I’d rather not be doing flashy magic in a military camp that’s already rather wary of me. Could it wait until we’ve left? We could even lend you the spare PipBuck for taking notes, once we get it back.”

“Hmm.” Her smile had vanished, replaced with a thoughtful frown. She nodded. “I do not like delaying, but I suppose that is an acceptable reason. I would not want to compromise the quality of my work due to excessive stress on the subject. Very well, we shall begin tomorrow.”

“Good,” I said, turning to Dusty, who was waiting patiently beside me.

He spoke before I could. “Serenity is going on the offensive, and they’ve already infiltrated at least one settlement. How likely do you think it is that they’ve infiltrated this group of soldiers?”

“That’s something I’ve been wondering myself,” I said. “My PipBuck hasn’t shown any hostile contacts, but we know how unreliable that can be when an Infiltrator is involved. Personally, I think the odds are low. Soldiers tend to be a close-knit group, and being isolated like they are would make it much harder to infiltrate their ranks. Even if someling managed to avoid suspicion, the knowledge that changelings are in play is going to increase suspicion of any unusual behavior.” I paused, looking to the entrance of the tent. “All the same, I think it would be a good idea to keep a watch.”

He simply nodded.

“I shall assist,” Echo declared. It seemed strangely comforting that she was contributing.

I had found more of my sisters, long dead, talked a potentially genocidal alicorn down to something approaching a reasonable pony, came across the destruction of an entire settlement, was surrounded by Enclave soldiers, had my identity revealed, and was faced with the knowledge that Serenity, having already murdered a number of ponies, had claimed a weapon of tremendous

power. So much was happening.

I wondered what the next day would bring.

## Chapter Thirty-Four

# Family

Enclave soldiers were gathering when we exited our tent in the morning. Ponies were checking over each other, readying gear, and organizing into groups. Probably half the camp was gathered.

Commander Aurora had already split off from them and was approaching us. “Leaving already?”

“We have some places we need to be, and shouldn’t delay for too long,” Dusty said. “Looks like you’re leaving, too. Something up?”

“Just routine patrols,” Aurora said, though the size of the group suggested otherwise to me. “Sorry, but I can’t discuss the details of our operations.”

Dusty held up a hoof and shook his head. “I understand, believe me.”

She gave a curt nod. “I was hoping to talk more when we returned, but I suppose I’ll have to do without. If you come back through the area, I wouldn’t mind the opportunity to talk. Our camp won’t be in the same place, but the patrols will see you coming in and can direct you.”

“I appreciate it,” Dusty replied. “I’m not sure where our business will take us next, but if we pass by, I’ll be sure to stop and say hello.”

“Good,” she said. “One final thing: I was hoping you might be able to do us a small favor. Some of my patrols have been taking ground fire from various locals who don’t know the difference between Loyalist and Council forces, and haven’t noticed that my patrols always break contact without returning fire. I’d appreciate it if you could help spread the word that we’re not the same Enclave they might be familiar with. You can point them our way if they need help, too. The ponies in Gemstone are already spreading the word, as are a few other groups we’ve encountered, but the more ponies getting word out, the better.”

“I’ll do that,” Dusty said. “Though on that subject, maybe you could do us a favor, too, and help get out the word about Serenity.”

“We can do that,” she said, though her helmeted head turned slightly, her gaze clearly shifting to me. “Though I assume you’re wanting me to keep your friend’s... involvement a secret.”

Dusty looked to me.

Hesitantly, I answered. "If you don't mind."

She simply nodded. "We'll see what we can do."

"Thank you," Dusty said. "I think that just leaves the PipBuck we lent your medical staff, if you don't mind."

"Of course." Aurora turned to another soldier. "Tailwind, go to Lifeline and return these ponies' PipBuck."

The other soldier saluted, and as he flew off, Aurora turned back to us. "If you'll excuse me, I have a briefing to take care of. Good journeys."

"Thank you," Dusty said. "And good luck."

She gave another curt nod, turned, and returned to the gathered soldiers.

Tailwind caught up with us as we were climbing into our motorwagon. I took the PipBuck, and settled into the back seat.

"So," Starlight said as she got behind the wheel. "Where to?"

"One more C.L.T. facility," Dusty said, bringing up his map. "It's a good distance west of here, about halfway to Trotsen, but we should make it today easily enough."

She grinned. "You got it."

Moments later, we were rolling.

As we made our way out of the camp, I was pulling out my diagnostic tools and hooking up the spare PipBuck to my own. Dusty looked back. "What are you up to?"

"Changing the tags again," I said.

"Worried about them tracking it?"

"Not really," I said. "They just let a known changeling leave their camp with minimal fuss. It's possible they let us go with the intent of following us, though I find that doubtful. I don't think they intend us any harm. Still, I don't intend to let them track us, whether they have hostile intentions or not."

"Fair enough," Dusty said, sitting back in his seat.

We rolled on.



We stopped around noon to get a quick meal and stretch our legs. Echo joined us, giving me the opportunity to present the freshly re-tagged PipBuck to her.

"Thank you," she said as she took the PipBuck in her magic. Despite her almost rigid stance of casual superiority, she inclined her head as she peered at the device, a hint of a smile appearing. It vanished a moment later as she placed it on her foreleg, closing the clasp, and addressed me in a matter-of-fact tone. "This should be most helpful."

She sat as we broke out lunch. She managed to hold the calm and disinterested look for perhaps half a minute before her eyes drifted back to the PipBuck. A minute later, she gave up any pretense, and began examining the device closely. She didn't stop at simply looking through the menus and examining its functions, either. Soon she was turning it this way and that, examining the case, dials, and buttons.

To my surprise, I caught a sense of emotion from her. I couldn't make out exactly what it was. What I could tell was that it wasn't directed at the PipBuck. It seemed somehow intangible, as if directed toward a memory or idea rather than a physical thing in her presence, and it made me think less of affection, and more of passion. It was the first sense of a solid positive emotion from her. I hadn't even sensed that small degree of positive emotion from her when she had spoken of her mother, though I had been more distant and more distracted at the time.

"I may need to borrow that small electronics toolkit you carry," Echo quietly murmured as she twisted her leg around to examine the underside of the main selector dial. "I am sorely tempted to dismantle this device to work out precisely how it works."

Dusty and Starlight frowned and grimaced at that remark, before looking to me. It seemed she was my responsibility. I suppose that was fair enough.

"I don't mean to disparage your talent, but of all the devices we have, a PipBuck is probably the most complex, and you know what disassembly can do to complex things. At the very least, it would take much longer than a quick lunch break. Maybe it should wait until after you've taken care of your research?"

She hesitated, but finally lowered her hoof. "Yes, you are quite correct. I should prioritize and focus on my primary goal, rather than interesting diversions." She paused again, sneaking a quick glance down at her foreleg. "Though as much as I appreciate this gift, and as much help as I am sure it will

be, I fear it will also be quite thoroughly distracting. It is such a fascinating device.” She glanced back toward the motorwagon. “One of many.”

Starlight looked up from her can of mystery vegetables. “You really like machines, don’t you?”

“Very much so, it would seem,” she said, peering at the vehicle for several more seconds, before shaking her head. “We remember a great many things, which can make it quite difficult to sort out my own thoughts.”

There was a moment of silence before Starlight cautiously asked, “You mean you don’t know what you like?”

“I bet you like fucking,” Sickle said around a mouthful of oats, and snickered as Starlight shot her a dirty look. “Hey, I know you do, little Star. You’re pretty loud for a runt.”

“It is complicated,” Echo said. “When we were in Unity, everything made sense. We all had a place. Ever since the Destroyer ruined everything, I have been... adrift. The world is a confusing and mysterious place.” She frowned, lifting her hoof to look at the PipBuck again. “I suppose I like things that make sense. I can peel away a little bit of that mystery.”

I slowly nodded. “That sounds pretty reasonable.”

“Hmmph.” She stared at the PipBuck for a moment before setting her hoof down. “Though on that note, I should take advantage of this device you have generously lent me to continue my studies. Whisper, as you appear to have finished your meal, would you please perform some transformations while I analyze your magic?”

I sighed, chewing and swallowing the last mouthful of stale oats before rising to my hooves. “Okay. Tell me what you need.”

“When I say so, I would like you to transform into an alicorn. You may copy my appearance, if that helps you.”

“That’s a pretty big transformation,” I said, frowning a little. “It takes a lot of energy and effort.”

She dismissively waved a hoof. “You have quite an adequate supply of affection to draw upon. That should not be a problem for you.”

“That’s... well, that’s true, though I still won’t be able to do that very often. What I mean is, shouldn’t we start with something simpler?”

“Of course not. An alicorn is our end-goal. We will be best served by analyzing the complete transformation and working backwards from there.

That you will expend more magic in the effort will be of benefit, as the stronger magical energies will provide a much better impression of the actions involved. Once I have a good grasp of the general behavior, we can work on smaller changes to refine the data.”

With that, she stood, stepping up to me. “Now then, we need to remove anything that could impact the tests and contaminate our data. Revert to your natural form and remove your barding and all personal effects.”

I did so, resisting the urge to grumble. A minute later I had stripped down, standing there in nothing but glossy chitin.

“Good,” she said, and her horn lit up. My vision tinted purple, and I felt a faint sensation that started in my horn and quickly spread through my body, as if my magic itself were vibrating. “Transform.”

I obeyed, focusing and pushing a good deal of my magic outward. It flowed through me as I steadily built it up, and with a flash, the flames engulfed me.

The whole world had changed. I stood eye-to-eye with Echo, and towered over Starlight and Dusty. Everything seemed so much smaller, and while I certainly had more mass, the lean form I wore now felt as agile as ever.

I may be familiar with transformations and the changes in perception that typically accompany them, but there was always something intriguing about it.

The first thing I did was turn my head to look back at my mane and tail. To my satisfaction—and, I must admit, a tiny bit of surprise—I had managed to mimic the strange, ethereal nature of her mane, which floated silently behind me. Despite my happiness at being able to mimic such a thing, I also noted how much energy the form was taking. A larger form should naturally be more draining, but this form was consuming my reserves even faster than usual.

“How long do I need to hold this?”

“Not long,” she said, tilting her head as she peered at me. The sensation of her magic on me fluctuated and changed several times, and she regularly turned to her borrowed PipBuck to record data. It was only about a minute before she nodded. “That should be good. Please return to your natural form.”

I happily did so, and the world returned to its correct size. I sighed softly

in relief as the gentle pressure of holding that magic relaxed.

Echo took a few more notes before giving a satisfied nod. "Yes, that will be very useful. Interesting data. Some interestingly familiar aspects. Notable departures from traditional transmutations. Curious... yes, this is a very promising set of data. It appears to confirm that there is value in this pursuit, and warrants further testing." She looked back to me, eyes eager and determined, and a vaguely concerning smile touching the corners of her mouth. "Again."



I climbed out through the window of the motorwagon, giving a mild groan as I moved. Echo was immediately at my side, her wings kicking up dust before quickly folding at her sides. "Are you certain you are well?"

"I'm fine," I grumbled, wings fluttering as I softened my drop to the ground. I unconsciously started to raise a hoof to rub at my head before catching myself and setting it down again. "The headache is mostly gone."

"Yes, well, that is good," she said, peering down at me with a concerned expression. "I had not realized it would be *quite* so straining upon you. Perhaps further study should be done at a more relaxed pace, or at least less stressful transformations. I would not wish to cause injury to you. If nothing else, it risks delaying further experimentation or even compromising the data."

I grimaced, but said nothing else. I could appreciate the practicality of the statement—I had, in fact, been thinking something similar—but at that moment I could only think of how irritatingly insensitive it seemed. Even though I recognized how emotionally driven that thought was, it was hard to shake. I blamed the lingering remnants of the headache.

As I silently levitated out the rest of my gear, she spoke up again. "At least you can take some comfort that your efforts will go to aid all of ponykind." She blinked. "All person... personkind?" She frowned. "There must be some term that isn't species-specific."

"All people," I offered as I strapped on my helmet and slung my rifle. "Or just 'everyone'."

"Hmmph. It seems to lack the gravitas of 'ponykind', but I suppose it shall have to do."

Starlight trotted up to my side. "Hey. Feeling better?"

"Much better," I said, smiling.

She smiled as well, though it faltered before she asked, "Are you... hungry?"

I sighed and shook my head. "There's no need to worry about that. I'd built up a good reserve, and I have plenty of opportunity to 'nibble' on a bit of affection. I'm fine."

She nodded, then leaned in to bump me with her shoulder. "Well, if you *do* need some more, um... *affection*, just, uh... let me know?"

Sickle snickered, immediately drawing out a blush from Starlight.

"That's not what I meant and you know it," Starlight shot her way. "Not that I'm against—not that it's any of your business anyway!"

While Sickle continued on her way to join Dusty, Echo looked down at me. "I suppose since it was my own tests that led to this, I should extend the same offer." She cast a glance to Starlight, and added, "The offering of magical energy, that is, not the implied sexual interaction."

Starlight groaned, covering her face with a hoof. "I wasn't implying that."

Just ahead of us, Dusty grumbled as he peered through his binoculars. "I'm surrounded by crazy mares."

He then grunted as Sickle flopped down, a heavy foreleg across his shoulders. "Ah, Dusty, see, you're lookin' at it all wrong. Crazy mares are great! They'll do shit the sane ones won't."

I crouched down as I moved up beside Dusty, and peered out at the C.L.T. Experimental Site Beta just a quarter mile away.

As with the other sites, there was little on the surface to see. In fact, one of the things I noted the most was what I *didn't* see: any sign of salvaging, rebuilding, or habitation. While the skywagon shelter had collapsed and the two vehicles beneath it were rusted out wrecks, they didn't appear to have been picked over for parts. The gatehouse's windows were broken, but the desk and chairs were still upright and the door intact. At the back of the compound was the broad entrance protruding from the side of a small hill, with a sign declaring the name of the facility in faded but intact letters.

But those were only suggestive details, bits of evidence that could support a possibility, but were not decisive.

More decisive was the one notable detail the other facilities had lacked, parked directly in the middle of the small, fenced-in compound.

"Holy shit," Starlight said, leveling her Lancer to peer through the scope. "That's a Sentinel bot."

Like its surroundings, it looked worn by the centuries of exposure, but otherwise intact. The four-legged robot slowly rolled along, like something halfway between Sickle and a tank. Many gems glittered from a magical energy weapon mounted on one side of the robot's turret-like torso, while the gaping muzzle of a short-barreled cannon was mounted on the other side. In case that wasn't enough, a pair of pods were mounted on its back, with large muzzles pointing upwards. Some form of mortar or grenade launcher.

"Ultra-Sentinel," I corrected. "The pinnacle of Equestrian combat robotics. Multiple modular weapon systems, heavy armor, and high mobility. It's about the deadliest ground unit the Equestrian Army had short of an actual tank."

"Great," Dusty grumbled. "And we need to get past it. Well, you know all that pre-war stuff. Any good news?"

"Yeah," I said, frowning. "The good news is it isn't a *zebra* robot. Those were even worse."

Out in the distance, the bot was slowly rolling across the paved courtyard. It would go on for several seconds before coming to a halt, slowly panning its weapons around as if scanning for threats, then turning and rolling off to a different part of the compound to repeat the cycle.

An endless, meaningless task, repeated for some two hundred years. If I were the type to anthropomorphize unintelligent objects, I might have felt sorry for it.

"I meant, any good news about how to get past it?"

"Well, there is the good news that it *might* not be hostile." I turned to look at him. "So, if you want to walk up to it and see if it opens fire..."

Starlight was already lying down beside Dusty, bracing her Lancer on the rocks. "I've seen lots of bots patrolling old-world facilities," she said. "Never seen any that didn't immediately open fire on any pony it saw."

Dusty nodded. "Same. Well, this complicates things."

"Perhaps there is some way we could safely disable and commandeer

it," Echo said, peering out intently. "I can think of many uses for such an impressive and advanced automaton. Whisper, you are skilled at computer hacking, are you not?"

"My specialties are security circumvention and cryptography, as well as basic networking and database skills. I don't have any experience with AI programming, if that's what you're suggesting. Besides, I would need direct access to its computer. I don't think it's going to let me walk right up, pop it open, and find a place to plug in. Heck, I don't even know if it *has* a cable port, and even if it does, I'd be surprised if any of my debug cables work on its hardware. If they put any decent security in there, it could take me days to bypass."

She frowned thoughtfully, continuing to stare. "So... not likely, but possible?"

"Unlikely on the order of needing some small miracle to pull off. Make that *several* small miracles."

"I've got this," Starlight said, shifting her position slightly as she lay out, taking a stable, braced firing position. "Mom took out a bot a lot like this, guarding some factory in Dodge City." She squinted into her scope. "Told me how, afterwards. There's a panel on the back, where you can get to the spark battery or generator or whatever they're powered by. It's thinner than the armor. Most robots have something like that, just got to know where to look."

"Long range, small target," Dusty muttered. "And you'd only get one shot."

"I can do it," Starlight said, her voice calm and confident. Her entire attention was focused down that scope. "Though this one's a bit bigger than the one I remember."

Dusty considered it for a moment before replying. "Hold up a minute. We've got some heavy weaponry, so let's get ready in case the shot doesn't take it out. Whisper? Fly back, get on the machine gun. If we fall back from the ridge, it'll have to come over the crest to get to us. That'll bring it nice and close, and make it an easy target for that machine gun. That thing should get through its armor, right?"

"The Model 1 heavy machine gun fires the same round as the anti-machine rifle, which was developed specifically to destroy zebra combat

robots," I said. "I don't know how well it performs against this specific model of robot, but it's probably the most capable of all the weapons we have."

"Not quite," Dusty said, scooting back from the ridge. "I'm getting that Balefire Egg Launcher. If we're going to carry the damn things around with us, we might as well be ready to use them, and there's not many things that need that kind of firepower."

"Serenity might," I noted, but his comment stirred another thought. "I still have two more matrix disruption grenades in the motorwagon. They'd do just as well."

"Except it has to get close for that," Dusty said. "You can't throw a grenade nearly as far as the launcher can reach, and especially not with accuracy. Still, it'll be a good backup if it gets close."

Echo stepped up. "Throwing will not be necessary. Give the grenades to me, and I can deliver them with unerring accuracy."

I immediately thought back to her trick of teleporting away all of our weapons. "How far can you teleport something?"

"A few hundred yards with ease," she said, her head rising proudly. "Even further, if I am willing to allow a small degree of uncertainty in the destination. Less, if the object to be teleported is particularly heavy, but anything under several hundred pounds would give me no difficulty."

"Huh," Dusty said, a smile slowly spreading. "I like it. Okay, Echo gets the matrix disruption. I'll dig out one of the other heavy machine guns instead, and set up on-line with Whisper. Starlight will lead off, and if the shot doesn't take it out, fall back behind us and get set up for a follow-up shot when it crests. In fact, we've got a damn case of mines. I'm going to seed a few in front of our position just in case."

A few minutes later, we were set and ready. Dusty was a good thirty yards to my flank with another machine gun, while Starlight, Echo, and Sickle were spread out on the ridge before us. Somewhere beyond them were a half dozen mines, and past that, the heavily armed Ultra-Sentinel that lay between us and the C.L.T. facility.

The earbud crackled in my ear, followed by Dusty's voice. "We're set. Starlight, you're clear to fire."

Another crackle preceded Starlight's reply. "Give me a minute. I need it

to turn around again."

Silence followed. I tried to resist the nervous urge to fidget, with the result that I double-checked the range on my sights only three times between adjusting my position in the back of the motorwagon. My only comfort was the massive weapon I was using. It was almost ridiculously big. Even the barrel alone was longer than I was.

The shot came out of nowhere. One moment was silent, save for the creaking of the motorwagon as I moved a few inches to the side, and the next moment, the sharp crack of the Lancer splitting the air echoed across the hills. My gut twisted, heart-rate picking up in anticipation.

Starlight opened the breach of her Lancer, quickly swapping out crystals. She was just sealing the chamber again when her head dropped to the ground.

An instant later, a huge spray of dirt flew into the sky from the far side of the ridge, followed by the sharp and powerful blast of an explosion.

Starlight scrambled back several feet as she keyed up her broadcaster, her voice blasting in my ears. "It's still up! It's still up!"

I could just barely hear Sickle shout back, "No fucking shit!"

"Fall back," Dusty called on the radio, his voice reassuringly calm. "Echo, you're up."

Echo had already stood, a sphere of purple energy snapping into being around her. A spray of magical bolts filled the air, throwing up puffs of dirt when they hit the slope and sailing overhead when they did not, like the most terrifying fireworks show ever. Echo didn't seem to care as she advanced a few steps to peer over the top of the ridge. A few bolts impacted her shield, which gave only a faint shimmer. She didn't react to them.

The fusillade stopped, and Echo's head tilted up, tracking something high in the air. Her voice reached out across the distance, as clear as it was unconcerned. "We have incoming projectiles."

"Take cover!" Dusty called out, not quite as calmly as before. I ducked down, hunkering low in the motorwagon, with just my eyes and horn above the edge of the armor.

I watched as Echo's eyes narrowed, focusing on the incoming projectiles. Small purple flashes appeared in the air above us. Then her gaze returned to the ground before her, and a second later, I heard the first of the distant

explosions echoing across the Wasteland.

A moment later, she sat down. A loud crack split the air again, followed by a whistle and the distant boom of the Ultra-Sentinel's cannon firing. The round exploded somewhere behind us a second later. Another burst of magical energy followed.

I gripped my machine gun, waiting.

Echo continued to sit there, looking calm and content, for a good twenty seconds. At that point she stood, looked out over the ridge, and sat again. Another explosion tore away a chunk of the ridge before her, and I ducked down behind the armor, while whistles of fragments sounded overhead.

I peeked up again just as Starlight skidded to a halt, huddling behind the motorwagon. "Holy *shit!*" she said, panting lightly. "That damn thing doesn't want to die. Nailed it right where mom said, even saw a bunch of flames, but it just won't stop!"

"They're made to be durable," I said reasonably. "We've got plenty of firepower left."

Echo had stood again, the matrix disruption grenade floating out before her. With a flash, it vanished, just as a burst of magical bolts saturated the area. Several struck her shield, which flickered heavily, before the burst of fire abruptly stopped. She sat again, and let the shield drop. From where I was, I could just see her drawing in a deep breath before bringing the shield up again, though it looked a little more transparent than it had been before. It seemed to me that it wasn't as impenetrable as she claimed.

She stood to look out again, and after a moment, called back. "It appears that its weapons have been rendered inoperable, but the robot is still mobile." She had hardly gotten those words out when a flash bloomed from the top of her shield, followed an instant later by the boom of the cannon firing. Echo fell back on her haunches as the shield vanished. I could actually see the shell sail through the air past us, having failed to detonate with the glancing hit.

"Correction," Echo called back with the faintest hint of a waver to her voice. "It appears the cannon is still functional."

Dusty cupped his hooves around his mouth as he shouted back. "Stop popping up in the same place!"

Echo stood in a low crouch, walking a short distance from her initial position, while I focused down the sights, the front post hovering directly

over the point on the ridge where the previous shell had struck.

"Steady," Dusty's voice reassured us. "We have the advantage here, just be patient and don't rush your shot."

I drew in a deep breath and exhaled, focusing. I tried to push all the worry and uncertainty from my mind, and instead fixated on my task, eyes looking down the sights, waiting for the first sign of the Ultra-Sentinel amongst the dust that now hung over the ridge.

A good twenty seconds later, a plume of dust and debris flew into the air, followed by a sharp bang unlike the cannon. Echo stood again, peering over the ridge without the benefit of her shield. She remained there for only a moment before sitting again and calling back to us. "It appears to have been immobilized."

Dusty cupped his hooves beside his mouth again and shouted. "Are its weapons still up?"

"It appears that only the cannon is still functional," Echo replied. "Its capability is greatly diminished. The robot is missing one of its legs, and should not be able to traverse its weapon far from where it is currently aiming."

"Where is it aiming?"

"Directly at me," Echo called back. She sounded almost proud of the fact.

Dusty turned back to his PipBuck, and my earbud crackled with his voice. "Star, mount up! You two take the wagon down the low-ground here to the right, north. Go about two hundred yards, then pop up and hit it from the side!"

Starlight dashed over to the motorwagon, practically leaping in through the window, and a moment later we were tearing off through the rocky low-ground. I clung to the gun for balance as Dusty spoke up again. "Short exposure! Pop up, put a few good bursts into the target, then back up into cover before it can engage you. Keep shifting positions until this thing is dead!"

The motorwagon bounced and rattled, our equipment sliding around behind me. Soon we passed out from the edge of the small hill we had been behind, rolling along a shallow gully that had once been a stream. Its steep sides were just barely high enough to conceal us.

Moments later, we slowed, and Starlight called back to me. "This far

enough?"

I swung the massive barrel around, pointing the weapon roughly where I expected the hostile robot to be. We were still outside of E.F.S. range. "Bring it up here," I called out. "Slowly. I'll tell you when to stop."

"Got it," she said. The vehicle turned a little—I corrected my aim—and rolled forward. Starlight slowed further as we reached the edge of the gully, and had to gun it to make progress up the steep slope, the vehicle pointing upwards at an awkward angle.

I saw the settling dust and thin trail of smoke even before we had cleared the edge of the gulley. I adjusted my aim, and as Starlight brought my weapon over the edge of the gully, I was pointed directly at the robot, maybe a hundred and fifty yards away.

"Stop!"

The vehicle lurched to a stop, my aim wavering with the momentum. As my sights resettled, I could see the Ultra-Sentinel lying askew. One of its legs lay twisted at an awkward angle, largely intact but apparently crippled by the mine, and the hoof-like tread ball was torn apart. The robot's cannon was pressed into the dusty earth before it, as if using it in an attempt to right itself. Its body was pocked by fragments and scorched by explosions, and wisps of smoke leaked from multiple points.

As I got it in sight again, the legs were moving, trying to pull itself around to engage us.

I placed the front sight post over the robot, flicked my ears back in anticipation of the sound, engaged S.A.T.S., and hit the trigger.

It was more than just loud. The concussion of the gun firing hammered at my head and chest. The muzzle blast threw dust up from the ground before me. I laid out a second-long burst, surprised at how manageable the recoil was for this beast of a weapon. Down-range, small puffs of debris or fragments marked impacts on the armored robot, accompanied by several larger clouds of dirt from rounds that missed and struck the ground around it.

I paused, letting off the trigger. The robot continued to move despite the dozen massive rounds I had put into it, and I hit the trigger again, loosing another second-long burst. Even without S.A.T.S., I landed most of the rounds on-target. I saw more puffs of impacts, and something bright flashed

from inside the robot. Even as the rounds struck, it continued to awkwardly lurch itself around.

As I let off the trigger, I was already shouting. "Reverse!" A moment later we lurched back down the slope, with me clinging to the gun. The last I saw of the robot was a flash of blue and yellow arcing out from its back.

The tires of the motorwagon ground in the loose soil as it skidded to a halt at the bottom of the gully, and I shouted out again. "Okay, move down the gully a bit, we'll—"

That was as far as I got when there was another flash, the same blue and yellow as before, but shockingly bright, and followed an instant later by the blast of an explosion. Dust swirled in the air. Something struck the ground nearby with a soft thump. I hurriedly ducked down, squeezing under the lip of the armored roof beneath the gun. A few more thumps sounded around us, and something small pinged off of the hood of the motorwagon.

"Holy shit," Starlight said, though I barely heard her over the pounding of my heart in my ears.

The sporadic pattering of falling fragments soon ended, as did the rolling echo of the explosion. I got up again, grabbing ahold of the gun despite the distinct impression that I wouldn't need it any more. "Bring us up again." My words felt mushy in my ears.

The motorwagon lurched up the slope, coming to a sharp halt exactly where we had been before.

Through the cloud of dust and rising smoke, I could see what little remained of the Ultra-Sentinel. Its torso had been torn open by the force of the explosion, and what internal mechanisms remained were glowing red-hot from the energy that had just been unleashed. The barrel of its cannon lay a dozen yards away. I saw no trace of the rest of the weapon. All but one of the legs had been torn away from the frame. Blown-off bits of robot littered the area around it.

Up on the ridge, I could see Echo peeking over the ridge, surveying the scene before her.

I almost jumped as Dusty's voice spoke in my ear. "I take it the bot's down?"

I quickly hit the button on the broadcaster and replied. "Yeah."

"I'm bringing us up," Starlight said, and the motorwagon pulled itself

up the slope and came to a halt on the level ground beyond. "Wow," she said, then laughed. "See, *that's* what I expected!"

I crouched down to look at her. "You expected it to blow up like that?"

"Well, yeah," she said, turning back to grin. "I was trying to shoot it in its power source. You have any idea how much energy a big spark battery packs? Heck, with the size of that thing, it might have had a full-on spark generator!"

Sure, wiring spark batteries with a small initiator was one of the techniques taught in my improvised explosives course, but I had never imagined the results would be quite so dramatic.

She chuckled. "Yeah. Just don't get too near it for a while. If it's anything like the one my mom popped, it's probably going to be pretty radioactive for a bit."

"Lovely," I said, casting a quick glance at my PipBuck. I'd always thought the prominent radiation gauge was a strange design choice, but it was moments like this where I could appreciate it.

We pulled up a short distance from the wrecked robot and dismounted as the rest of the group gathered.

Echo was the first, calmly strolling by us. She was frowning again. "Was it entirely necessary to destroy it so completely?"

"I didn't expect it to blow up like that," I said, resisting the urge to be overly defensive; it had, after all, been trying to kill us. "And it's not like we had a lot of options for stopping it."

"I suppose," she grumbled, continuing on right past us to the wreckage.

"Hey, wait," Starlight said, taking a step forward before stopping herself. "It's radioactive!"

"That is of no concern," Echo replied, walking straight up to the ruined robot. Her PipBuck started clicking loudly. "I am an unicorn. Radiation is as beneficial to me as it is harmful to the lesser species."

"Oh," Starlight said, looking a little sheepish. "Right. You're sure?"

"Of course I am." She casually lifted a few random parts, all apparently ruined by the damage we had caused and promptly discarded. "I have been in far more radioactive environments than this. I have bathed in the radiation at the heart of a balefire crater, and all that it did was make me stronger."

Starlight hesitated before cautiously replying, "Uh, I've spent hours in

a megaspell crater. Had to have some RadAway, sure, but it's not—”

“Radiation diminishes over time,” Echo said, tilting her head to peer into the glowing inside of the ruined robot. “*You* have been in places that have had two hundred years to dissipate. *I* was there mere minutes after detonation. The radiation there would have killed you in seconds.”

“Oh,” Starlight said. “I... kinda keep forgetting you’re that old.”

“Age has nothing to do with it. I am referring to an event approximately three months ago.”

Starlight’s ears flicked upright in surprise. “What? There was a megaspell three months ago?”

Echo set down the leg she had been examining and looked over her shoulder at Starlight. “Of course there was. Do you really suppose that anything less than a megaspell could kill a goddess?”

“Oh,” Starlight said, then her expression tightened as she realized what Echo meant. “Oh.”

Echo turned back to the wreckage. She continued her rummaging for a minute before grunting and turning her attention to her insistently clicking PipBuck. “Is there any way to silence this infernal racket?”

“Oh, yes!” Starlight said, starting to step forward before once again stopping herself. “I’ll, uh... I’ll talk you through it.”

While she was doing that, Sickle came lazily walking up, her armor rattling as usual. She was frowning behind the bars of her muzzle as she looked at the wreckage. She stopped beside me, silent for a moment before looking my way. “Have fun blowing shit up?”

I wasn’t sure how to respond to that, so I just shrugged.

Dusty arrived soon after, carrying the five un-detonated mines. He gave a nod to me. “Good job.”

“Thanks. Good plan.”

While he stowed the mines, Echo dropped the part she had rooted out of the robot and turned to approach us. “Utterly ruined. There does not seem to be a single component worth salvaging, and even *I* wouldn’t dream of being able to repair it.”

Starlight quietly muttered, “Gee, sorry.”

“Hmmph,” Echo said, frowning at her for a moment before raising her head in her usual regal fashion. “Apology accepted. With any luck, we will

find some more robots, and will be able to disable them in a less destructive fashion.”

“Yeah, lucky us,” Starlight said, rolling her eyes. I’m sure Echo must have seen it, but she did not dignify it with a response.

Dusty grunted as he hopped down from the motorwagon. “Lucky or not, chances are good we’ll be running into more robots. I doubt they’d have just the one.”

Echo’s ears perked up, a smile crossing her face. “Well then! What are we waiting for?”

“Not much,” Dusty said, before looking over to Starlight. “We’ve just got almost two hundred pounds of gun back there to pick up.”

“Oh, right,” Starlight said, already climbing back into the motorwagon. “I’m on it!”



The heavy doors leading into the underground compound were shut, but what could have been a tedious obstacle instead turned out to be nothing at all. I had approached the control panel knowing it was likely nonfunctional, and was instead surprised to find indicator lights glowing when I opened it. The facility still had power.

Better yet, the doors weren’t locked. A simple press of a button was all it took, and with an ear-piercing shriek of metal, the great doors slowly ground open.

There had been another robot inside the main entryway, and thankfully, it was just a regular Sentinel bot, rather than the more powerful Ultra-Sentinel. Even more fortunately, we were perfectly aware of it even before the doors opened; it was well within E.F.S. range. While it wasn’t showing as hostile, we remembered the turrets at the previous facility, and while Echo gave a weak protest to our “destructive tendencies”, we were determined to not take the chance.

Starlight stood ready with her Lancer, and I waited further back on the motorwagon’s gun. The moment the door had opened enough, Starlight took her shot.

She didn’t wait to reload, instead scurrying immediately behind the cover of the thick concrete wall, but it wasn’t necessary. The mark on the

E.F.S. blinked red before winking out. When we cautiously entered, we found the Sentinel with a ragged hole blown in the upper part of its torso, still glowing slightly from the impact. It had burned deep through the front armor, severing the small head-like turret and destroying something vital inside the robot's torso. It smoldered, but to Echo's delight, did not explode.

While Echo immediately trotted up to the robot, her usual prim and proper behavior momentarily forgotten, the rest of us continued on. The entryway was tall and open, almost like an office lobby, complete with several benches and what appeared to be a receptionist's desk. There was power there, too. While less than half of the lights still worked, the plain construction, lack of clutter, and white-painted walls combined to make the best of what light there was.

One side of the room hadn't fared as well. The ruins of another Sentinel lay there, shoved up against a wall that was pockmarked and charred. A few other scorch marks marked the opposite wall, near where we came in. There had been a brief fight here at some point, though the robot was the only sign of casualties.

At the far end of the room were a set of double doors, and above them, raised and only slightly worn letters declared a greeting.

### **Welcome to Crystal Life Technologies**

#### **Experimental Site Beta:**

#### **Permafrost development and testing**

Persuading Echo away from the disabled Sentinel with promises that she could examine it after our exploration was complete, we pushed open the doors and passed inside.

Other than the occasional shadowed area where multiple lights had failed in sequence, the facility was well lit, making exploration much easier. The white paint on the walls had held up remarkably well, shielded from the elements as they were, and while it was a dull and sterile aesthetic, it also gave the place a sense of cleanliness and order that the world was in short supply of. Even the thin layer of dust on everything failed to dispel that impression.

The entryway had led to a common area, and we began our search, proceeding through the so-called atrium and into a cafeteria. Along the way, I noted a few clusters of bullet holes, scorch marks, and splotchy stains.

None of us remarked on them.

Given its proximity to our entrance, the first place we examined was the kitchen. Surprisingly, the water still worked, though it is perhaps generous to call the brown murk that came out of the faucets ‘water’. There was a huge walk-in fridge and freezer setup, but its cooling system had failed at some point; we immediately closed the door when we saw the muck that had once been food, thankful that two hundred years had rendered it so decayed as to no longer have a stench.

The cabinets were better. While the bags of flour, oats, and other such goods were thoroughly ruined, there were plenty of sealed foods that appeared intact, including enough canned food to last our group for several weeks. Another large cabinet held an array of spices, many of which were still sealed.

But there was one cabinet that left Dusty in awe. When he opened it, he gazed wide-eyed into it for several seconds before quietly murmuring, “Sweet Goddesses above, that’s a lot of coffee.”

Dozens of cans were arrayed on the shelves, and he immediately noted the multiple coffee machines nearby. “We’re definitely taking these,” he said.

Starlight, on the other hoof, left the kitchen beaming, with almost a dozen cartons of snack cakes tucked into her bags.

As for myself, I tucked away a full set of utensils, as well as a proper plate, bowl, cup, and even a real can-opener. It felt slightly strange just how pleased I was about the acquisition.

It was soon perfectly clear that our initial impression was correct: the place had never been looted. Our next stop was the facility’s medical clinic, its supply untouched.

“Dibs,” Sickle said the moment we opened the drug cabinet to find the stock of painkillers.

“You can have *most* of them,” Dusty allowed. “We need to keep a few for actual medical use.”

“Sure, sure,” Sickle said, popping open one of her cargo cans to shovel in the bottles and vials.

The drugs were far from their only supplies, of course. We found bandages, splints, saline, antibiotics, RadAway, and enough healing potions for everyone to take a couple, with a few more left over as spares. There

was even an autodoc, powered and functional, though we could hardly be displeased that we had no need of its services at the time.

There were a few more support sections, dealing with things as mundane as laundry or as critical as power and water purification. While the centuries had been rough on the equipment, a fair amount of it still worked. The spark generators powering the facility were obviously functional, but Starlight immediately trotted past them to a small cluster of equipment at the back of the room, with all sorts of displays, conduits, and machinery. She looked at the various dials and displays, and began fiddling with the controls.

“What are you doing?” Dusty asked as we approached.

“I’m just checking...” She flipped a large switch, and when a large button started flashing red, pressed it. There was a soft thump and a flicker of lights on the display panel, before a machine about the size of a small oven hummed to life, a light above it coming to life.

Starlight turned to us, grinning. “They’ve got a set of backup spark generators,” she said proudly, and placed a hoof atop the machine. Three more stood beside it. “And they still work!”

“Could be useful,” Dusty said. “Think it could power the motorwagon?”

“Probably!” Starlight patted the humming machine. “Heck, even if it isn’t enough to run the thing, we can use it to recharge when we’re stopped. No more worrying about running out of batteries!”

“Sounds good.” Dusty sat, raising his PipBuck to poke a couple times at it. “Okay, got it marked for later, we’ll see if we can remove it safely once we’re done checking the rest of the place.”

The rest of the front section of the facility was almost entirely living spaces. Most looked like they had been abandoned quickly, with personal belongings still laid out, untouched for centuries. It was eerie, as if all the ponies here had simply vanished.

A few rooms had details that dispelled that imagery. Walls that were gouged and scorched by weapons fire. A desk riddled with fragments. An upturned bed, laid as if to create a defensive position, with a dark stain running down to the floor.

But still, no ponies.

During our exploration, we came across several destroyed turrets, and only a couple of functioning ones. Starlight dispatched them with the same

trick-shot she had used before. We also came across the wreckage of a few more robots, much smaller than the Sentinels and with multiple spindly arms. Despite that, we didn't find a functional one until we reached the accessway leading to the rear half of the facility.

We gathered outside the doorway leading into the short hall. According to our E.F.S., a non-hostile contact was just beyond. Dusty cracked the door open to let Starlight check with her mirror. She floated it out in her magic, then quickly drew it back. "Yep. Another Sentinel."

Dusty nodded. "Take it out."

"Fuck that," Sickle said, pushing forward. "*I'll* take this one out."

Dusty quickly stepped forward to block her path. "Sickle, that thing's armed to the teeth. If it turns hostile before you get to it, it'll mulch you."

She shoved her face close to his. "Fuck you, Dirt! I'm here to fucking fight, and I'm tired of sitting back hoofing myself while you cunts are having all the fun!"

"Don't blame me for that," Dusty said, glaring back. "When your entire tactical range consists of 'run up and kick the thing', yeah, sometimes you're going to have to sit back 'hoofing yourself'."

Echo stepped in. "Perhaps we could find a way of disabling this one without destroying it?"

A sharp crack and flash of red silenced the conversation. Starlight drew her Lancer back, turning a flat glare at the arguing ponies. "There, it's dead. Can we move on, now?"

"What?" Sickle shoved past Dusty to look through the doorway, then trotted in. By the time I had followed the others in, she was at the ruined robot, and was already starting to snarl. "You fucking... fuck!" She spun around, kicking the ruined robot into the wall.

Echo bound past me, calling out, "Stop that!"

The room itself looked like another lobby, only this time, past the receptionist-style desk, there was a massive blast door at the back. It wouldn't have looked out of place at the front of a Stable, aside from not being circular. It stretched from floor to ceiling, and a sign beside it was labeled "Secure Labs".

I kept half an eye on Sickle and Echo to make sure they weren't about to get into a fight over the robot, while Dusty and Starlight approached the

door. Starlight poked a button on a panel set in the wall beside the door. It beeped angrily at her.

"It's locked," she said, ears flicking back.

Dusty stood beside her, frowning. "Hmm... it's a keypad lock, right? Do you think Whisper could hack the lock?"

I sighed. "I don't think 'hacking' works the way you think it does."

He looked back at me. "...That's a no?"

"Most likely, it's an independent system that isn't connected to any other computer, so I'd have to get into the physical circuitry of it, and at that point, you could just physically bypass the whole thing. You don't need to do anything with the computer. Even that's assuming they used a spell matrix complex enough to even qualify as a proper computer."

"Good luck on getting into this thing," Starlight said, peering at the panel itself. "It's recessed three inches into a concrete wall and reinforced with steel plate." She tapped it with a hoof. "I could maybe get into it, but it'll take time. Hours, probably."

"Well, I don't intend to turn around empty-hooved," Dusty said. "Get started. We can wait."

I gestured back to the receptionist-style desk nearby. "I might not be able to hack the keypad, but I can at least see if there's any record of the passcode."

"Sounds good."

I walked around behind the desk, with its terminal and surprisingly plush office chair, which had held up remarkably well for two hundred years of disuse. Settling in, I reached out and hit the power button on the terminal, which beeped and whirred as it booted up.

I then promptly ignored it, opening the drawers, starting with the shallow pen drawer just below the keyboard. Various writing implements and papers filled the space. It took me only a few moments to find what I was looking for: a sticky note stuck to the bottom of the drawer, near the back. I closed the drawer.

"Hey, Starlight," I called out, catching her attention. She hadn't even gotten all her tools out, yet. "Try A-B-one-C-three."

She blinked in surprise, then turned to the panel. There were five beeps as she pressed the keys, followed by the deep thumps of the door unlocking.

A warning buzzer sounded, and with a squeal, the door slowly swung open.

“Holy crap,” Starlight said, then turned to flash me a grin. “Well that was quick!”

“I’m good at what I do,” I said with a smile.

The screen before me flashed as the computer finished booting. It didn’t ask for a login, instead immediately going to the main screen. It seemed the computer had been wiped clean, save for a single message. I opened it.

---

*Okay, it's simple, but I don't have a lot of time, and I \*\*really\*\* want someone to be able to get in, so... 13: N01P3.*

*Yeah, yeah. My crypto teeth would be ashamed. And if this \*\*is\*\* Goldbug, I'm sorry you had to see that, please don't leave me.*

*Also, fuck irony. Like, seriously.*

*CoolBugz*

---

“You okay?”

Starlight was beside me. I hadn’t noticed her approach.

“Yeah,” I said, hitting the power button. The terminal whined as it powered down, and I heaved a sigh. “They were here. It was a message from my hive.”

She wrapped a foreleg around my shoulders, giving a squeeze. “That’s good, right? This place still has power!”

“Yeah, that’s good.”

But I was thinking of an earlier C.L.T. message I had seen. I remembered the remarks about the mortality rate of Permafrost. I remembered how the Sweetdreams project—which had failed all but one of the changelings relying on it—was the ‘safe’ option.

And if the irony referred to was what I thought it was, I was very likely about to find several more of my deceased sisters.



The secure labs were extensive, with a great amount of equipment, both scientific and industrial. The hum of machinery was ever-present, with

overhead conduits pumping fluids and air. One water pipe had broken and collapsed, bringing some of the lighting down to block a hallway, but it had either ran out of fluid or some automated system had closed it off.

Each lab was a large, open space, with tables loaded with scientific equipment and abandoned papers. The first one we entered had a freezer the size of a small skywagon set against one of the walls. Tubes and wires ran from it, and it hummed quietly, still functioning after all that time.

A frosted window gave a view in, and a switch conveniently labeled "lights" illuminated the inside well enough for us to see. Inside were dozens of cylinders arranged on shelves, each with a simple lid, and so frosted over that we couldn't discern any markings.

I looked over the table nearby for any documentation that might suggest the contents. The first thing I found was a lazily scrawled note.

*I know we can't afford proper test subjects, but I never expected management would accept that proposal. It was a dumb joke made in frustration. I didn't think they would take it seriously. After the idiotic budget cuts, I thought they'd stick us all on cheap "theoretical" research, if they didn't throw us out altogether and close shop. Instead they do this. I don't know what to think any more.*

*But now we have alternative test material, and even if it's far from ideal, everypony here is eager to continue testing. All the doom and gloom of the budget cuts has been forgotten.*

*Speaking of which, the results of the initial tests:*

*The Neighapolitan was bland to the point of vileness. Seeing as this is identical to its pre-Permafrost state, this would suggest everything is working precisely as intended. More "scientific" testing revealed only a fractional percent of crystallization in the outermost layers (See report #212618), and none in the inner layers. The difference in patterns was peculiar, a complete reversal of the previous issues during cryo-set. It would seem we overshot our corrections. Ice Topaz noted additional crystallization in the container itself, which may warrant investigation. I doubt the solution to all our problems is some cheap waxed cardboard, but it would be rather amusing if this lark actually produced something substantial.*

*Ice Topaz claimed "dibs" on the rocky road for tomorrow's tests. She can have it. I have my eyes set on a nice, quality vanilla bean that I am certain*

*will be scientifically enlightening.*

Starlight stood beside me, her head cocked to the side as she read. “Scientists are weird.”

The door of the freezer rattled loudly, and we turned to see Sickle pull at the handle, then growl and kick at it. “Damnit. Open this shit up!”

“Sickle, this is a cryogenics freezer,” I said. “It’s probably very—”

“I don’t give a fuck!” Sickle snarled, and with a powerful kick of her forehooves, sank her leg-blades almost an inch into the freezer door. “I ain’t had ice cream in like ten fucking years, so either figure out how to unlock this shit or I’m tearing it open!”

I stared for a moment as I made connections. Then I nodded. “Okay. It might take a minute to figure it out.”

She pulled her blades free, sitting heavily on her haunches and glaring at the door while I got to work, looking over documents and the freezer’s switches and dials.

Starlight stood back, murmuring, “Didn’t think she had such a thing for ice cream.” In a more conversational tone, she added, “The only ice cream I ever had was some freeze-dried brick from some military rations. It tasted like chalk.”

Sickle merely grumbled, staring at the door.

Fortunately, like any good lab, they had detailed checklists of how to operate their experimental equipment. A binder beside the freezer detailed the steps to reverse the cryogenic process, and an insert noted the alterations to procedure to bring the subject temperature to just below freezing, rather than all the way to room temperature. Within a minute, I was watching the temperature dial steadily climb, while warning lights blinked over the door. Finally, the temperature reached the desired temperature. The warning lights went out, a green indicator light turned on, and with a soft thunk, the door unlocked.

Sickle shoved past us, wrenched open the door, and started rooting around. I returned to the side of the freezer, watching through the window. She filled the cramped space, bumping against racks as she scraped the frost off several tubs of ice cream. She eventually found what she was looking for, snatched it up, and backed out.

As soon as she was free, she tore off the container’s lid before looking to

me. “Give me one of those fucking spoons you grabbed.”

I didn’t argue. I simply levitated out a utensil and passed it to her. I could always get more.

She snatched it from the air, then sat, slapping at the clasp of her helm’s muzzle to let it dangle free. Then she dug the spoon into the ice cream—strawberry, I noted—and took a bite.

Sickle sat still for a long, tense second, then let out a slow, pleased sigh, the tension fading from her body. She even smiled as she took another big scoop. “Fuck. I almost forgot how good that is.”

Starlight was staring. She opened her mouth to say something, but thought better of it, shook her head, and wandered off.

We continued searching, with Sickle trailing behind, eating her ice cream.

The next lab contained another cryogenic freezer, much like the previous, though with a good deal more wiring and an attached terminal. It had a light switch in the exact same place as the last. I flipped it, expecting to find something similar to the previous freezer.

I almost staggered when I instead saw four changelings, frozen in place.

They lay on metal trays, unmoving and frosted over, with wires connected at various points on their bodies. For a moment, I simply stared at the scene, heart pounding. Then I stepped up to the window and looked closer, hunting out details.

I could tell they weren’t in the greatest of condition. I could see cracks in their exoskeletons, with frozen crystals clustered around them, as if they had burst out from the carapace. One was frozen in mid-grimace, as if they’d been in pain.

There wasn’t much I could do from there. I hurried over to the terminal, which quietly hummed away, still on after all this time.

Starlight was at my side, barely restraining a grin. “Are they okay?”

The screen displayed a log of status updates, sorted by “test subject”. I loaded up the first.

---

+00:00:21 - Caution: freezing rate variation  
exceeding safe tolerance, crystallization likely.  
+00:00:38 - Caution: crystallization detected in

*surface layers.*

*+00:00:42 - Warning: crystallization exceeding 0.1%  
in surface layers. Abort recommended.*

*+00:00:48 - Danger: intracranial crystallization  
detected. Abort immediately!*

---

But there had either been noling there to abort, or they ignored the warnings, reasoning that a risk of death was better than the near-certainty they would face outside. I couldn't even guess which of those scenarios had happened.

These would have been intelligent changelings. They would have done their research. They must have seen the same mortality rates that I had seen. They must have known that the odds of surviving were not in their favor, but they still went through with it.

The rest of the log was filled with more of the same. Updates on crystallization levels in different layers and organs. Notices of damage caused by the uneven freezing. The eventual critical damage to circulatory and nervous systems, finally ending with the inevitable conclusion:

---

*+00:01:43 - Notice: intracranial damage exceeds  
survivable levels. Subject Alpha deceased.*

---

I numbly switched to the other logs. Beta had been declared deceased for similar reasons. Delta had extensive fractures all along her back from aggressive crystallization, severing her spine in multiple locations before further fractures formed in her skull, killing her.

But Subject Gamma lacked a declaration of death.

“The third one,” I croaked, then cleared my throat, pointing to one of the frozen changelings. “She might still be alive.”

Dusty looked back to me. “Might?”

“She’s in bad shape,” I said, my throat tight. “There’s... heavy damage to her heart, liver, both kidneys, and one lung. Multiple splits in her carapace. Several torn arteries. Burst vessels in the brain. It’s... it’s bad. Really bad. But we’ve got a lot of healing potions.”

Dusty frowned, his voice softening. “That’s a lot of damage for some

healing potions."

"We have an autodoc, too!" I swallowed past the lump.

He remained silent for several long seconds before slowly nodding. "It's your call."

I froze, considering the situation. I knew what I *wanted* to do, but I needed to stop, think, and be sure I was doing the right thing. The more I thought on it, the more convinced I was that it was the right course. Short of finding a completely intact pre-megaspell medical center with an inexplicably still-living staff, we were as good as we were going to get.

"I don't think we'll ever be better prepared for this."

Initiating the thaw was even easier than the last time. I simply told the terminal to thaw them out, and it did all the work. I simply stood back, trying not to fidget and fret too much.

The wait was painful. Almost a minute passed before noticeable progress was made. The needle on the thermometer started steadily creeping up. There were no visible changes until it finally approached the freezing point. Soon the frost was melting, water trickling and then steadily flowing from their bodies. Soon it was joined by a thin trickle of blood seeping from old wounds.

Subject Gamma—I had no real name for her—twitched as she thawed, her right legs weakly kicking in a spasmodic rhythm. I wasn't sure what was causing it, but I could imagine it wasn't good.

The terminal beeped softly. I looked at the screen.

---

*Beginning resuscitation.*

---

There was a flicker of magic across Gamma's head and chest. I jumped as she reacted violently, her back arching, her body going rigid and spasming, rattling around on the metal tray. Blood was flowing steadily from the cracks in her carapace.

Starlight stepped back, a hoof going to her mouth. I rushed past her to the door, already digging out potions. It rattled, still locked. I looked up at the warning lights, waiting for the moment they changed and the door unlocked.

The instant it did, I threw open the door, rushing in. The inside of the

cryo-freezer was balmy and hot, and filled with the rattling and banging of Gamma's thrashing. I was at her side immediately, hooves going to her head to hold her as I brought a potion over.

Her jaw was clenched tight, half muting her gurgling grunts. There was no coordination or intelligence to her movement, just mindless spasming. I gave up my attempts to open her mouth, instead pouring the potion over her teeth, hoping enough would get inside.

But I knew that was hopeless. "We need to get her to the autodoc!"

"Here," Dusty said, moving up behind me. "Get her on my back."

Echo's powerful voice cut through the racket. "Give her to me. I will see her there!"

I hesitated, but she did not. Gamma was already floating in the purple glow of Echo's magic. There was a momentary pause as Echo's eyes met mine. Then, with a purple flash and soft pop, they were gone.

I shoved past Dusty and broke into a gallop, ignoring the returning pounding in my head and the varied terrifying scenarios playing out in my mind. My hooves skittered on the smooth floor as I pushed myself, rushing out from the secure labs to the front of the facility.

I practically slid into the medical clinic, to find Echo standing there, securing the spasming Gamma in the autodoc. She didn't bother sparing me a glance. I stood there, panting, as she closed the autodoc's door.

The device beeped, noting its subjects unrecognized physiology, and asking if we wanted it to make its best guess at treatment or abort. Echo looked to me, and I quickly hit the button to approve treatment.

It whirred to life. The screen started listing injuries. Many were the same as I'd seen before, but now there were new ones. Blood volume was down. Her heart had stopped again, having gone just long enough to cause serious intracranial hemorrhaging.

I watched the text updating on the screen as the autodoc tried to patch up the damage while resuscitating her. I was still watching as the chaotic brain activity came to an end. The machine switched entirely to resuscitation and life support.

Starlight had sat beside me. Her foreleg looped around my shoulder, comforting and familiar. I simply stared, waiting, hoping.

Minutes stretched on. Brain activity remained at zero.

I'm not sure how long the machine continued in its steadfast attempt to resuscitate Gamma. My perception was focused entirely on that screen, barely even aware of my companions around me.

Eventually, the message disappeared, replaced by a red alert: *Patient deceased.*

I slowly sank into Starlight's embrace, sinking my face into her chest as the tears finally came. We sat there for a long time, holding onto each other as I silently cried.

Once more, I had found my sisters in their bid for survival. Once more, I had found only death.

Even if I had expected that outcome, it was still painful. Until then, I could hold out hope.

The tears eventually came to an end. I sniffled, straightening and wiping at my cheeks. Starlight was red-eyed, her cheeks wet. She met my eyes, her expression full of sympathy and concern.

I'm so very glad she was there. I reached up, giving one of her hooves a gentle squeeze that she returned. Then I swallowed the heavy lump in my throat, rose to my hooves, and continued on.

I returned Gamma to her companions, wondering who she had truly been. Was this CoolBugz, a sister I had only known through a false name in scattered C.L.T. systems?

I gathered them together, so unlike the other sisters I had committed to the flame. These were no empty husks, or even decayed ghouls. They were preserved, almost lifelike past the cracks in their carapaces. It was a raw sensation, something that I couldn't distance with the centuries that had passed. Gamma might have been killed by the cryogenic process two hundred years ago, but she died right before me.

The green fire consumed them all the same, granting them one final transformation.

I remained sitting there for a while, trying to gather my thoughts. Starlight remained sitting by my side the whole time. Dusty tried to say a few comforting words, but I didn't really hear him. I'm not even sure what Echo was doing. She was probably just passively observing. I barely even noticed when Sickle sat heavily beside me, despite the crash of metal.

But I did notice when, a minute later, Sickle held the tub of ice cream

in front of me. I stared down at it, uncomprehending. It was only half full, and the ice cream half melted, with a thoroughly messy spoon speared into the middle of it. It just remained there. Then she gave it a wiggle.

I almost declined. I wasn't hungry, or in the mood for treats, but then it clicked. The meaning of the gesture.

My magic took hold of the spoon, scooping out a bite of half-melted ice cream.

It was pretty good.

Sickle reclaimed the spoon, taking a much larger scoop for herself, then gave me a solid pat on the shoulder. In usual fashion, it was a jarring impact, and I'm sure the spikes would have drawn blood if not for my armor and exoskeleton. Still, I didn't mind.

Instead, I rose to my hooves again, and we walked silently away from the ashes.

Dusty cautiously mentioned that we should still search the rest of the facility, as if concerned that I would take offense to getting back to business, but I soothed that concern by agreeing. I can't say I was enthusiastic about it in the slightest, but I knew I had to move on. It's not as if there was much left to explore.

The rearmost labs were the largest yet, with rows of lab tables at one end, a bank of cryogenic freezers set in the wall at the other end, and an array of ancient medical and examination equipment in between. A ring of lights had been rigged over the equipment in the middle, to give plenty of light when working, but they had fallen at some point in the past, crushing lighter equipment and scattering broken glass around the middle of the room. Otherwise, the room was quite intact, if a little dim.

We made our way past the lab tables and their scattered papers. I paused to shine my flashlight over some of them. I'm not entirely sure why. The few legible documents mostly discussed chemistry and thermodynamics that I didn't understand, and even if I did, would have been completely irrelevant to me. Still, it was information, and I was there. I needed something to do.

Leaving that behind, we picked our way over the glass-strewn floor to the freezers. Starlight was first, bounding up onto a medical bed and hopping across to a clear spot of floor. I lagged behind, starting to pick my way across the floor, until the sight of my own holed legs reminded me that I wasn't

mimicking an earth pony. I spread my wings, flying across the rest of the floor in a short hop.

Echo simply appeared in a flash of purple. I naturally looked to see the source of the bright flash. When I looked back to Starlight, I froze.

She had her hooves up on the rim of the frosted freezer window, her flashlight floating beside her. She was staring through the window, her eyes wide and ears back. "Uh... Whisper?" She looked my way, her expression uncertain, maybe even unnerved.

I stepped forward, nervously placing my forehooves on the rim and rising up to look inside.

The interior was dimly lit. Most of the freezer's contents were visible only as a multitude of rounded silhouettes. There were dozens of them, maybe even hundreds. Starlight's flashlight was still floating in place, piercing the gloom. Its beam illuminated the closest of these identical shapes, and I fixated on it, staring, barely able to comprehend what I saw.

It was a changeling egg, perfect in every way.

## Chapter Thirty-Five

# Prepared for the Future

While Starlight celebrated, I sat, and I thought.

I was no longer the only member of my hive. One hundred and twenty three eggs were held in cryogenic suspension. Every one had been meticulously hooked up to medical scanners, allowing the lab's computer to monitor and record their status.

I had searched through those logs. Entry after entry came up clean. In the end, only a single egg had any warning over uneven freezing and crystallization, and even that was well below the threshold the program considered hazardous. They had all survived.

Starlight had stood nearby, waiting and watching. I could see her holding back the nervous excitement as I continued searching the logs. When I finally allowed a smile to show, she grinned and cheered, hopping around in excitement.

And so, she celebrated, while I sat, the smile fading away as I considered my new situation.

I do not mean to say that I was disappointed. I wasn't. I was so wonderfully relieved to have found something after all of my searching. At the same time, I had hoped the changelings I had found would be *adults*, individuals who could help with the many difficulties our hive would face. Experts that could help us rebuild, perhaps even soldiers and other Infiltrators that could help combat the threats rising in the Wasteland. Instead, I had one hundred and twenty three eggs, all dependent on me.

So, while I wasn't disappointed, I was concerned.

It was several minutes before Dusty approached me. "Something wrong?"

"No," I said, giving another weak smile, but it faded away almost immediately. "Not exactly. I'm just thinking."

He nodded, but he seemed to pick up on some of the seriousness of the situation. "About what?"

I considered brushing it off, but this was something that needed to be addressed, and to be honest, something I thought needed to be discussed.

I stood, turning to face the rest of the group. Starlight immediately stopped, grinning at me. Echo stood nearby, tall and proud, though a hint of a smile touched her lips. Off to the side, Sickle lay kicked back against a cryo-freezer, the mostly empty ice-cream container resting on her belly.

“Everyone,” I said, looking around at them. “First off, I wanted to say... thank you. Thank you for helping me. You’ve gone out of your way just to help me find my hive when it would have been easier to just walk away. I couldn’t have done this without your help.”

“Of course we had to help!” Starlight said, laughing softly.

Dusty nodded along, giving a soft smile. Sickle grunted something unintelligible.

“That said... I have concerns.” With my words, Starlight’s grin instantly vanished. I continued on. “My hive will survive, but it’s still in a tenuous position, and its recovery will be even slower than I had expected. There are more than a hundred eggs. I... I can’t raise all of them on my own. I can’t *feed* all of them on my own.”

Starlight immediately spoke up. “We can help! I mean, I can help.”

“I appreciate the offer, but there are too many, even for all of us. They’ll need to be fed, cared for, educated, and protected. The best scenario I can think of is raising a small number of them until they’re old enough to help raise more. It means my hive will recover, but it’s going to take time. We’re talking two, maybe three generations before my hive becomes self-sufficient. Decades. Until then, it’s going to be in a very fragile state. It will be vulnerable.

“Right now, those young changelings are safe and stable. It would be... *irresponsible* of me to put them in danger. I can’t thaw them now.”

Starlight stepped forward. “But—”

I held up a hoof. “Not yet. They almost died once, already. I can’t waste the opportunity that’s presented itself. I have to do what I can to make sure the world is *safe* for them.”

“What exactly did you have in mind?” Dusty asked.

“Serenity,” I said. “They’re already a problem. Whatever it is they’re doing, it’s going to be bad for ponies. Even speaking in purely practical terms, my hive will need peaceful, friendly ponies, and Serenity puts that in danger. And if they should find out about my hive? I don’t doubt that

they'd put every effort into wiping us out completely.

"I can not in good conscience hatch these changelings with a threat like that looming over them. Not until Serenity has been stopped. Since I'm the only active Infiltrator in my hive, that means the duty falls to me."

Dusty was frowning, thinking. "That's a pretty big thing you're talking about. Maybe you should think a bit on it before deciding."

"I've been thinking about this for days, now," I said, slowly shaking my head. "This isn't an impulsive decision. This is something I need to do, for both my hive and for the other people of the Wasteland."

"If you're sure," Dusty said. "What are you thinking?"

"Serenity has two primary advantages," I said. "So we destroy those."

"What, the big fortified base and huge army?" Starlight asked. "How the heck do we do that? I mean, I guess we do have some balefire eggs..."

"Those are powerful, but too small to wipe out an entire Stable. Besides, those aren't the advantages I was referring to."

She cocked her head. "What *did* you mean?"

"Their first advantage is their secrecy. Most ponies don't even know Serenity is out there. A few do, and some are spreading the word, but even they don't know the details of Serenity's capabilities. They don't know how changeling Infiltrators work, what kinds of tactics and options they have, or how to effectively combat these changelings. I do. My hive has always tried to aid ponies with knowledge and assistance, working behind the scenes. My hive's survival is going to depend on working with ponies, maybe even more openly than ever before."

Dusty was slowly nodding. "Information is good. Good intel was one of the best advantages we could hope for, when I was in the Rangers. Still... I'm sure Serenity has near-perfect intel on every settlement around, and no pony has the forces to oppose them. Not even those Enclave guys."

"Which is their second advantage: unity. They can focus all of their efforts against enemies that are completely disorganized. Right now, Serenity has the opportunity to pick apart ponies one settlement at a time. There is no unified front, just a bunch of small, easily defeated groups. Some of them are a hair's breadth from fighting each other. If ponies don't pull together, they'll be picked off one-by-one." I looked around the group. "We already saw that at Rust."

Starlight's ears drooped. Dusty's expression, on the other hoof, hardened.

"We can't fight them on our own," I said. "Nobody can. The only way I can see for overcoming Serenity is going to as many ponies as I can, impress upon them exactly the level of danger we're all facing, and convince them to work together to face it."

Dusty gave a dry snort. "Oh, is that all? Shit, most settlements can't even agree to things within their own walls."

Starlight nudged him, managing a smile. "I dunno. If anyone can talk everypony into doing something, it's Whisper."

"I don't expect it will be easy," I said, "but a mutual threat can be a strong motivator to cooperate, and I expect I can leverage that to our advantage. Even if I can't get everypony to work together, getting the information out will weaken Serenity's position, perhaps enough that those who do band together will have a fighting chance."

"And if they don't?" Dusty asked.

"Then we lose nothing that we wouldn't have lost, anyway," I said. "The alternative would be to stand by and do nothing. Let hundreds or thousands of ponies be conquered, enslaved, or killed, and give up on any chance of my hive being able to thrive as it once had."

"Yeah, yeah," Dusty said, waving a hoof. "I get it. Shit. I don't particularly like it, but I get it."

"I don't like it, either," I said, "but I think this is something I have to do."

"Yeah," Dusty repeated, then sighed. "I see some problems with that idea, though."

"What's that?"

"Serenity's already hit one settlement. We might not have much time. We also don't know if we can even walk into Mareford without being shot. Sure, you can go in on your own, but the rest of us are all wanted ponies."

"I am not," Echo said from behind him, but he waved off her retort.

"The point is, it's going to be hard dealing with Mareford, and she'd be basically on her own in a town we *know* has been infiltrated before."

"It wouldn't be the first time," I said, "but that was when acting as an Infiltrator, impersonating a common citizen, rather than making myself the focus of attention. Given my recent experience, I'd much rather be able

to have you nearby.” I cast a glance around. “That is, assuming you wish to help.”

“Of course!” Starlight said, grinning.

Dusty nodded. “If there’s a way to help ponies against Serenity, I’m all for it.”

Sickle made a vague, quiet grunt.

We looked to Echo. She was frowning, looking at me for a second before speaking. “Given your combination of persuasive argument skills and remarkable stubbornness, I presume any attempt short of physical restraint would fail to dissuade you, and I am still in need of you for my research. Very well, I shall assist.”

“Thank you,” I said, sharing a smile. Then I turned back to Dusty. “Mareford is still a possibility, but there might be other places to start. If we can get other groups involved, we might be able to use that to leverage Mareford. You know more about the political disposition of settlements in the region. Any suggestions?”

“Well...” He frowned, thinking for a moment. “Mareford isn’t the only big settlement. There’s also Trotsen, and we’re closer to it than Mareford. The two towns are trading partners. If we can get Trotsen in on this, that’s going to carry a lot of weight, and would give a good way to catch Mareford’s ear.”

“Starting big is probably a good idea,” I said, nodding. “Smaller settlements may be hesitant to commit if they aren’t sure the bigger settlements are in.”

“I have my doubts that they’ll be willing to work together,” Dusty said. “They might be trading partners, but the towns aren’t exactly friends. Still, it’s worth a shot, and even if they don’t act together, at least we might get them all acting. And hell, getting Trotsen stirred up could be useful on its own. They’re about the only force around that could compete with the Mareford Militia.”

“Oh?”

Dusty nodded. “Yep. The Militia is the better fighting force, mind you. More disciplined, better trained, and better equipped. Then there’s the Rangers, who are even better. Still, Trotsen has at least a dozen combat-focused motorwagons, and that’s just what we know about. Mareford has

a pair of whirligigs, but that's only enough to move a couple Ranger teams. The mobility Trotsen has in the field is a huge advantage."

"I can certainly appreciate the advantage of mobility," I said, thinking of our own motorwagon. "Though I imagine Serenity tops everyone in that regard."

"Not the Enclave," he noted. "Though it seems they've got their own fight."

"If we do get other settlements to work together, we might try approaching them again," I said. "They don't want to compromise their own fight, but if we show them we've got a good chance of beating Serenity without excessive expenditure on their part, they might be willing to pitch in. I think I might be able to use the *Cumulonimbus* as a point of leverage. Despite how Commander Aurora dismissed it, I imagine they don't like the idea of their own ship being in the hooves of a genocidal enemy of ponies."

Dusty frowned at that, but nodded. "Yeah, I imagine not. Be careful pushing it too hard, though. If she realizes you're trying to—"

"She'd be upset, yes," I said, giving a lopsided smile. "People don't tend to like being manipulated, and military types tend to be more *forceful* about it."

Dusty gave a single chuckle. "Yeah, just a bit. So... Trotsen?"

I nodded.

"Okay, then," he said, giving one final nod and turning to the others. "Let's get—"

"Wait," I said, holding up a hoof. "There's one more thing, first."

He cocked an eyebrow, but listened.

"I'm hesitant to ask it, but... I need to ask you all a favor."

"Sure!" Starlight replied, then asked, "What is it?"

"I'm... rather uncomfortably aware that I am here at least partially by chance. There have been several times that I could have easily died. One lucky shot, a random piece of shrapnel, almost anything. Chances are, my odds of dying were probably better than my odds of getting here."

Starlight's smile had vanished, her eyes widening a touch in alarm. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that, right now... I'm the only *active* member of my hive. I'm the only member able to do anything, and the only one carrying our knowledge and values. If I were to die, they would be on their own. Taking

on Serenity, it's going to be dangerous. I'm already a target, and spreading the word about Serenity is going to catch their attention. I've been fortunate to get this far, but it would be irresponsible of me to endanger the future of my hive. So, I want to ask all of you for a favor."

They watched and waited intently as I sat. It was difficult to say what I had to say. "I'd like to ask you to promise that, if I die, one of you will come back for them. That... if you're the last one of us left, you won't keep fighting. You'll save yourself, leave, and come here. That you'll make sure they still have a chance at life."

Starlight's ears had drooped as she slowly nodded. "Y-yeah... but we're not letting you die."

Dusty was frowning, looking down at the ground as he considered the request. "I don't know. That's..." He looked up, meeting my pleading eyes. He stared silently, as if trying to come up with a suitable argument, but he couldn't hold my gaze. He instead looked over at the freezer, with the hundred-plus eggs within. His ears flicked back, and he sighed. "Yeah."

"Well," Echo said, "I suppose if you were to get yourself killed, I would be in need of another helpful changeling, anyway, and I do imagine a child would be more amenable. Still, I would prefer if you do not die, so I shall do my best to ensure your safety. I can shield you from harm just as well as I can shield myself." She cocked her head to the side, looking off into space as she mused, "Perhaps I could repair that power armor you have acquired. It would certainly improve your odds of survival."

"Thank you," I said, feeling my throat tighten just a touch. I swallowed past the lump, doing my best to ignore it. Instead, I lifted my PipBuck-clad leg, touching a hoof delicately to the device. "I've been making recordings about what's happened to me since waking up. I've talked a lot about my hive and its values. I've been keeping it all heavily encrypted, but... I'm going to decrypt the files. I'll leave a copy of what I have here, maybe give you guys copies, too, but I'm going to be recording more. If I don't make it, I'd like you to copy those files so these changelings can hear it. So they know who they are, where they come from."

Starlight was nodding. "Yeah," she said, her voice ever-so-slightly strained. "Now can we stop talking like you're going to die?"

I gave a soft, reassuring smile. "I don't plan on dying, but it would be

irresponsible to not account for the possibility.”

Starlight stepped forward and wrapped me in a tight hug, her words coming out slightly choked. “Will you *please* stop being so depressingly practical for a bit?”

I couldn’t help chuckling slightly as I returned the hug. “Okay. I’m done.”

“Good,” she said. She still kept hugging me.

When she didn’t immediately stop, Dusty spoke up. “Okay, then. We should get ready to go. Starlight, see if you can get one of those spark generators. Everyone else, scavenge any essentials we might need, like food and water. We should head out as soon as possible.”

Starlight finally released me, and reluctantly walked off to begin the salvage. Echo said something about robots before hurrying off. As for myself, I simply remained sitting, lacking anything better to do with myself.

A minute passed before Sickle pushed her way up to her hooves and lumbered over to me. She came to a stop beside me, speaking in a quiet rumble. “So, yeah, it’s been fun and all, but I think it’s about time I took off.”

I looked up to her in surprise. “What? Why?”

Her armor rattled with a shrug. “Ain’t much for me to do around here,” she said. “Hell, figured I’d head up north a bit. Sounds like there’s still plenty of raiders and warlords and shit up there. Might be fun.”

“Going north?” I stared at her, legitimately shocked at her decision. “But... why? There’s still so much going on here.”

She snorted. “Yeah, sure. You’re going to go around and talk at a bunch of ponies. Woo. Loads of fun.”

“You know there’s going to be violence,” I said. “Serenity isn’t going to stop without a fight.”

“Yeah, great,” she said, and I’m pretty sure she rolled her eyes somewhere under that helmet. “And I’m sure I’ll have just as much fun as these last fights.”

And now it all made sense. “That’s what this is about? You’re feeling useless here?”

“I’m feeling *bored* is what it’s all about. I ain’t getting nearly enough fucking to hang around in the back doing nothing while you cunts have fun fighting. And Serenity? Hah. Bet those *cunty bugs*’ll all be flying and shit.

Ain't much for me to do."

"There's *plenty* you could do," I said, reaching up a hoof and placing it gently on her shoulder. "They won't all be flying, and I'm sure there'll be other fights, too."

"Dusty and Star can handle the long-range shit just fine, and that Luna-wannabe will probably do well, too. Ain't much of a fight for me, and I ain't playing second-up. So unless you're planning on offering me some of the best fucking ever, I ain't got much reason to stick around."

Her head inclined slightly, as if waiting to see if I took up the not-so-subtle offer. I tried a different approach. "I think you're wrong," I said. "There's still plenty you can do, even right in the front-line of the fight. Even against Serenity."

She turned her head to face me more directly. "Like what, huh? Name one thing."

I frowned, stepping up to face her squarely, and meeting her gaze without any sign of hesitation or fear. "Sickle, you're probably the most stubborn, combative, unrelenting pony I've known. If you really think you're going to be useless, why don't you find a way to *make* yourself useful, instead of running away?"

Her head drew back a touch, jaw tightening. "You know... I kinda like that you ain't so scared of me any more." She lifted a hoof, pointing the vicious leg-blades at my chest, her lips curling back. "But don't think I won't beat your fucking ass to a pulp if you push me. I've killed plenty of ponies for less."

"Because they were insulting you, no doubt," I said, refusing to let my eyes waver despite the adrenaline teasing at my senses. Then I put on a thin smile. "But I'm not insulting you. I'm *challenging* you."

She stared back at me for several long seconds before replying. "That clever mouth of yours is going to get you beat some day."

"Maybe," I replied, "but not today."

We stood there, squared off, the metal-clad beast of a pony looming above me.

Sickle broke the silence with another snort, and shoved her way past me.

I staggered, wheeling around to watch her walking off. I mentally scrambled, trying to think of something else to say, and eventually just

called out. "Sickle!"

She stopped, head half-turning, but said nothing.

Still, nothing came. Finally, I sighed. "Good luck," I said, ears drooping. "And... thank you."

Her head turned a little further, inclining almost curiously. Then, she looked away again and continued walking. She stepped out into the hall, and then she was gone.

I stood in the empty lab, watching the door as if I expected her to come back. Eventually, I turned away, slowly wandering.

I found myself again at the window of the giant cryo-freezer, rearing up to rest my forelegs on the rim of the window. I stared out into the chamber and the rows of dimly lit eggs. There were so many of them. They were safe, but they were also so fragile.

Hoofsteps approached some untold number of minutes later, moving right up beside me. Starlight's voice was soft and pleasant. "Hey."

"Hey," I replied, still staring out over the eggs.

She stood beside me, looking through the window with a gentle smile. After a moment, she placed a hoof on my shoulder, giving a gentle rub. "You did it."

"Yeah," I quietly replied. Then I drew in a deep breath, and slowly let it out. "Still a lot more to do."

She nodded. "Yeah." There was a long, lingering silence as she shared the view with me. Eventually, her attention shifted more toward me. "So, I guess this puts you in charge of your hive, huh?"

"It's quite the responsibility," I said, slowly nodding.

"So does that make you the queen, now?"

I flinched, ears flicking back. "No," I quickly replied. "I'm not a queen." I emphasized this by gesturing toward the eggs. "One of them will be. Not me."

She paused, considering me. After a moment, she smiled. "Well, I think you'd make a great queen."

My first impulse was to argue the point, but I looked to her and that comforting smile, and knew she intended it as a sincere compliment. "Thank you."

Her smile grew a touch, and she turned to look at the eggs again. "You

going to be okay leaving them here?"

"They're about as safe as they can be," I said, despite the many fears that lingered in the background. "Nopony knows about this location but us, and it's far from any settlements. I'll be locking the labs up again, and I should be able to set a new passcode. They'll be safe."

She nodded. "We should probably get on that, then. Dusty wants to move out soon."

We headed out. Once we'd left the secure labs, I focused on the lock for the giant blast doors, while Dusty led Starlight off to help him break into some vending machine. It only took me a few minutes to figure out how to set a new passcode. I locked the labs up tight and rejoined them, to find Dusty pulling packs of cigarettes from an opened machine.

Starlight was sitting on top of it, her hooves lazily swinging off the edge. She was smirking down at him. "Yeah, no more making fun of me for hoarding snack cakes, Dusty."

"I didn't make fun of you," Dusty quietly replied, steadily shoveling packs into his bag.

"Okay," Starlight said, and laughed. "No more rolling your eyes silently while 'not making fun of me', then."

Despite his focus, the corner of Dusty's mouth crept upwards. "Not like I won't have plenty of other reasons to roll my eyes at you."

Echo stood back, watching them all with a tight frown, but said nothing.

Dusty noticed my approach as he buckled his bags. "Good timing. We all set to go?"

"I am," I replied.

"Good," he said with a nod, then asked, "Where's Sickle?"

"I don't know," Starlight said. "Couldn't find her."

"She left."

They all turned to look at me, blinking in surprise.

"Why?" Dusty asked.

"She was... bored," I said. "She decided it was time to move on."

I left it at that. I didn't feel particularly like elaborating, and I doubted that she would have liked me explaining the conclusions I had drawn.

Dusty stared for a moment before sighing. "Shit. We haven't even started, and we're already losing ponies."

"I can't believe she just left," Starlight said. "I mean... hell, I don't exactly like her, but... shit."

In the background, Echo had cocked her head to the side, and finally broke her silence. "What are you talking about? She did not leave." She turned her head, looking towards the front of the facility. "She is currently in the back of your motorwagon, rummaging through the cargo."

Dusty's ears perked up as he turned to look that way. I did too, then turned my attention to the E.F.S. and the single contact it reported in that direction.

We made our way out to the entrance and stepped outside once again. Sure enough, Sickle was in the back of the motorwagon, hunched over something.

I walked toward her. "Sickle? What are—"

"Well it took you fuckers long enough," she grumbled, sitting back and tossing the minigun-armed battle-saddle at my hooves. I heard a sharp inhale from Echo as she stepped forward, catching it at the last moment in her magic.

Sickle was rooting around again. "You want me to stick around? You pull that weak-ass shit off that harness..." She reared back, swinging up one of the massive heavy machine guns and thumping it down on the edge of the cargo bay. "...and mount this motherfucker in its place!"

Echo floated the battle-saddle close to her chest, casting a disapproving glare at Sickle, but after a moment said, "That should be a trivial modification."

"Those things can put guns on both sides, right?" Sickle asked. "'Cause I'm thinking of tearing that grenade launcher off this rust-bucket power armor and putting it on the other side."

"Uh, wait a minute," Starlight said. "I can't be the only one worried about giving Sickle a gun, am I?"

"Fuck you, runt."

"And I thought you were leaving?" Starlight added, looking at me for confirmation. I nodded.

"There's going to be a good fight, right?" Sickle gave an amused snort. "But hey, if those bugs are going to cheat by flying, I'm going to cheat by bringing a fucking gun."

Dusty was watching, his expression looking as if he'd bitten into something sour and was trying to hide it. "The idea of you with a gun and grenade launcher is... terrifying," he said, before adding, "Hopefully in a good way."

"Good!" Sickle said, grinning savagely. "I like terrifying."

"I assume you intend to wear this," Echo said, frowning down at the harness. "It is woefully insufficient for a pony of your girth and length. It will require extensive modification."

"Well then, you better make yourself fucking useful and get on that, huh?"

Echo scowled. "You could at least have the courtesy to politely *ask* for my assistance."

"Yeah," Sickle said with a derisive chuckle. "And you could have the courtesy to eat me, bitch."

I stepped forward. "Sickle, there's no need to be nasty." Then I turned to Echo. "Would it be possible to make the modifications?"

"It is certainly *possible*," Echo said, glaring at Sickle. "I would need to requisition some additional material from some of the unused equipment to enlarge the harness. However, I am not terribly inclined to do any favors for someone so relentlessly rude."

"I understand," I said. "Could you *please* make those modifications?"

Her frown deepened as she looked down at me, then raised her head again to her usual superior pose. "I shall do this task for *you*."

"Thank you."

Sickle snickered, and I immediately turned to her.

"I'm glad you decided to stick around, but if you continue to be rude to Echo when she's trying to help you, I can always withdraw my request."

"Yeah, yeah," Sickle said, waving a hoof dismissively. "Still wouldn't hurt her to pull the fucking log out of her ass."

"No more than it would hurt you to ease up on the hostility, especially when she's doing something for your benefit."

Sickle just shrugged.

"Have you ever even fired a gun?" Dusty asked, skepticism clear in his expression.

"Sure, a few times," Sickle replied, kicking back in the bed of the motor-wagon and kicking her rear hooves up on the edge of the roof. "Ain't like

it's hard."

Dusty raised an eyebrow. "In a fight?"

"Nah." She lifted a foreleg, wiggling a spiked hoof. "Never needed a gun."

"Great," Dusty grumbled. "And how long ago was this?"

"I dunno," Sickle said. "Five or six years ago? Maybe more?"

"No experience *and* one of our biggest guns. This will only end well."

Turning his attention to Echo, he asked, "How hard would it be to make it so we can swap out weapons?"

"Trivial," Echo replied, floating the battle-saddle before her. With a few clicks, the minigun floated free. "These harnesses were explicitly designed to allow the swapping of weapons with a minimal use of tools. The only difficulty will lie in fabricating mounting hardware for new weapons, but that should take mere minutes."

"Good," Dusty said with a nod. "In that case, I've got a different weapon I'd like you to mount first, just so we can get her some practice shooting."

He climbed into the motorwagon beside Sickle, who made some quiet and obscene comment that he ignored. A minute later, he climbed out again, holding a rifle. It was another Model 4 rifle, like my own, but it had a thicker, longer barrel, with a bipod mounted beneath it.

"That tiny thing?" Sickle said. "I'd do more damage hitting someone with that than shooting them!"

"We have less than three hundred rounds for the HMG, and we're not wasting them on training. We've got probably a thousand rounds for this gun, we can spare a few."

He passed it over to Echo, who examined it with a critical eye. "Magazine fed. That will pose some difficulty. The battle-saddle lacks a reloading mechanism. Designing one would take some time, as would adapting the minigun's feed mechanism to this weapon."

"No need," Dusty said. "It's just for training, so we can make do with manual reloading. Actually, Whisper, I was thinking you might want to consider using this one, once Sickle is done with it."

I cocked my head, looking at it more closely as I asked, "Why is that?"

"You tend to be a bit heavy on the rate of fire, but you've gotten to be a pretty reliable soldier in general. That one's designed to handle automatic fire better. It's got a heavier barrel, lets you fire more without overheating

it, and it's a more stable platform. We could load you up with some drums and let you lay out some heavy fire."

"I guess," I said, frowning a little as I looked at it. "I don't know, though. I kind of like this rifle. It's light. That with a drum mag seems a little awkward."

"It'll be heavier and slower, sure," Dusty said with a nod, though he wore a faint smile; it seems he approved of my observation. "But it's also much more capable for longer-ranged engagements. If we get you some practice with it, you could swap out depending on the situation. They're based on the same weapon, so their operation is identical."

"I suppose that makes sense."

Meanwhile, Echo had floated out several spare parts and a toolkit from the motorwagon and gotten to work. It took only a couple of minutes before she had the rifle fitted to the right side of the battle-saddle. Another minute was spent alternating between the weapon's built-in sights and the aiming reticle of the battle-saddle before she was satisfied with its alignment.

After that was several minutes spent rebuilding the frame and replacing straps, and after coaxing a lethargic Sickle from the motorwagon, a few minutes fine-tuning the adjustments to fit snug and secure over her armor.

Sickle did not make it easy.

"Get this shit out of my face," she grumbled, roughly prodding the arm that held the firing bit and aiming reticle.

"Calm yourself," Echo replied, standing proudly as her magic did the work of pulling on the straps. "That part is necessary to aim and fire the weapon. You will simply have to deal with it."

"It's going to be in the way when I'm kicking the shit out of ponies," Sickle shot back. "Fuck, I can't even move my head down all the way!" She demonstrated by smacking her armored muzzle against the firing bit, and followed up by wiggling her head, swinging the long spike atop her helmet. "How the fuck am I supposed to stick ponies with this if I can't even move my head right?"

"I suppose you will simply have to settle with shooting them."

"Fuck that," Sickle replied, swatting the metal arm again, and I'm pretty sure bending it a bit. "You don't see the fucking Enclave birdies with metal sticks jammed in their faces, do you, bitch?"

Echo's magic glowed around the protrusion as she held it in place. "That is because they are wearing power armor, and all the systems required for aiming and firing are built into their helmets. They—"

She abruptly stopped, ears perking up. A smile crossed her lips. "I believe I may have a solution to your problem. Give me your helmet."

Sickle frowned. "What?"

Echo repeated her request more slowly, and Sickle scowled. "I heard you the first time, you stuck-up bitch. I mean, *why* do you want my helmet?"

"Because if you do not want a rigid bit, I will need to incorporate those mechanisms into your helmet. Now remove your helmet and give it to me."

Sickle stared at her for several long seconds before answering. "Fine," she growled, a warning tone to her voice as she sat and unstrapped the helm. "But if you fuck it up, I'm kicking your ass."

"Hmmpf." Echo took the helm and walked over to the motorwagon, only to stop again. She turned to Starlight, who was relaxing on the hood of the vehicle. "I am uncertain as to who claims ownership over the damaged pegasus power armor, so I shall ask you. May I remove some parts necessary for this project?"

Starlight glanced over to Dusty, who didn't bother looking up from the drum magazines he was loading. She turned back and shrugged helplessly. "I guess?"

"Good."

That took a bit longer, as Echo dismantled part of the power armor's helmet to remove the components she was seeking.

Sickle lay where they had been previously working. She tried to look disinterested, but every now and then she would crane her head a little to try to see what Echo was doing before pretending she didn't care. A spiked hoof dug at the ground.

I took advantage of the inactivity to move a short distance away and continue my recordings.

Several minutes later, Echo finally straightened again. "It is done."

"Bout fucking time," Sickle grumbled, pushing herself up to sit again, and snatching the helmet as it was offered to her. She immediately stopped as she looked inside, lips curling back. "What the fuck?"

Despite the remark, she slid the helmet on, then turned her head about,

the thick-barred muzzle swinging beneath her chin. “What the fuck did you do to my helmet?”

“I removed the E.F.S. projectors from the pegasus power armor helmet and mounted them in yours, and set an adjustable firing bit inside your helmet’s muzzle. The spark battery compartment I attached at the rear of the helmet provides the power for those devices, and the cable currently dangling from the rear right side of the helmet provides an electrical linkage between the helmet-mounted systems and the battle saddle.” Her nose rose a fraction as she put on a proud smile. “It is a flexible solution that will give you full E.F.S. functionality, including a projected point-of-aim, without compromising your hoof-to-hoof mobility.”

“You really fucking love to listen to yourself talk, don’t you?” Sickle grumbled, still swinging her head around in every direction. “This sparkly color shit is stupid.”

“It is actually quite advanced technology,” Echo said. “The spell matrix involved is—”

“It’s still stupid,” Sickle growled.

Echo frowned. “Yet I am sure you will agree that it is less... ‘stupid’ than the rigid arm you objected to before.”

“Less stupid is still pretty stupid,” Sickle grumbled.

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Starlight called out. “Say ‘thank you’, you ungrateful bitch!”

“Fuck you, runt,” Sickle replied with a sneer. “Let’s see if this damn gunthing works before we start thanking anypony.”

Despite her tight frown, Echo took the time to adjust the firing bit to fit Sickle’s mouth. Attaching the rifle itself was completely straight-forward. Finally, she connected the cable to link the helmet to the battle-saddle.

“There,” Echo said with a short nod. “It is complete. When you disable the safety, you should see the aiming pipper. It will show the point of aim. With the necessary data and some time, Whisper should be able to add proper range adjustments to the spell matrix.”

“Yeah, okay,” Sickle muttered as she turned to look out across the open fields nearby. After a moment, she asked, “The fuck is a safety?”

Dusty sighed.



We eventually abandoned our plans to head out that day, once it became clear that proper firearm safety and handling was going to take more than a minutes-long lesson. More than an hour later, Dusty still hadn't even given her any ammo.

Eventually, he had nearly told her off. "Listen, Sickle! If you want to carry one of the big guns, then you're going to have to put in some damn work. I ain't gearing you up with a weapon that's more likely to kill us than our enemies!"

"I know what way to point a fucking gun, dumbass!" Sickle replied.

"Not giving a shit might work great for running up and kicking someone, but it doesn't work with guns! If you keep half-assing it like this and not caring about what you're doing, you're going to end up shooting one of us on accident."

Sickle snarled. "At this rate, it wouldn't be an accident!"

"And that's not helping," Dusty said, leveling a hoof at her before sweeping it back in my direction. "And what about Whisper? You seem to like her. If you don't pay attention to this stuff and treat it seriously, you could accidentally kill her, too. Do you really want that?"

Dusty metaphorically dragged her through the lessons, with Sickle grumbling and arguing the whole way. I hung back, having finished another audio recording, and now sat beside Starlight on the hood of the motorwagon. Echo was nearby; she had decided to not insist on further "research" with me after our previous session, and was instead in the back of the motorwagon, examining the less advanced of the two ruined power armors.

"Do you think this is a good idea?" Starlight asked, watching the so-called training with me.

"Maybe not," I said, half-distracted by sorting through the contents of my PipBuck. "But it's still better than the alternative. This is the price of Sickle staying, and as uneasy as I am with some parts of that, it's unfortunately likely that we'll need all the advantages we can get."

"You sound so optimistic," she grumbled.

"I am," I said. "With all the factors in play, I think we have a very good chance of achieving our goals." I gave a shrug, giving up on my PipBuck

and lying back beside Starlight. "Still, no reason to not stack everything as far in our favor as possible, not to mention taking precaution against any problems that might come up. Even if I'm optimistic of our chances, there's still going to be risk."

Echo spoke up from the cargo bed. "Which is why I hope to get this armor functional. While I am entirely confident in my shields, I would prefer to have redundant safety measures in place for Whisper. Her health is of great value to both of our plans."

Starlight rolled her eyes. "Gee, glad she's so useful to you."

Echo didn't look up from her work. "Given your strong emotional attachment, I would think you would be pleased by my efforts to protect her."

"That's not..." Starlight sighed, closing her eyes and laying her head back against the motorwagon. "Yeah, sure, I'm happy you're trying to protect her. It's the 'why' that's dumb."

"Ah," Echo said, her magic floating some mechanical part into place on the armor. "You object to my motivations in helping her, not in the help itself."

"It's just all clinical, like... I dunno, like she's a *tool* to you."

"Despite my lengthy observations, we have only directly interacted for a little less than twenty four hours," Echo said, looking up from her work for a moment to meet Starlight's eyes. "Given the limited interaction, yes, I have not formed any sort of emotional attachment to any of you which would significantly influence my behavior."

Starlight quietly snorted, and muttered, "Behold, the savior of ponykind: kind of a dick."

"Well, she's trying," I said. "And to be fair to Echo, it took more than twenty four hours for me to start thinking of you as a friend instead of just a traveling companion. I'm not sure exactly where I would put that. When we got to Rust, perhaps?"

Starlight gave another snort, though there was a bit more humor behind it this time. "So, like, two days instead of one?"

"Or thereabouts," I said, cracking a smile. "Mind, I'd be lying if I said there was no selfish interest in staying with you. You were pretty much my only opportunity for love and survival knowledge prior to Rust, and still my best prospects after it, but that was only part of it. An increasingly small

part, at that.”

“Sure, I get all that,” she said. “I mean, it’s still a *little* weird when I think about, but I guess I don’t really think about it much. Like, I’ve gotten used to it.”

Echo spoke up again. “Whisper is much better at putting on friendly pretenses than I am.”

“I’m sure I am,” I said, “but you’d be mistaken if you think that’s the case here. I don’t generally *need* to put on pretenses, because I do legitimately care about people, even ponies. I took up my profession to help others. Changelings, yes, but one of the advantages of being an Infiltrator is that it becomes much easier to see the ways we are similar rather than different. I might not have thought of Starlight as a friend right away, but I *liked* her immediately.”

“Wasn’t I pointing a gun at you?” Starlight said with a smile.

I chuckled. “But after you put the gun down you were all smiles and cheerfulness. Considering how bleak everything seemed, it stood out to me. And you know, even though I had my own problems, spending some time around you made me want to help you with your own. Sure, again, there was a bit of a selfish side to it. I needed food, and, well... seeing you happy gave me hope that good things could still thrive in the Wasteland.”

Her smile steadily grew until she finally gave a soft laugh and thumped me on the shoulder. “Okay, that is *ridiculously* cheesy, you silly little bug!”

I grinned. “Plus, you have a nice laugh.”

She lay back, still chuckling.

After a moment of enjoying the good humor, I looked back to Echo. “In any case, I think there’s an important point to all this. You and I have certain similarities. We’re both trying to help ponies, and it seems we both have a similarly methodical thought process. I think the difference is, while you’re trying to help ponies as a whole, you seem to overlook the individuals in the process.”

Echo’s head came up again, her work pausing as she considered this. “Hmm. I believe I see what you are trying to say. I... I must admit, most of our lives, our memories, are from our time in Unity. What benefited the whole benefited us. The chaos of individuality is most troubling.”

“It’s certainly more complicated,” I said with a nod. “But the variety

makes the world far better for everyone involved, I've found."

Echo hummed again. "I do have to admit, as frustrating and incomprehensible as it seems at times, I am certainly finding the variety to be *intriguing*." She returned to her work, floating some mechanical piece into place along the back of the crude power armor. "There was certainly no opportunity to work on such interesting arcane technology when we were together in Unity." There was a momentary pause in her work, brief enough that I almost missed it. "Nor was there any desire for such, now that I think on it."

I considered that for a moment. "I take it this Unity wasn't much for individuality?"

"What need did we have for individuality when we were one?" Echo replied. "We were the whole, and the whole was us. What was good for one was good for all."

"Wow," Starlight said. "Yeah, I'm switching my vote on alicornhood from 'no' to 'hell no'."

"There is no need for you to be concerned about that," Echo grumbled. "That aspect of our Unity was a gift from our mother. Without her, we are adrift and alone."

"I don't mean to diminish your loss," I said, "and I recognize it's not quite the same thing, but you're not entirely alone."

She scoffed. "It is a meager shadow of what I once knew," she said in a low tone, keeping her attention focused on her work. Tools and parts floated in purple magic. "Still, I appreciate the gesture, and will strive to make do with what I have. Even I must admit to have found *some* silver lining to these unfortunate events."

I nodded. "Discovering your own interests?"

She paused, looking off into space for a moment before resuming her work. "I am uncertain if it is discovering something very old or something very new, but yes."

The conversation lapsed, and I sat there for a while, thinking, until Starlight's words brought my attention back to the present. "Oh boy. He's giving Sickle ammo."

I looked over just in time to see Dusty finish inserting the drum and chambering a round. The rifle looked ridiculously tiny on her side, even

with the suppressor extending the weapon's length.

"Remember," Dusty was saying. "Keep the weapon pointed downrange at all times. Safety on unless you're expecting to shoot. Never point it at anypony unless you're intending to shoot them."

"Yeah, yeah," Sickle grumbled. I had to give Dusty credit for perseverance; he'd apparently worn her down from 'belligerently hostile' to 'irritated but resigned', and she followed his directions, even if every inch of body language suggested her annoyance.

"Okay," Dusty said, stepping back before pointing with a hoof at a dead tree some hundred yards away. "Go ahead and disengage the safety, then line up the sights on the target."

"Uh-huh," Sickle muttered around the bit. I saw her jaw shift slightly as she worked the safety latch, then her head twitched upwards. She adjusted her stance, first lowering her chest a bit, then sticking her rump up, and finally arching her back. "Well this is awkward as shit. How the fuck am I supposed to aim this?"

"Practice, mostly," Dusty replied. "I'd say it took the average soldier a good week of combat drills and a few hundred rounds of ammunition to become acceptably proficient with battle-saddle mounts, and specialists put in many times that. You're getting the crash-course version."

"Lucky me," Sickle grumbled. "No wonder Rattle couldn't hit shit." She bit down, and a single sharp crack echoed across the shallow basin. I could see Sickle frown, then she bit down again, and again. The weapon fired a few more times, then stopped.

"What the fuck?" Sickle snapped, standing upright again and turning to glare at the weapon. "Did this shit break? I know they hold more shots than that!"

"They do," Dusty said. "But I only loaded five rounds into the mag."

"Well give me a full one!" Sickle shot back. "And why was it only firing one at a time? This shit's supposed to be full-auto, right?"

"It can be," he said, removing the drum from her weapon. "I just wanted to make sure you have the basics of weapon handling down before you get to playing around too much. I'll give you a few more rounds, you can get some practice in using the weapon. Once you're doing well enough, we'll step you up."

Sickle groaned. "Leave it to you to make guns even *more* boring."

"Trust me," Dusty said as he slowly loaded a few more rounds into the magazine. "When it comes to guns, boring is good. Exciting means something's gone wrong."

"And this is why I kick things instead of shooting them," Sickle grumbled.

Dusty gave a chuckle. "So far, you aren't shooting things because your aim is horrible. You didn't even come close to the tree."

"Oh, fuck off," Sickle replied. "I had that circle-cross thingy right over the tree. Not my fault the fucking sights are off."

"Getting the sights aligned is part of why we're doing this." He slid the partially loaded drum into place again, racked the bolt, and gave her a pat on the side. "You're loaded. Keep the aim-point at the center of the tree, right where it splits into two branches. Fire three rounds, I'll adjust, we repeat. Got it?"

With little else to do, I watched the brief training session. There were several cycles of firing and adjusting, with Sickle grumpily following Dusty's directions. Eventually he switched the rifle to full-auto, letting her fire a few bursts that peppered the tree with bullets. With the weapon securely mounted to her side, I was hardly surprised at how easily she could control the recoil, and with the aid of the aiming device Echo had rigged up for her, she was even reasonably accurate.

On the other hoof, it still took her a good five seconds to line up a shot.

It was getting late when he finally decided she was ready.

The heavy-barrel rifle came off, and Dusty hefted the heavy machine gun in its place. The mounting bracket Echo had rigged up attached easily, and after a minute, the weapon was set. Next came the ammunition. The can holding the ammo fit into a bracket Echo had attached across the back of the harness, with the belt feeding down through a simple chute and into the weapon itself.

Dusty racked back the charging handle, chambering a round. "Okay, weapon's hot. Now remember, we don't have much ammo for this. If you spend this belt, you might have to do without for a while. We'll try to make sure you have some ammo, but if you want more, you'll have to spend some of your share of the caps... so try not to waste too many rounds."

"Yeah, okay," Sickle said with a resigned sigh.

"I've got it set to single-shot right now to check the aim," he said, stepping back and sitting to put his hooves over his ears. "Put one round into the tree, same point."

Sickle's jaw tightened, and the monstrous gun thundered, kicking out a small wake of dust and echoing across the landscape. Fragments of dry wood flew from where the top of the dead tree had been moments earlier. For the first time in a few hours, Sickle cracked a smile. "Yeah, that's more fucking like it."

"Looks like the sight is aligned," Dusty said, lowering his hooves. "Okay, it's yours, now. It's an expensive piece of hardware, so if you want to keep using it, I expect you to take care of it." He turned to his saddlebags and pulled out a bundle. "Which means it's time to teach you how to clean it."

Sickle's smile vanished. "Aaand we're back to boring."



We spent the night there, enjoying the relative comfort of the abandoned facility. Sure, the air was a little musty due to the lack of maintenance in the air system, and everything was coated in a fine layer of dust, but the beds were more comfortable than anything I'd had since leaving my chrysalis.

When we returned to the motorwagon that morning, we found Echo slumped over the power armor she had been working on, with several disassembled pieces of scientific equipment all neatly arrayed around her. She was snoring softly.

There was an amused silence as we looked over the scene, until Starlight spoke up with deliberate loudness. "She looks so cute when she's not being so arrogant."

Echo's head jerked up and she slid back to a sitting position, blinking several times before the scene and words finally registered. "I am not arrogant," she said, and wobbled a little before bracing herself. "...What time is it?"

Starlight was grinning. "You're wearing a PipBuck."

Echo frowned and looked down at the device, wobbling a little as she lifted her hoof. "Right."

Dusty climbed up to the motorwagon's window, sitting on the edge for the moment. "Did you stay up all night working on that?"

"Of course not," Echo said, shuffling her wings before raising her head,

taking up her usual prim and proper pose, though she remained sitting. "I obviously slept, and for a perfectly reasonable time. I simply overslept is all."

Starlight snickered. "Uh-huh. Who's got a problem about honesty now?"

Echo's expression tightened, eyes widening and ears standing alert. Her mouth hung open for a moment before she formulated a response. "I... suppose 'reasonable' is a very *subjective* term that we might not exactly agree on, so I am not *technically* being dishonest."

"Ah, yes," I said. "Technically true, the best kind of true." Then I smiled. "Mostly because it's also the best kind of lie."

She scowled, raising a hoof to rub at her eyes, but catching herself halfway there and quickly setting her hoof down again. "It is much too early to have someone twisting my words around over something so unimportant." She pointedly turned to look at Dusty. "I assume from this gathering that you intend to depart?"

"Yep," he replied. "How's the armor doing?"

"It is taking me longer than I had hoped," Echo replied with a hint of a grumble. "The *brute* caused a considerable amount of damage when she disabled it, particularly in the torso. Unfortunately, the torso articulation is the most complicated of the entire armor. I have made great progress, but it will require several more hours to fabricate the necessary replacement parts from what I have."

"Several hours, got it." Dusty nodded. "Well, it'll have to wait. We've got a long ride to Trotsen, but since we're setting out early, we might make it today."

"That will be a lengthy journey," Echo noted, and her magic reached out to grab the various parts gathered around her. "Very well. I shall continue my work once we have arrived there."

In moments, all of the various parts were tucked neatly away, and the power armor was once again laid out on its side at the back. Echo stood atop the motorwagon, spreading her wings. "Again, I shall follow you from above."

With that final statement, she beat her wings, rising up into the sky.

"Bitch talks way too much," Sickle said as she climbed up into the rear of the motorwagon, the vehicle creaking under her weight. My attention again

turned to the massive barrel sticking out past her chest. Sickle was menacing enough on her own, but I had gotten used to her presence. The addition of the huge gun changed that, and I found myself regularly glancing over at it.

I tried to shake off the nervous feeling, reasoning that I would eventually get used to it, just as I had with the leg blades, spear-like horn, and general demeanor. I climbed into the rear of the motorwagon, stowing my bags and gear beside me.

That gear included the new rifle, along with a pair of pouches holding loaded drums. Dusty had me put a drum through it in steady bursts, and I had to admit, it controlled nicely, especially when I was lying down with the bipod out. It might be clunky compared to my regular rifle, but when I was putting tight bursts into a dead tree probably three hundred yards away, I could appreciate its advantages. It was more light machine gun than rifle.

Still, it would probably live there in the motorwagon, except for the occasions where I needed to use it.

“Open up your map,” Dusty said to Starlight as he climbed in, setting his own rifle beside him. “Scroll up north, about thirty miles.”

Starlight did so, and Dusty gave a few corrections before finding the right place. “There. That’s an old road, goes all the way to Trotsen. You’ll make your way north until we hit that, then follow it west all the way to the city. Good?”

“You got it,” Starlight said, scrolling the map again. “Terrain’s a little rough between here and there, but I think we can do it, and it’ll all be smooth sailing from there.”

“Good,” Dusty said with a nod. “Let’s move out.”



It took us almost two hours to wind our way through some particularly rocky terrain, but we eventually found our way to the road. It wasn’t much of a road, mind you. It certainly wasn’t the paved street or highways you might see in some cities. It was an old dirt road, unmaintained for two centuries. Still, it was a level path across the Wasteland, and almost entirely free of debris.

“Trotsen convoys make the trip on this road,” Dusty had said. “I’m sure

they make sure it stays clear. We heard that a few raider gangs tried taking them on, but none of them were up to fighting a convoy of heavily armed motorwagons. Most just steer clear."

He turned to give us a serious look. "But we aren't a convoy, so keep your eyes out."

So, while I spent a good portion of the journey adding to my recordings, and hoping the background noise wouldn't be overwhelming, I kept an eye out.



A rapid cacophony of impacts broke the monotony of driving, accompanied by the chatter and crack of automatic fire.

"Shit!" Starlight blurted as the motorwagon swerved sharply, throwing me against the edge of the window I was looking out, then back into the seat as she corrected. I quickly pushed myself back up. I had been watching out our left, and now turned my attention right. Dusty was grabbing his rifle, shouting out at the same time. "Step on it! Contact close right, high-ground!"

I slid across the seat as the motorwagon roared, snatching my rifle up in my magic and sticking it out the window. There was a small bluff less than a hundred yards away. Dusty was firing rapidly, peppering me with shell casings and kicking up plumes of dirt and dust from the ridge. At our speed, I couldn't see any ponies. I was still searching when another series of snaps and cracks made me duck, with a couple rounds pinging off the side armor.

I came up firing, putting rounds out in the general direction of the low cliffs. I didn't stop until the magazine ran empty, the cliffs already falling behind us.

That's when we saw the twin plumes of dust kicking up from the low-ground nearby, their sources obscured by a low rise. I had just finished reloading when a pair of motorwagons came surging over that rise, tearing across the open ground between us.

"Whisper!" Dusty called out. "Get on the gun!"

I set my rifle down and scrambled over the back of my seat to climb up behind the machine gun. It was a bit cramped with Sickle there, but she didn't complain about me taking the gun; she had her own, now, and was

already turning to face the incoming vehicles, a grin on her face.

The attacking motorwagons had split up, with one swinging towards the road behind us, and the other speeding across the field to our side, running parallel to us. I focused on the one at our side. It was smaller than our motorwagon, but covered in heavy plates, and several long poles were topped by pony skulls. I swung the machine gun around, bracing against the wild bumps and lurches of the rough road, and hit the trigger.

I fired a short burst, just a few rounds, but I knew as I fired that I had missed. I fought against the bumping and swaying of the wagon to get my aim on-target. There was movement in the back of the other motorwagon, and something long pointed in our direction. I hit the trigger again, laying out another short burst. I couldn't tell if I had hit, but the motorwagon immediately swerved away.

I looked behind us, where the second motorwagon had just pulled onto the road, swerving as it plunged into the trail of dust we were kicking up. This motorwagon was similar in size to our own vehicle, but taller, and featuring a massive wedge of metal welded to the front like a giant, murderous plow. Through the dust, I could just make out a pair of ponies riding in the back, clutching spears in their mouths and wearing thick metal armor.

Getting the gun pointed behind us was difficult, and I had to press one rear hoof against Sickle's side to push myself halfway onto the roof, awkwardly wedging myself alongside the gun as I got it turned around.

The driver of the other vehicle saw what I was doing, and swerved off the road again on our left. Behind it, a great plume of dirt and smoke burst from the receding cliffs, and a purple, winged form arced up into the sky. Echo had joined the fray.

Despite driving off the road, the close motorwagon was still gaining on us. I dropped down again before swinging the gun all the way around, but I hadn't even started climbing up again before the other vehicle swung over, plunging through our dust-trail to the other side of the road.

As I got down again, Sickle reared up in the back of our vehicle, pointing a bladed hoof. "Fuck off, you little shits, or I'm coming over there and kicking your asses!"

I doubt they heard her. I could barely hear her over the clatter and

roar. Still, if I had seen Sickle pointing and yelling at me, I would have reconsidered what I was doing.

Instead, the attacking vehicle centered on the road, rapidly closing on us.

“Sickle!” I shouted out as loud as I could over the cacophonous noise. “Shoot them!”

“Fuck that!” she shouted back, planting her hooves on the edges of the cargo bay.

I cast a quick glance off to the side. The other vehicle was driving straight away from us, perhaps deciding we were too dangerous of a target. Black smoke mixed with the plume of dust behind them. I’d evidently hit something. In any case, they were not currently a threat, especially as I saw Echo swooping into a steep dive toward them.

I gave up on the machine gun, snatching my rifle from the back seat. A bullet cracked by my head. Another smacked loudly against Sickle’s armor. She roared in reply.

The other vehicle was pushing up beside us as I floated my rifle around. It was almost impossible to aim, but it was a point-blank shot. I switched it to automatic and held down the trigger, trying to aim for the windows.

As the front end of the attacking vehicle got beside us, it swerved. Sickle leaped. The other vehicle slammed into the rear corner of ours with a tremendous thud, throwing me to the side. My helmet hit the side armor. Dust flooded over everything. Our motorwagon swerved again, shuddering hard and bouncing off the road. All the cargo slid around violently as the world spun.

I leaped for safety, wings beating to lift me clear of the chaos. The entire road turned to dust as I surged upwards, still reeling from the blow to the head. I caught a glimpse of the other motorwagon, with Sickle clinging to the hood and kicking at the window, before it disappeared into the cloud of dust kicked up by our own wagon’s uncontrolled skid.

Sickle came flying out of the cloud, completely airborne, followed a moment later by the tumbling motorwagon. Our own wagon shuddered as it slid and skipped sideways across the ground, my heart lurching as it tipped, but it finally came to a rest upright. The cloud of dust it had kicked up washed over everything.

I shook myself from gawking and turned, wings beating as I swooped

down toward the hostile motorwagon, changing magazines as I closed in. Through the dust, I could see it had landed on its side. My E.F.S. showed at least one hostile being within.

Sickle was nearby, slowly pushing herself up and shaking her head.  
“...Motherfucker!”

Something vaguely pony-shaped moved in the back of the motorwagon. I back-winged, drawing short, and put out a long burst. I couldn’t tell if I hit, but whatever it was retreated into the shelter of the vehicle.

Sickle was already trotting toward the vehicle, favoring a foreleg. I swung wide behind her, following her in.

She just went right up to the rear of the vehicle, a cargo bed much like on our own, and stuck her head in.

There was a shout, then gunshots. Sickle jerked back, then roared again, wedging her upper body in through the rear window. There was cursing and a few more gunshots, and Sickle pulled back, dragging out a dirt-caked and bleeding pony, still clutching a pistol in his mouth.

Despite the broken leg dangling uselessly at his side, the pony twisted his head around, firing another round into the only part he could currently aim at, Sickle’s side. It did as little as you might expect against her thick armor, and Sickle responded by rearing up, gripping the pony in both forelegs, and bashing him against the rear of the wagon.

The fight seemed to go out of the pony, but after a moment to recover, he turned his head and fired several more times into her armored shoulder. Sickle responded by smashing the pony against the motorwagon again and again and again.

I landed on the upturned side, blinking against the dust that stung at my eyes. My heart hammered as I peeked through the side window, rifle floating beside my head. I saw movement, hastily aimed, then stopped. It was the rear leg of a pony, kicking in slow, weak spasms at the far side of the interior. The rest of her body had been sticking out of the window, and was now crushed under several tons of motorwagon.

I pushed out my magic, casting a bright green glow through the dust-choked interior and checking that there were no more ponies. My E.F.S. confirmed it.

At the rear of the wagon, Sickle finally ceased her banging, tossing aside

the limp and excessively dead pony.

Two cracks sounded from somewhere nearby, and I quickly scanned around, but the slowly settling dust still hung thick in the air. A moment later, my earbud crackled with Dusty's voice. "Whisper, check in."

"Here!" I said into the broadcaster, still looking around. "I'm at the other motorwagon. They're dead."

"Is Sickle there?"

"Yes. She's fine."

"Good," he said. "I've got another contact due south of my position, obscured by dust. Get airborne and get eyes on them."

"On it!"

I shot upwards, clear of the cloud of dust. My E.F.S. was showing a single contact, and I turned to face it. Through the haze of dust, I spotted the silhouette of a pony, low to the ground. I slowed to a hover, leveled my rifle, and kicked on S.A.T.S. Two bursts kicked up several sprays of dirt, and while the form barely moved, the contact marker winked out.

"They're down," I reported over the broadcaster.

"Copy. Get a good three-sixty scan, then get back down here."

I looked around, taking in the area. Another body lay a short distance from the motorwagon, close enough that I could see the ragged wound across her side. My E.F.S. showed no signs of life. There were no other ponies nearby. Looking further, I could see that the other motorwagon was continuing on, still trailing smoke, while Echo flew swiftly in our direction.

I dove down again, back-winging in time to land atop our motorwagon. Dusty was in the rear, perched on an uneven pile of jumbled gear. His rifle was up, and his eyes glanced my way as I landed.

"I didn't see anyone else around," I said, then pointed out in the direction of the fleeing vehicle. "The other motorwagon is running away, and smoking pretty badly."

"Good," he said, relaxing slightly. "That... could have gone a lot worse."

"The hell was that?" Starlight said, perching on the edge of the window, and dabbing a hoof at the corner of her mouth, wiping away a tiny bit of blood. "Since when do raiders have motorwagons?"

"Motorwagons are supposed to be more common around Trotsen," Dusty said as he climbed up on the roof for a better view; the dust was

finally settling. "It's where they were made, originally. I don't know if these were raiders, exactly, but I guess it's not too surprising other ponies would get their hooves on some motorwagons. We've seen raiders sporting some impressive hardware, after all."

Meanwhile, I had dropped off the edge of the roof to hover beside Starlight. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," she said, wiping at her mouth again, then smiling. "Face-planted into the steering wheel when we spun out. Just split my lip is all. I've gotten worse just playing around."

"When your 'playing around' is climbing and jumping all over ruined buildings, I'm hardly surprised." Still, I eyed the injury warily, as if I might discern something that her PipBuck hadn't already told her.

A burst of wind made me flinch back, and I looked up to see Echo directly above us, looking down with wide eyes. Her voice was surprisingly loud. "Is everyone okay?"

"We're fine!" Dusty called out, then gestured with his PipBuck-clad hoof. "We need to get you fixed up with a broadcaster so we can communicate with you."

"Yes, of course," she replied, her voice back to a conversational volume as she landed lightly on the rear of the motorwagon. "And the attacking ponies?"

"Dead or driven off," he said, gesturing in the direction of the other motorwagon. The dust had cleared enough for me to see Sickle rooting around inside it.

"Well, that is good," she said with a sharp nod, and followed it up with a frown as she looked down into the cargo bed. "We really must find a better way for you to secure your cargo." Her magic enveloped the contents, rapidly placing them back in their respective places.

Starlight hopped down and trotted over to the other motorwagon, and I followed.

Our own vehicle sported only a shallow dent and some scrapes on the rear corner. The other motorwagon had not fared nearly so well. One of the front wheels was bent almost entirely sideways, and the body itself was visibly twisted from the crash. Everything was coated in dirt.

Sickle was sitting beside the wagon, checking over the pony she had

killed. It looked as if his fashion choice had been much like hers, though his metal armor was both thinner and less complete in its coverage. Several spikes were welded across his back, most of which were now bent from Sickle's assault.

If these ponies weren't raiders, they were certainly taking to the raider aesthetic.

Starlight paused, watching Sickle for a moment before speaking. "Okay, I've got to admit, ending a motorwagon chase by jumping over and kicking the other wagon to death? That was pretty cool."

"Fuck yeah it was!" Sickle said, grinning behind her muzzle. "Think I cracked some ribs. Oh, that looks good." She pulled something away from the body—a pill, I think—and slapped it between the bars of her muzzle to swallow it.

Starlight started looking over the motorwagon, joined moments later by Echo.

"Well, the front axle is toast, obviously," Starlight noted. "Must have landed right on it. Look at how cleanly the struts sheared!"

"The vehicle's chassis was deformed by the collision," Echo said, leaning in close to examine the underside of the vehicle. "It has much lighter armor than your vehicle. I assume that and the lighter cargo load explains its superior speed."

"Probably," Starlight agreed. "Think we could fix it up?"

Echo gave a sharp nod. "Undoubtedly. My only concern is whether the motor or transmission has been damaged."

I moved to the passenger compartment, looking around for anything we should take, while they continued their conversation. I did my best to ignore the now-still legs sticking through the window, and rooted around.

There were a few soft thumps from the undercarriage, followed by Starlight's voice. "I'm not seeing any external damage on them."

Dusty joined us. "Find anything?"

"Not yet," I said.

Starlight called out, rather happily, "I think we can fix it!"

"Fix it?" Dusty asked, as if the thought hadn't occurred to him until that moment. "How long will that take?"

"A few hours," Echo said. "A day at most."

"More delays," Dusty said. "And in territory where we've already been attacked once. I know we've got a lot of firepower, but I don't like tempting fate. We should move on before we attract any more attention."

Sickle called out from somewhere more distant. "Fuck that, I like the attention!"

"Seems like a shame to just leave it," Starlight said, climbing up atop the upturned vehicle to peer in the side window, and smiled when she saw me there.

"We don't really need a second motorwagon," Dusty noted.

"Well, maybe Echo wouldn't have to fly everywhere?"

"I am perfectly content with flying," Echo said. "Still, I suppose it would be more relaxing."

"You can always perch on the roof," Dusty said.

"I suppose." From her tone, I could picture the frown she must have been wearing.

"Well, what about selling it?" Starlight asked. "A working motorwagon is worth a small fortune if you can sell it, and Trotsen seems like the place that would buy them, right?"

"They probably have enough already," Dusty said, though his tone had turned more thoughtful. "Still... would be a shame to pass up something that valuable. Hmm. Tell you what. If you two can get this thing mobile in, say, thirty minutes, we'll take it with us. You can finish repairs once we get to Trotsen, or we can find somepony to buy it. Sound good?"

"You bet!" Starlight said, immediately galloping for our motorwagon and the tools she had there.

Echo flew after her. "I do not think we can repair the axle in time, but perhaps we could arrange a way to tow the vehicle..."

A half-hour later, the damaged motorwagon had been righted, its front end lifted and secured to the rear of our own by a quickly kludged-together hitch. It was an awkward-looking arrangement, but it sufficed to move.

Looting had come up light. There was a pistol and a rifle, both pipe weapons, and a small supply of ammunition for each. There was a five-gallon canister about half-full of water, a few cans of food, and a few drugs that Sickle had quickly snatched up. A small set of tools were scattered around the cab, and while they looked brand new, we already had more than enough

of our own.

Still, we gathered it up. Every piece was something we could trade for caps. The only things we left were the armors they had been wearing, despite Sickle's suggestion that Starlight could use some better armor.

Starlight declined, naturally. "I'm not wearing raider armor."

She did, however, snatch the goggles one of the ponies had been wearing. On seeing it, I immediately started looking for a second set for myself. The closest I found was a gas mask. I declined to take it.

We piled in once more and continued on our way, a little slower as we towed the second vehicle, while Echo flew close overhead.



"Trotsen is pretty much the industrial center of the region," Dusty said as I finished unloading the machine gun. "So I guess that much hasn't changed."

I floated the ammo can back, setting it in the bed of the vehicle before leaning in under the gun itself. "Probably about the only thing that hasn't, then."

"True," Dusty said. "The stripes hit the place with some sort of seismic megaspell. Tore the ground right up. Not sure why they did that instead of balefire. Maybe they figured it'd wreck factories better or something."

I pulled out the thick pin holding the mount in place, then struggled to lift the gun. Dusty had asked me to take down the gun; if raiders were driving around in motorwagons, he wanted us to do everything we could to not look hostile. "How bad is it?"

"Not sure," Dusty said. "I've never been here, before. Way I hear it, the ground split open in some places, and shot hundreds of feet into the sky in others. Ah, there we are."

The vehicle rattled as we rounded another rocky hillside, and I finally got the gun down, placing it in the cargo bed. I climbed back into the rear seat, and through the front windows, past the jagged rock formations that hemmed in the rocky road, I could see massive iron gates spanning between two cliff faces. They were overlooked by battlements, with a wild variety of ancient signs, strips of canvas, and other seemingly random adornments arrayed around the tops. I settled into my seat, gathering my belongings.

My armor was already hidden with my disguised form, but I took the time to remove most of the combat-related equipment from my walking-around gear. The pistol should be more than enough.

I was almost done when Starlight gave a quiet gasp. "Oh shit."

Looking forward, I didn't immediately see what drew that reaction. It wasn't until I noticed she was looking upwards that I leaned my head out of the window to see what she had seen.

What I found sent a chill through me.

Above the massive gate, suspended by her neck, hung the corpse of a changeling.

## Chapter Thirty-Six

# Trotsen

I'll admit to a small measure of irony in our direction and leadership. As of late, our goals had been entirely of my own creation. Sure, at least some of those goals resonated with my companions, especially when they served to help ponies, but I still appreciated just how much they were willing to help me.

Yet even as I provided the motivation, we all deferred to Dusty's leadership. He had the experience with the Wasteland that I lacked, and his understanding of tactics and coolness under fire had likely saved our lives many times. On top of that, he made a decent face for our little group. He might not have the social skill training of an Infiltrator, but he was a decent pony. Blunt and occasionally gruff, but decent, and I think ponies tended to respect him for it.

I was happy with that arrangement. I know it might seem strange for an Infiltrator to stand back and let someone else do the talking for them, but it could be equally nice to enjoy the benefits of being one of the background ponies, there but not really seen. A good Infiltrator needs to know when to follow a pony's lead.

But a good Infiltrator also needed to know how to adapt to a changing situation.

So I had been the first to dismount, approaching the guard with a soft smile, while Dusty remained in the background, tending our cargo.

"We're looking to unload some cargo," I said in answer to the question of our intentions. I followed up by offering a hoof, the light-tan coat quite different from my familiar default. "I'm Summer Breeze."

"Uh-huh," the guard said, following the minimum standards of social etiquette by giving my hoof a single cursory shake before returning his hoof to the ground. He was a rather rugged type, clad in a mix of metal and leather that could have passed for raider garb if it were a bit dirtier. A large-bore pipe rifle hung at his side. "And where did you get *two* motorwagons?"

"Oh, I lucked out on that!" I said with a soft chuckle. "Our ride came from some slaver types, and my crew nicked it when they made their escape.

I bought it from them for a steal, on the condition I hired them. I've got to say, it was one of the best deals I'd ever made!"

It was an absurdly flimsy story. If there really were Serenity changelings in Trotsen, and they recognized my companions, then it would be a natural conclusion that the one unrecognized pony was the changeling known to be in their company. On top of that, there was the general risk that always came with lies. Most notable of those was the risk that one of my companions might flub their part of the story. We had agreed to mitigate that risk by them saying as little as possible.

I was also quite conscious of Echo's poorly concealed disapproval of my methods, as she stood rigid and frowning beside our wagon.

We could only hope that any Infiltrators were more interested in a changeling going by the name of "Whisper", and might not immediately recognize the ponies she was known to travel with. I just wished Sickle wasn't quite so distinctive.

"The other one came from some raiders that attacked us earlier today," I continued. "They wrecked trying to drive us off the road, and hey, free motorwagon! I mean, we don't *need* another motorwagon, but I figure we could make some good caps off it." My smile grew as I leaned in toward the guard. "I figure you guys already got a lot, so I could *probably* get a better price at Mareford, but, you know, we're already here, so if somepony were to offer, I *suppose* I could let it go..."

Of course the guard wasn't the pony I should talk to about that, and he showed the appropriate lack of interest in my offer—even with the pretty mare smiling at him—but I hadn't expected him to be interested. I was selling a role, not a motorwagon.

"Uh-huh," he said, looking over the two vehicle. "We'll have to inspect your cargo."

"Sure thing!" I said, giving a nod, and stepped to the side, gesturing forward with my hoof. "Just be gentle. It's mostly weapons and ammunition we took from raiders. Like, three or four groups, now." I gave an awkward laugh. "It's been an *interesting* month."

"Uh-huh," he said again, approaching the wagon itself.

The pair of guards who had been standing behind him followed. I followed lazily behind, hopping up to sit on the hood of the motorwagon as

they conducted their search.

The courtyard behind the gate was wide open, with the bare dirt criss-crossed with tire tracks. Behind us, the giant gates loomed overhead, shut now, with a few more guards keeping an eye on us. Ruined buildings lined the small canyon ahead of us, with structures built right into the cliff faces. At the tops, pipes and broken walls hung over the edge where the ground had split long ago, and several piles of rubble had been shifted aside to clear a road through the canyon.

I turned back to the guard, who hung on the side of the motorwagon, looking over our cargo. “Speaking of interesting, what’s with that bug over the gate? You guys got some sort of infestation? I’ve seen lots of mutated insects out there, but never one so pony-like.”

“You could say that,” the guard replied, but remained focused on his work.

“That so?” I grinned, tapping a hoof against the hood as I mused, “Maybe it’s good we picked up so many munitions. Bugs that big must take some ammo. This trip might be more profitable than I thought. Hmm...” After a moment of feigned thought, I looked back to the guard. “But why’s it hanging from the gate? That’s kind of, you know... gross?”

The guard grit his teeth. “That *thing* is a changeling, and it’s hanging there as a warning to others like it.” He shot me a harsh glare. “And part of this inspection is making sure *you’re* not changelings.”

I cocked my head to the side, showing a moment of confusion before snickering and pointing a hoof to my face. “Do I *look* like a bug?” I laughed softly, then paused, my smile fading away. “What’s a changeling, anyway?”

“Shapeshifting bugs,” he said in a low grumble, turning back to the cargo and pushing a few boxes around in his search. “They kill ponies and take their place, then they get all buddy-buddy with you so they can drain you dry.”

I stared, mouth hanging half-open for a moment before snapping shut again. “You’re messing with me. Seriously?”

“Yes, seriously,” he said without looking up.

I sat there, blinking a few times. “That’s... really fucking creepy.” I shook my head, then looked over to Starlight and Dusty. “Okay. New rule! No splitting up. Like, at all. And... yeah, I think we’ll need a change of plans.

I know you guys want some time to kick back and relax, but I think we're leaving as soon as our business is done."

Sickle grumbled, just as I expected, and I waved a hoof. "I know, I know," I said, putting on a show of conciliation. "And I'm sorry. Once we get to Mareford, I'll add a couple days to your break to make up for it. Okay?"

She answered with a grunt.

The guard poked at something, then looked to me. "Is this artillery?"

I climbed onto the roof of the motorwagon to see what he had found, then smiled. "Oh, yeah, the mortar! Got a dozen rounds for it, too. Feel free to make an offer!"

Dusty's gaze flicked my way, and I was pretty sure the guard saw it. I immediately moved to respond to the look of concern. "Yeah, I know," I said, giving a dismissive wave of my hoof, though I chuckled as I did it. "It's useful'. I know you like keeping equipment available for emergencies, but I have to make some caps. Besides, what do we need a mortar for? A raider ambush? It'll all be over before you can set it up."

While he still looked concerned, he gave a shrug. "I guess."

I looked back to the guard. "But if you want *real* heavy firepower, you'll want to see what we've got in that case. The one in the back, behind the clunky looking armor. I got three balefire eggs in there. I'll offer you a good deal for them. Twenty five hundred caps each, or I can sell them all for seven thousand. I'll even throw in the case for free!"

The guard snorted. "Do I look like a fucking merchant?"

"No," I said, smiling a little more. "But I like to practice my sales pitch. Besides, I tell you, word gets out, maybe whoever buys the supplies for you guys decides you could use a bit more firepower! Especially with the whole bug-pony infestation." I paused, tapping my chin with a hoof. "...Though I guess if they're in town, that might be overkill. Oh well. I've got plenty of other merchandise. Maybe you could use them for something else? I suppose you'd be the one to know."

"No, we don't want it," he grumbled. "And like hell you're bringing it into town."

I let my ears droop. "But how am I supposed to sell them if I can't bring them in?"

"I don't care," he said. "You're not bringing a bunch of balefire eggs

when anypony could be one of those bugs.”

“Surely there has to be some sort of compromise?”

“No compromises,” the guard said. “Not for some unknown merchant. You can either let us hold them while you do your business, or you can get lost.”

I frowned. “That’s going to make it hard to sell them.”

“I don’t care.”

I continued to frown for a moment before sighing. “Fiiine. Maybe I can work out a deal to transfer it when we’re out of town, but to tell the truth, I kind of doubt I’ll be able to move those things.” I turned. “Sickle? Would you kindly unload the case for this gentlecolt?”

She snorted and hauled out the case, while I turned back to the guard. “So, where can we park? I hope it won’t be too far from any markets.”

“You can park anywhere there’s enough room,” the guard said as he gave one final check, then hopped down. “Just keep the speed down. You run into anything or anypony, you’ll be paying for it, one way or another.”

“We’ll be careful,” I said, smiling again. “So, I’m looking to sell a good deal of munitions, some high-tech equipment, and possibly the second motorwagon, once it’s repaired. Are there any shops or ponies I could go to?”

“Yeah, sure,” the guard grumbled, gesturing a hoof to the small canyon, the one path into the rest of the town. “Over there.”

“Well, I’m sure we’ll find something,” I said as I dropped into the cargo bed. Sickle was already climbing back in, the case of balefire eggs left in the care of the guards. I hoped we would see them again. “Thanks for the help. Let’s go.”

We left the scowling guard behind as Starlight drove us slowly forward. As I settled into the back seat, Dusty turned back to me, speaking quietly. “I don’t like leaving those balefire eggs with them. If any of them are changelings—”

“We don’t have a choice,” I said, shifting around to get comfortable. “Part of being an Infiltrator is accepting that things aren’t always in your control, and sometimes you just have to roll with what you’re given. On the plus side, if there was any infiltration of the guards, it’s small. It’s the scenario that best fits the situation. The balefire eggs should be well-guarded. It’s certainly not impossible for them to be stolen, but they’re probably more

safe in their care than they are in ours.”

“We could have turned around and gone somewhere else.”

“Where?” I asked. “We know they’ve gotten into Trotsen and Mareford. We know at least one of their agents has been going around smaller towns. There is no avoiding this. There are no safe havens, unless we *make* it safe.”

The motorwagon slowly wound through the canyon, passing several houses built along the side of the road, and beneath a few walkways crossing overhead.

“This is sounding worse and worse,” Dusty said as he settled back into his seat.

“Counterespionage is a *bitch*,” I said. “It’s a bit out of my field, but I had enough education on the basic topic to understand the difficulties and uncertainties that abound.”

“You’re not making this sound any better.”

“I know. Right now, all we’re doing is gathering information. Then we’ll see if there’s some action we can implement, or if we’ll just move on like with our cover story.”

Dusty sighed. “I really don’t like this whole damn thing.”

Beside him, Starlight cracked a grin. “I dunno, it’s kind of exciting, like I’m in some spy story or something.”

“Just don’t get too excited,” I said. “Espionage is mostly long stretches of boring mundanity set to the backdrop of ever-looming danger.”

Dusty grumbled, but said nothing.

As we emerged from the short canyon, the ground to one side dropped several hundred feet, giving a spectacular view of the ruined city of Trotsen.

It looked as if the ground had been torn apart and clumsily thrown back together, forming a wide cauldron of erratic terrain. Jagged spires, some still topped by ancient buildings, loomed over wide crevices. Ancient factories lay in ruins, with many upended and broken where the ground moved beneath them. Newer buildings made of scavenged materials dotted the broken landscape, and wide dirt paths wound their way through patches of level ground. Stretches of canvas, like great sails, hung over several of those paths and other public areas, while colorful ponies and the occasional banner broke up the grays and browns and bare steel of the settlement.

The path was surprisingly wide as it followed a shallow slope, and we

descended into the town.

An impressively well-made bridge spanned a narrow, deep chasm, and we rolled slowly across the softly creaking structure to enter the town proper. Ahead of us, the path split up, shooting off in different directions between the haphazard buildings and uneven terrain.

A pair of ponies sat on a patio overlooking the chasm we had just crossed, watching our progress with curiosity. I had Starlight stop us, and climbed up to sit on the edge of the window. After giving a friendly wave, I called out, “I was hoping to do some trading, but we don’t really know our way around. Any chance you could point us in the direction of any shops or markets?”

Still looking a little confused and uncertain about our presence, they both pointed to one of the paths. “Thanks!” I said with a wide grin, then slipped back inside to pass the directions on. A moment later, we were rolling again.

The path was nice and wide, easily able to accommodate our motor-wagon with plenty of room on either side, even as the tall buildings, mostly made of salvaged metal, loomed above us. The scattered ponies wandering the path casually made way for us, though several did watch us pass with curiosity, and perhaps a measure of suspicion.

Quite a few of those ponies wore armor of welded metal, with various embellishments and decorations. Short, blunt spikes seemed the most common, but there were a wide variety of patterns and designs. One lean, elegant-looking mare wore a set of fairly skimpy armor, polished to a fine shine and adorned with long strips of dyed cloth. A less refined-looking pony wore a set patterned to resemble a skeleton, complete with a helmet that was currently hanging from his shoulder.

It seemed it was the local fashion choice. Even the many who did not wear anything that could be described as armor tended to have some small neck-piece or other adornment.

The path opened into a small square, with huge stretches of canvas hanging overhead and a small number of shops, their fronts opened up to let passers-by see their wares. While the town looked to be almost as big as Mareford, the pace of the little market was rather relaxed. Business appeared to be slow but reasonably steady, and the shopkeepers that weren’t currently

tending customers were mostly relaxing.

I spotted a pair of likely shops with a convenient open stretch of dirt nearby, and directed Starlight to park there. The shopkeepers were watching us with varied expressions as I climbed out the window.

"That's a nice set of wheels you have there," said the smiling stallion, whose shop appeared to deal primarily in arms and armor. Even with my experiences in the Wasteland, I was still a little surprised to see such a specialized shop. "Don't think I've seen this one, before. Where'd you get it?"

"Belonged to some slavers that tried to take my crew," I said, and gave the roof a loving pat with my hoof before hopping down. "And now it belongs to us."

"More likely she stole them," said the mare opposite us. Her shop featured many pieces of wartime technology and other old-world artifacts, which I had figured might be useful both for unloading the equipment we had acquired, and to supply any parts Echo might need for her repairs. Given the glare the shopkeeper was giving us, I suddenly questioned whether we could hope for a fair price.

"If some slavers or raiders attack you, it's hardly stealing to keep their stuff," I said, offering a smile in hopes of softening her reaction.

Sickle backed me up with a chuckle. "Yeah. Ain't like they were going to use 'em any more, being all dead as fuck."

"Anyways," I continued, attempting to divert the conversation in a more productive direction. "I've got a lot of equipment I was hoping to trade, if —"

"You a changeling?" the mare asked, eyes narrowed at me.

I blinked at the bluntness of the question. "What, those bug-things the guard was talking about? No, of course not."

"Uh-huh," she said in a clearly suspicious tone. "That's just what a changeling would say."

The other shopkeeper called out. "That's what a pony would say, too." He turned and shot me a smile. "Don't mind Cactus Rose. She's prone to dramatics and as prickly as her name."

The mare wheeled around and shouted. "Oh, bite me, Sagebrush! You know there are changelings all over the place. Any stranger could be one! Well, I'm not going to let those nasty little bugs take advantage of me!"

"Seems to me, if they're going to impersonate somepony, it'd be a pony we all know and trust, instead of some outsider," Sagebrush replied, his smile turning sly and playful. "Maybe even some pony that's always saying *other* ponies are changelings."

Cactus Rose's eyes widened, then narrowed in anger. "Well at least I know *you're* not a changeling. No bug could be such a perfectly intolerable ass as—"

"Woah, woah," I said, stepping in and raising a hoof. "No need for us to all fight amongst ourselves. I just wanted to do some trading, nothing more."

"Well I'll be happy to trade," Sagebrush said with a smile and a nod before looking to the other mare. "Rose?"

She frowned at me for several long seconds before replying. "I don't trust her. She could be a changeling."

"I'm not," I said, nice and casual. "All I want to do is trade some goods and make some caps. Okay?"

She eyed me for another second before giving a snort. "Fine. I'll trade." Then she lifted a hoof, pointing at me. "But I've got my eye on you!"

I held up a hoof in mock surrender before turning back to my 'crew'. "Okay, let's start unloading some of the trade goods. Dusty, I'll let you take care of any munitions. You know that sort of stuff better than I do."

"You got it, boss," he said, with a poorly hidden smirk, and Sickle snickered behind him.

While they did that, I took the opportunity to browse Sagebrush's goods. It was mostly on the simpler side of things, with several pipe guns and simple metal armor, and even some spears and blades.

"Got some armor, if you're looking for protection," he said. "It's a dangerous world, you know. Would be good to have some sort of protection. Get some proper armor, we could get you looking like a proper rider in no time."

"Thanks for the offer," I said, giving a charming smile. "But I'm really not much of a fighter, and the wagon has better armor than I could carry." Then I chuckled, inclining my head. "Besides, if my alicorn friend back there gets that power armor working, she's going to try to stuff me into it."

"Yeah, that's a fine piece of hardware," he said, peering past me to catch a glimpse of the armor in question. "Not very practical for walking around

town, though."

I raised an eyebrow. "I hope it's not so dangerous that I *need* armor here in town," I said, putting just a hint of unease into my tone. "I mean, I saw everypony walking around in armor, but..."

"Oh, no," he said with a chuckle. "That's just the local style. Everypony wants to be a rider, so they all dress up like it. Though I guess there is the whole changeling mess. To be honest, I think a pony's more likely to have trouble with ponies thinking they're a changeling than they are from *real* changelings, even assuming there are even any still in town."

"Wait," I said, ears perking up alertly. "You mean there's this whole mess with the cranky guards and suspicious ponies, and nopony even knows if there's actually any more of these changelings?"

"Oh, we know!" Cactus Rose shouted out from her storefront, while Echo tried to get her attention.

Sagebrush rolled his eyes at her shout before looking to me again. "You saw the one they strung up by the gate, I take it?"

I nodded.

"That's the only changeling we've seen," he said. "Got the guards all shook up, though. It killed the captain of the guard and took his place. I guess the guards just stumbled into discovering what happened. Now everypony's paranoid. They figure, if they replaced a pony that high up, who else might have been replaced?"

I gave a show of considering that, wearing a faint frown. After a moment, I glanced to him again. "You seem rather relaxed about this. You're not worried?"

"More like, what can I do?" He shrugged. "I don't even know if there's anything *to* worry about, or if it was just some lone bug. If any pony could be one of those things, I could worry myself to death trying to figure out who is, without even knowing if there's anything worth worrying about. If anything, I'm more afraid of what other *ponies* are going to do." He gave a subtle gesture in the direction of Cactus Rose. "She ain't the only one worked up about it, even if she's maybe the most unhinged."

"It's really that bad?"

"Well, it ain't *good*," he said. "Ponies are worrying that if Captain Iron Hoof could be replaced, anypony in power could be. Maybe even Sand-

storm.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, holding up a hoof. “I’m afraid I don’t know a whole lot about this town. Who’s Sandstorm?”

“She’s the top rider,” he said. “Means she’s in charge here. Also means some ponies think she’d be a perfect target for those changelings to replace.”

Cactus Rose shouted out again. “Don’t tell her all that! She could be a spy!”

“She’s not a spy, you paranoid twit!” he shot back. “A spy would already know all this!”

“Maybe it’s an act!” Rose replied. “Act all dumb-like, so we *think* she’s not a spy, only she is!”

“Why don’t you tend to your own customer?” Sagebrush said, gesturing to Echo, who was frowning down at the inattentive shopkeeper, an old blender suspended in her magic.

When Cactus Rose turned away, grumbling, Sagebrush returned to me. “Sorry about her. Anyway, see anything here you like?”

“I’m afraid we’re already pretty well-stocked for weapons and ammunition,” I said. “We’ve got some good quality pieces you might like, if you’re interested in stocking some more high-end weaponry, but I’ll let my associate handle that. He’s my gun stallion.”

“I’ll certainly take a look,” he said with an appreciative smile. “The riders are always looking for new toys to play with.”

“I just hope they’re not going to be turning them on each other,” I said, slowly shaking my head. “Sounds like things are a mess.”

“Yeah,” he said, the smile vanishing again. “Hell, this whole thing... I doubt you’ll have any trouble, if you’re just passing through, but...” He glanced past me for a moment before giving me a serious look. “You might want to keep that big mare with you, just in case.”

“That’s sounding like a good idea,” I said, pinning my ears back in a look of concern. “I hope things aren’t getting, um... violent.”

“Ponies are scared and don’t know what’s going on,” he said, giving a weary shrug. “I mean, it’s been great for business, but maybe not so much for my health. Hell, normally I’d say Trotsen’s a great place and tell you to relax, but we’ve already got three dead ponies because of this mess. If I had some wheels of my own, I might do the whole wandering merchant thing

too, at least till this blows over. Speaking of, I don't suppose you'd entertain any offers for one of your wagons?"

I had perked my ears up, widening my eyes a bit. "W-wait, *three* dead ponies? You mentioned the guard captain—Iron Hoof, right?—but who were the others?"

He sighed, ears drooping a bit. "Hell, I'm almost surprised you didn't hear about it already. Whole town's been talking about it, which sure as shit ain't helping the whole paranoia thing."

"It isn't paranoia!" Cactus Rose shouted, while Echo glowered with annoyance behind her. "One of those bugs tried to kill Sandstorm!"

Sagebrush rolled his eyes and ignored her. "Somepony named Anvil ran at Sandstorm with a shotgun. Put a shot into her armor before he got gunned down by the guards. I don't know. His family said he was acting strange before that, so they and a bunch of ponies say he was replaced. Except, some of the ponies he hung out with said he'd been talking about how a changeling could have replaced Sandstorm and nopony would know. Some ponies think he was trying to be a hero.

"And then there's Ivy and Lily. They're sisters. *Were* sisters, I guess. Yesterday, Ivy shot Lily in the head. She said Lily had been acting all weird, like she wasn't her sister, and everypony was talking about these changelings that could impersonate anypony. Said she realized what had happened, so she pulled a gun, started demanding to know where her sister was. Guess she didn't get the answer she wanted. Now she's in jail and nopony knows what to do with her, 'cause they don't know if the mare she killed was a pony or a bug."

I didn't have to fake the look of unease, not with the cold sensation that was gathering in my gut. They might not know, but I did. If either of those ponies had been changelings, there wouldn't have been any doubt.



We found accommodations at an unusual establishment, consisting of several separate, small buildings set on the side of one of the jagged monoliths protruding up into the sky. A few such buildings had been built further up, home to the town's few griffin residents, but the small cluster of buildings forming this particular establishment were owned by a pony. She, in turn,

rented the small huts to visitors. The one we had been given had two bedrooms, with a main room overlooking the town. It gave a decent view, and more importantly, a good degree of privacy.

I sat on the worn cot, staring off into space and idly rolling my last matrix disruption grenade between my hooves. While the others cast off their gear and settled in, I was lost in thought.

We'd visited several other merchants. Some were as paranoid as Cactus Rose, while others were more welcoming. Despite those differences, almost all of them were wary of other ponies, whether strangers or not. I'd caught narrow-eyed glances at other nearby ponies, and the generally cautious, closed reactions they gave. Even the innkeeper, an elderly mare who looked like the perfectly archetypical kindly grandmother, gave us all a long, wary look, as if she might be able to pick out a changeling's disguise through careful scrutiny.

It was wartime Equestria in miniature, but even more volatile. There were no megaspells, but there was also no veneer of a greater society with its laws and traditions. If things continued as they were, Serenity might not even have to set hoof in Trotsen again. Ironically, the truth was working better for them than any deception they could have tried. With the exposure of a single agent, they were tearing a town apart. They had bred anger and paranoia, but the ponies of Trotsen had nowhere to direct those feelings, and so they turned inward on themselves.

They had surely not intended to lose an Infiltrator simply for that, but that didn't change how it worked in their favor.

As paranoid as ponies were, it wasn't hard to subtly steer conversations with other merchants in directions where they shared more information, though it mostly all told the same story. Ponies were scared. Anypony could be a changeling. The ponies in charge, the riders, were trying to keep order and find out if anypony else had been replaced, but every single action they took was seen by some as changeling spies trying to secure their hold over the town. Some even talked of dissent among the riders themselves, as those in power worried that their ranks might have been infiltrated.

It was a mess of rumor, hearsay, and speculation. A black pit of misinformation from which no knowledge could be extracted.

We needed to set a course of action, and we needed to do it before the

whole situation exploded.

Dusty had finished stowing his gear when he approached me. "You're being all quiet again. Have you figured out how we should handle this?"

"Maybe," I said, slowly rolling the grenade between my hooves. "It's a messy situation."

He snorted. "No shit."

"Well, they obviously know changelings are a problem," Starlight said, before frowning. "Which I guess is only *mostly* a good thing."

"Sure," I said. "On the plus side, they know there's a threat, and they're eager to strike back. Motivating them to fight will be easy." I rolled the grenade the other way. "On the other hoof, they're paranoid. Some stranger coming to them, offering them information on their mysterious and deceptive enemies? They'd have to be shockingly naive to not think that we were changelings, ourselves. It's too convenient. How did we get this information? How do we explain how we know where their hive is? How would we have gotten that information?"

Starlight shrugged. "They did capture us. Wouldn't that work?"

"Oh, really?" I said, putting on the persona of some anonymous but suspicious official. "So they captured you, took you down into a heavily fortified Stable, and you just walked right out the front door? They just let you go?"

Starlight frowned. "Well... I mean, it's true. Except they didn't *let* us anything."

"True" is not the same as 'believable'," I said. "They'd want to know how and why. How? I'm a changeling Infiltrator, and I used my evil shapeshifting powers to impersonate others and sneak us out. And then they shoot us. Or we come up with some complex lie to explain how we got out, and hope we all do such a meticulous job of storytelling that they don't see the inevitable flaw and shoot us. Or we do everything perfectly, come up with a perfectly plausible and believable story for how we could have escaped... and they think our story is flawless because we're changeling spies trying to manipulate them, and shoot us anyway."

Starlight's frown deepened.

"Then there's the information I can give on combating changeling Infiltrators. How do I know that? Long experience facing them? Then how are

we still alive, and how has nopony else heard of these changelings? Experience at espionage? Now I'm a professional liar. I'm actually a changeling? I'm one of the enemy. Oh, 'but I'm one of the good ones!' That's just what a spy would say."

Sickle snickered. "Or maybe you should stop whining about it, storm right up to whoever is in charge, and lay down how it is."

"Close," I said.

Sickle stopped, cocking her head slightly to the side as she looked at me. "Yeah?"

"There's only three ways I can see this going," I said. "I don't want to cut and run. Yes, we could get out before the paranoia boils over and we get caught in the crossfire, but if we do that, lots of ponies are going to die, and one of the largest obstacles to Serenity goes down with them hardly lifting a hoof."

"I'm not against a tactical retreat when it's necessary," Dusty said, "but that's a 'last resort' kind of thing."

"Agreed," I said. "At the same time, I also don't want to try some elaborate lie to pass on this information, whether by planting bits of information or coming up with some complicated backstory for how we acquired it. It would be difficult enough to pull off if I were the only one involved. With five of us, I'd say it's impossible. Even if we carefully plotted and rehearsed everything, there's always going to be gaps, and that means improvisation. With how dissimilar our training and experience is, there's no way we're going to improvise along similar lines, and it will be impossible to predict what the others might have said. That means any attention paid to our story would turn up flaws, and any flaws are going to be seen as a sign that we're changeling spies."

"Which is so stupid," Starlight said, cracking a wry smile. "Only *one* of us is a changeling spy."

I gave a chuckle, though the humor faded almost immediately. "But the fact is, every option we have is problematic. Whatever we do is going to have risks. With all that said... I think deception is going to do more harm than good."

"Finally!" Echo blurted with a sudden exhalation, as if she had been holding the word back for some time. She continued in a more conversational

tone. “It has been most uncomfortable remaining silent in the face of your scheming. It is good that you should cast off the habit of deception and return to the values of Harmony.”

I sighed. “I told you, I prefer the truth when possible.”

Starlight was snickering softly. “You know, Echo, you sure are super gung-ho over the whole Elements thing for somepony who barely knew they existed a few days ago.”

Echo turned on her, her mane flaring and eyes narrowing. “I know the Elements quite well! We have seen them. We have touched them. We have *used* them!” She stomped a hoof, looking away from Starlight in disdain. “Except for my sisters, I likely know more about the Elements than anypony alive.”

At least, I think that last bit was what she said. I didn’t quite catch it. I think there was a moment of others speaking, as well, though I definitely didn’t catch that. It wasn’t until Dusty spoke my name that I realized I was gawking at Echo, mouth hanging halfway open.

The purple alicorn who stood before me wasn’t just a mere pony. She wasn’t even “just” an alicorn. I knew, or at least, strongly suspected, their origin. She was a testament to Equestria’s mastery of magic. Perhaps the greatest project of the Ministry of Arcane Sciences, and the final legacy of the Mare who led them.

“Are you Twilight Sparkle?”

Echo’s deep, violet eyes locked with my own. “...No,” she said, before turning away again. “But we remember being her, just as we remember being so many others before we came together in Unity. We remember them, but they are not me.”

“Are you sure? Because—”

“I am quite sure,” she replied sharply, eyes narrowing a touch. “And this inquiry into my past is a useless distraction from the more important matter at hoof.”

I shut my mouth, despite the many questions and concerns racing through my mind, and finally nodded. “Okay.”

Starlight cautiously raised a hoof. “Assuming we’re done with... whatever that was, I have a question.”

I tore myself away from staring at Echo to address Starlight. “Yes?”

"Yeah... isn't being honest one of those 'then they shoot us' things?" Starlight asked. "I mean, we're all worried about them finding out you're a changeling because they'd think you're a spy, right?"

"Like I said, there are going to be risks, so we need to take a few steps to minimize that risk." I looked back to Echo. "To start with, how far could you teleport all of us, in an emergency?"

Her expression softened, losing the glare as she quickly considered the problem presented to her. "Without any time to prepare, and all together? A hundred yards should be quite easy, though I could make no promises for the smoothness of the journey. With a few moments to prepare and properly align the arcane energies, I could easily double that or more."

"Okay. Do you think you could teleport the motorwagon, if it was necessary?"

Her ears flicked back, and she frowned. There was a momentary pause before she replied. "I am a great and powerful child of the Goddess. No task of magic is beyond me. However... I must admit that I have never attempted to teleport anything quite so massive. I could make no concrete promises of distance without having ample time to practice for the task."

"Hmm. That's not ideal." I looked around. "I'd like to have a way of getting our motorwagon out of town in a hurry, if it becomes necessary. We can always leave without it, but I'd rather not."

"Oh, that is trivial," Echo said. "We have sufficient explosives to breach their gate many times over, and I am certain the vehicle can climb over whatever is left."

"Preferably *without* causing massive destruction," I clarified with a disapproving stare.

"Oh," she said, frowning in thought. "Well, I suppose I could teleport into the gate room and force it open from there. It would take several more seconds, and I suppose it is more practical, but it does seem to lack that dramatic flair of making an explosive exit."

"I like to minimize dramatics," I said. "Next up: I know you've only just started studying changeling magic, but you should have enough knowledge to make a guess. Could you produce a spell to undo a changeling's disguise?"

She tilted her head, thinking for a moment. "There are some notable differences between changeling and unicorn magic that would make repli-

cating such a spell difficult, but it is much easier to disrupt a spell than it is to form one. I believe I could create such a spell, yes.”

I nodded. “And how long would that take?”

“Hmm. For a properly formatted counterspell to a rather different method of spellcasting? I suppose it depends. Are we concerned for the well-being of the subject?”

“We absolutely are,” I said.

“I had thought so. In that case, I would estimate a few weeks for a refined and efficient spell, though I could likely produce a crude, brute-force method in only a few days. I must caution that these are rough approximations, however, and do not account for unexpected hindrances or breakthroughs.”

“That will probably take too long for what I had in mind,” I said. “Still, I’d like you to start on that. It would give us more options in the future. As for now...” I held up the grenade I had been holding the whole time. “We need to hit the markets tonight, and find as many matrix disruption grenades as we can. If we’re lucky, there might be a few for sale.”

Dusty raised an eyebrow. “What for?”

“A spell matrix is nothing more than an artificially cast and sustained spell. Matrix disruption grenades are designed to disrupt them. With a little tweaking, they can be altered to affect other magical patterns. Do it just right, and you can disrupt the magic a changeling uses to sustain their transformation. You force them back to their natural form.”

“Oh,” Dusty said, his eyes brightening up. “And you know how to do that?”

“In theory.”

The look of wariness returned as he echoed, “In theory.”

“So long as you know the appropriate output values, it’s a very simple modification,” I said. “I just haven’t actually done so, before.”

“So you’re hoping to uncover changeling spies we don’t even know are there using modifications you’ve never performed to matrix disruption grenades that we don’t have.”

“Oh, no, of course not,” I said, shaking my head. “It would be wonderfully convenient to uncover a changeling spy as a way to influence these ponies’ view of us, but I would never bank on luck. They might be something I can leverage in negotiations, but they’re also a cheap and low-risk

shot in the dark. More importantly, they're a good precaution, just as having Echo prepared to teleport us to safety is."

"Uh-huh," he said, the frown returning. "How likely do you think it is that we'll succeed?"

"Unfortunately, it's impossible to say," I said. "I can say that our odds of escaping if things *do* go poorly are very good, thanks to Echo."

"Let's just hope we don't have to find out," Dusty said with a shake of his head. "Okay. What's the plan?"



We walked right in the front gate.

Sandstorm, along with many of the riders, lived in the partially intact ruins of the F&F Motorworks factory. They had a wall with gun platforms, armed motorwagons, and at least a dozen armed ponies milling about.

We arrived early in the morning, but there was already a good deal of activity going on, with armed ponies loading up a pair of motorwagons. The guards on the walls were spending more time watching than they were the approaches, and they didn't even notice us until we arrived at the open gate. I greeted them with a smile and pleasant introduction. It was easy enough to arrange a meeting with Sandstorm, especially seeing as we had a motorwagon we were looking to sell.

A guard led us into the main factory building, the front half of which was intact, while the rear half had been obliterated when the ground under it had jutted a good hundred yards upwards. The inside of the main building was dimly lit by the overhead windows, and living arrangements had been made among and beneath the ancient, corroded machinery. Several ponies were gathered around a cooking pit, while others lounged around chatting nearby. It was a small community within a community.

We were led up a set of stairs to the main offices, high above the factory floor. The guard opened the door for us, and we stepped in. It was an appropriately fancy place, with old wood paneling on the walls. While the broad windows looking into the factory itself were boarded over, the back of the room had windows overlooking the front grounds on either side of the large balcony. The room was well-furnished, as well, with a grand desk and an assortment of chairs and couches.

Aside from the two guards within, there were two earth ponies, and it was immediately clear which one was Sandstorm. While she wasn't particularly big, perhaps even a bit on the lean side, she had a grizzled, sand-blasted look to her. Her yellow coat was marred by several scratches and shallow scars, and looked dry and weather-worn. Beneath that, however, she looked quite fit and athletic, and particularly so for someone who looked to be in their forties, if not older.

She also looked like she was ready for a fight. She wore metal barding with thick, angular plates and blunt spikes along the back. A pipe rifle hung at her side, with a wide, stubby barrel. Unlike most of the pipe rifles I had seen, this one looked almost like a work of art, with extensive engravings covering its length, and a pair of long, black feathers dangling from the barrel.

Surprisingly, she wore a PipBuck on her foreleg.

But what struck me most was her expression. It was hard and attentive, and her eyes practically bored into us. It wasn't an angry or paranoid expression. It struck me as the look of someone who knew, absolutely, that they were in charge, and who was not about to let anyone forget it.

I worried that her gaze might have lingered ever so slightly longer on me than any of my companions, though I couldn't say for sure.

She stood by one of the windows, and beside the massive desk. A brown stallion, about the same age as her, sat behind it, and while he had his own armor and had a certain degree of roughness to him, he lacked the mare's presence.

Sandstorm spoke, her voice firm and slightly gravelly. "You're quite the unusual group for some merchants," she said, eyes watching closely for reactions. "Why are you here?"

I took a single step forward, enough to be the forward most of our group, without moving close enough to seem a threat. "My name is Whisper, and I'm here because you have a changeling problem. So do we. I think we can solve our own problem by helping you with yours."

The reaction was predictably icy. I'm sure the guards behind us had tensed, and the stallion behind the desk eyed us more critically. As for Sandstorm, she held us in the same glare for a long, tense moment before speaking again. "You've had run-ins with changelings, have you?"

"Yes," I said. "They want us silenced or dead, and I'm probably about to

make us one of their top priorities by coming here.” I looked around the room at the other ponies. “In fact, if any of the ponies in this room have been replaced, I wouldn’t be surprised if they break disguise to attack me when I tell you what I’ve come to do.”

“I see,” Sandstorm said, turning to face me more squarely. “And what, exactly, *did* you come here to do?”

I turned my head slightly to indicate my saddlebags. “If you’ll allow me?”

Her eyes narrowed ever so slightly, but after a moment, she nodded.

I calmly opened the flap of the bag and slipped my muzzle in, pulling back a moment later with a datastore between my teeth. Stepping up to the desk with calm, careful steps, I placed it on the edge, then stepped back again. “The changelings you’ve been dealing with have a hive in Stable 112, an undocumented Stable located at a development site called Serenity. I’ve recorded the location on that datastore. They’re led by a changeling calling herself Queen Chrysalis the Sixth, and I’ve included what little knowledge we have on her, as well as the historical connotations of that name. I’ve also included a layout of their Stable, what little information we have on their available assets, which include several motorwagons and an under-repair Raptor-class cloudship, details on how to modify matrix disruption grenades to strip away changeling disguises, and some basic information on changeling infiltration tactics.”

She hadn’t even glanced at the datastore. “That’s a lot of *very specific* information.”

“It is,” I said, before answering the unspoken question. “We had gone to investigate the ruins there, not knowing of the Stable beneath. They captured us. They intended to keep us captive as food sources. As for the inevitable question as to how we escaped, the full answer is long and complex, but the part I imagine you would find most relevant is that I am also a changeling.”

There was a single silent moment as several ponies processed that, yes, I had just admitted to that. A second later, the brown stallion rose, quickly reaching for his pistol. He never got there. Purple light flashed around the room, leaving a collection of weapons held above us in Echo’s grasp.

“There is no cause for alarm,” Echo said evenly. “If we had intended you harm, we would have already done so.”

The guards, stripped of their weapons, shuffled angrily, clearly wanting to take action, but recognizing just how futile the attempt would be, especially as Sickle turned to square off with the nearest one, grinning as if daring him to try something. Dusty and Starlight both had their weapons out now, though they kept them lowered, not quite pointed at anypony.

The brown stallion cursed. Only Sandstorm had retained her weapon. Her head had turned slightly towards it, but she hadn't actually reached for it, which was apparently enough for Echo to let her retain it.

Sandstorm eyed the floating weapons, then fixed her eyes on me. "So you're one of those bugs?"

"I am a changeling," I said. "I come from a different hive, one that's directly opposed to Serenity's methods. I would even say we were at war with them if my hive were in any state to be considered a credible opposition. The Wasteland is not an easy place for a species that lives on love and isn't willing to commit the crimes that Chrysalis condones."

"Uh-huh," Sandstorm said, continuing to eye me as if her glare might bore right through my disguise. Finally, she said, "Show me."

I frowned, then gave a short sigh as I unwound my disguise. Green fire flashed. The stallion behind the desk flinched. Sandstorm did not.

Once I had returned to my natural form, I met Sandstorm with a flat glare of my own. "Why is the first response when I tell ponies I'm a changeling always to ask me to show them? What would I gain from lying about *that*?"

Okay, I know, it's probably more a matter of curiosity combined with a desire to see a rather unusual claim backed up, but still...

As Sandstorm continued to stare, one of the guards shuffled a bit to the side. "Uh, Sandy?"

"Relax," she said, slowly easing her stance. "We're just having a conversation, aren't we? So, you're a *friendly* bug, huh?" One could hardly miss the clear and contemptuous emphasis on 'friendly'.

"Friendly enough," I replied. "I like ponies. I've worked alongside them most of my life, and I don't like what these other changelings are doing. If you want a more cynical and self-serving reason, we need happy and loving ponies to survive, and given the balance of power, it's far more in our interests to work *with* ponies rather than *against* you."

“Uh-huh.” She took a slow step forward, and while her posture was more relaxed, her eyes were as hard as ever. “That’s awfully convenient, isn’t it?”

“Not from my side of things,” I said. “Convenient would have been arriving *before* some hostile changeling had stirred up paranoia. I could have come here without some pre-existing fears influencing how ponies reacted to me. Instead, I’m putting my life at risk merely talking to you, even *without* revealing what I am. That’s the kind of danger we’re all facing, now.”

There was a pause, as if she was considering what I said. “And what, exactly, do you want from us?”

“Minimally, nothing,” I said, and inclined my head toward the desk and the datastore sitting upon it. “I’ve delivered information about the Serenity hive. Even if we aren’t able to do anything else here, that information weakens them. It will help ponies defend themselves, and the further that information spreads, the better it will be for everyone. But that’s just the minimum. Ideally, I’d like to work with you to combat this threat.”

“Against your own kind?” Sandstorm asked, her voice level but her intentions clearly suspicious.

“Changelings are no more united than ponies are,” I replied. “These changelings are as much my kind as raiders are yours.”

That finally drew a response, a contemptuous snort. I pressed the point. “Serenity wants to take over the Wasteland. They want to enslave enough ponies to keep themselves well fed, and they’ll kill any who get in the way of that, pony or changeling. They already have. I’ve had one of the kindest changelings I’ve ever known bleed out in my hooves because of them, and I’ve walked through the ashes of a pony settlement they leveled just to gain access to some raw materials. My hive won’t survive them, and I expect the losses among ponies will be devastating.”

“Uh-huh.” Sandstorm rolled her jaw, eyes looking to the datastore before returning to me. “And let me guess: you have a plan.”

I nodded. “I’d like to help you as an advisor. I know how changeling Infiltrators work, and I’ll offer any knowledge and expertise I can in order to help combat this threat.”

“And if I told you to fuck off?”

I hesitated. “Then I’d ask that you let me fully explain things, and if you still feel that our assistance is unnecessary, we would leave.”

"Then start talking," she said. "I want to get this over with."

Not the best note to begin with.

"To start with," I said, "I don't think you realize the full extent of this threat. Ponies are paranoid that any of them could be replaced by a changeling, but the fact is, that paranoia isn't going to help them. You know that changelings are posing a direct threat, but you just had a changeling walk right into your office and disarm every pony in the room. If I had been with Serenity, I could have killed and replaced every pony here, and not a single pony outside this room would know it. You might have a strong fighting force, and might be one of the dominant factions in this part of the world, but for defending against Serenity, all of that strength means exactly *nothing*."

She snorted derisively. "Sure it doesn't. That's why they're sneaking around instead of trying anything."

"They don't need to try anything," I said, and gestured at the window. "The ponies out there are doing their work for them. At least two ponies are already dead, and everypony is growing paranoid and suspicious. The whole thing is a giant bomb, and all that's needed is a single careless spark to set the whole thing off. If I can see that, you can bet they're going to see that."

"We don't know those were ponies."

"Changeling shapeshifting is an actively sustained spell," I said, my voice softening. "It requires a constant supply of energy to maintain. Not much; a changeling can maintain an easy disguise like a pony for weeks, but it still needs that energy. Without it, the disguise fails, and they turn back to this." I turned a hoof toward myself before setting it down again. "A dead changeling means no more energy. I'm sure you can see where I'm going with this."

She had stopped, eyes drifting away as she considered that. Her ears drooped ever so slightly. The slip in her expression lasted for only a moment before her eyes returned to me, though her glare wasn't quite as hard as it was before. "Assuming you're telling the truth."

I sighed. "Yes. Assuming I'm telling the truth."

She stared, silently judging me for several long seconds before speaking again. "Okay then, bug. You act like you know what they're up to. If you were in charge of these changelings, how would *you* run things?"

I took a step forward before sitting, hoping it would engender a more conversational tone. “That depends entirely on their small-scale goals,” I said. “Overall, they intend to exercise control over the region and eliminate any resistance Trotsen and other major settlements might offer, but there are a few ways of doing that.

“The first is by taking over. They replace a few key members with their Infiltrators, influencing the leadership of a settlement to serve their purposes. That could be either isolating settlements so that the rest of the hive can strike against disorganized opposition, or exerting enough control over the leadership of a settlement to assume indirect control over the populace. Given that the only known Infiltrator had replaced the captain of your guard, a position of some military importance and presumably authority, it seems likely this was their original plan.”

I gestured to her. “Which would also mean that you, or a pony near you, would be a prime target for replacement. Other high-ranking ponies would almost certainly be targeted as well.”

“Of course we would,” Sandstorm said. She remained standing. “You’re not telling me anything I don’t already know.”

“The second option would be to promote chaos. Ponies are already getting paranoid and lashing out at each other. A combination of high-profile replacements to weaken faith in a strong leadership combined with seemingly indiscriminate replacements among the populace to spread distrust would quickly lead to a loss of social order. Infiltrations are short-term, with agents assuming an identity only long enough to stir up further paranoia before moving on and leaving the ponies to deal with the consequences. The final goal would be either complete societal breakdown, leading to the dissolution of the settlement, or delaying and weakening the settlement long enough to secure other goals, followed by cleaning up with either their own forces or with other factions they’ve taken control of.

“Given the state of the population and the uncovering of one of their Infiltrators, I expect they may be transitioning to this method, although the lack of activity indicates they haven’t fully done so yet. My intervention, and particularly the knowledge of how to disrupt changeling disguises, may accelerate their transition to this plan.”

“...You’ve put a lot of thought into this,” Sandstorm said, eying me

critically.

"I am well-trained," I said. "The only way to conduct a successful counterespionage operation is to understand the methods and goals of a hostile agent."

I was a little surprised when the suspicious look faded again. "Uh-huh."

I continued. "The final option comes if the previous options fail to get the desired results: direct action. First, actions would be taken to isolate the settlement in question, whether through cutting off lines of communication or by advancing activities in other settlements to the point that they no longer presented a threat. I'm not entirely clear on the geopolitical situation here, but it seems that the only real contact you have with other settlements would be by your motorwagon convoy, so that would be a priority target and a likely starting point."

Sandstorm's ears twitched and stood alert, her gaze drifting away to stare into space.

I tilted my head slightly. "Is there something to be concerned about?"

"No," she immediately replied, her attention returning to me, and she finally sat. "Keep talking."

"After the threat of outside forces has been removed, focus turns to local defenses. Infiltrators target command, control, and communications inside the settlement to sow chaos and disrupt the ability to coordinate actions. Special operations teams target isolated units, likely disguised as friendly forces to achieve total surprise and taking measures to prevent communication with other defenders. Attacks are carried out quickly and aggressively to cause the most damage before any alarm can be sounded. The moment that momentum starts to fade or there is danger the alarm may sound, the main attack commences. In this case, several hundred soldiers attack, with power armor and heavy weapons. They might come in over a poorly defended section of canyon wall, or the earlier assault might have secured one of the entrances into town, allowing them to bring in more heavy equipment. Either way, they have a powerful military force and multiple ways of bypassing defenses."

Sandstorm was frowning. Though she looked deep in thought, she quietly mused, "You seem to have some awfully thorough plans for taking out a town."

"Planning like this dates back to the war," I said. "They were developed at a time when there were many hives, with thousands of changelings in each, all waging a silent war of espionage in pony territory. I can't say for sure how much of that knowledge this other hive has retained, but I would much rather plan for the worst than not plan enough."

She gave a dry snort, perhaps amused, perhaps not. After a moment, she asked, "You mentioned communications several times. Why?"

"Information is an Infiltrator's most important asset," I replied, then inclined my head towards Dusty. "From what I've seen out in the Wasteland, it's one of the most important things for a soldier, too."

"Absolutely," Dusty said with a nod.

"Serenity needs to disrupt communications and control the flow of information so that they can keep their secrecy. It's harder to defend against an enemy you don't know is there, and it's impossible to strike back if you can't find them. On top of that, if they can keep settlements isolated from each other, they can hit each with overwhelming force and minimum risk. They'll pick ponies apart one settlement at a time."

"Uh-huh," Sandstorm said. "And you think they'd do that by attacking our convoy?"

"It's the most likely target. A small force with no reinforcements or communication, and one vital to your settlement." I eyed her curiously. "Why?"

"Doesn't matter," she said, expression hardening again. "You know, I'm hearing a lot of talk about how fucked we are, but nothing about how we fuck them instead."

Sickle snickered.

"The Serenity hive relies on being able to act without threat of retaliation," I said. "They can take their time, strike when opportunity presents itself, and always fight on their own terms. They can isolate us and fight us one-by-one until there isn't anything left." I raised a hoof, gesturing to the desk and the datastore sitting atop it. "But we know where they live. We can't win on the defensive, so we go on the offensive. We get as many people together as we can—ponies, griffins, zebras, changelings, *everyone*—and hit back while we still have a chance."

"Hmm." Sandstorm stood and walked over to the desk. She hopped up

to sit on the edge before picking up the datastore. “Just like that, huh?”

“Hardly,” I replied, remaining seated where I was. “Before we can even start to deal with Serenity, we need a certain degree of security. I have three matrix disruption grenades that I have modified to disrupt changeling magic, which we can use to reveal any hostile Infiltrators. If we can clear a number of higher-up ponies and established a strict buddy system to minimize the risk of later abduction and replacement, we can make it much harder for Serenity to act against us. We won’t be able to screen the whole populace until Echo finishes her spellcrafting, but it gives us more ponies we can trust, and if we’re very lucky, might even net us one of their agents.”

“Or it’s a bomb and you blow up some of my most trusted riders,” Sandstorm mused.

I shrugged. “Feel free to examine them. You could even test one on me, if you feel the need, though we don’t have many of them.”

She didn’t answer, instead giving a vague grunt, and slotted the datastore into her PipBuck.

While she started looking over the data, I continued. “The main problem is, we can’t just attack head-on. We need allies, preferably a lot of them. Serenity is too strong for you to fight alone.”

“We’re tougher than you think,” Sandstorm said, her eyes remaining on the screen.

“You’ve certainly got your strengths,” I admitted. “The problem is, Serenity has every one of those and more. They’ve got motorwagons, too, but they don’t even need them.”

I spread my wings, flicking them through a couple beats before holding them out for show. “Every one of their soldiers can fly. You can’t catch them or outmaneuver them. Then there’s the power armor, and the magical energy weapons, and now they’ve even got a Raptor.”

I folded my wings again. “And if that isn’t enough, they’ve got numbers on their side. The hive population was at least a thousand, and maybe double that. A heavily militarized hive can support more than fifty percent of its population as active military, and most of the rest can be mobilized when necessary.”

“More wartime knowledge?” Sandstorm asked with a hint of disdain.

“Changeling history,” I said. “Specifically, the original Queen Chrysalis

and her hive. I doubt Serenity's queen is going to be any less militant than her namesake."

She muttered, but finally finished her reading, lowering her PipBuck to look back to me. "So you think we need allies, huh?"

"Yes," I said, nodding. "We're stronger together than we are apart."

She snorted. "That's pretty rich coming from an underhooved little sneak that preys on ponies."

I held her gaze. "From a lifelong spy who recognizes the old ways won't work, and that it's time for things to change."

She held the glare for a moment before cracking a thin smile. She hopped down from the desk, and I stood to meet her. "Okay, then," she said, and extended a hoof. "I think we might be able to work together."

I smiled and gave her hoof a shake.

Or at least, I tried to. The moment our hooves met, she hooked her leg around mine and pulled in close, shoving her face close to mine. There were a few shouts from my companions, but I was focused more on what she said. "I don't trust you for a fucking second," she said in a low growl. "The only reason I'm even listening to you is because this fancy legwarmer says you're not hostile, but I know damn well there's a big difference between 'not hostile' and 'friendly'. If you try to fuck us over, I will kill you, painfully, and your fancy Luna-knockoff won't save you. Got it?"

"I've got it," I said, calmly. "And I'm not asking you to trust me. All I'm asking is that you listen and consider what I have to say."

Her lips peeled back in a sneer. "Then we'll get along just fine." She ended by pushing me back, sending me staggering. "And give my ponies their weapons, already."

I recovered my balance, flicked my wings smoothly against my back, and turned to give Echo a nod. Her magic flashed around the room, returning weapons to their holsters.

The guards both jerked in surprise, then looked to Sandstorm. "Uh..."

"Relax," she said, her tone sharp, and she turned to the stallion who still stood, awkwardly, behind the desk. "Axe. Gather the head riders. Don't tell them why, and not a word about what's happened here."

He looked surprised, his eyes darting to me before looking back to Sandstorm. "Uh, are you sure—"

Sandstorm stepped in, voice clear and loud as she cut him off. "Did I fucking stutter?"

"No," Axle quickly replied, while Sickle snickered some more.

I took the moment to resume my Summer Breeze disguise. The instant the magical fire had passed, Sandstorm was glaring at me. "What the *fuck* do you think you're doing?"

I cocked my head to the side and raised an eyebrow, finally lifting a hoof to gesture to freshly ponified myself. "I would think it's pretty obvious."

"Oh, that's fucking hilarious," she dryly replied. "Drop the pony act. I'm not going to have any bugs parading around pretending to be ponies, whether they say they're helping or not."

"I doubt having a changeling standing beside you is going to help your credibility at this time," I said, and given by the way her snarl vanished, she recognized the merit of the argument. "Besides that, we have a very narrow window of opportunity. I don't expect my nature will remain secret for long, but until then, the only individuals who know it are in this room. Serenity's agents will know that I'm a changeling, but at this moment, they don't know that I'm working *openly* with you. That means they won't know how much danger they're in. We should take advantage of that to do as much damage as we can to any high-level infiltration efforts."

"Hmm... yeah, okay." She pointed a hoof at me. "But you're staying where I can see you, then. No sneaking off to pull any shit when I'm not looking."

An annoying restriction, but one I could hardly object to. "As you wish," I said. "One more thing: it's possible that one of your ponies in this room has been replaced and is remaining silent. Individuals close to the leadership would be prime targets for replacement, and if anyone here has been replaced, they could get the warning out and make the whole gambit pointless. We should make sure you're all ponies before anyone leaves."

Sandstorm mused on that for a moment, until a hint of a smile appeared. "You heard the bug," she said as she turned to Axle, then pointed. "Middle of the room. And you two dunces. Great job keeping guard, by the way."

Axle looked at her as if she'd asked him to gnaw his own hoof off. "Wait, what? You're seriously taking orders from a *changeling*?"

He'd barely gotten the final word out when she struck him in the side

of the head, sending him sprawling.

"I ain't taking orders from *anyone*," she snapped. "But I want to see this thing work."

"But Sandy," one of the guards said, stepping up while giving me a wary look. "What if it's a bomb?"

She turned to me. "Give me one."

I obliged, and she snatched it from me. Gripping the end in her teeth, she twisted and removed the outer sleeve, exposing the internals. She seemed to know what she was doing as she examined it.

"It's not a bomb," she said. "It'd take more than tweaking two of the crystal leads to rework the spell matrix into something deadly." I was impressed; either she knew a good deal about arcane technology, or she was great at bluffing. "Now quit being such babies and group up."

She reassembled the device as the three other ponies reluctantly gathered. The sleeve slid back into place and locked, protecting the delicate wiring. Then she turned to me. "Well? What are you waiting for? Get your little bug-butt in there."

I opened my mouth to object, but caught myself; it was a reasonable request, and one that might make them feel more at-ease. I'd even offered to let them test it on me, so I could hardly back out now. "Okay," I said, shucking off my saddlebags and removing my PipBuck. With my gear left safely in the care of my companions, I approached the trio of nervous ponies, stripping away my disguise and finally showing my armor.

"Hey!" Sandstorm snapped. "Change back. You said this thing undoes your disguise, and I want to see it work. And where the hell did that armor come from?"

"No," I said, my tone a bit more grumpy than I had intended. "I've been hit with one of those during training, and it's an experience I don't intend to repeat. Besides, if I were lying to you, I'd just drop my disguise when it goes off and pretend it worked. There's no point to it. As for the armor, it was always there, just shapeshifted away."

"Wait," one of the guards said, tensing. "How bad is this going to be? You didn't say anything—"

"You'll probably barely notice," I said, then inclined my head to the other guard, the only unicorn in the group. "He's the only one who'll really feel it,

like someone tapped on his horn. The discharge resonates with changeling magic, and it's too different from unicorn magic. But me? Imagine the most painful sound you've ever heard, then imagine it getting jammed right into your brain. The more magic I've got flowing around, the worse the resonance. Hell, one of my fellow trainees passed out."

Sandstorm gave an exaggerated sigh. "Luna's teats, you love to talk."

"She really does," Sickle said, grinning and clearly enjoying the situation far more than it warranted.

"Whatever," Sandstorm said, gesturing her hoof at me. "Just get in there."

I obliged, ignoring the anxious and angry looks of the ponies I stood beside. When I turned back, I addressed Sandstorm. "You should be in here, too."

"Not happening," she said, already stepping back. I considered insisting —we could easily force the matter—but decided against it. I'd just have to keep an eye on her until we could be sure.

She led everypony else away from me and the other unlucky ponies, giving us plenty of room and keeping their fancy arcane technology safely away. Finally, Sandstorm pulled the pin and tossed the matrix disruption grenade our way.

I didn't see the impact. The moment it left her hoof, I closed my eyes, bracing for what was about to come.

The discharge hit me, sending an electric twinge through my horn and a deep shudder through my body. It was as if the small sound of its discharge had resonated through my nerves. I huffed out a sharp breath as it passed, blinking as I reoriented myself. The world felt lopsided, and my horn had gone slightly numb.

"See, that wasn't so bad," Sandstorm said as she walked up, giving me a critical look before looking to Axle. "Now go get the head riders."

"Yeah, I'm on it," he said before walking off, grumbling quietly under his breath.

Sandstorm had turned to the guards. "As for you two, keep your mouths shut about this. Not a word."

The same guard spoke again. "But Sandy—"

"Not a fucking word!" she said, stepping in. "I hear anypony talking about our changeling 'friend' here, and you two will be riding into battle

strapped to the hood of my wagon, *got it?*”

The guard winced. “Yeah.”

“We’ve got it,” the other replied.

“Good.” Sandstorm half turned, then stopped, glaring at me. “And what the fuck are you still doing all bug-like.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Starlight grumbled. “First you bitch about her shapeshifting, now you’re bitching about her *not* shapeshifting.”

Sandstorm shot her a sharp look. “Nopony asked you,” she said before looking back to me. “But if we’re going to keep this between us, we can’t have you going around like that.”

“Give me a minute,” I said, heaving a deep, steady breath. “It’s still a bit of a shock, and I—”

“Just make it quick,” Sandstorm said. “I want to fetch some gear before everypony shows up.”

I took a few more breaths before carefully feeling with my magic. It’s not that it was hard to cast something, but more that the burst of magical energy had overwhelmed my senses. It’s like being blinded by a spotlight; your vision is going to be spotty for a bit and all the colors are off. In this case, it meant diminished magical precision. I had to focus long and hard before taking my Summer Breeze disguise, and hoped that I had gotten the transformation accurate enough. Nopony said anything, so I assumed it was good enough for casual work.

The hint of a headache made me grumpily wonder if I was doing any lasting damage to myself with the past day or so of activities, even though I logically knew the chances of that were minuscule.

Once I had gathered my equipment, Sandstorm led us out, her expression hard. A few of the ponies we passed along the way took notice of this, but none commented. That, or they were wondering about the strange procession of ponies trailing behind her.

We made our way out from the main factory building, past a collection of motorwagons, and to a large side building. Along the way Echo stepped up beside me.

“I do not like this plan,” she said. “You finally agree to cast off deception, and the very first plan you enter into is one that depends on secrecy and lies.”

Sandstorm’s ears twitched our way.

"We're potentially dealing with hostile changelings," I quietly replied. "Unfortunately, that means a certain degree of deception is necessary at this stage."

"I do not question its effectiveness," she said, "but recent lessons and events have made it clear to me that 'effective' is not the same thing as 'right.'"

I sighed softly. "It's like I said: Honesty is not just about telling the truth."

"Hmmph." She did not elaborate, and instead slipped back to the rear of our procession.

When we reached the side building, Sandstorm led us in.

"Raindrops!" she called out as we entered what looked to be a living room, with well-worn wartime furniture. "Get your shit! We're going out!"

There was a clatter in the next room, followed by a stallion's voice. "What's up now?"

"Maybe something, maybe not," Sandstorm answered vaguely as she made her way to one of the doors leading further into the building. I followed her into a workshop, where a blue stallion stood by a workbench, setting the breastplate of an armor suit atop it. He was about Sandstorm's age, with a similarly weathered but fit appearance, though he lacked any armor; presumably, the piece he had just set on the workbench was his. He looked at me with curiosity as I entered, then at Sickle and Dusty as they followed behind me.

His eyes widened slightly, ears flicking back. His attention snapped back to me, and the little pip on my E.F.S. turned red.

I stepped back, expression hardening as I dropped into a combat stance. "Echo, bubble him."

Contingency planning paid off. Echo immediately did what I asked, conjuring a shield around the stallion even before giving me a questioning look.

"What the *fuck!*!" Sandstorm shouted, snapping around to face us. Her head turned, once again starting to reach for her gun but holding short, well aware of how futile the gesture would be. Instead, she turned to face me. "Let him go!"

"He knows what I am," I said, keeping my eyes on him.

"She's a changeling!" he shouted, giving the shield a desperate kick. It

didn't even flicker.

Sandstorm cast a quick glance his way, and I took the opportunity to throw out a quick explanation.

"He didn't recognize me when I came in the room. I've never used this form before. It wasn't until he saw my companions that he realized who I was and turned hostile." I held up my PipBuck-clad foreleg to clarify that last part. I didn't mention that she was now showing as hostile, too. "The only ones who would possibly know that would be Serenity." I didn't mention the Enclave Loyalists, either. No need to confuse the situation any more than it already was.

"They've got a bounty on them!" Raindrops said, pointing a hoof. "In Mareford. They killed a bunch of ponies there!"

I inwardly cursed. It was true, and would certainly explain his reaction. Still, I didn't quite buy it.

Curiously, from the glance Sandstorm gave and the hint of unease creeping in past her anger, it seemed she didn't quite buy it, either. Still, her expression hardened a moment later as she refocused on me. "Is that true?"

"Partially true," I replied, as diplomatically as possible. "We killed several ponies there, but that was because they ambushed us to cover up their collaboration with local raiders. It wasn't the murder that Big Gun tried to sell it as." My eyes narrowed as I focused on him. "Regardless, I have to wonder why he seems to be the only one in town to know, and more importantly, that wouldn't have told him I was a changeling."

"It's the PipBuck!" he shouted. "It's the same kind you got from the changeling impersonating Iron Hoof!"

I glanced at Sandstorm's PipBuck. Was that where she had gotten it? Her own expression was torn, predominantly angry, but I could see the unease growing.

"My companions have the same PipBucks," I pointed out, keeping my voice calm and reasonable. "So why am I the only changeling?"

"They could be changelings too," he quickly replied, "but I don't recognize her."

Sandstorm still hadn't spoken. I turned to her again.

"You know this looks suspicious. That's how Infiltrators operate. Replacing someone near the leadership lets them influence that leadership

without suffering the same scrutiny that the actual leaders do. We should make sure he isn't a changeling."

Sandstorm's expression hardened again. "Is this what you're here for? Fucking with our heads, making us suspicious of each other? Is that your fucking plan?"

I replied sharply. "We can find out for sure if he's a changeling or not, so what would be the point? One quick test, and this whole thing gets cleared up."

"Test?" Raindrops asked, voice wavering slightly.

Sandstorm visibly winced at the hint of fear in his voice. "Fuck you, bug," she growled. "You're not using that fucking thing on him, period."

"Then at least question him!" I said, quickly running out of options; I didn't want to have to force the situation, though we seemed to be quickly approaching that point. "Was there anything suspicious he said lately? Any time he acted just slightly strange? Some detail he couldn't remember? Any time he prompted you to fill in details that he should already know?"

The anger cracked again, and I hammered the point. "If you don't want use one of the devices on him, then ask him a question. Something only he would know. Something obscure enough that nobody would think to ask him in an interrogation."

"Don't listen to the changeling!" Raindrops shouted. "She's trying to trick you! Sandy!"

Her eyes wandered, thinking for a moment before fixing on me. "Okay, bug," she growled before turning her head slightly towards Raindrops, eyes remaining on me. "What was your first ride?"

"Sandy, don't do this," he said, placing his forehooves against the shield. "She's a fucking changeling, she's trying to—"

"Just answer the question," Sandstorm said, voice low, glaring at me. "We'll get this all sorted out."

Raindrops hesitated. "I... I don't know, it was so long ago, and I've been with you for so long..."

I watched as Sandstorm's expression crumbled. The impostor had taken a hopeless shot in the dark, and missed.

"Sandy..."

She turned, her expression slack, ears sagging, eyes fixing on him in

slowly dawning horror. A tremble, subtle at first, steadily grew and spread through her body.

He was slowly shaking his head, eyes starting to tear up. "Sandy, they're trying to trick you. It's what they do. You know it's me!"

Sandstorm turned her head, drawing her rifle before facing him again. She was trembling, every muscle taut with rage.

Tears started to trickle down his cheeks. "Sandy, please. Don't listen to her."

Sandstorm's voice was quiet and cold, betraying only a hint of a waver. "Drop the shield."

I nearly winced at her tone. "If he's been replaced, we should question —"

Her head snapped around, and I flinched back as everything turned purple; Echo had raised another shield, separating us from Sandstorm, but it had been an unnecessary precaution. The gun was still pointed down, even as she snarled at us. "Drop. The fucking. *Shield!*"

So many concerns danced through my head. The state of our fragile alliance, the future of the region, and the fate of this captured spy. With Echo's help, we held all the power in the room, but despite that, I felt almost helpless.

Being an Infiltrator often means having to face situations you can't control, where the only choices available are not good and bad, but bad and worse.

So I turned to Echo and gave a small nod, hoping for the best and dreading what I might have just done.

Echo stared back silently, but eventually the shield dropped. Raindrops was exposed, but hardly any less trapped. There in the corner of the workshop, he had a wall of ponies between him and any exit.

"Sandy, don't—"

She wheeled around, slamming a hoof into the side of his head, and he toppled to the ground. She was immediately on top of him, driving a hoof into his gut, then pinning him down by his neck. The muzzle of her gun hovered inches from his face. "Shut up! Shut the fuck up! You don't get to sound like him! You don't get to wear his face!"

Raindrops was gasping past the pain and the hoof constricting his

breathing. When she finished shouting, he calmed. His eyes darted around the room, looking for an escape but not finding it. Then he smiled, though it was awkward and forced, showing too much teeth. “Why not? He’s not using it any more.”

I quickly stepped forward, but Echo’s second shield was still up between us. “Sand—”

The rifle blared loud in the small space, hammering away until the magazine ran dry. When it was done, the mauled corpse of a changeling lay in Raindrop’s place, a puddle of blood steadily spreading beneath her. Sandstorm stood above the broken form, panting and seething with rage as tears ran down her cheeks.

I swallowed, and tried to offer some comfort. “He might still be alive. They take—”

“Shut the fuck up!” she snarled, her trembling growing as she glared at me. “If you say one more goddesses-damned word, I will beat you to death with my bare hooves!”

It was an empty threat, but I shut my mouth, and after a moment, gave a small nod in reply.

The front door of the building banged open, and hooves raced our way. Seconds later, several armed ponies burst into the workshop. The lead pony, clad in heavy armor and carrying a shotgun, first pointed his weapon at us, still safely behind Echo’s shield, before noticing the dead changeling with Sandstorm still standing over it. “What the fuck happened—”

“You!” Sandstorm said, spinning towards him, and he visibly flinched at the trembling fury in her voice. “Sound the horn. Gather *everypony*.” When he didn’t immediately reply, she stepped towards him, roaring, “Now!”

He turned and quickly ran past the other gathering ponies, many of whom were gawking at the dead changeling. Sandstorm ignored them, taking a moment to wipe a hoof across her cheek before going over to a locker at the foot of the workbench. She pulled out heavy saddlebags and a large bundle, slinging them across her back before grabbing a trio of spears. Finally, she turned back to the gathered ponies.

“You!” she growled, singling out one hapless pony. “Grab that... *thing* and follow me.”

She took a single step before stopping, turning her head to glare at me.

I wanted to say something, *anything* to console her and maybe smooth things over, but I knew it was pointless. Instead, I lowered my gaze, looking to the floor.

She gave a quiet snort. “You too,” she growled. “Come on.”

One of the other ponies looked between us. “Are they—”

“They’re with me,” Sandstorm snapped. “Get the fuck out of the way.”

Echo finally lowered the shield, and we awkwardly followed behind Sandstorm. Every step she took was an expression of anger, as if she were beating the earth into submission. Her head was low, eyes narrowed, and every movement was sharp, tense. A few ponies watched with concerned, anxious faces. Everypony stayed out of her way.

As we neared the main building again, ‘the horn’ sounded. It started as a low moan, but slowly grew in pitch and volume until the eerie and unmistakable wail of an air-raid siren echoed through the canyons. The sound rose and fell as we entered the factory, returning to the office.

Once there, we waited in silence. Sandstorm sat in the chair behind the desk, silent and furious, staring off into space. Nobody wanted to be the first to speak.

I kept looking at the mangled changeling. She was a grotesque sight. The head only vaguely resembled what a head should look like, and the multiple bullet wounds across its body left the carapace shattered, flexing in ways no changeling should flex. I looked away, but in the awkward silence, my eyes kept drifting back.

The only interruption came when a guard came in. “Sandstorm? The head riders are here. Should I—”

“Tell them to wait out front with everypony else,” she coldly replied, and the guard quickly stepped out and shut the door.

Minutes passed after the siren fell silent, until the sound of ponies grew outside. Sandstorm remained silent, still save for the steady tremble of rage. Another minute passed before she stood, walking over to the window. She looked outside, then turned and walked up to me.

“Give me the grenades.”

I nodded and retrieved the last two matrix disruption grenades. “We only have—”

“Shut up,” she growled, snatching them from me, then looked to the

pony who had brought the deceased changeling. "Bring that thing."

With that, she walked to the door at the back end of the room, and stepped out onto the balcony. We followed into the brisk morning air.

A sizable crowd had gathered within the front grounds of the factory complex. At least three hundred ponies stood below, with more making their way up the path. The ponies closest to the balcony were all decked out in armor and carrying weapons, while those further away were more lightly equipped, with few weapons. They were talking amongst themselves, likely questioning why they were there. I even spotted a hoofful of griffins, perhaps a dozen, amid the sea of ponies. The hum of conversation rapidly dwindled to a few murmurs as Sandstorm emerged.

She glared out over the crowd, her gaze harsh. After a moment, she took up the two matrix disruption grenades. They were below the rim of the balcony as she armed them, so the first the crowd saw of them was when she tossed them over the edge.

I heard questioning murmurs, but only one voice of alarm, some pony who realized what she had just thrown out. The grenades dropped into the crowd. One pinged off the back of an armored pony near the front before falling under hoof. Another pony, a bit further back, reflexively caught the one aimed at him. He panicked the moment he realized what he held, fumbling the device. A few more shouts sounded, but the few attempts to run were thwarted by the weight of the crowd and the surrounding walls.

Flashes of panic made way for confusion when the devices discharged. Some unicorns winced, but within moments the crowd was murmuring again in confusion. Sandstorm stood at the railing, looking over the crowd. Not a single changeling was visible.

The volume of murmuring grew rapidly as Sandstorm stepped back from the railing, then surged as she hefted the changeling corpse up over the railing. The body tumbled down just before the crowd, hitting the ground with a muffled crunch.

Sandstorm was seething again. The trembling grew as she reared up, planting bloodied hooves on the railing, and shouted out to the crowd. "We know where they live!"

The murmurs surged, then rapidly quieted.

Sandstorm bared her teeth in a savage snarl. "These fucking bugs

thought they could break us. They tried to turn us against each other. They pitted family against family. They've murdered loved ones and ruined lives!" Her voice shuddered with rage as she hammered a hoof against the railing. The emotion was contagious, as angry murmurs sounded in the crowd below.

"They thought they could fuck with us, but now the tables have turned!" She was practically roaring now. "Now we know where they live! Now we can take the fight to them!" The crowd's volume grew. "Now we're going to show these bugs that nobody fucks with Trotsen!"

The armed ponies in the front cheered and hefted weapons, full of eager, savage grins. The mood was rapidly spreading through the crowd.

"Get your weapons!" Sandstorm shouted. "I want every single motor-wagon readied with at least a week's supplies! I want every fucking pony who can carry a weapon! I don't care if you're riding cargo in the hauler or are hanging off the side of a wagon. If there's room for you, then today you are a rider!" She hammered her hoof against the railing again. The cheering had spread, faces further in the crowd lighting up.

"You've got one hour to gear up and gather at the main gate. Anypony who isn't there will answer to me!" She looked over the crowd once more. "Now mount up!"

Another cheer tore through the crowd as ponies started splitting off, running in all directions. I could see the news traveling along the path below, spreading amongst those who had yet to arrive.

"Axe!"

The stallion stepped out from among the riders below at Sandstorm's call, shouting back, "Here!"

Sandstorm looked down at him, lips curling back into a savage snarl beneath tear-stained cheeks. "Bring out the Beast."



Ponies ran about in a flurry of activity. Supplies were thrown haphazardly into motorwagons in the rush, while arms and armor were checked over and donned. Every now and then, another motorwagon would hum to life and rumble across the dusty courtyard. Each was laden with a small gang of ponies crammed in every available space, and all grinning with savage,

animalistic excitement, all in anticipation of the fight to come.

Sickle chuckled darkly beside me. "I think I like this town."

Sandstorm stood nearby. She was no longer shaking with barely controlled anger, as if she might murder the next pony to approach her. Instead, she stood tall, her harsh gaze watching the steady progress. It did not make her look any less dangerous, but it did make her look far more focused.

We stood beside one of the intact side buildings of the factory complex, waiting.

Half the motorwagons had already departed. The massive cargo motorwagon I had first seen at Mareford was making its way out the gate, loaded with dozens of armed ponies and crates full of supplies. I had to wonder if they were leaving anything in town for those who weren't coming. For that matter, I had to wonder if there *were* many who weren't coming, not to mention the concern of what Serenity's Infiltrators might do while we were gone. I had to hope that they saw this force as the more immediate threat.

The deep thrum of a motorwagon's motor sounded from inside the building beside us, unremarkable at first, but in moments it had grown in volume beyond even that of the cargo wagon. Ponies were opening the great doors at the front of the building. A small, savage smile crossed Sandstorm's muzzle as she started walking that way, and we followed.

A metallic screech and rattle grew from inside, slow but rapidly building. It combined with the growing roar of the motor into a cacophony of sound, tremendous and terrifying. I could feel the sound with my hooves.

The giant muzzle of a cannon thrust out from the open doors, followed by the massive vehicle it was mounted to. It was all blocky angles, made even more menacing with the massive plow-like ram mounted to the front and the array of spikes along the top. Axle was riding atop the huge machine, a heavy machine gun before him. The massive tracks tore at the dirt as the vehicle lurched, grinding to a halt.

Sandstorm grinned, dark and savage as she approached her Beast.

We had a tank.

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

# Casualties

A long, thin line of dust cut through the Wasteland.

At least two dozen motorwagons tore down the bare dirt trail. It was the same trail the Trotsen caravans had used for years, but this time, it bore a different cargo. Two hundred ponies, maybe more, were tucked into every available space. They carried weapons of all sorts, from spears to machine guns, with expressions both angry and eager.

At their head rumbled Sandstorm's Beast, a relic of an earlier age. A mighty war machine, eager to return to the role it had been built for centuries ago. It roared like its namesake, a warcry echoed by those who followed.

And I was following right behind it, surrounded by ponies looking for a fight.

I had turned these ponies loose on the Wasteland. Now, I could only hope I could nudge them in the right direction.



The great convoy had halted for the evening, parked in a chaotic cluster of vehicles. Even with our speed limited to that of the slowest of the vehicles, we had already covered half the distance to Mareford, and we could expect to arrive the next afternoon. While several eager mechanics had already detached our second vehicle to work on fixing it up—without even bothering to ask us—I made my way to where Sandstorm consulted with her riders. Echo and Sickle followed on my flanks, like a pair of large and terrifying bodyguards.

Sandstorm was standing beside a folding table, along with a small group of ponies. Axle was at her side, speaking while she looked at the map spread across the table. “Gangrene and Howler caught up with us, but there’s still no word of Shaft, Buckeye, or Clanger’s patrol. I don’t know if they’ll have time to catch up before we get to this ‘Serenity’ place.”

I was almost to them when a pony stepped in front of me. “Turn around,” she said, magic glowing around the grip of her shotgun. “Riders only.”

Sandstorm looked up. She was dusty from the day of travel, and her eyes were still reddened, but her expression looked as hard and determined as ever. That expression darkened the moment she saw me. “Let her through.”

The guard frowned, but stepped aside, eying me suspiciously.

I continued forward, giving an appreciative nod to Sandstorm. “Thank you.”

She ignored me, turning back to Axle. “What were you saying?”

“The patrols,” he said, casting repeated wary glances my way. “Gangrene and—”

“Right,” Sandstorm said, nodding. “Nothing to worry about. They’ll have plenty of time to catch up. They’ll be faster, and they can go direct while we swing by Mareford.”

“Wait,” Axle said, his ears shooting up, and casting me another quick glance. “We’re really going to Mareford?”

Sandstorm’s eyes narrowed ever so slightly, a look that seemed particularly dangerous to me. “I want more guns and ammo,” she said. “Everything we can get, and those Mareford fucks are going to give us a damn good deal on them if they know what’s good for them. Hell, won’t hurt to spread word about these damn bugs. Maybe if they see their own head on the chopping block, they might get off their fat asses and do something for a change.”

She was going to Mareford, spreading information, and giving them the opportunity to join in, all while keeping a position of power by not *explicitly* going there for help. I didn’t have the time to fully consider the stance before she turned to me and quite bluntly asked, “What the fuck do you want?”

I blinked, but quickly recovered. “I was hoping to find out what the plan was.”

One of the other riders, a mare with spiked armor, cut in. “Who the hell is this? Sandy, what’s going on?”

Sandstorm scowled as she turned on the rider. “What’s going on is this dipshit has a pair of motorwagons and some hired guns. She’s willing to go along with the whole ‘stomp the bugs’ plan, so she gets to play at being a rider.”

The mare glanced warily between us. “Just like that? She could be a changeling!”

"Of course she could be a fucking changeling," Sandstorm said, an edge creeping into her voice. "Hell, so could you, or any of the rest. That's the problem, ain't it?" She lifted a hoof, gesturing to me. "Right now, she's helping us, so we'll *let* her help us. If she decides she's *not* going to help us any more, well, we'll just have to make a *new* arrangement..."

She trailed off with a warning glare at me.

The other mare grumbled, but begrudgingly backed down, casting her own glare my way. "Fine."

A nearby stallion with a spiky red mane grumbled. "I don't like this."

Sandstorm's jaw clenched. She turned to him with a dangerous purpose to her movements. "You going to bitch to me about not liking the situation?" She took a very deliberate step towards him. "You really want to go down that fucking road with me right now?"

He wisely backed down. "No, ma'am. Sorry."

"Good," she growled, and turned back to the table. "Then let's stop whining about all this stupid shit and start focusing on the *real* problem." Her hoof came up, jabbing at the map. It landed right on a penciled-in mark: Serenity.

One of the other riders, a silver-maned mare, quickly stepped forward to help shift the subject back. "We're slower than the usual convoy, but we'll still make Mareford by mid-day. Best time from there to this 'Serenity' place would probably be around six hours, depending on what the old roads are like in that area. That'd put us there around nightfall, maybe a bit after, but that doesn't give us any time at Mareford."

"And I don't like the idea of showing up at night," Sandstorm said. "So mid-day, day after tomorrow. Longer than I'd like, but it'll have to do."

"We'd be there tomorrow evening if we just go straight there," Axle pointed out, but Sandstorm gave a dismissive wave of her hoof.

"We could split up," another rider suggested. "Take the fastest wagons and best riders out to Mareford, while the Beast and other wagons go direct. We'll have to gun it, but it'll give us some time to work out a deal and still meet with you well before dark."

The first rider grunted. "I dunno. I mean, hell, neither group would be an easy target, but you know how bad the raiders have gotten lately. Something's up with them."

My ears perked. “You’ve been having raider problems?”

The looks from most of the ponies was predictably icy at my intrusion. Sandstorm came to my defense, whether intentional or not. “Motorwagons,” she said. “Sure, raiders get their hooves on a working motorwagon every now and then. It happens. Either they dig one up and get it running, or take out an inexperienced crew and steal theirs. Usually, they don’t last long before we take ‘em out, but lately they’ve been flush with ‘em. We’re up to, what, eight new wagons this last month?”

She looked around until Axle gave a nod, and gestured to me. “Nine, including the one she captured.”

“Nine,” Sandstorm echoed. “I figure they must have turned up some old wagon yard or something. They ain’t done much with ‘em yet, ‘cept lose the one that tried hitting our convoy, but they’re being more of a pest than usual. If it weren’t for the fucking bugs stirring shit up, I’d have my riders out putting those raiders down and finding out where they got their rides. We can always use some more wagons.”

“A sudden upswing in raider activity and equipment,” I noted, frowning. “It seems like that’s been happening a lot, lately. This might be Serenity’s doing.”

A couple of the cold looks had been replaced by questioning ones, so I explained myself. “They’ve used raiders before. Pass on equipment or information, and let the expendable raiders do their dirty work. And Serenity has motorwagons.” I inclined my head towards where my companions had set camp. “We swiped our first wagon from them, and they had several more.”

There were a few murmurs at the news—whether that of Serenity’s involvement with raiders or my mention of previous contact with them—but Sandstorm cut them short by speaking up. “Doesn’t matter, anyway,” she said with another wave of her hoof. “We’re not splitting up. I want a show of force when we roll up on Mareford. We’re going to let those sedentary morons know we mean business.”

I nodded, glad she’d made that call, even if her intent was a bit more aggressive than I would have liked.

“So,” she said, looking over the gathered riders. “On to Mareford in the morning. We set camp there, get a good deal on all the guns and ammo we can carry, maybe convince a few of their so-called Militia to get off their asses

and actually help ponies for a fucking change.”

One of the riders snorted. “Ain’t like we need *their* help.”

I spoke up. “Against Serenity, I think we can use all the friends we—”

The spiky-haired stallion cut me off. “There ain’t no fucking ‘we’, bitch. You ain’t one of us. I don’t think you’re even—”

“*Hey!*” Sandstorm’s shout cut across the group, instantly silencing the stallion. She leveled a hoof at him. “She’s our guest, so watch your fucking mouth you disrespectful cunt.”

As he cringed back, she turned to look at me. “Well? Keep talking, bitch.”

There were a few snickers from the gathered riders, as well as a look of silent annoyance from the stallion. I wasn’t surprised that Sickle snickered as well.

I ignored that and continued. “What I was saying was that we could use all the friends we can get, and I think I have some friends that might help out.”

She frowned, pausing for a moment before speaking. “Don’t think we need any ‘friends’ here, but hell, I ain’t turning away anypony who wants to squash some bugs. They want to tag along, fine. Who are they?”

“Enclave Loyalists,” I said. “About fifty or sixty soldiers, maybe more.”

In my defense, calling them “friends” was more of an exaggeration rather than an outright lie. Echo didn’t directly call me out on the claim, but I’d still like to get that down for the record.

Several of the ponies looked at me with perked ears and looks of surprise at my unusual claim, and I clarified. “They’re the ‘good guy’ side of the civil war going on up there. They’ve been trying to help ponies down here, and they’ve got good reason to dislike Serenity. We’ve met with them before. If they see hundreds of ponies gathering to fight Serenity, they’ll want to pitch in and make sure we win.”

Sandstorm’s expression had soured. “I trust the birdies about as much as I trust the bugs,” she said with distaste, before her expression mellowed. “Still, be nice to have some more fliers, since it looks like changelings can fly. Fuck it, why not?” She lifted a hoof, tapping the edge of the map. “Where are they?”

I quickly consulted my PipBuck, comparing locations for a moment

before reaching out to tap at the map a short ways east of Rust. "They were camped here last we saw them, but they had been moving regularly. They probably won't be there, but we should come across one of their patrols easily enough."

Axle grunted. "That's way out of the way! That'd add a whole day to our trip!"

"At least ten hours," another pony said, leaning over the map. "Maybe twelve. Terrain is a bit rough there."

"And that's if we stumble across them right away," Sandstorm noted, and shook her head. "Sorry, not happening. I'm not giving these bugs any more time to prepare."

My ears flicked back. "But we could use their help, and it's only a small delay."

"I said it ain't happening," she said, and gestured a hoof around. "This ride ain't stopping. Be glad we're even swinging by Mareford. You want to bring in these Enclave pricks, you can haul your tail over there and tell 'em yourself. Put a hustle on it and you can catch up with us at Mareford."

I frowned, looking at the map. It'd probably be doable, assuming the Loyalists hadn't moved camp or we found them quickly enough, but there was little room for complications. "That might work," I said, reluctant. "Though my wagon is a bit heavily loaded. We'd make better time if we could offload some of our cargo to one of your wagons."

There were a few grumbles from the riders, including a few who spoke up. "We're not your mules."

"Consider it collateral, then," I said, "for our good behavior. If we don't show up again, you get to keep it."

"I won't turn down free shit," Sandstorm said, "especially since most of it is weapons. The hauler won't even notice the load, and it's still faster than the tank. Deal." She held out her hoof, and I shook it, as she added, "Feel free to not come back."

"I'll meet you at Mareford," I said evenly, gave a parting nod, and walked off.

As I left, I heard Axle speak up. "You're just letting her go?"

Sandstorm's groan brought a smile to my face. "Seriously, you bitches whine that she's here, now you're whining that she's leaving. Buck up,

already. We've got a fight to look forward to."

The rest of the conversation faded into the background as the distance grew.

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We set off early in the morning, before the sky had fully brightened.

It was easy to forget just how much of an arsenal we had accumulated from the mercenaries and raiders we had fought. It wasn't until we started unloading our motorwagon that the truly excessive scale of it became apparent. Dozens of grenades and mines. Multiple heavy weapons. Two sets of damaged power armor. Roughly a hundred pounds of explosives. Enough small arms to outfit an entire squad of ponies, with enough ammunition that it would have been easier to measure it by weight instead of by round, if only we had scales. And that wasn't even counting the two drums of water, the large stash of canned and packaged food, an extensive variety of spare parts and mechanisms Starlight had picked out as valuable, or the assortment of barely-used camping gear we had forgotten beneath all the other stuff.

Almost all of it was unloaded. When we left, we were stripped down to a bare combat load: our personal gear, some spare ammo, and three days' worth of food and water. All told, we probably offloaded a literal ton of equipment, and I could see that the wagon sat noticeably higher on its suspension.

We carefully inventoried everything, and persuaded the increasingly impatient rider taking the cargo to verify the count. Then we climbed into our lightened vehicle and set off, rattling and bouncing across the Wasteland with renewed speed.

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Starlight made exceptional time. It was a rough ride, as she drove the motorwagon across the uneven terrain at speeds she wouldn't have risked—or possibly even been able to reach—with all our cargo.

It was exhausting, and it was exhilarating. We tore across the dry Wasteland at speeds I would normally only experience when flying. Starlight was exuberant, with a huge grin, eyes narrowed in excitement behind her gog-

gles. Sickle stood tall in the rear, her hooves braced against the vehicle frame, giving the occasional enthusiastic yell.

I managed to hold out for almost half an hour, my mind occupied by concerns over current events, before their enthusiasm seeped into me and planted its hooks.

By the time we neared the Enclave camp, my squishy pony body felt sore and bruised from the journey, but I was grinning just as much as Starlight was.

The good mood quickly faded as we drove up to the camp at a more sedate speed. Sure enough, the Loyalists had moved on. The camp was abandoned, the tents removed. The few bits that did remain were clearly worse for wear.

Dusty ordered me onto the gun as we approached. I slid out over the back of the seat, and reared up to grip the machine gun. I pivoted it around as I scanned over the remains of the camp, keeping the barrel elevated in case any friendly ponies were out there.

The signs of magical energy weapon strikes were clear on the abandoned earthworks. The rearmost tower had collapsed. A few tattered tents had been left behind, and several craters peppered the interior of the camp. There had been a serious fight here, but there was no sign of either side.

"This looks bad," Dusty said, already turned to look out from the camp. I turned the gun around to do the same. "Serenity must have hit them before they moved out," he continued. "Hard to say how the fight turned out, and there's no telling where they went."

"So, what now?" Starlight asked. "Drive around looking for a patrol? That could take hours."

"We don't even know if they're patrolling this area any more," Dusty said. "If Serenity hit their camp, that means they either evaded their patrols or hit too hard and fast for Aurora's forces to hold them off. Either way, it means Serenity has the upper hoof in this area. She may not risk sending patrols around here."

I mulled over that for a moment, while Echo spiraled down, landing in the midst of the camp and slowly searching it. I watched for a bit before ducking down, looking under the roof at Dusty. "Okay, you're the military pony. Say you were in charge of these Loyalists. You're in unfriendly

territory, and just got driven back by a superior force from Serenity. What would you do, and where would you go?"

He frowned around the bit of his rifle, considering it for several long moments. "Depends on how poorly it went. I'd certainly want to pull back and establish a better position. Ideally one Serenity doesn't know of or will have a hard time locating. Even better, fall back to friendly positions. Biggest problem with that is 'friendly positions' means up in the clouds, and last we heard, they hadn't been able to locate other Loyalists."

"Okay," I said, nodding along. "Let's assume going above the clouds isn't an option, because if they've gone up there, we wouldn't be able to find them anyway. What does that leave them with?"

"Short term, they could stay on the move," he said. "They're mobile. Keep scouts out for early warning, keep moving any time hostile forces are detected." He frowned. "Except they would have been doing the same thing for defending this camp, and that clearly didn't work. Plus, staying mobile is exhausting, especially if they have to move casualties. On the other hoof, digging in means getting crushed by superior numbers. There's not much of a good play, here."

"It's a bad situation," I agreed. "So, given that, what would you do?"

He slowly scanned across the barren terrain as he mulled over the question. "Honestly? I'd either keep retreating at speed until it was clear there was no pursuit, or until I found friendly forces that could help mount an effective defense. 'Cept they don't have any friendly forces." He gave a quiet snort, and after a moment, added, "Myself, I'd go for Mareford. Good, strong defenses, and probably the safest place in the Wasteland. Granted, that's 'cause I lived there, so I know what it's like. Don't know if Aurora would consider that a valid option or not."

"It's a possibility," I said. "Would be awfully convenient."

Dusty snorted. "Yeah. Too convenient to hope for."

"Maybe."

"Hmm. You know..." Dusty lowered his rifle, looking back to me. "Aurora said she'd been sending patrols by Gemstone regularly. It's about the only place we know they might go by, and if they took any serious casualties, they'll need to rest somewhere. If Aurora doesn't consider Mareford viable, she might try sheltering there, at least temporarily. It's not a good position,

but it might be the best she has. Even if she isn't there, she might still be in contact."

"Might be worth checking out," I said.

"Yeah," he said, though his tone didn't sound convinced. Still, he shored up his expression and gave a decisive nod. "Let's do it."



The drive to Gemstone was less exuberant, but just as swift. I spent most of it in my natural form, with my armor, to protect against the banging and jostling of the wagon.

We were five miles out when Dusty called out, "Two fliers inbound, south-east high! Looks like Enclave."

I quickly retook my disguise while Dusty brought out his binoculars. By the time I was ponified once more and on the gun, Dusty had them in sight. "Blue and rainbows. Looks like Loyalists."

I grunted at how he said that. "Looks."

"Yeah," he said. "Keep an eye on them in case they attack. Hopefully they're friendly, but I don't want to take the chance."

"Yeah," I said. "I assume they've seen us?"

"Oh yeah," Dusty replied. "They're diving towards us, and one of 'em pointed. Hey, give them a wave. If these are really Loyalists, we want to look friendly."

I did so, giving an exaggerated wave to ensure they could see it. When I finished, my hooves returned to the gun, and I gave a dry snort. "You know, I appreciate the irony of me saying this, but sometimes I *really* hate dealing with changelings."

Sickle chuckled and gave me a heavy, spiky-hoofed pat on the back. "Yeah, we all do."

"Thanks," I grumbled, rolling my shoulder; the cloak had given enough padding to keep the spikes from drawing blood, but only just.

Echo had swooped down to fly just above us. As the flying ponies drew nearer, they veered to come in at an angle, the ominous gems of their weapons no longer pointing directly at us. I took that as a good sign, and gave another wave. One of the ponies returned the gesture, and soon were banking around, circling us as they bled off the last of their altitude. Two

pips popped up on my E.F.S. as they swooped in beside us: non-hostile.

"Hey!" the lead mare called out in greeting as she slipped in, matching speed to fly just beside our motorwagon. "You heading in to Gemstone?"

"Yeah," I called back. "We were looking for you guys, too. We need to talk."

She held up a hoof, then turned her head away. I could barely hear her words over the wind and rattling of the wagon. "Yeah, it's that changeling and her friends. Yeah, the same one. Says she's looking for us." There was a long pause. "You got it."

Lowering her hoof, she looked back to us. "Okay, you're cleared into town. Just don't go pointing that thing at anypony!"

She immediately banked, wings pumping as she veered away, her partner mirroring her actions perfectly. Moments later they were both climbing up into the sky.

"Well that wasn't the warmest welcome ever," Starlight said from below.

"Warmer than getting shot," Dusty said. "Seeing as they probably got in a big fight with Serenity, I imagine they're going to be a bit wary." There was a pause as he thumped his hoof against the roof. "Hey, Whisper?"

I slid down to peer in over the back seat. "Yeah?"

He'd turned to look back at me. "You sure you want to do this?" he asked. "These ponies know you're a changeling, and if they've had trouble, they might not look too kindly on the fact. This could be dangerous for you."

I frowned. He was right, after all. "Could be," I said, slowly nodding, but I quickly hid the frown to put on a show of determination. "But I'm not sure there is any place that isn't dangerous for me, right now. At least here we have the chance of improving our situation."

"Fair enough," he said with a nod, and turned back.

Minutes later, we came into sight of Gemstone. As we rolled over the tracks and up the path to the small town, we could see several figures atop the walls. One was a bright blue pony, while four more were clad in Enclave armor, the menacing black broken up by the Loyalist colors. The trio of magical energy weapons atop the wall swiveled to us; my heartbeat ratcheted up, but they simply tracked us, waiting in case we became a threat.

We came to a halt in front of the gate, waiting under the eyes of the

Loyalist soldiers as the gate slowly swung open. Once it had, we rolled slowly through the opening.

There were a few more Loyalist soldiers beyond the gate, two of which were trotting our way, and further in I could see a few town ponies. One of the wall-top pegasi took wing, and once we were beyond the gate, flew in to hover before us, a hoof held up in a clear command to halt. The wagon ground to a halt once more, as black-armored pegasi surrounded us.

I started to worry that we had made a horrible mistake.

“Okay!” the lead pegasus called out. “Exit the vehicle, and leave all your weapons behind. You can have them back when you leave, but you’re not carrying them in town.”

The bright blue pony atop the wall was a unicorn stallion, and he reacted with surprise at that declaration. “What are you talking about?” he called out. “We don’t disarm our guests.”

“You don’t,” the pegasus replied, his attention focused on us. I couldn’t help but imagine him glaring behind those eyepieces. “But we do, especially for these ponies.”

“Now hold on a minute!” the stallion said, trotting down the stairs to approach the Loyalist soldier, while we remained carefully still and quiet in our motorwagon. “These ponies are *our* guests, and besides, this ain’t the first time they’ve been here. Well, ‘cept the big purple one, but I figure if they vouch for her, she must be all right.”

“They aren’t all ponies,” the pegasus replied, his gaze unwavering. “The gray one’s a changeling. Maybe the others, too.”

“Hey!” Starlight called out, thumping a hoof against the steering wheel. “Come on, really? Why don’t you shout it a little louder? There might be ponies in Mareford that didn’t hear you!”

I winced a little. I appreciated Starlight leaping to my defense, but I couldn’t see it helping us.

A mare’s voice cut across the argument. “What the hay is going on out here?”

I recognized that voice, ears perking up as I looked out the window. Sure enough, the Enclave Loyalist trotting up to the scene was Sergeant Hail Burst. The mask that would cover her muzzle hung at her side, letting everyone see that she looked thoroughly unhappy, a look only furthered

by the pocked and charred surface of her armor. It seemed someone had unloaded a magical energy weapon into her side.

"I ordered these ponies to disarm," the first pegasus said, gesturing our way before inclining his head to the unicorn guard. "Blueberry objected."

Hail Burst turned to the approaching guard. "You understand that at least one of these individuals is a changeling, and that we can't verify whether or not they work with the group that we have been fighting?"

The unicorn halted, casting a glance our way, frowning. "Can't say I know anything about that," he said, a cautious tone to his voice, but it vanished as he followed up. "Can't say it makes any difference to me, either. We ain't in the habit of assuming the worst of our guests, if you remember."

Hail Burst had immediately turned back to the other pegasus. "Snowfall, your orders are to assist the locals in guarding the settlement, not to take over its operation. Unless they ask you to do something that directly violates your orders or our laws, you are to follow their direction. They can keep their equipment." She then turned to look pointedly at us. "But keep a close eye on them, all the same."

While she was saying that, I had climbed over the back of the seat, and pulled myself up onto the roof where I was more open and visible. "I appreciate that my kind doesn't have the best reputation at the moment," I said, hoping the openness might defuse some of the tension, "but we came here looking for you because there are events underway that you need to know about."

There was a tension in Hail Burst's jaw, the only part of her face I could actually see. Despite that, she replied evenly. "What kind of events?"

"There's an army gathering," I said. "The ponies of the Wasteland are preparing to hit Serenity. We've got one chance to stop Serenity before it's too late for hundreds, if not thousands, of people. We've met you before, so they sent us to see if we could convince you to join the fight."

She frowned.

It was the guard, Blueberry, who spoke up. "What do you mean, an army?"

"Trotsen mobilized every vehicle they have. They've got a few hundred soldiers, dozens of motorwagons, and even a tank. Right now, they're making their way to Mareford, which has the best fighting force in this part

of the Wasteland and is the largest producer of weapons and ammunition. We're also reaching out to any others who are willing to join the fight. Every extra person we can get pushes the odds a little more in our favor, and we're only going to get one shot at this."

There was a moment of silence. Hail Storm stood there, as if thinking hard on what I had said. Blueberry gave her a critical look. Behind them, a few more ponies were looking on from porches or storefronts.

Then Blueberry turned back to me. "Fuck it. I'll go."

Hail Storm's head whipped around to look at him.

I opened my mouth, about to say that it wasn't necessary, but I realized just how hypocritical that would be. Instead, I nodded. "I appreciate it."

Some of the onlookers were approaching, and a couple of the other Gemstone guards were trotting up to Blueberry. "What's going on?"

"They're gathering an army," Blueberry replied. "Taking on the group that wiped out Rust."

As they fell into a hushed conversation, Hail Storm watched, her expression difficult to read behind those amber eye lenses. Finally, she turned to me, her tone a bit softer than it had been. "We should speak with Commander Aurora."

The pegasus guard, Snowfall, stepped up. "Commander—"

He fell silent as she held up a hoof. She lowered it again, looking to me. "Come with me."

I hopped down from the wagon, with Echo landing beside me. From behind the wheel, Starlight called out, "I'm going to park the wagon, then I'll join you!"

I gave her a nod, then turned to follow Hail Burst to Emerald's store.

Not Emerald's store. Not any more. I hesitated a moment at the thought, then huffed a deep breath and pushed on.

I felt like an intruder as I stepped into the store. It was as if it had somehow become some alien place, even though almost everything was just as I remembered it. Only one thing had changed: Emerald was gone. A different pony was behind the counter.

Dazzle was slumped across the counter, head resting on her forelegs, and lifting wearily as we entered. There were the faintest of bags forming under her eyes, hinting at fatigue, and her well-groomed mane had just a couple

of hairs sticking out of place. For anypony else, it wouldn't have looked unusual. For Dazzle, it looked like she was completely run-down.

Despite that, her expression slowly brightened as she recognized me. "Hello again," she said, her voice soft. It was friendly, if not enthusiastic; the events surrounding our last meeting still hung over us. "Wasn't sure if you'd be coming back."

Hail Burst snorted. "Who says 'she' has? This is a changeling."

I winced, then gave Hail Burst a pointed look. "The same changeling you had no problem with just a few days ago."

"Things change," Hail Burst said.

"Wait," Dazzle said, looking between us in confusion and perhaps a touch of alarm. Her eyes settled on me. "You're a changeling?"

I sighed. At this rate, the entire Wasteland would know before nightfall. "Yes," I said. "I always was, and—"

Her eyes suddenly widened, ears perking high, and she pointed an accusing hoof at me. "*That's* why your coat and mane were so immaculate! You... you... cheater!"

"I'm sorry, I—"

My mouth snapped shut as she started laughing, her hoof returning to the counter. "Holy crap," she said, and I stared in momentary confusion at her broad grin. "Okay. I've got to admit, I'm a little envious!"

I'm not used to stumbling over my words, but after a few aborted attempts at a reply, all I managed was, "Oh."

She gave another laugh. "Oh, goddesses, that would be the best thing ever. So you can really look like anything you want? Like, not just cosmetic changes, but *anything*?"

"Uh..." I glanced at Hail Burst, who was frowning again. I looked back to Dazzle's excited grin. "...More or less. Bigger changes take more out of me, but anything pony-sized is fairly easy."

Hail Burst coughed. "Yes, well, that's all great, but you're going to have to wait on... whatever this is. Our little changeling friend here is going upstairs to talk with Commander Aurora."

"Oh," Dazzle said with a subtle wince, her smile halving in intensity. "I hope we can catch up afterwards?"

I hesitated, still a little surprised by her reaction, but after a moment

I relaxed, smiling back. "I'd like that."

We parted as I followed Hail Burst up the stairs. Her armored tail flicked faintly, an agitated expression. Her behavior was clear enough to me; she was not at all pleased with how amiable my encounter with Dazzle had been. Given how bluntly she had outed me, I imagine she had hoped it to sour any existing relationship, instead of being a new source of interest. Between everything I had seen and heard, the conclusion was increasingly obvious: they had encountered Serenity, and that encounter had gone poorly.

It wasn't until I saw Commander Aurora that I knew just how poorly it had gone.

I hadn't heard a reply when Hail Burst knocked, and when I followed her in, I saw why. Commander Aurora wasn't in her armor. Instead, she was in a bed, slowly and agonizingly pushing herself up to a sitting position with her remaining foreleg. There was no sign of the other leg, only a thorough canvas of bandages wrapped around her chest, covering the misshapen place where the shoulder should have been. I couldn't tell if her wing was hidden under those bandages, but from the contours of her body, I suspected it was missing as well. More bandages wrapped around her neck and up to her face, even over her right eye. Glimpses of badly burnt and partially healed flesh showed at the edges of the cloth.

She wheezed slow, ragged breaths as she finished sitting, and turned to look at me with her one good eye. Despite the tremendous pain I'm sure she must have been in, her eye was hard and unflinching.

When she spoke, it was in short fragments, and her voice was wholly changed; the hints of scratchiness had become raspy, gravelly tones that almost overtook the words themselves. "If I thought... you had anything... to do with what happened..." She paused, taking a few more rasping breaths before continuing. "I'd have you taken out back... and shot."

It was simultaneously concerning and reassuring.

"I hope it doesn't come across as making light of the situation," I carefully replied, "but I'm glad you're not doing that."

"I'm not... stupid..."

She abruptly broke out into rough coughing, her body shaking with its violence. She almost fell over as she fumbled for a glass of water on a stand beside her bed, and Hail Burst trotted over to help her.

While they were occupied, I glanced around the room. It was furnished nicely enough, particularly given how everything had to be scavenged. There were some maps and other papers on one of the tables, as well as a terminal. The other table held an array of medical supplies, and soiled bandages filled a small trashcan beside it. There were even two empty potion bottles set in front of a large trauma kit; Aurora had likely been given at least two healing potions while here, and who knows how many before arriving in Gemstone, and was still in such bad shape.

There was a quiet murmur as Aurora waved off Hail Burst, her eye meeting me again. Her voice was a little clearer. “The supply team didn’t expect us. We caught them by surprise. No warning.” She paused for another short coughing fit, but it passed easily. “Their response force chased scouts. Hunted for us. They didn’t come straight for our camp. It gave us time... so either they wasted an opportunity to wipe us out... just to make it look like you didn’t tell them anything... or you didn’t tell them anything.”

I just nodded. There was little I could add.

“Which doesn’t mean you aren’t trying to play us,” she rasped. “Just that you aren’t doing it for Serenity.” Her head turned, as if signifying the end of the conversation, and she faced Hail Burst. “Why did you bring her here?”

Hail Burst cleared her throat. “Because she brought some information and a... proposal... and I thought you should make the call on what we do about it.”

Aurora sighed slightly, the sound grating and unpleasant. “You’re the acting commander... that means you—”

“With all due respect,” Hail Burst said, her voice firm, “this is significantly bigger than organizing camp defenses and sending out a few patrols while you recover.”

There was a long pause as Aurora stared back at her, but finally, reluctantly, she looked back to me. “Okay... What is it?”

“We’re gathering an army,” I said, and gave her a brief overview of the forces involved. Once I had laid out the situation, I added, “And we could use your help. I can see that things haven’t gone well for you, but I imagine this has also shown just how dangerous Serenity can be when you’re on your own. This fight is inevitable. They’re going to come after us until there are no more threats to them. The one choice we have is whether we face it

together or all alone.”

Aurora had broken her hard stare, looking down with a more thoughtful expression, and eventually followed up with a slow shake of her head. “We’re not a fighting force any more,” she rasped. “When those changelings caught up with us, there must have been more than a hundred of them. We took more than fifty percent casualties. Eight confirmed dead, twelve missing. Many of the wounded will never recover. We lost Lifeline and most of the medical supplies. We have barely enough hooves to man the walls and do local patrols.”

“Mareford has doctors and supplies that could tend to your wounded,” I offered, hoping I remembered correctly. “And they have a much more defensible position, with a large fighting force. I’m sure they’ll be willing to help you if you’re willing to help them. Your wounded get the best treatment available in the Wasteland, while your able-bodied soldiers get the help of an entire army to strike back at the people who attacked you and killed their comrades. An army that can help you take back the *Cumulonimbus* before Serenity can turn it on the settlements around here.”

Her eye looked up again, fixing me with a hard stare, as if she could see the juicy carrot I was dangling in front of her. Still, she remained silent for a few moments as she mulled it over. Her reply was a change of tactics. “And why are you so interested in getting *us* into the fight?”

“I’m interested in getting *everyone* into the fight,” I said. “Heck, one of the guards here already volunteered to join in when he overheard us.” I raised a hoof, gesturing to Aurora. “As for your group, specifically, I may not be all that versed in tactics, but I’ve been in enough fights to appreciate the value of a hard-hitting force to break the odds. You’re a group of trained soldiers in heavy armor, carrying heavy firepower, and with excellent mobility. We’ve got an army to engage Serenity’s forces on even terms, but the more mobile and aggressive forces we have, the better we’re able to hit them where we want, when we want. Your ponies could be the difference between victory or defeat, and the stakes are far too high for all of us to not push things as heavily in our favor as we can arrange.”

She watched me warily, even as she carefully considered what I said. “Could be,” she rasped, giving a little nod, but then added, “but it could also be that your army doesn’t stand a chance, and my ponies are better off

withdrawing. Once our war is done, then we can come back and deal with them properly.”

“After hundreds or thousands of ponies have died!” I said, and quickly softened my tone again. “At least come to Mareford. See the people who are gathering to fight. You can judge for yourself whether they have any chance of pulling this off, but at least meet with them.”

Another long pause. “I have eighteen wounded soldiers. Will Mareford have the capacity to care for them?”

“Yes,” I said; even if they didn’t have enough medical facilities, I’m sure something could be arranged. “They’re a much larger settlement than Gemstone.”

She grunted weakly, followed by a few suppressed coughs. It took her a moment to recover and speak again. “And what if these changelings move into Gemstone when we leave?”

I frowned, alarmed at the possibility, but I quickly shook it off. “I would imagine they’d put a priority on dealing with the gathering army rather than hitting a small settlement. That said, and I hope you don’t take offense at this, but given how your previous encounter with Serenity turned out, I think it’s unlikely that your presence here would change the outcome.”

She grunted again, grimacing slightly, but the expression faded away over the next few seconds. Finally, she gave a slow nod. “Okay. We’ll meet with your army. I think we can do that little.” She turned her head to look at Hail Burst again. “Make it happen.”

Hail Burst gave a sharp nod. “Yes ma’am.” She then turned, giving a jerk of the head that made it clear I was to follow her.

We exited the room. I’d barely stepped into the hall and shut the door before Hail Burst abruptly turned to face me, muzzle close to mine. I drew to a halt, expecting some hostile gesture.

Instead, she immediately got down to business. “This army we’re meeting. When will it arrive in Mareford, and how long do we have to get there before it leaves?”

Regaining my composure, I answered. “They should be arriving sometime this evening, probably in the next few hours. As for when they set out for Serenity, I’m not sure, but they’re eager to start the attack and doubt that you’ll show up. I doubt they’ll stay any longer than necessary, which

might mean setting out at first light.”

My response was met with a snort. “You sure don’t like giving a lot of time, do you? You expect us to displace all our wounded and equipment just like that?”

“Less ‘expect’, more ‘hope’,” I replied.

“Wonderful,” she dryly replied. “Go talk to your friends. I’ve got a lot of preparations to organize and a short time to do it, so the last thing I need is some changeling getting in my mane.”

She turned and walked briskly to the stairs, her mouth clenched in a tight frown.

“I’m sorry for what’s happened to you,” I said, trying to ease some of the tension. “I know you’ve had bad experiences with changelings, but I’m not your enemy. I’m trying—”

“*I know,*” she replied, the words coming out in a clenched-teeth growl. She looked back over her shoulder. “And for the record, this isn’t me treating you like an enemy. I shoot my enemies. This is me treating you as a bad reminder of just how hard we got fucked. So you just go hang out with your friends. Stay out of my way. Give us the time to go meet this army, get a feel for what’s going on, and let *this crap...*” She raised a hoof, gesturing back and forth between us. “...settle down and sort itself out, ‘cause nopony’s going to just take your word about anything right now.”

I paused, and finally nodded without saying anything else.

“Good,” she said, turned, and headed down the stairs.

I gave her a few moments to gain some distance before heading downstairs myself. When I stepped into the main room again, she was just stepping out the front door. Starlight and Dusty were at the counter, along with Dazzle and the gate guard, Blueberry. Starlight had been watching Hail Burst’s exit, and turned to me with a worried look. “What’s wrong?”

“They’ve had a hard time,” I said with a shake of my head. “But they’re going to go to Mareford, so they may be on board. I guess we’ll find out when—”

I halted; Dazzle had stepped out from behind the counter, grinning expectantly. The moment my mouth shut, she said, “Well, come on! I want to see what you look like!” Blueberry looked over with curiosity, while Starlight’s ears had perked up with alarm, looking anxiously around the

gathering.

I opened my mouth to reply, but stopped and sighed. There really wasn't any point in arguing it. I called up my magic, and after taking a moment to slip out of my cloak and saddlebags, stood before her in nothing but my chitin.

Dazzle walked up, no smiles now, just staring intensely. She moved to the side, eyes tracing over every inch of me. "That's so weird," she murmured before her lips twitched upwards with a hint of a smile. "You're all glossy and shiny."

"Thank you."

Her eyes hesitated at my legs. "What's with the holes?"

I shrugged. "Nothing's really 'with' them. That's just how changelings are."

"That's so weird," she repeated, though she was smiling openly again. "I like it. It's exotic!"

I could hear Starlight's hoof meeting her face. "Oh goddesses no."

Dazzle laughed loudly, taking a step back and raising a hoof. "Hey, relax. I'm not going to get between you two lovers. I learned my lesson."

"We're not lovers," Starlight groaned.

The front door swung open, and Sickle stuck her head in, grinning beneath her muzzle. "Hey, is someone making the runt squirm without me?"

Starlight abruptly set her hoof down, glaring at Sickle. "Go away!"

"Fuck you," Sickle said, still grinning as she entered. "Oh, wait, I forgot. That's Whisper's job."

Starlight groaned. "Why are you even in here? Don't you have anything better to do?"

"I know when I'm needed," Sickle smugly replied. "Also, no."

Starlight grumbled and turned away from her. "Anyway, didn't we have some actual business to deal with?"

"You mean other than admiring your exotic marefriend?" Dazzle said with a light, teasing tone, then blinked. She turned to me, head craning a little, with a questioning look at my flanks. "Wait, are you actually a mare?"

I resisted the abrupt urge to tuck my tail in close and protective. "I am female," I replied as evenly as possible. Dazzle just smiled, giving a little chuckle. I added, "I do have to say, it's a nice change to have ponies react

with curiosity instead of fear or revulsion.”

“Well, we try to be friendly,” Dazzle said with a shrug, and leaned against the counter. “That’s what Gemstone’s all about. You’re a good... well, not-pony, I guess, but you know what I mean. You’ve been nice and friendly, and you’ve helped us out before. What you look like isn’t going to change that, even *if* some other changelings are causing problems. I think Emerald taught us better than that.”

That name sucked any humor out of the conversation. Starlight looked away, and despite the difference in species, it was apparent that my own discomfort was clear. “Hey, hey,” Dazzle said, raising her forehooves. “I didn’t mean to kill the mood. I know, it hurts that she’s gone, but... look, she always tried to cheer up ponies, right? I don’t think she’d like her name making them sad.”

I swallowed. “It’s... not that.”

Starlight eyed me.

Dazzle’s expression was still restrained, but curious. “Then what?”

I just stood there, silent, while my mind raced, bouncing from one piece of information to another, weaving it together, sorting out the benefits and risks.

There is one particularly dangerous side to secrets: the damage they cause can depend heavily on how the come to light.

I took a deep breath, gave a silent apology, and spoke. “Okay. Emerald made me promise not to tell you this, but—”

“Woah, woah,” Dazzle said, raising a hoof. “If she made you promise, that’s that. She must have had good reason to—”

“She did,” I said. “But the situation’s changed, and I’m certain that if she were still here, she’d want you to know.” I hesitated before adding, “And you’re going to figure it out soon, anyway. Better you learn all of the details now instead of having to make assumptions.”

Concern had etched itself into Dazzle’s expression. “...What are you talking about?”

“Emerald was a changeling.”

Both Dazzle and Blueberry stared at me, blinking. Dazzle spoke first, and with an uncharacteristic crudeness. “Brahminshit.”

I shook my head and pushed on. “Did she ever tell you where she

came from?

Dazzle stared open-mouthed at me for a few seconds before replying. "She never really talked about her past, but that doesn't mean she was a changeling!"

"But she did talk a little about it," I said. "She even mentioned it to us, vaguely, on one of our visits. Do you remember the name of the place she grew up at?"

"Why is that so important?" Dazzle demanded. Her body was tense.

"Please," I said, keeping my tone gentle.

She glared silently at me for several seconds before replying. "Like I said, she didn't really talk much about her past. Yeah, I remember her saying something about it, but... I don't know, I can't quite remember the name of the place. It's just..."

"Serenity."

Blueberry's ears went up, his expression tightening.

"That's the place," Dazzle said, thumping a hoof lightly on the counter before noticing the change in Blueberry's expression. "What?"

"That's the group the pegasi were talking about," he said, his eyes fixed on me. "The one that hit them so hard. The one that wiped out Rust." A hoof came up, pointing at me. "And she was talking about leading an army there."

"Emerald was born there," I said. "Her hive taught that ponies were just monsters, responsible for everything wrong with the world. That the only thing you were good for was food. Then she got here, and found out that wasn't true at all. She found out just how nice ponies could be. She couldn't go on helping her hive hurt ponies, so she... she *left*." I looked over Dazzle and Blueberry. "I don't know if I can convey how significant that is to a changeling. To a changeling, turning away from your hive is... it's like a pony cutting off their own cutie mark."

Dazzle and Blueberry both winced at that imagery.

"I want to make it clear," I said, my voice gentle. "She was still the same person you knew. She wasn't trying to deceive you, and it tore her up that she had to keep it secret. And I know you're going to think it, but no, it wasn't because she didn't trust you. I think she knew you'd understand. She didn't tell you because it would be *dangerous* for you."

Dazzle looked to me with damp eyes. “Dangerous?”

“Serenity,” I said. “At the time, they were mostly passive, hiding, but they guarded their secrecy. If they found out some ponies had information that pointed even *slightly* in their direction, they’d see it as a threat, and they’d be ruthless in removing it. If she told you, and Serenity ever caught word of it, they’d see every pony in Gemstone as a risk. They’d have done the same thing here that they did to Rust.”

Dazzle didn’t reply. She simply stared, her gaze lowered to the ground, as if unable to fully process everything that was said.

“That’s why she insisted on going on that job,” I said. “She knew who Amber was. She knew Amber was another agent of Serenity, and that if she slipped up in even the slightest way, she’d be discovered. She also knew that if Serenity had any reason to suspect that she told you anything, all of Gemstone would be in danger. That’s why she planned on going out and faking her own death, to keep you safe.”

“Fake?” Dazzle said, her eyes rising once more. “Is she still alive?”

That little glimmer of hope hurt. “I’m sorry. Amber must have caught on that something was up. Serenity killed her.”

She deflated ever so slightly.

“But it’s only because of Emerald that we even know Serenity is a thing.” I raised my PipBuck-clad hoof. “Because of her, we know where they are. Because of her, we were able to discover that Serenity isn’t just hiding any more. Their queen wants to put every pony under her hoof. They’ve been arming raiders and have already wiped out one settlement. We’ve turned up agents infiltrating both Trotsen and Mareford. Serenity is gearing up to make a big move, but Emerald has given us a chance to fight back.”

Dazzle slowly nodded, silent.

“These other changelings,” Blueberry said. “What happens if they aren’t stopped?”

“It wouldn’t be just taking over,” I said. “The only value they put on ponies is food. Most likely, they’ll wipe out any groups that could be a threat, like Mareford or Trotsen, as well as what’s left of my hive. They’ll probably kill most ponies and keep just enough to be harvested for love, with a small breeding population, all kept under heavy guard.”

Dazzle’s expression had turned uneasy. “What do you mean, harvested?”

"Changelings feed on love," I said. "Serenity has dozens of ponies held prisoner in suspended animation, and they drain them of love to feed the hive."

The look of unease grew, with a touch of fear. "That's how you guys feed?"

"That's how *they* feed," I replied sharply, eyes narrowing for a moment before I relaxed again. "My hive survives by making friends, to earn willing affection, even if we can't always be open about it."

I might have gone on, but Blueberry had abruptly turned and walked off toward the door, his expression grim. I might have said more to him, but Dazzle asked how the whole love-feeding thing worked, so I settled in to give her a brief answer. That led into discussing Queen Chrysalis the Sixth and the Serenity hive, and the differences between those and my own queen and hive, which of course necessitated explaining more details of our history.

And yes, there was certainly a large part of me that was anxious about sharing so much information. At the same time, there was something almost cathartic about it. It was almost like unloading, like a weight had been lifted, if only temporarily. It also seemed to help Dazzle. She started out tense and uneasy, but steadily relaxed until she sat beside me, fascinated by this new and unknown subject.

We must have talked for half an hour. It finally came to an end when several Enclave Loyalists entered, bearing a stretcher, with Hail Burst in the lead. She approached me. The rest continued on to the stairs, though their helmets turned to track me, expressions unreadable behind the amber lenses.

"We're about ready to go," Hail Burst said as she came to a halt. "We're loading the last of the wounded right now. Dust-off is in ten minutes."

I stood. "I guess we should get ready to go."

"Right," Dazzle said, quickly rising to her hooves. While she trotted to the back of the store, I called up my magic, restoring my disguise. Hail Burst's frown tightened slightly, but she said nothing, simply turning to leave.

"Wait!" Starlight said, and Hail Burst looked back at her. "What about Singe? Is she okay?"

"The civilian?" Hail Burst asked. "She's stable. We've already loaded her up."

Starlight relaxed, smiling at the good news. "Thank you."

Hail Burst nodded, turned, and left.

Dusty spoke for the first time since I came downstairs. "Let's get back to the wagon," he said. "Where'd you park?"

We followed Starlight out the back door of the store, and I almost ran into her back as she abruptly halted.

Some forty ponies had gathered there. Some were guards clad in varying degrees of heavy armor. Others wore lighter barding, or even none at all. Almost all were armed with the Wasteland-made energy weapons Gemstone was known for. Arclight was there, too, with a small wagon of his goods, and was in the midst of passing out his creations to the few ponies not already armed.

Echo sat in the back of the wagon, warily watching all the ponies gathered around her.

I saw Blueberry near the front of the pack, and still grim-faced as he helped tighten the straps of another pony's armor. At the sight of our appearance, he turned to face us.

Starlight, being in front of us, spoke first. "Uh, what's going on?"

"We're all going, too," Blueberry said, backed by several sounds of affirmation from the ponies around him.

I have to admit, I was a little concerned. These were just regular ponies. *Good* ponies, certainly, but not soldiers. Some were part-time guards, but most weren't even that. Given Dusty's glance my way, eyebrow raised, he was thinking the same thing.

I stepped around Starlight. "I don't want to turn away anyone who wants to help, but are you sure you know what you're getting into?"

"We know," Blueberry said, while a few other ponies nodded along. "Hell, we saw what they did to these pegasi when they arrived."

"It's going to be even worse than that," I said. "This isn't going to be like fighting raiders, even if it was the biggest band of raiders to ever exist. The changeling hive we're going to be facing has professional soldiers with extensive training and the best equipment available, and that's the *least* scary thing about them." I looked around, wondering how far the word of my nature had spread. After a moment, I decided it didn't really matter anymore. "I may not know all that much about combat tactics, but I *do* know changeling infiltration tactics. We can expect anything from

impersonating friendly or neutral forces, or embedded Infiltrators passing on information, or even replacing or assassinating leadership, and chances are good we won't even know it's happening until ponies start dying."

There were a few looks of concern among the crowd. I could see Blueberry considering what I said, but his look of grim determination returned a moment later. "We all know it's going to be bad, but that's why we're going. Hell, I had friends in Rust, and now we find out they're the ones that killed Emerald? People like that need to be stopped. But then you say they're holding a bunch of ponies hostage? Yeah, I ain't going to sit around all safe and pretty when I could be helping. Far as I see it, it can't be any worse for us than it already is for them."

I hesitated, looking over the group of ponies. "Like I said, I'm not going to turn away any pony that could help, but... but the world is already short enough on good ponies."

"It'll be a lot shorter on 'em if we weren't willing to help," Blueberry said. "Emerald was right about that. Gemstone isn't just hollow talk from behind a wall of turrets. We're about doing what's right, even if it costs us, because that's what the Wasteland needs."

There were murmurs of agreement as looks of unease faded. Some of the ponies stood a little taller, a few smiles starting to overtake grim expressions.

The door behind me thudded open, immediately followed by Dazzle's voice. "Okay, I grabbed all the—woah..."

I looked back. She had donned her heavy bardings, and had slung two bulging and hastily packed saddlebags across her back, while her magical energy rifle hung from its sling around her neck. The look of surprise on her face lasted only a moment before melting into a pleased smile. "...Well, all right. We're all going?"

Several ponies called out in the affirmative, and her smile grew as she approached the rest of the group. She only paused when she saw Arclight. "You too?"

He looked up from the wagon of weapons. "Somepony's got to maintain the weapons and do repairs. I'll be more useful with you ponies than I will sitting in my workshop."

"Well we'll be glad to have you along," she replied.

Dusty and I exchanged glances before he stepped forward. "Okay, I'm

not going to complain about having a few more hooves, but we're on a tight time-table. We need to get to Mareford as quickly as possible, and we don't have enough room to carry everypony."

"The pegasi have sky-wagons!" some pony in the crowd called out.

"They have two," Dazzle said, "and they're probably full-up with wounded." She then gestured to our motorwagon. "How much can that pull? Can it pull a wagon?"

Dusty frowned. "Our motorwagon's up to it, but I wouldn't trust a normal wagon to hold up to that kind of speed."

It was Arclight who spoke up next. "We've got a couple of wagons that should be up to the trip. They wouldn't hold up to full-speed driving, probably, but they'll hold up to a modest pace so long as we stay to the old caravan road."

Dusty considered that for a moment, clearly still having some concerns, but finally nodded. "Okay, but it'll have to be quick. The Loyalists are taking off in about five minutes. Echo, Starlight, could you help them?"

"Should be easy enough," Starlight said, already trotting towards the motorwagon. "We still have the rig we welded on to tow the other motorwagon, shouldn't take much to modify it."

What followed was a frantic scramble. Dusty and I helped load a few ponies and their supplies into our motorwagon, giving up our own seats to join Sickle in the cargo bed. Six ponies crammed into the cab. Dazzle climbed up to sit straddled across the side-armor of the cargo bay, and a few other ponies followed her example, clinging to the vehicle. Our wagon sagged once more under the load of ponies.

Behind us, a pair of wagons were brought in, one of which already carried two of the gate's magical energy cannons. Echo and Starlight got to work hooking them up end-to-end, cutting, welding, and just plain hammering scrap metal parts to serve their purposes, all with impressive haste. Echo's magic, particularly the ability to levitate several hundred pounds and hold it steady, seemed to help a lot.

They had just finished getting the wagons connected when a Loyalist soldier swooped in, backwinging to come to a hover beside us. "We're lifting now. Hail Burst wants to know if you're setting out now, or if we're meeting in Mareford."

"We're ready to move," Dusty replied. "We won't be making the best of time, but we should still make Mareford by nightfall. If she wants to travel together for mutual security, we'd certainly appreciate it."

"I'll let her know," the soldier replied, and zipped off.

Dusty gave one last look back at the pair of wagons behind us, linked end-to-end and packed with ponies, then turned to rap a hoof against the roof of the wagon's cab. "Okay, Starlight. Take us out."

The motor hummed, dirt crunching softly under the tires as we started to roll. New squeaks and groans joined the usual soft cacophony of sounds, and as we built up to the speed of a brisk trot, the wagons behind us rattled along.

We wound our way out from behind the store and toward the town gate. The heavy gate itself was already open, and several of the town's ponies were gathered on either side or atop the walls. Ponies called out cheerfully, waving to each other, though I caught an undercurrent of worry in the occasional damp eye or wavering smile.

As we rolled through the gate, I looked back at the trailing wagons and their cargo. The ponies there waved back happily to the ponies they were leaving behind. Their grins were sure and proud. They were good ponies, following me in the hopes that they could do the right thing and help others who couldn't help themselves.

I only hoped I wasn't leading them to their deaths.



It was dark when we rolled up to Mareford.

The old dirt road was level enough to make decent speed without destroying the towed wagons, though it had been a rough ride for the passengers. Several times, the ponies in the wagons had started looking distinctly miserable. Each time, some pony made a comment we couldn't make out, and was answered by laughs and grins. Despite the unpleasant ride, it seemed their spirits were high.

The Loyalists descended as we neared our destination, flying alongside us at a relaxed pace, with the two military sky-wagons trailing at the rear. I'm not sure if they counted as sky-tanks when they didn't carry weapons, but they were still armored flying vehicles. I'd noticed Dusty looking at them

several times during our trip, no doubt contemplating ways to make use of such hardware.

Lights danced and flickered from campfires set outside the gate, illuminating the Trotsen motorwagons and the ponies milling around them. The Gemstone ponies started murmuring amongst each other, craning to get a good look as we slowly drew closer. The Loyalists, in turn, drew back at Hail Burst's barked order, and formed into neat columns behind us.

Sandstorm's 'Beast' was easy to find, still at the head of the pack, its cannon pointed squarely at the gate. Under Dusty's direction, Starlight drove us up to the tank, and with a slow, rattling groan, our wagons finally came to a halt.

It was Axle who popped up from the tank at Dusty's call. He stared out at us for a second before snorting. "Didn't think you'd actually make it," he said, casting a glance back at the Loyalist forces, who had landed neatly behind us.

"We told you we'd be here," Dusty replied evenly. "Is Sandstorm up?"

"Yeah," Axle said, pointing off to the gate. "She's still in town, talking with their mayor."

"Guess we'd better get in there, too," Dusty said.

Starlight stuck her head out the window, twisting to look back at us. "Uh, Dusty, you sure that's a good—"

"It's fine," Dusty quickly said, cutting her off, and ignoring the questioning look Starlight gave him. Instead, he turned to address Hail Burst. "You should probably make introductions, too."

"Of course," she replied, her head turning to look at the gathered Trotsen force before looking back to Dusty. "Will Mareford be making accommodations for my ponies, or will we be camping outside of the walls?"

Dusty shrugged. "I suppose that depends on how our meeting goes."

"I see." Hail Burst turned and called out. "Cyclone! You're in charge while I'm gone. Get everypony settled in case we're staying in the field, and set pickets. Downdraft, you're with me."

Dazzle nudged Dusty's shoulder. "Should we stay out here, too?"

"You should make your introductions, too," he replied. "Besides, they better not be turning away Gemstone ponies at the gate. We can at least get all of you some decent beds for the night."

"Sounds good to me," Dazzle replied with a smile.

The motor hummed again as we slowly rattled our way up to the gate, with Hail Burst and Downdraft hovering alongside us, all under the eyes of the guards at the gate.

There must have been at least twenty militia gathered atop the walls and by the gate itself, many half-hidden in the shadows. Rifles were slung in easy reach. Light machine guns rested atop the walls, ready to pour out a hail of fire. In the recesses of the half-collapsed upper floor of some office building, the firelight flickered in a lens, the shadows almost entirely concealing the barrel of a monstrous rifle.

Three ponies stood by the gate itself, clad in the sandy-brown barding of the Mareford Militia. The two flanking the gate gripped the bits of their rifles, holding them ready, while the third stood her ground in the middle of the path, her own rifle slung across her chest. As we drew closer, she held up a hoof. "Hold up there!"

We ground to a halt once more, and she set her hoof down again. "We told you, you'll have to wait until the mayor is done talking with your boss. Until then, you're staying outside."

Dusty placed his forehooves on the roof and pulled himself up so he could be seen. "Hey, Rose. We're not Trotsen. We're bringing in representatives from Gemstone and the Enclave Loyalists. They're looking to join the fight."

"The fight? What—" The mare halted, blinking as she peered out in the dim light. Her voice sounded a little strained as she spoke again. "Dusty Trails?"

His tail flicked beside me. Even when faced with destruction, it seemed we were still wanted. "Yeah, it's me."

There was a moment of silence. Dusty didn't elaborate further, while I wondered if it was the wise choice or a missed opportunity to explain his position. The guard mare, Rose, stood silently for a moment, obviously thinking over the situation. Finally, she took a slow step back and to the side; the adrenaline spiked as I noted it was a move entirely consistent with getting out of the line of fire, until she spoke. "Maybe you'd better come in, then. I think Mayor Hardwood's going to want to talk with you."

Dusty's expression immediately brightened. "Hardwood's mayor

again?"

"He is," she replied, raising a hoof and giving a circular motion. A moment later, the gate groaned and creaked open. "I don't know if he'll be so happy to see you, but I expect he wants an explanation. And Dusty? You and yours better be on your best behavior, understand?"

"Of course," Dusty replied, nodding. I resisted the urge to look questioningly at Sickle. She'd just see it as encouragement.

We were waved through the gate. On the other side, a squad of militia ponies waited to escort us through town. I couldn't blame them for the show of caution, considering we were supposedly wanted ponies with several dozen armed ponies following us, but it didn't make me feel any more comfortable about the situation.

Even restricted to a walking pace, it took only a couple of minutes to arrive at the town hall. I was pleased to see it was apparently intact, with no signs of fire damage.

Sandstorm was coming out as we pulled up. She was frowning. Not a great sign.

The motorwagon came to a halt, and we dismounted, several dozen ponies climbing down and stretching their legs. I hopped down from the wagon and slipped past the other ponies to approach her. "How'd it go in there?"

She snorted, continuing to walk right past me. "Fucker likes to talk as much as you do."

I followed along. "Did he agree to help?"

Her tail flicked in irritation. "Only thing he decided was that it was getting late, and we should talk more in the morning."

"And will you?"

"Fuck off," she grumbled, pointedly not looking my way, but following up with, "Yeah, I'll be there."

I came to a halt, letting her walk off on her own, and turned to rejoin the rest of my group. A pair of soldiers parted from the others to head inside. Dusty informed me that they had asked us to stay put while they went to see if the mayor would see us.

Echo landed unannounced, drawing several startled reactions from both the Gemstone ponies and the militia soldiers, and neatly tucked her wings

in at her side and stood calm and proud, as if nothing was unusual about her abrupt appearance. “Do you suppose they will try to kill us?” she casually asked.

“Hah!” was Sickle’s immediate reply as she hopped down from the motorwagon with a solid thump and rattle of armor. “I’d like to see ‘em try. Seriously. I could use a good fight.”

“Settle down,” Dusty said, earning a crude gesture from Sickle.

I heard the soft clopping of Hail Burst’s power armor behind me, and turned to see her frown. “I take it there’s a problem with your little army?”

“No problem, just a delay,” I said, hoping it was true. “It’s a bit late for a big meeting.”

She gave a quiet snort. “It’s a waste of time. It isn’t like our enemies just stop as soon as night falls.”

“He’s a mayor,” I said, “not a general. I imagine he’s used to a more civilian schedule.”

“Hopefully whoever leads the ‘soldiers’ around here is a little more disciplined.”

“They are,” Dusty replied.

It was a couple of minutes before the soldiers returned. The stallion leading them approached us and spoke up clearly for everyone to hear. “Dusty Trails. Hardwood will see you and your companions. As for the rest of you, there will be a meeting in the morning at oh-eight-hundred—eight o’clock—to discuss possible arrangements. Until then: Gemstone ponies, that building across the way—” He lifted a hoof to point to an old and mostly-intact apartment building. “—serves as a shelter and inn. There should be enough room for all of you. As for the rest, we have to ask that all military forces remain outside of the city until an agreement has been reached.”

“Wonderful,” Hail Burst grumbled, while the Gemstone ponies started unloading their gear.

Starlight called out to the soldiers. “Uh, can you guys watch over our wagon while we’re in there? We don’t want anypony stealing it.”

The soldier in charge eyed her, but said, “Yeah, we’ll keep an eye on it.”

We parted ways. Hail Burst and Downdraft took off to return to their camp, while Dazzle and the other Gemstone ponies made their way to their

accommodations. As for Dusty and the rest of us, we entered the impressive town hall building, escorted by a squad of soldiers.

I would say it seemed excessive, but the barrel of Sickle's heavy machine gun was bobbing right next to my head as we walked, and a living pseudo-goddess followed close on my flanks. If anything, it was insufficient.

I hoped these soldiers hadn't come to the same conclusion. It would be an unnerving recognition, and fearful ponies are dangerous ponies.

There were some distinctly uncomfortable looks from the few ponies in the lobby as we entered. They certainly had good reason to be concerned. It was distinctly unusual, enough that I had to consider the implications. If they considered us a threat, allowing us all to enter a room with their mayor would be a significant risk. Either they were making a risky decision, or one of those two conditions weren't true.

Which meant either that they were leading us somewhere *else*, or whoever was in charge didn't think we were a risk.

So it was just a little reassuring when they led us up the stairs and down the hall to the same office I remembered from my previous visits.

What was much less reassuring was the signs of recent repairs: small patches of plaster on the walls, consistent with patched bullet holes, fresh chips and gouges in the banister, and a few places where no amount of cleaning had been able to remove the bloodstains.

A new pony sat behind the large desk where I had once seen Big Gun. He was just as old, though a bit rounder and softer in appearance. He sat back in his chair as we entered, eying us carefully, though his expression struck me as less critical, more concerned.

Dusty naturally took a place at the front of us, giving a deferential nod to the mayor. "Hardwood."

"Dusty," Hardwood replied, his voice soft and tired. He remained silent for a couple of seconds before sighing, slowly leaning forward to rest his forelegs on his desk. "Been a lot of strange stories turning up, lately. If you'd shown up a month ago, you'd be telling me your story in cuffs. But now... ever since Gun died, things have been turned upside down. Ponies keep turning up more shady shit he might have been involved in, Silverline's been up in arms about him murdering her husband and how you were framed, hell, I've got a herd of zebras that showed up out of nowhere singing your

praises. Then we've got Militia soldiers trying to stage a coup—"Dusty's ears perked in alarm. "—Gun's mercs turning bandit, all this nonsense about these so-called 'changelings'. Now you show up in the middle of it all, and..." He drew to a halt, silent for a moment before slowly shaking his head. "Hell. What's going on, Dusty? What happened to you? I knew you. You were a Ranger. I have a hard time buying that you'd turn on your own, but we had a bunch of dead ponies and no answers. Just for once, I want a simple, no brahminshit story."

"Simple story?" Dusty said. "Okay. I didn't turn on them. They turned on us. They set an ambush for us, tried to kill us, all on Big Gun's orders. He's the one that set those raiders on the water caravan, and we knew. He wanted to silence us for good."

Hardwood was slowly shaking his head, only to be interrupted at the soft thump of a small notebook landing atop his desk. Both he and Dusty looked back to me as I rebuckled the flap of my saddlebag. "The notebook belonged to a raider boss named Gutrip," I said. "He's the one who led the attack on the caravan, and took Silverline and Quicksilver. Check the last page. They were told exactly where the caravan would be, and more significantly, that the guards would leave them unprotected there."

Hardwood reached out, taking the dingy notebook, and slowly flipped through the pages until he reached the end. He stared at it long and hard, without visible reaction, before finally giving a slow, long sigh and setting it down. "I heard some traders saying the same thing. Hell, I wanted to believe you, but it just seemed so absurd to believe that some of the Militia—some of the Rangers, even!—would be involved in something so... so..." He raised a hoof, giving a weak gesture as he tried to come up with the right word, and finally gave up. "Then some of the Militia officers, ponies I'd known for years, tried to take over."

Dusty stepped in close to the desk. "What happened?"

"The day after Big Gun and Wild Runner were murdered, it was chaos. Ponies were scared, and even more so when they looked through some of Big Gun's records. Some of the staff asked me to come in and help out, just to reassure ponies until we figured out what happened and had a new mayor elected." He shook his head again. "I was here when some Rangers and Big Gun's mercs came in, said they were taking charge until things settled

down. We all said we had it handled, and then they tried to arrest us all, saying we'd murdered Gun and Runner. Guess they must have expected the rest of the Militia to go along with it, but the ponies standing guard there refused. Next thing I know, everyone's shooting.

"I spent four hours, bleeding from the leg, while Rambler held me and the others at gunpoint. Rambler! I shared drinks with him every month! I'd been friends with his wife since we could hardly walk! I'd helped take care of his kids! And he was holding a gun on me, ready to kill me like he'd killed Marionberry." He was trembling faintly, and he took a moment to draw a deep breath, calming down.

Dusty's ears flicked back. "They killed ponies?"

"Some," Hardwood said, his voice quiet. "She tried to run when they herded us into the office. Only one of the soldiers guarding the place lived, and she lost a hoof. A Ranger died when they stormed the place, too." He gave a quiet sigh. "It was a bad day."

Dusty murmured something quietly, slowly shaking his head.

Hardwood looked up again. "So they turned on you?"

"They did."

Hardwood stared for a moment before slowly nodding. His eyes slowly drifted away, looking over the rest of us. "Interesting company you keep these days."

"It's been an interesting couple of months," Dusty replied. "You know why we're here."

"Yes," Hardwood said with a tired sigh. "The supposed 'changelings'."

"There's nothing supposed about them," Dusty said. "I've seen them."

Hardwood raised an eyebrow. "You have?"

"Yes, sir."

Another short pause. "And how bad is it?"

"To be blunt? They scare the shit out of me."

Hardwood fell silent again, thinking for a good while before finally shaking his head once more. "This whole thing is a mess. Has been for months." He slowly slipped out of his chair, walking around the desk with a pronounced limp. He came to a halt in front of Dusty, and raised a hoof.

Dusty lifted his own hoof, and they shook.

"I never really bought what they said," Hardwood said. "I know some

called you a traitor for leaving, but I know why you left, and it just doesn't jive with you being some murderer. I knew there had to be more to it." He lowered his hoof again, looking past Dusty to one of the nearby soldiers. "They're free to go."

The soldier nodded.

"Thank you," Dusty said, and Hardwood gave a weak smile, nodding in reply.

"I get the feeling it's going to be more chaos heaped on all the crap we've already got, but it's good to see you again, Dusty. I... also want to hear all the details of what happened. There's still a lot of unanswered questions." He groaned slightly as he leaned against the table, taking some weight off one of his rear legs. "But that can wait for tomorrow. It's too late to be getting into all of that."

"Of course," Dusty said, offering a smile. "We'll talk in the morning?"

"If I have any time with all the other talking I'm going to be doing," Hardwood said, weakly mirroring the smile, though it quickly faded.

"Well, we'll get out of your mane, then. Goodnight, Hardwood."

Hardwood nodded, and Dusty turned, heading for the door. We followed, while the soldiers slowly dispersed as word was passed, casting only a couple of wary glances our way. The four watching over our motorwagon were a bit more wary, but another soldier came trotting up, passing on the news, and they let us pass.

Starlight parked the motorwagon beside the makeshift inn, and we made our way in. Dusty handled getting the rooms, but was otherwise tight-lipped.

He remained so until we had gone upstairs to a vacant common room, with the doors into our rooms, and well away from any prying ears.

"A coup," Dusty said as we came to a halt by one of the room's doors. "Shit like that's exactly what I was worried would happen if Big Gun was killed. A bunch of ponies *died* because of it."

I gave a quiet sigh. "I know."

"Yeah, you know," he grumbled.

"I know it's not always the most persuasive of arguments," I said, "but it's likely it saved far more ponies."

He snorted irritably.

"I don't like what happened, either," I said, stepping forward to look him a little more squarely in the face. "I don't like people dying as a result of my actions, but I still think we made the right call in a difficult situation."

"Oh, shut up," he grumbled. "I don't care. Fuck, I'm not even disagreeing with you. I'm just pissed." He waved a hoof off to the side. "That's your room." Then he walked across the common room to another door.

I frowned, contemplating whether I should say more, but decided against it. These events were a little close to home for him, even in a more literal sense. I figured he could use some time alone.

Though with the way Sickle followed him, I doubt she intended to give him that opportunity.

Instead, I turned, entering the room Starlight and I would share for the night.



I woke at exactly six, having made use of the PipBuck's alarm-clock function for the first time since I had acquired it.

I stretched, rose, and took care of the usual morning prep. Dusty was waiting in the common room, with a couple plates loaded with cooked antique boxed mush. He gave a little nod to us and gestured to the plate he wasn't eating from, which seemed to say to me that he didn't particularly want to talk, but wasn't holding a grudge.

We settled in to our mediocre breakfast, joined several minutes later by a very lethargic and possibly hungover Sickle. She flopped noisily onto a couch that was a little too small for her, and sprawled out on her back with a quiet groan.

When he finished eating, Dusty started bringing out all his weapons, unloading and stripping them down. "There's going to be fighting, soon," he said quietly, not looking up from his rifle as he removed the bolt. "You should tend to your weapons. You too, Sickle."

She grumbled something unintelligible, and didn't budge.

As for myself, I agreed with Dusty, and started pulling out my own weapons.

Starlight sat beside me. "Guess I should maintain my weapons, too." She then sat there silently for a second. "Oh, look, I'm done."

Dusty snorted softly. "Magical energy weapons need maintenance, too."

"Sure," Starlight said. "Keep the dirt out of the case, make sure things don't get knocked out of alignment, maybe clean the lens. It takes a couple of seconds, tops."

"Well, if you're not cleaning your weapons, how about you help Echo looking over the motorwagon. We drove it pretty hard, I'd rather not have it break down to something we could catch early."

Starlight's expression brightened. "Okay, that sounds more like it." She quickly snatched up her saddlebags. "Don't take too long!" she called out as she trotted off down the stairs.

"Guess that answers where Echo is," I said as I opened up my rifle, while hoping the offer of casual conversation might break the ice.

To my relief, Dusty took the offered gesture. "She's been anxious about it being left alone," he said, though his attention was focused on the bolt of his rifle. "Something about all that advanced pre-war tech just lying out there in the open."

"I suppose that makes sense," I said, then paused as a thought occurred to me. "Shouldn't that be wartime tech, though?"

Dusty looked up, blinking in surprise as he thought on that. "Huh. Everypony says pre-war, but I guess most of this stuff isn't from *before* the war. Never really thought of it before. I wonder why that is."

"I guess because it's less of a mouthful than 'pre-megaspell-apocalypse,'" I offered, and he snorted in amusement.

He fell into silence again, but I was satisfied that things were good between us. Being an experienced soldier, I imagine he might be familiar with the idea of even good decisions having hard costs. I know the idea of a commander making a decision that will kill some of his soldiers in order to save far more is a common cliche, but it's one that always struck me as having a solid basis in fact.

After a moment, he addressed Sickle again. "Seriously, though, you should look over your weapon. It won't take long."

She groaned a little louder, a hind-leg lazily kicking in the air. "Fuuu... It's too goddesses-fucking early for that shit." She cracked a smile, lazily flopping a forehoof across her crotch. "Tell you what: you come over here and fuck me 'till I'm good and awake."

He rolled his eyes, returning to his weapons. “Not happening.”

“Aww,” Sickle said in mock disappointment. “That’s not what you said last night.”

Dusty’s jaw tensed, but he didn’t reply.

As we lapsed into silence, I focused on the task at hoof. For a relatively mundane task, there was something satisfying about working on that rifle. It was an intricate and complicated machine, where so many parts worked together to produce a single result. It wasn’t quite as satisfying as coding, but there was certainly a degree of puzzle-ness to the procedure.

The similarity kind of fell apart when I pulled the pin from the bolt and started brushing it clean. Carbon build-up is hard to map to a coding analogy, though I did crack a smile when I considered that perhaps my rifle just had horrible memory management.

I had just started reassembling the bolt group when Starlight returned, walking up to where I sat. “Hey, Whisper?”

The firing pin slid neatly through the bolt, holding the rotating cam in place, and I carefully picked up the retaining pin; it was a bit awkward with just my mouth and hooves to work with, but having an earth pony as my standard disguise had given me enough practice to manage it. “Hmm?”

“Yeah, I just thought of something I should probably ask you about,” she said. There was a pause while I slid the retaining pin into place and gave a gentle tug on the rear of the firing pin to confirm it. Then Starlight spoke again. “Um... in private?”

I looked up to see her awkward half-smile.

Before I could say anything, Sickle chuckled. “Soooomepony’s getting their morning fucks.”

I sighed, but didn’t bother shooting her an irritated glance. She’d just find it amusing. Starlight didn’t, either, though her ears flicked back for a moment. “Sure,” I said, looking at the reassembled bolt. It’d take only a couple of seconds to put it back in and close up the rifle, but I still hadn’t gone over the barrel or gas system. “Dusty, could you watch my stuff?”

“Of course,” he said, in the midst of checking over his magazines.

“Thanks,” I said, setting the bolt assembly down and rising to my hooves. Sickle just lay there, watching us as we left.

Starlight followed me into the room. She looked concerned, and absently

left the door open as she entered. I stepped back, shutting it behind her.

Outside, I heard Sickle finally getting up, her armored hooves thumping heavily on the floor.

Now, I'm going to have to digress slightly.

People have a certain psychological need for control in their lives. It can manifest in all manner of strange and even unforeseen ways, but it's there.

This is a danger to Infiltrators for two reasons.

First, we have to recognize that there are many situations where we do *not* have control. We might be able to stack the odds more in our favor, but in the end, our fate is often completely out of our hooves. A mistake by someone else, compromised information networks, even completely baseless or unreasonable assumptions made by someone else might lead to an Infiltrator's capture or death. Recognizing that lack of control can be terrifying, and it's one of the hardest things that an Infiltrator must overcome.

But equally dangerous are the situations where we *do* have control. When you act in secrecy, arranging things behind the scenes, there are times when you set something in motion that your target, whether a person or an organization, has absolutely no chance to prevent. A good scheme, properly executed, is like a work of art. It's a remarkably pleasant sensation, that feeling of power, where for a fleeting moment, you're the one pulling the strings. For that moment, you hold the fate of a project, a life, a country, in your hooves.

In a life where we normally have so little control over our fate, there is a natural desire to hang onto that fleeting sensation for as long as possible. To drag it out just a little bit, to savor the feeling. To show your target that, for just that moment, you have absolute power over them. It's one of the psychological factors addressed in our training. No matter how tempting or satisfying it is, a good Infiltrator can't indulge in such dangerous pleasures. A good Infiltrator doesn't taunt their defeated foe. They don't give clever one-liners. They don't monologue and explain their masterstroke like some Con Mane or Daring Do villain.

A good Infiltrator lures their target into a false sense of security, and then shoots them in the back without a word.

I never heard the shot.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

# Damage

Out of the abyss of nothingness, a hint of light was the first thing that I can consciously remember. It didn't mean anything. It simply was. It was all that was. Nothing else existed, even thought, but that little hint of gray in the dark stirred something. It grew, and as it grew, I slowly became aware. A thought slowly bubbled to the surface, and I knew where I was: the entrance of my hive, looking out the entrance tunnel at the light outside.

I heard sound. I couldn't discern any details, any meaning to the sound, but I knew it must be my sisters, walking the tunnel with me.

I ached. My body felt oddly tight. I realized I was on my back. I wasn't looking down the tunnel. I was... underwater? The light of day filtered down to me, cloudy and indistinct. The sound I heard was... a voice? Echoing faintly through the water to my ears. I couldn't breathe, but I was still breathing. Somehow that made sense. I must have transformed into a fish.

It continued to make sense until it didn't, and new scenarios floated to the surface. My brain struggled slowly up to speed, picking out fragments of memories and imagination to piece together and make sense of the jumbled and incomplete signals that reached it.

What finally pierced the haze of slowly dawning confusion was pain. The aching tightness I felt steadily grew in intensity, a focal point that my consciousness steadily crystallized around. As the pain grew, so did the hazy light. The gentle touch of affection teased at the edge of my senses, and I reflexively fed on it. Somewhere, muffled yet increasingly clear, I could hear Starlight's calm, gentle voice.

My eyes opened, lids slow and heavy, and immediately shut once more against the searing light. Starlight's voice was still there, soft and coaxing, then distant and loud, then soft once more. Again, I struggled to open my eyes, the blinding light slowly fading.

Starlight was still talking. I tried to answer. I think I managed a moan.

Something cool was pressed to my mouth, and something wet spilled across my tongue. Thirst suddenly flared up, and I weakly tried to grip the object with my mouth, struggling to drink as much as I could. I tried to

grab at it, as well, but I don't think my hooves were listening to me.

A warmth flooded through me as I drank greedily on what my brain insisted must have been at least half a gallon of fluid, yet it did almost nothing to alleviate my thirst. The world steadily focused. The pain seemed to both fade and grow more focused, in a way my half-awake brain couldn't quite comprehend. My head and chest both felt like they were in a vice.

A dim silhouette steadily resolved into the soft, smiling face of Starlight, an empty healing potion floating beside her. The previously blinding light was nothing more than the glow of cloud-filtered sunlight through the thick curtains beside her.

She spoke again, and finally, I was able to make out the words. "That's better. You all awake now?"

I opened my mouth to reply, only to wince in pain. Something was wrong with my jaw. It felt as if the carapace along my cheek might have been cracked. That thought led to noting the sharp teeth my tongue had touched. I was in my natural form.

Why was I in my natural form? And why did I ache? I tried to dig up the memories, but my memory was a morass at the time. I vaguely remembered something about working on my weapons and Starlight talking to me. I became very concerned that I had accidentally shot myself.

I must have missed several seconds, as Starlight was bringing a cup to my mouth. "...need your fluids. You've been out a while. If you wake up a bit more, we can get you some painkillers, too."

Dusty had entered at some point without me noticing. He stood opposite Starlight, though I couldn't make sense of his expression.

I tried to drink greedily from the cup, but Starlight took it slowly, a hoof gently supporting my head. When it was done, she let it down again, and I sank into the pillow, panting. Even in my degraded mental state, that stood out as alarming. I was winded from taking a drink.

All sorts of questions immediately leaped to mind. What happened? Where was I? Why was I injured? How bad was it?

What I managed to croak out was simply, "...What..."

Starlight leaned in close, gently looping a foreleg around my shoulders. She didn't squeeze, though the touch still called up a twinge of pain from my side. "You're okay," she said, her face close enough to be comforting

without being so close as to seem uncomfortable or intimate, and I'm not entirely sure why that evaluation immediately came to mind.

The thought lasted only a moment before I managed a weak smile. Starlight was there. Starlight was good. That meant everything was good.

It was several more seconds before the questions started teasing at my senses again. It was around then that I registered the E.F.S. indicators in my vision. While it didn't give me a lot of details, it did indicate that I was in poor shape, just in case the pain wasn't making that clear.

"W-why," I croaked, then paused, swallowing, and trying again. "...Why am I hurt?" My voice was off, my words tumbling around in my mouth and coming out all wrong. My jaw didn't move right.

"It doesn't matter right now," Starlight said, her smile faltering for a moment before returning. "Right now, let's just focus on you getting better, okay?"

I found myself mirroring her smile, my head sinking a little deeper into the pillow, and savoring the gentle feeling of her affection. That lasted only a moment before the concerns surfaced once more. I was starting to recognize how impaired I was, how slow and muddled my thoughts were. Something was very wrong. Naturally, I had to figure out what was wrong and how to fix it. "But... what happened?"

Starlight's hoof gently touched my chest, which I finally recognized was covered by a blanket. I was in a bed. "Don't worry about that," she said, voice soft and soothing. "You need to rest, okay?"

The sound of her voice was so gentle and pleasant. I focused on the sound. A moment later I twitched, fighting off the lull of sleep; I could feel myself shutting down, dozing off, but I couldn't do that yet. I had responsibilities, and no time for sleep.

"Details," I asked. Even just that much made my chest ache. I needed to wake up, clear my mind, focus, and evaluate my situation. Maybe I could transform into something that handled the pain or injuries better, but I didn't even know how hurt I was.

They had exchanged looks, silent for a moment, until Dusty finally spoke. "You were shot."

I remember thinking that didn't seem right at all. Being shot seems like one of those things you should remember. I had a hard time articulating

the thought, so I simply repeated myself. “Details.”

He frowned, but finally replied, “A changeling tried to assassinate you. She shot you in the back.”

I actually had to stop and think on why a changeling would be trying to kill me. When I finally connected the thought, the memory of Serenity brought a spike of adrenaline. I was their enemy, and they were targeting me specifically.

Most times, I find adrenaline a nuisance, between the narrowing of senses and tendency towards jitteriness, but it beats the heck out of coffee for waking up. I can’t complain about the painkilling effect, either.

“How... how bad am I?” I wheezed, fighting off the sudden urge to cough. I rolled my head to the side, spotting the cup floating in Starlight’s magic. She must have recognized where I was looking, as she filled it again before floating it over. This time I was able to lift a foreleg to gently guide it, ignoring the twinge of pain at the motion.

Dusty waited until I had finished drinking to answer. “Bad enough that you’ve had four healing potions and surgery, and you’ve been unconscious for about thirty hours.”

Thirty hours. That was too long. What had I missed? Had the Trotsen forces already left? Had I slept through the entire fight? Too many questions came all at once, but as I slowly fell back into my training, I shelved them. I had to deal with my current situation before I could adequately handle anything more grand.

I tried to lift my PipBuck-clad leg, but I only managed to lift it an inch before the hot stab of pain made me set it down again. I was breathing faster just from that little effort. I repeated myself. “Details.”

“You need to rest.”

I looked at Dusty, doing everything in my ability to keep my voice firm and even, even as the world skewed strangely around my head; I was pretty sure I was observing the late effects of a concussion. “Dusty,” I said, pausing a moment to catch my breath. “I need details.”

He continued to frown down at me, staring right into my eyes. I held his gaze, putting all my focus into maintaining a steady stare. I must have managed it, as he gave a little nod and spoke.

“She had a weapon just like yours. A standard Equestrian Army pistol

with suppressor, firing subsonic hollow-points." He gestured to my side. "She hit you from just off your flank, two rounds into the back right side of your chest. Two perforations of the right lung, one perforation of the left lung, laceration of the trachea and esophagus, serious damage to the diaphragm, and heavy blood loss. One of the rounds lodged against your heart. Your... shell, or whatever you'd call it, was shattered in one spot. We're guessing one of the rounds broke a rib before you transformed."

I realized Starlight had averted her eyes, her expression tight and fragile.

Dusty continued. "She followed up with two rounds to the back of your head, but you got lucky. The first shots must have knocked out your shapeshifting, so you had your armor. One hit low and to the side, slipped past the helmet, shattered your lower jaw, and lodged in your nasal passage. The other one struck the back of your helmet. That stopped it, but it still caused a minor fracture across the back of your skull."

I lay there numbly for a few seconds, piecing everything together. It seemed so unnatural. "That's... a lot. How...?"

"Immediate treatment with healing potions," Dusty said. "And she didn't have the time to finish the job. I forgot how freakishly fast Sickle can be. Shit, she was up and moving before I even heard the shots. Busted through the door, took down the assassin, and I got a healing potion in you to stop the bleeding."

"That's... still a lot."

"Blood loss was the biggest danger, and healing potions handle that very well. A bigger problem was getting the bullets out of you to do more serious healing. There aren't many ponies around that can do surgery *and* wouldn't freak out at you being a changeling. It took us hours to get Soaring Heart to come help you."

I groaned softly, letting my head sink back. "...Great. I bet Echo loved my secrets biting me in the flank." I winced, closing my eyes, and quickly added. "Sorry. That's... not fair."

I heard Dusty's grunt, followed by a stretch of silence before he finally spoke again. "There's more."

My eyes cracked open again, blinking a few times against the blurriness. He met my gaze before continuing.

"She wasn't the only changeling," he said. "Serenity hit back."

The fading tingle of adrenaline picked up again. "...How bad?"

"Bad," Dusty said. This time, he didn't wait for me to insist on details. "Hardwood is dead. Aurora is dead. Sightline, the Militia commander, is dead. Hail Burst was badly injured. One of Sandstorm's riders died stopping an assassination attempt on her, and Axle's still in bad shape. Then there's the sabotage. They planted demolitions. Destroyed three motorwagons, damaged another two and one of the skywagons. Killed about a dozen Trotsen ponies and one of the Loyalist soldiers, plus some miscellaneous casualties."

I felt like sinking into the bed and never coming out. This was bad. We hadn't even gotten to the fight, and already Serenity had hit us hard. "What... what happened since then?"

"A whole lot of nothing," Dusty said, a distinct grumble to his tone. "Mareford's a mess, sorting out leadership. The Militia is doing well enough, but the town itself is all chaos. Sandstorm's pissed beyond all belief and growing impatient. She wants Mareford to pitch in, but the ponies running the mayor's office are scared of getting involved now. Hail Burst isn't impressed by any of this, and is talking about getting her ponies to safety. Gemstone's still in, mostly thanks to Dazzle, but they're pretty much the only ponies still on-board with the plan. It's a shit show. You'd think being hit like this would make ponies *more* likely to work together."

I listened, taking it in, digesting it.

Then I rolled weakly to my side, grit my teeth against the pain, and started pushing myself up.

Dusty was there in an instant, his hooves moving to my shoulders. "Oh, no. You need to rest and recover."

I'd like to say I fought back, but that might imply that my feeble resistance had any chance of success. I found myself on my back again, with his hooves resting gently atop my chest. "Just rest," he said.

"No," I wheezed. Breathing was surprisingly difficult. I weakly raised my hooves, clutching at his forelegs. I focused all my energy into focusing on him and speaking in a hard, firm tone, though I imagine the effect was less than I imagined it to be. "Dusty, listen to me. There isn't time for rest. If this falls apart, we're all *done*. Serenity wins. I need—"

I coughed, pain lancing through my side with the sudden convulsion

and leading to several more pained coughs. I clutched Dusty's leg tighter, focusing on the pain for a moment, eyes clenching shut. When they opened again, I fixed him with a glare. "I need... to do... what I can." I weakly shook my head, the world twisting strangely with the movement. "I know I'm in bad shape, but... but I can still talk. That's what I'm good at. If I can help keep things from falling apart, then I need to do so, before it's too late for all of us."

He had that tight frown again. That frown where he really disliked what I was saying even though he knew I was right. His hooves didn't move. "Whisper, you can't even stand up right now."

"Then help me stand."

He stared silently for several seconds before replying. "You're not going to stay put no matter what I say, are you?"

"No," I said, letting my hooves slide back down to my sides. "You'd have to tie me down, and I'd just shapeshift out of that."

He gave a quiet snort, and after a moment, looked up to Starlight. "Get some painkillers."

A minute later, Starlight passed a couple of pills to Dusty, who had produced another healing potion. He leaned over to give me the pills. I weakly raised a hoof, blocking his. "Only one," I said, already breathing a bit harder from the sudden movement. "I've had those before. Too strong. I... I need my head clear. I need to think."

"You sure?" he asked. "It won't do much good if you can't think past the pain."

"Can handle that," I replied, eyes half-shut. "Can... change. Relieve some injury."

Starlight finally spoke again. "You can heal by shapeshifting?"

"Not heal," I said, head lolling to the side as I looked to her. "Relieve. It's... complicated. Rewiring nerves is hard, but... but I can work around the injuries."

It was a bit of a simplification, and possibly over-selling my ability, but it was reasonably accurate.

"Okay, then," Dusty said, removing one of the pills. "We can always give you more if you need it later."

"Yeah," I said. "That healing potion should help, too."

"We're running low on these," he said. "But you're right. We need ponies sticking together. Stocking up on healing potions won't matter if Serenity wins."

My hooves wavered as I reached up and gently clutched the healing potion. The pill I risked taking in my magic, receiving only a faint throbbing sensation along the back of my head for the effort. The small exertion also left me well aware of how depleted my magic was. I'd burned through a lot of it just healing up.

Starlight's affection was still there, and I continued to cautiously feed on it.

I downed the pill and slowly drank the potion. The magic took hold immediately, the pounding headache and searing pain in my side fading a touch. I laid my head back, waiting for the painkillers to kick in, and bracing myself for what was coming.



In the next half-hour or so, I managed two significant accomplishments: I assumed a fully upright sitting position with only minimal help from Starlight, and transformed into my standard disguise without complicating my injuries.

The healing potions had mended my skeletal structure—carapace at first, bones after my transformation—to the point where nothing was shifting and tearing at my soft inner bits, but I still had significant soft tissue damage, as my PipBuck happily informed me via its medical screen. The painkillers were doing their job, which was both good and bad at the same time. The pain was much less immediate, but my head felt stuffy and muddled. I didn't like it.

I'd also restructured and rewired several parts of my disguise as best I could, despite my temporary impairment. I *think* it worked, though with how much the pain and drugs were obscuring things, I couldn't be sure. I left the minor outward physical signs of injury, however; not only would it be more consistent with my impaired behavior, it might be something I could play for sympathy.

Before those alterations, I had felt weaker than when I had emerged from that chrysalis two months earlier, starving and atrophied. Even after, I still felt weakened, but functional.

After a few minutes to recover from the effort and catch my breath, I finally felt ready to move on. "Okay. Dusty, what's the situation? How do we get these ponies talking again?"

"Oh, they're talking," Dusty said with a grimace. "At least, as long as you count arguing and bitching as talking."

When I prompted him for details, he clarified. "Hardwood had made plans to have organized talks with all the foreign representatives and key members of Mareford. So far everypony's holding to that, even Sandstorm, though she seems to be losing her patience for the whole thing. She's getting the last of the weapons she 'traded' for tonight, so I wouldn't be surprised if she takes off in the morning. She's certainly threatened to."

I slowly nodded, a hoof placed firmly on the bed beside me to keep my balance as the whole world wobbled. "Okay. So we need to make sure that doesn't happen. Are they having any of these meetings before then?"

"Just one," Dusty said. "Right now. It's supposed to go for a few more hours, but like I said, Sandstorm's getting impatient."

"So we need to do this now," I said, heaving another sigh. "Okay. Let's... let's do this."

The first step, of course, was getting to my hooves. I turned slightly to the side, sliding slowly off the edge of the bed. Starlight moved to help support me, but I weakly waved her off with a hoof. "No, let me... let me try first."

She hesitated, obviously wanting to help, but let me try on my own.

I got one hoof down to the floor, and slowly slid until I dropped onto all fours. A thin line of pain ran across my side, along the partially mended rib, but I grit my teeth and bore it. I had to stay leaning against the bed for several seconds, but after another stabilizing breath, I gently pushed myself away. I wavered, spreading my hooves a little wider. My sense of balance seemed delayed, as if it took a second for the sensation of 'down' to make its way through my muddled brain, but I managed to keep my balance. My side felt sore, but not pained. I could do this.

"So far, so good." I heaved another deep breath and took a tentative step forward. It was slow and awkward, and the motion made my side ache horribly, but I retained my balance. My right foreleg trembled slightly, but held. "Okay. So... the meeting."

Dusty led the way out of the room, while Starlight remained close on my flanks, ready to step in at a moment's notice. I limped slowly along at a slow, shuffling pace. Not my best showing.

Both Sickle and Echo were waiting for us in the next room. Sickle watched me for a moment before cracking a smile and standing. "Well, shit, it's about time you got up."

Starlight snorted in sudden irritation. "Shut up, Sickle. She was *shot*."

"And I don't hear her bitching about it," she replied, casually walking up to me. She paused, eying me for a moment before giving a chuckle. "Well, it might not have been a minigun or big fucking rifle, but hey, not bad." Then she gave me a bone-jarring pat on the back. I grit my teeth against the pain that lanced through my side, a quiet hiss of pain escaping my lips past all my efforts.

Echo had stood as well, and now moved briskly to interpose herself between us. "Will you please stop trying to aggravate her wounds?"

"Oh, fuck off," Sickle said. "She took a couple shots to the head and got back up. A pat on the back ain't going to kill her."

"From you, it might," Echo replied. With her standing between us, I couldn't see her expression, but I'm sure she was glaring.

By then I was able to breathe normally again, the pain in my side steadily receding to a deep ache. "Everyone... please, we have more important matters to deal with." I paused, then added, "And Sickle?"

She looked to me, her smile fading away to her more typical, vaguely irritated look.

"...Thank you for saving me."

Her head tilted slightly, apparently surprised at where I went. Then she shrugged. "Shit, I got to stomp a bug. That's good enough for me."

"Well I still appreciate it."

She just shrugged again.

I paused to look around our gathered group. "As for the meeting... we should remain alert. If Serenity still has any agents in Mareford, we could be walking into danger."

Echo gave a snort. "They had best not attempt anything. I will not permit them to harm you again."

"Heh, I hope they try something," Sickle said, grinning. "I could do with

squishing some more bugs.”

I paused, and though I was fairly certain, I had to ask. “The assassin. I assume she didn’t survive?”

Sickle laughed. “Fuck no. Shit, it’s too bad you were out. You should have seen the splatter she made.”

I grimaced. “I thought so. Still... if another changeling shows up, it might be advantageous to capture her alive, if possible.”

“Eh, we’ll see,” Sickle said. “How many limbs can one of you bugs lose before dying?”

“Not many,” I said. I really didn’t have the energy to spar with her. “Let’s go.”

We headed out. While the meeting was being held at the town hall, just across the street, it still took an agonizingly long time to get there. The worst part was the stairs down from our rooms, which I had to take sideways, slowly moving one hoof at a time until I stood on a single step, before starting on the next. I distracted myself from the discomfort by listening to Dusty’s description of the situation and ponies I would be meeting. It mostly worked.

By the time we had climbed the stairs in the Town Hall and approached the old conference room, I had a tentative plan formed.

We entered with Dusty and myself in the lead. Ponies were talking, and while the conversation didn’t halt at our entrance, many ponies looked over to us. Reactions were distinctly mixed. Sandstorm and Hail Burst both frowned as they looked at me. Many of the Mareford ponies eyed Dusty, their expressions wary. Dazzle, who was looking a little worn down, brightened again upon seeing me.

At one end of the table sat the Mareford mayoral staff Dusty had told me about. Holly, Brushfire, and Mulberry all looked at us before returning to the conversation without missing a beat. Sitting beside them was Two Bits who, due to losses, had inherited command of the Militia, at least temporarily. He gave us a careful look, though he finished up with a small nod directed to Dusty. Finally, on the opposite side of the mayoral staff, sat Seroon. It was a little surprising to see him there, but Dusty had told me Seroon had quickly impressed Hardwood, to the point that the staff still consulted with him. He certainly seemed to have taken well to the role, and

looked relatively relaxed compared to the ponies around him, even giving a soft smile our way. A touch of appreciative affection touched at my senses, and I thankfully drew on the energy he and Dazzle offered me.

There were other ponies, too, enough to make the fairly spacious room feel a little cramped. Sandstorm had a half-dozen of her riders behind her. Even more Mareford ponies were gathered around their end of the table, including a couple of more military-looking ponies and another of Seroon's tribe. Hail Burst was relatively light, with only a single soldier at her side, although the power armor—menacing even with the blue and rainbow detailing—made their presence much more pronounced. Only Dazzle had shown up alone, it seemed.

"We heard you the first fifteen times," Holly was saying, her impatience clear in her tone. "But right now, the only army I see is the one you've camped outside our gates in an attempt to extort us."

Clearly, negotiations were not going well.

Sandstorm stopped glaring at me to shoot back a reply. "Well if you'd pull your head out of your flank for half a second, maybe you wouldn't need other ponies to tell you what's going on. Fuck, a bunch of their spies just bent you over the table, and you *still* don't see it!"

"Funny how they only became a problem when you showed up," Holly replied.

That seemed like a perfect time for me to step forward and interject. "Excuse me."

And I was ignored. "Oh, right," Sandstorm said with clear disgust. "I forgot. It doesn't matter if shit's going wrong, so long as it only happens outside your walls."

"Excuse me," I said again, ribs protesting as I tried to bring my voice up to something more than a quiet conversational tone.

Holly snorted in irritation, while Mulberry took the opportunity to reply. "I would like to help, but we have to look to the safety of our citizens first."

"Excuse me." I even managed to speak loudly enough that most of the table might have heard that I had said something, even if they likely couldn't make out precisely what I had said past the loud conversation.

"Oh, I'd *love* to hear you explain that one to the ponies in Stinkpit and

Hayseed. Let me guess, you had to protect your citizen's right to steal from them?"

Dazzle cut in. "Perhaps we should listen to what Whisper has to—"

"We did no such thing!" Brushfire shouted. "Those towns attacked our ponies!"

Mulberry quickly added, "And even if it's true that Big Shot had set things up to fake it, we still—"

**"Shut the fuck up!"**

I cringed as Sickle's powerful bellow pounded at my ears in the enclosed space, ratcheting up the headache a notch. In the stunned silence, she pointed a bladed hoof at me, her teeth bared in a snarl. "Whisper's talking."

And with that, every eye in the room was on me.

I carefully straightened up, taking a quick breath before speaking. "I'm... sorry about that interruption," I said, even as Sickle snorted. "Also, I apologize if I'm a little hard to hear. I still haven't recovered fully from my injuries, and I'm afraid I can't manage much volume."

No harm in playing for a bit of sympathy right off the bat.

It was Seroon who spoke first. "I hope I speak for all of us when I say that I am happy to see you are still with us, and to wish you a swift recovery from your injuries."

I smiled, softly. "Thank you. I should probably still be in bed recovering, but with everything that's happened, I felt I had to be here." I turned to the mayoral staff. "I understand that you have to look after your own citizens. I won't even try to argue that you should not, but you need to understand the threat you're facing to do so. Queen Chrysalis, the Serenity hive, they're coming. They've already wiped out one settlement. This gathering army is the best chance to stop them. If it fails, you'll still have to face them, only you'll do it alone."

"So ponies keep saying," Holly said, "but we haven't had any problems before this army arrived at our gates."

"Your government had been infiltrated, possibly for months," I said. "Wild Runner had been replaced by a changeling. I'm not certain exactly how long it had been, but every indication suggests it was for quite some time." Or at least, that was the scenario that made the most sense.

They shared a look of surprise, which thankfully gave me the oppor-

tunity to catch my breath again. “And how do you claim to know this?” Brushfire asked.

“Because I’ve made a point of learning all I could about Serenity’s activities. I know more about the capabilities of changelings and the threat Serenity’s assassins pose than any *pony* in this room.”

Behind me, I heard Hail Burst give a quiet snort at my wording.

I continued to press the point, even as the ache in my side started to grow again. “And more than that, they’ve attacked you directly. You might argue over why they did so, but it should make it clear that they hold no good intentions for you and have no problem killing anyone to get what they want. All it took for them to start killing ponies here was the mere possibility that you might be a problem to them.”

The trio looked to each other, with Holly murmuring quietly.

Before they came to a consensus, Two Bits cleared his throat to draw their attention. When they looked his way, he spoke. “It’s clear they have hostile intentions. Striking back with multiple allies gives us a stronger force and lets us control the circumstances of the conflict. It’s the reasonable response to being attacked, and gives us the greatest advantage.”

I was pleased to see that he was on the side of the allied effort. That meant more pressure we could make use of.

Holly shook her head. “We don’t even know if there will *be* a conflict.”

“They’ve killed our people,” Two Bits replied. “They drew blood. If they want peace, they can come out and say so, but until then, I’m under the opinion that these changelings just declared war on us.”

Mulberry shifted in her seat, ears drooping. “I agree it’s a... hostile act, but ‘war’ just seems a little...” She gestured vaguely with a hoof, as if searching for an appropriate word, but ended up leaving it unsaid.

Seroon slowly and gently put a hoof on the table, and immediately, the Mareford ponies stopped and looked at him in anticipation. I wasn’t sure if I should be impressed or concerned. In just a week, he’d impressed the ponies of Mareford enough that they were listening seriously to him. The only question I had was whether this was due to insight or personality on his part, or simply a sign of how desperate the ponies of Mareford were.

“If I might interject,” he said, his voice soft, but perfectly clear over the now-quiet room. “I know my kind has certain reputations. One of

those reputations is for the use of assassins. It's true. My tribe may be descended from soldiers, but we have carried the history of our people with us. Assassins were a respected profession, and while our ancestors did not possess those skills to pass down, they did pass down our understanding of them as a part of our culture." He placed his other forehoof on the table beside the first, leaning gently on the surface. "You see, soldiers and assassins served similar goals."

One hoof raised slightly. "A soldier is the sword, able to hew flesh or deflect a hostile blade." He set that hoof down, and raised the other. "But the assassin is a scalpel. It makes the tiniest of incisions, but wielded with skill and restraint, it can cut out infection and save the whole body... or it can sever an artery and kill it."

His hooves returned to the table. "But it's a delicate thing. A fine blade. If you attempt to use it for every problem, it becomes dull, brittle. You risk breaking it. You can not hack wildly away with it, like a foal clearing brush with a machete. Neither can you make the aggressive slices and thrusts you can with a sword. You have to use patience, a delicate touch, and most of all, discretion."

He looked squarely at the trio of mayoral staff. "This Serenity they speak of has sent its assassins into this city. They see Mareford as a threat, one great enough that they have spent the lives of two of their assassins, and an untold amount of effort and resources, simply to strike at us. They have marked us all as their enemy, and they must intend us harm."

Brushfire looked uneasy as he replied. "We don't really know any of that, though. All we know is that the assassins were changelings, but we don't know anything about what's really going on. Sending out the Militia all on the word of some strangers is inviting a worse attack."

"There is more," Seroon said, and slowly swept a hoof around the room. "Consider: who did they attack?" He gave them a moment before answering himself. "They attacked settlement leaders. Military commanders. They destroyed equipment that was to be used against them." Then he lifted his hoof once more, slowly turning it to point straight at me. "And they attacked Whisper. They lost one of their assassins trying to kill this mare. That act stood out to me, and the message it delivers is clear." He calmly crossed his hooves on the table. "This Serenity sees her as a threat on par

with the leaders of the most powerful cities in the Wasteland, and we should listen to her words with the utmost attention.”

I absolutely love that he was able to put so much weight behind my words, but as an Infiltrator, that was an alarming number of eyes suddenly scrutinizing me.

Holly was the first to speak the question that must have immediately come to everyone’s mind: “Why?”

Seroon simply gave me a little smile, and left me to answer.

I felt increasingly exhausted under the weight of all their attention. I took a deep breath, steadyng myself, and spoke. “Because I know how they work. I know what changeling Infiltrators are capable of, the tactics they use, and the best ways to defend against them. I know Serenity’s strengths and weaknesses, and I’ve been spreading that information. Serenity’s greatest advantage was that nopony knew that they even existed. Now they’ve lost that advantage. Ponies know that they’re a threat, and more importantly, they know where to find them.”

Dazzle pitched in as well. “Whisper’s the reason we’re all here in this room. She’s been spreading the word and bringing in as many ponies as she could to help stop Serenity. Of course Serenity is scared of her. She’s the only reason we can even fight back.”

She finished by quite blatantly turning to look at the mayoral staff.

Holly shook her head, but the motion was slow and hesitant, ending with a glance to Two Bits before speaking. “Even if that’s all true, sending out the Militia is a risk. It means leaving the city unprotected. It means leaving our defenses and fighting out in the open. The Militia can hold the walls against any threat, but if this is some sort of trap and we lose them...”

Two Bits frowned. “We’d have a better shot hitting them first.”

“Soldiers and walls might be good against raiders and other armed forces,” I said, “but they’re useless against assassins that can look like anyone. You can’t defend against this. If you fortify your position and don’t strike back, you give them all the time in the world to take care of any other settlements that *are* fighting back, and then they can take their time infiltrating and slowly picking you apart.”

Holly snorted in irritation. “They won’t find us to be such an easy target,” she said. “They might have landed a sucker-punch, but they blew

their surprise. Now we know what to look for.”

Hail Burst gave another, louder snort.

Myself, I stared at her in silent disbelief. A small part of me—possibly made louder by the lingering pain and drugs—wanted to shout at her for being too stupid, but that wouldn’t be productive.

Fortunately, I still had another card to play. So, instead of trying to beat her down with my words, I instead spoke gently. “Holly, when I say that your walls and soldiers can’t stop a determined changeling from getting into Mareford, or even getting up close to important ponies, it’s not speculation. If you had any hope of doing so, you would have known that I’m a changeling.”

She had opened her mouth to reply before fully processing what I had said, and ended up stumbling on her words. Surprised mixed with apprehension and doubt.

“Yes, it’s true,” I said. “Many of the ponies in this room already know. I’m also a changeling that has access to a sizable arsenal, including multiple balefire eggs. If I were aligned with Serenity, I could have leveled this building and killed everyone within it, and there wouldn’t have been anything anyone could have done to stop it.” The risk of me not surviving the attack was enough that I wouldn’t want to attempt it even if I had been inclined to do so, but that wasn’t important right then. “That’s the kind of danger we’re all facing with Serenity, and that’s why we need to work together to stop them. The longer they’re allowed to operate in the background, the more people die.”

Murmurs were rippling around the room among the ponies who hadn’t already known, and Echo had stepped up protectively to my side, glaring down her muzzle at the assembled ponies. Somewhere behind Sandstorm, I heard one of the riders speaking to another. “I fucking told you she was brown before!”

Mulberry was the first of the trio to find her words again. “That’s... why you know what they can do? Because you are one?”

I nodded, despite the way it made my head swim. “Yes. And I know exactly how changeling Infiltrators train and operate. The more time we give them, the more they’ll pick us apart. We can’t defend long against them, but we *can* strike back and stop them at the source.”

Brushfire looked dazed, while Holly was shaking her head. Her expression wavered back and forth, as if torn between talking to me or ordering my arrest. Her voice shook when she finally spoke. “No. For all I know, you’re just like those other changelings, and you’re trying to talk us into a trap! The Militia isn’t going anywhere!”

She turned to Two Bits, but jumped as Seroon placed a hoof lightly on her foreleg. “She is trying to help. Trust her.”

“Trust her?” Holly replied with an incredulous look. “Why the hell should we trust her? You know what she is!”

“I’ve known what she is since the day we first met,” Seroon said with a calm, placid smile, and turned his gaze to me. “She is an individual who stepped aside from her own quest to help some strangers she had just met. Someone who put herself in danger to protect my kin, with no more reward than the satisfaction of having done the right thing. One who mourned over our fallen, and who ensured that the rest of my tribe would have a future. That is far more important than whether she is a pony or not.”

There was a momentary pause before his smile widened a hair. “Though I did notice that she was no longer a pegasus.”

My ears flicked back instinctively, and despite the embarrassment of that little detail being called out, I couldn’t help a weak smile. “I’ve been getting a little more relaxed with my disguises as more ponies know what I am.” Or possibly careless, but ‘relaxed’ sounded better.

Mulberry looked anxiously around at the ponies and the zebra, and cautiously spoke up. “I think Seroon might be right.”

Holly shot her a look, then turned to look at me again. I made a point to keep my expression as soft and non-threatening as possible. I don’t think it helped much. “...I don’t trust her,” she said. “Even if she did all those things, what, she’s just turning on her own kind? I don’t buy it.”

“Serenity isn’t ‘my kind’,” I said, without showing any of the distaste I felt at the idea. “They see ponies as nothing more than food. My hive might have stayed hidden, but we always tried to work with ponies, not against them.”

Holly’s eyes narrowed ever so slightly. “You’re from a different... hive?”

“I am,” I replied with a small nod. “And Serenity has no more love for my hive than it does for your ponies.”

Her eyes darted to Echo's glowering visage, then the rest of my companions, and finally returned to me. "And are they changelings, too?"

"No. They're ponies."

She slowly nodded, mulling it over, and her expression grew harder by the moment. "So your hive wants us to go to war with this other hive... and you're all that they send to help us."

"My hive doesn't have any more to send."

"Oh, of course," she said with a snort. "A whole hive, and they can't spare more than one single changeling. Why would they, when they can just send you, and you can get the ponies to do all the fighting and dying?"

Mulberry blanched, nudging her. "Holly..."

It seemed Mulberry had swung our way. Brushfire still looked dazed. We were close. We just needed a little push to tilt things fully into our favor.

Maybe it was the drugs addling my mind. Maybe it was the desperation of the situation and the absolute need for these talks to be a success. Maybe, just maybe, it was something else. Whatever the reason, an option presented itself to my mind. One that wouldn't just give that final nudge, but might flip the scales entirely.

"I'm not 'just' a changeling."

I focused on the magic of my disguise, but I didn't unwind it. Instead, I steadily poured more magic into it. More, far more, than my usual transformations. I closed my eyes as the magic flames steadily flowed over me, slowly, as I carefully poured my meager magic into crafting the new form. The ache in my side grew in intensity for a moment, then rapidly diminished. I did my best to hide it, holding myself in a firm, confident stance.

Seconds later, it was done. I opened my eyes again to see the world had turned purple. Several ponies had started to pull weapons, but had halted as the shield bubble had snapped into place. Beside me, in the shield, Echo took a step forward, drawing even with me. She scanned over the ponies for a moment before looking to me with a satisfied expression.

More specifically, she looked *up* to me.

The shield vanished a moment later. I took one slow, steady breath, before speaking in a softly resonant voice. "My name is Queen Whisper, and I am the last surviving adult of my hive." I slowly turned my head to look across all the gathered ponies, and the tip of my great notched horn

nearly scraped at the ceiling. “If my *family* is to have a future, it will be side-by-side with ponies, and I intend that to start here and now. I will fight alongside you, and do everything in my power to ensure we overcome the threat Serenity poses.”

Ponies continued to stare at me in shock, and I started to worry that I might have gone too far. I remained still, as non-threatening as my enormous form would allow, my heart pounding in my ears and sending throbs of pain through the back of my head. It was a few ponies murmuring in the background that finally broke the spell. Weapons lowered, tensions relaxing, as the giant insectoid creature before them refrained from attacking. While Hail Burst looked just as annoyed as before, many of the Mareford ponies looked awed, if a bit apprehensive.

Mulberry finally broke the silence with a simple question. “You’ll... help us?”

I gave a slow, serious nod. “To the best of my ability.”

Brushfire had finally come out of his daze. “Will that be enough?”

I gave a soft smile, careful to not show off too many of my sharp teeth. “Between the forces we have gathered here, I am confident that we can defeat Serenity. I will do what I can to make sure that victory comes at as small a price as possible. I may not be the greatest combatant, but I will offer every ounce of experience I have.”

“And that’s a lot?”

I paused a moment to consider how I wanted to answer that. “...I learned the art of espionage in Equestria, during the height of the great war. We had to avoid the attention of the Ministry of Morale and the scrutiny of an increasingly xenophobic population just to get the love we needed to survive. We did this, and turned over zebra spies and smugglers, and combated hostile changeling Infiltrators from other hives. I don’t want to overstate my ability, but I am experienced.”

I felt like I was imitating Echo, if just a bit.

Two Bits spoke over the growing murmurs. “And you can tell us about these other changelings?”

I nodded, giving me another moment to just breathe before speaking again. “I can tell you the approximate strength, equipment, and training of their forces, the capabilities of changelings, their strengths and weaknesses,

and the mentality of their leader. I do not have any experience leading a military force or orchestrating military tactics, but I can offer my knowledge of these changelings to help you do so.”

The ache in my head grew, my heart pounding harder still. I couldn’t properly catch my breath; rapid breathing is a common sign of stress and tends to make you less believable. I wanted to project certainty and honesty, so I kept my breathing slow and steady, even as my body protested. Passing out would be preferable to appearing dishonest.

Two Bits slowly nodded as he considered what I had said, then turned to Dusty. “Is this all true?”

Dusty nodded grimly. “All of it. I’ve seen Serenity. It scares the hell out of me.”

Two Bits grimaced, and cast a glance back to the mayoral staff. “I say we take it. Hit back before they hit us worse.”

“I agree,” Brushfire said, looking to Holly.

She continued to look at me with wide eyes. “I... I don’t trust her.”

Mulberry placed a hoof on her side. “Holly...”

“I don’t,” Holly said again. “But... if you’re all convinced it’s the right call, then... okay.”

Mulberry smiled.

“About fucking time,” Sandstorm said, rising to her hooves. She looked to Two Bits. “We’re rolling out in the morning. If you and your ponies are coming to the party, you better be ready. We’ve already given these fuckers enough time to get ready for us.”

“We’ll be ready to move out,” Two Bits said in reply, standing as well. “I’ll pass the word and get everypony ready to move.” He looked to me. “When I’m done, I need to talk with you. We need a good idea of what we’re going to be facing.”

“Of course,” I said, dipping my head slightly, allowing myself to breathe a little more freely. As he turned to leave, I looked to Hail Burst. “Will you be joining us?”

“For now,” she said, her tone irritable. “You didn’t say anything about being a *queen*.”

“It’s a recent development,” I said. “Also one that might make me more of a target, but seeing as Serenity is already sending assassins after me, there

isn't much reason to keep it secret."

"Yeah, sure," she said, rising to her hooves and walking away. "Just don't keep too many secrets from your *allies*."

She left, and several other ponies milled around, discussing what had just happened. Some, naturally, approached me with varying degrees of nervousness and curiosity.

"I'm sorry," I told them when they asked to speak. "I'm afraid I need to excuse myself and get some rest while I can. I'll be happy to answer any questions you have once I've recovered a little more."

The town hall was already more busy as we departed, with ponies hurrying around and talking rapidly. Soldiers had gathered, with commanders giving directions to their subordinates. Despite the activity, every eye turned my way as we passed.

I kept walking, putting on the look of calm confidence, with only a subtle slowness and favoring of one leg hinting at the extent of my injuries. By the time we reached the inn, the limp had grown. The stairs sent tendrils of pain through my side.

Finally, we reached the door to the room. I entered, took two more steps, and finally collapsed to the floor. My magic flickered out as I reverted to my natural form, groaning.

Starlight scurried up to my side. "Whisper!"

"I'm okay," I weakly replied, wincing in pain as I rolled to my side. "I'm just... exhausted."

Dusty stepped up. "Let's get her back in bed before she hurts herself worse."

The world abruptly turned purple as the weight lifted from my body, and I floated in Echo's magic. It took me a few moments to fully connect that thought past the pounding headache. "I... didn't hurt myself. I just... burned through a lot of magic."

"Well, you did what you were aiming to do," Dusty said. "Now you're on bed rest until we leave. No arguing this time."

"No arguing," I murmured. I wouldn't have argued even if I had the energy to. Moments later I was lowered gently into the bed once more. In that moment, it was the most wonderfully luxurious bed I had ever experienced. I slowly relaxed, weariness descending over me.

Echo was still standing over me with a thin frown. "...I can't say I approve of the dishonesty," she said, before begrudgingly adding, "but it did have a certain dramatic flair."

"Not dishonest," I murmured, closing my eyes.

I felt the bed shift as Starlight sat beside me. "What do you mean?"

"I mean... I'm the only one left in my hive. I'm basically playing the role already. Might as well call it what it is... at least for now."

Dusty made some unhappy grunt, but didn't say anything.

"Well I think it was pretty cool," Starlight said, and I could tell she was smiling just from the tone of her voice. "You looked... you looked cool."

I gave a soft chuckle. The conversation faded away, but Starlight remained there beside me, sharing her company and affection.

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I felt a bit better by the time morning came around.

I'd spent almost all the time sleeping, interrupted only for a couple of hours to receive visitors. I had been gently stirred awake sometime that evening to meet with Two Bits. I'd wanted to get up to meet him more equally, but Dusty insisted that I stayed in bed.

We spent at least an hour discussing Serenity, their equipment and forces, the disposition of Queen Chrysalis the Sixth, and the capabilities of changelings. A good deal of time was spent with him inquiring about changeling psychology, as we collaboratively pooled our knowledge to get a better tactical picture of what we faced.

It was a very interesting conversation. I wish I had been coherent enough to remember the details.

At least I was clear-minded enough to explain my diminished size as an effort to conserve magical energy. That much was technically true. While assuming the form of a proper queen wasn't as exhausting as mimicking Echo, it was certainly among the more difficult and draining forms I had ever taken.

The extra drain on my magic from my healing simply compounded the issue. Fortunately, I was well supplied on that front. I had brief visits from Dazzle and Seroon to wish me well, and I fed on some of the affection and appreciation they held for me. Dazzle even insisted on giving me another

healing potion from her personal stash, which helped ease the returning pain in my side.

It was Starlight that provided the bulk of the magical energy I needed, of course. I hadn't even realized how much I was draining her until I saw her wobbling a little, her eyes slightly unfocused.

"I'm okay," she had said, her ears perking up and expression growling livelier for a moment, before slowly slipping back to slack weariness. When I apologized, she refused it. "It's okay," she insisted. "You need it more than I do. Besides, at least this way I'm doing something useful."

I insisted that I was fine, and that she didn't have to worry about me now, but from the fragile smile, I could tell she didn't believe me.

I tried to fill some of my little waking time being productive and making more of these recordings. I went over them a couple of days later and deleted the whole thing. It was rambling and semi-coherent, skimping on important details while repeating inconsequential ones. The whole thing was a complete and utter wreck and made me seriously question how sound-of-mind I had been at the time.

Still, I was feeling better when Dusty roused us. Only the faintest hint of light crept in around the edges of the curtains. Starlight groaned weakly beside me while I slowly pushed myself up to sitting once more. My side was still sore, but there were no more stabs of pain. The cracks in my carapace were fully mended, though the shell was still discolored in thin lines where it had split. More importantly, my head felt clearer, with only a faint ache lingering in the back of it. My jaw still felt tight and slightly lopsided, but not enough to impede my speech. I wasn't up to normal, but at least I didn't have that splitting headache any more.

Despite spending more than half a day in bed, I still felt exhausted. I slid from bed and onto my hooves, and while I wobbled a little from lethargy, my sense of balance had returned. Once Dusty had finally roused a grumbling and half-asleep Starlight, I staggered out into the common room. Echo and Sickle were already there, with the latter sprawled out and on the large couch, mumbling some incoherent greeting. Dusty guided us to chairs at the small table, and surprised us by pushing mugs of coffee into our hooves.

I started to decline, but after a moment's pause to think, changed my mind. "I don't normally care for stimulants, but I think I might have to

make an exception.”

Sickle gave a weak chuckle, her voice thick with sleep. “Yeahhh, you call that weak-ass shit a stimulant. Heh.”

“I guess you won’t be wanting any, then,” Dusty said.

Sickle grumbled a little. “Eh, whatever. I’ve got plenty of Dash left. You want some, *Your Highness*?”

I winced slightly at that. “No thank you,” I said, and followed up with a sip of the coffee. The taste was just as strong and off-putting as I remembered, but that wasn’t the point.

Sickle shrugged. “Yeah, a lightweight like you’d probably just get all jittery with the good stuff.” She slowly stretched, letting out a drawn-out yawn as I took another sip before adding, “Maybe some Buck. That’s good for getting back on your hooves when you’re beat to shit.”

“I’ll pass.” Another sip. “But thank you.”

A thump and clatter drew my attention to the side, where Dusty had just deposited a bag. “Your armor,” he said. “Figured you’d want it back.”

I slowly nodded. “Probably a good idea.” It had already saved my life once already, and I couldn’t imagine things would be getting any safer until Serenity was dealt with.

I finished my coffee and started pulling out armor pieces. Donning it was awkward. Though I felt a good deal better, I was still stiff and sore, which made the process neither swift nor pleasant. Straps squeezed my carapace in ways it really wasn’t comfortable being squeezed just yet, and I was still reluctant to use my magic when I didn’t need to, just in case.

The final piece was the helmet. I paused, turning it over in my hooves to examine it. All I found was a tiny nick in the back, slightly off-center. It seemed like far too small of a thing to have hurt the way it did. I slipped it on, carefully buckling it in place. “...Okay. Guess I’m as ready as I’ll get.”

“There’s one more thing,” Dusty said. When I looked at him, he continued. “You made a big showy display of being a queen, yesterday. Are you planning on keeping that up, or going disguised?”

I stared silently for a moment before slowly, quietly groaning, and sinking down against the table. “Urgh. I shouldn’t have done that.”

“Well, it’s a little late for second thoughts,” Dusty said, frowning a little. “Still, it worked. You got everypony onboard, but you also got everypony

talking. I've been trying to think on it, and I'm still not sure if ponies would be more concerned seeing a giant queen-bug walking around, or a pony they know isn't actually a pony, or a bug that isn't the bug they're expecting."

I groaned again as I considered all of those. "Past-me was stupid," I mumbled, and finally, wearily, pushed myself upright once more. "As much as I don't like it, I decided to take up the title, so I might as well live up to expectations. Anything else would be dishonest."

Echo gave a soft snort, and I couldn't tell if it was amusement or annoyance. "I am starting to lose track of what *is* honest, anymore."

"I suppose it's complicated," I said. I closed my eyes, focusing my magic once more.

The change came easier. There was less damage to work around, no drugs or pain muddling my mind, and I had much more love and affection stored up than I had the day before. Additionally, I wasn't fabricating a new form. I was retaking one I had already created. It was still an impressive amount of energy devoted to the change, but it was more like slipping on a comfortable old sweater than knitting a new one from scratch.

The change completed, I steadied myself, slowly looking over my form. I was so much like Queen Ephema, but another changeling would see the differences. They'd probably even recognize that it was me. The holes in my limbs were still my own, patterned the same as before. My mane was different from Ephema's, with a more silvery teal color, lush and sleek, as opposed to her slightly shorter and straighter mane. Even the notches in my impressively sized horn were different, though only subtly. I couldn't see my eyes, of course, but I knew they would be just like hers, vibrant green and expressive.

I could feel my throat tighten as I made the comparisons. Part of it felt like sacrilege, as if I were usurping her position, disrespecting her memory. I tried to shake those feelings off. Someling was going to have to take responsibility for leading the hive. For now, that was me.

I looked back to Echo, speaking in my new yet still familiar voice. "The best I can say is that I will do what I can to *make* this honest. If I am taking on the title of queen, I will do what I can to live up to that responsibility."

She frowned in contemplation for a few moments before finally nodding. "I suppose that will do."

"Well I think you make a great queen!" Starlight said, grinning sleepily as she looked up at me. I couldn't help smiling back. "You look so cool!"

Sickle shrugged. "Eh, I've seen better." She took a long swig from a beer before adding, "Now you add a dick to that, then maybe we're talking."

Starlight grimaced. "Damnit, Sickle! Do you have to make everything perverted?"

"Yep." Another swig. "Shit, you know you'd love it. You'd jump right on that dick."

Starlight rolled her eyes, and I stood to bail her out. "If you're quite done trying to make Starlight squirm, I believe we have an army expecting us?"

"Yes we do," Dusty said, rising to his hooves as well.

The next few minutes were spent gathering our belongings. In my case, that was simple, as my possessions had already been packed while I was resting. Dusty brought them out for me. Included among them were my rifle and pistol, resting atop the saddle bags. "I finished cleaning them for you," he said quite simply.

"Thank you," I replied. I hadn't even thought of them until that moment.

When we left, I took the straps in my mouth, carrying my bags that way, rather than using my limited magic on the task. I'd considered adjusting the straps to fit this new form, but I lacked the drive to do so at the time. Besides, I reasoned, my armor only fit in my natural form, so if there was any fighting to be done, I'd probably revert to that.

As we started to leave, Dusty started giving directions to everyone other than myself. The intention was rapidly obvious. Sickle on one flank, Echo on the other, Starlight bringing up the rear, and Dusty himself at the head. They were guarding me.

It was probably for the best. As you might expect, I drew attention. Every eye turned our way as we emerged into the main lobby of the building. Most of the ponies there were from Gemstone, and they looked on with curiosity, with only a few nervous gazes. Dazzle was there, and softened much of the effect by waving and calling out a clear "Good morning!"

I replied with a soft smile and a nod. A few other ponies followed Dazzle's lead, though generally with a bit more hesitation.

That tone changed as we stepped outside.

The town was still shrouded in the dim blue haze of the pre-dawn

twilight. A pair of militia soldiers were stationed near the front of the building, rifles slung across their chests. Two Bits had evidently spread word about me, as there were no looks of alarm or leaps to action. Instead, they watched me warily, scrutinizing my every step. I gave them the same soft smile and nod I had given to Dazzle. They didn't react at all.

They also didn't seem to pay Dusty any attention, so I suppose my big reveal accomplished some good.

It was only a short trip to our parked motorwagon. More ponies passed on the street, and the reaction there was decidedly more mixed. While some still looked curious, many flinched back upon seeing me. Considering I was standing between a vicious-looking over-armored beast of a mare and an ethereal-maned pseudo-goddess, that said quite a bit about the impression I was making.

Echo stood guard while we clambered into the wagon. I climbed into the cargo bay and peered into the passenger compartment. I'd fit in the back seat so long as I laid out lengthwise, though my horn would make things awkward. It'd be almost impossible to look out the narrow side windows without either sticking my head outside or twisting it completely sideways, neither of which sounded appealing.

The wagon rocked as Sickle climbed up behind me. "Guess you're back here with me, huh?"

"If I were feeling better, I'd try flying along with Echo," I said. Then I added, "So I'm not crowding you."

"Shit, ain't like I mind getting up close and personal." She chuckled, lips peeling back in a lewd grin. "But hey, if you want to make the trip a lot more fun..."

Starlight called back from the driver's seat. "Sickle..."

"Oh, relax," Sickle replied, sprawling back against the back armor and filling almost half the cargo bay by herself. "I'll keep your bug-friend nice and cozy back here."

Once we were all settled in, we drove to the same gate we had entered. There were many more of the Mareford Militia soldiers gathered there. At least fifty were formed into ranks in their identical uniforms and almost-identical kit, while commanders reviewed their troops. More were marching in. A few smaller groups of similar soldiers stood to the side, bearing heavier

weapons. I saw a few machine guns, massive rifles, and even a pair of rocket launchers.

A bit further away, some twenty other soldiers sat, talking while going over their gear. They were less uniform in their appearance, with seemingly personal selections of headgear, eyewear, and other accessories. They were also more heavily equipped, with a wide variety of weapons, and each had the bulge of a PipBuck hidden under the flaps on their legs. Rangers.

Several wagons were parked nearby, laden with supplies. Many ponies milled around them, checking them over. Some of Seroon's tribe was there, too. I saw Bloodbeak among them, who hopped and happily waved at us. I raised a hoof, offering a cautious wave in reply, which produced a pleased smile from her.

As the gate slowly ground open, Two Bits parted from the group of Militia ponies to trot our way. "Hey, Dusty!"

Dusty poked his head out of the passenger-side window. "Yeah?"

Two Bits hopped up, hooking a hoof over the edge of Dusty's window to be even with the other pony. "You heading out to the Trotsen camp?"

"We are," Dusty replied.

"Good. The Militia is assembling. Let Sandstorm know we should be ready to march in twenty minutes." He'd unbuckled the flap over his PipBuck, revealing a map. "We're figuring about two days march to the rally point, here, though it's a bit fluid right now. Sandstorm's being bitchy about the wait, but she finally agreed we should hit the downed cloudship first. We don't want the bugs getting it running. She also agreed to play a screening force for our march, so that should speed things up."

"Sounds good. I'm sure Serenity will want to try something. Hopefully that'll limit their options." He paused, looking slowly over the map before nodding. "Okay. So who's in charge of this show, anyway?"

Two Bits gave a dry laugh. "Shit, does it look like anypony's in charge? We're just all kinda going in the same direction. At best, we're bashing our heads together until everypony's more-or-less on the same page."

I had to chime in. "That sounds like a disaster waiting to happen. Serenity will be looking to exploit any divisions."

"Not to mention it'll make tactical command a bitch," Dusty said. "You remember how the Bloodletter raid went?"

“Fuck, don’t remind me of Bloodletter,” Two Bits said with a groan. “I still don’t know how you kept from strangling Hardhat for that shit.”

“And now we’re looking at the same thing with twice the number of commands and ten times the ponies. We need somepony in command, or at least a joint headquarters.”

“Yeah, I know.” Two Bits sighed. “Everypony’s getting together at camp tonight. We’re still trying to hammer out some details, but maybe we can beat some sense into these ponies. I could use your help there, Dusty.”

“I’ll be there.”

Military matters weren’t my strong suit, but if it was a matter of persuading ponies to do something, perhaps there was something I could do. “Is there any way I could help?”

Two Bits paused, looking back at me in a way that struck me as very analytical, though whether it was considering my ability to help or contemplating what threat I might pose, I couldn’t say. “I don’t know. Half of me says they’re not going to listen to some changeling, but it seems like everypony else knew it and went along with you anyway.” He considered a moment longer before nodding. “Yeah. If you think you can help, show up. I doubt it’ll hurt. Besides, I still need to pick your brains now that you’re not conked out on painkillers.”

I nodded. “If there’s anything I can do to help our odds, I’m at your disposal.”

He nodded back, then hopped down again, waving us through the open gate. “Get going! We’ll talk about the rest later!”

“Wait!”

I looked back as Bloodbeak came running up, barely keeping her pack and rifle balanced on her back with her good wing. She skittered to a stop before giving us a big grin. “Can I ride with you guys?”

“Sure!” Starlight called out. “Hop on!”

“Woo!” Bloodbeak leaped, pumping a fist, followed by scrambling to keep from dropping her gear. She quickly got ahold of the straps in her talons, and hopped up, pulling herself into the cargo bed. “Thanks, Starlight!” She dropped her gear in the back, turning to give me a smile. “Hi, Whisper!”

“Hello,” I said, giving a smile and nod. As much as I was pleased to see

her showing no concern over my appearance, I couldn't help but glance at the pip on my E.F.S. compass. Non-hostile, for what that was worth. I didn't like being suspicious, especially when she seemed so happy just to be there, but I'd already been quite literally shot in the back. A little wariness seemed appropriate.

"And you guys, too!" She quickly added, flashing a smile to Sickle and Dusty. Sickle just snickered, while Dusty nodded. "Oh, this is going to be so cool! I love this thing. How fast do you think you can get it up to this time?"

I caught Dusty both rolling his eyes and smiling. He gave Two Bits a parting wave before turning back to Starlight. "All right, Starlight. Take us out."

Bloodbeak cheered, rearing up to place her talons on the edge of the roof, and looking for all the world like an excitable and unusually feathery puppy.

We rolled forward once more, passing under the watchful eyes of the wall-top guards, and made our way to the small army camped outside, busy as ponies packed up supplies and boarded wagons. The ruined skywagon sat just outside the Loyalist camp, an empty shell scavenged for any vital parts. The destroyed motorwagons were nowhere to be seen; they had been stripped and cannibalized for parts, even the frames.

Thirty minutes later, the army started to move. It was a slow thing, like a great beast slowly coming to life, snaking its way onto the bare dirt path. Already, Loyalist flights were taking to the air, spreading out into a loose but well-organized formation on the flanks of the procession, while a few pairs climbed and flew further afield, on the lookout. Sandstorm's Beast and some of the other large motorwagons led the great column, with us following close behind. Many of the Trotsen ponies were walking now, while the many lighter wagons, freed of the burden of their occupants, now roamed out ahead of the column. They sped towards hills and ridges, and along the bare path before us, searching for any trouble.

Bloodbeak watched them go with a look of longing. Her eager chatting had ended as soon as we had started moving, but she'd quickly found the pace a bit lacking. "Maybe we should be out there with them?" she asked hopefully, but Dusty insisted we remained in the formation.

Behind us marched the Mareford Militia, neat and orderly. They weren't some immaculate unit, like the Ministry of Image's pictures of pristine

parade-ground troops, but that had always struck me as superficial. Their bearing and organization gave me the impression of experienced soldiers. Their uniforms were worn and faded and stained by long use, but their equipment was well-cared-for. They didn't march in some picture-perfect formation, but they still formed orderly lines and followed directions, even as some of the ponies chatted and joked. It was a clear contrast to the Trotsen and Gemstone ponies, who walked in a more blob-like herd.

At the rear trailed a few dozen wagons, laden with food, supplies, and munitions, with another group of Mareford soldiers bringing up the rear.

I sat back, watching the motorwagons ahead of us send up lines of dust across the Wasteland.

Over the rumbling of the nearby wagons, I didn't hear the steadily growing thumping until the last moment. In a sudden burst of sound, a whirligig flew right over-head, just twenty or thirty feet above us, and a second one roared past us a moment later. Both flew low over the convoy at high speed before climbing and banking away in opposite directions.

In the front seat, I heard Dusty chuckling. "Damn showoffs. Heh." Several of the Mareford ponies cheered behind us.

"That's so awesome," Bloodbeak said. "They wouldn't let me ride on them. Wouldn't that be cool?"

"They... can be fun," Dusty admitted, and Bloodbeak chuckled.

We rolled on, as I continued surveying the scene.

We had dozens of armed vehicles, including a tank. We had power-armor clad pegasi, an armored skywagon, and a pair of whirligigs. We had wagons laden with weapons, munitions, and supplies. We had hundreds of armed ponies, many of them professional soldiers.

This was no simple band of Wasteland-dwellers. No raider warlord could compare. Even the most successful mercenary company would fall short. It was a proper army.

The Wasteland had seen no shortage of violence, but this was something different. This wasn't a minor squabble or raid. This had the feel of something historic, something the Wasteland had never seen.

For the first time in two hundred years, Equestria was marching to war. And I was right at the head of it.

## Chapter Thirty-Nine

# Race to Armageddon

It took all of two hours for things to go wrong.

The first sign was when the Loyalists abruptly changed formation. Half the pegasi flying at our flanks ascended and spread out before us, while the others adjusted to fill in the gaps. Hail Burst remained low with a couple of other Loyalists. Judging by their hoof gestures, they were having an urgent and animated conversation.

Dusty caught on right away, and leaned out of the window to shout up. “Hail Burst! What’s going on?”

Her head twitched his way as if she heard, but then ignored him.

It was then that I caught a dot of darkness on the horizon, just peeking up from behind the low hills in the distance.

I turned to retrieve my binoculars, tucked into the bags I had stashed beside me. By the time I found them, the black dot on the horizon had grown and ascended, like a dark cloud rising over the Wasteland. It must have been ten miles or more away, judging by the hills, yet it was still clearly visible. Calls and shouts started to rise from other ponies as they spotted it, and I raised my binoculars, fearing the worst.

Now, what I had expected to find would have been scary, but in retrospect, it might have been a good thing. I had *expected* to see a swarm of changelings, loaded with magical energy weapons and clad in power armor. I’m not an expert on tactics, so I didn’t have the knowledge to weigh the costs and benefits of launching a massive assault on our concentrated army, rather than any number of defensive tactics. All I knew was that a swarm of changelings that large would mean a huge fight was minutes away.

But when I focused on the dot, I didn’t see changelings. I saw angular shapes. I saw the slowly swirling form of dark clouds, laced with lighting. I saw a single long word spelled out in white paint.

“Dusty,” I said, trying to keep my voice even. In the periphery of my vision, I saw his head turn to me, but I remained focused down my binoculars. “It’s the *Cumulonimbus*. ”

They’d gotten the Raptor flying again. We’d been too slow to stop them.

Dusty hurriedly fetched his own binoculars, taking a moment to confirm before turning and shouting. “Bitsy!”

“Woah,” Bloodbeak said, having leveled a third set of binoculars at the distant cloudship. “What is *that*?”

“A cloudship,” I quietly replied. More shouts were going out. I heard ponies trotting and galloping around, but I kept my eyes fixed on the distant Raptor. “Why is it heading away from us?”

“What?” Dusty raised his binoculars, watching for a moment before saying, “That’s more perpendicular to us than away.”

“Yeah, but it’s not flying *towards* us,” I said.

“Might be trying to circle around behind us.” Dusty said, sweeping his binoculars along ahead of the Raptor. “Or maybe they just want to get altitude before getting close. Other than the Loyalists, we don’t have much that can reach altitude. Maybe Gemstone’s cannons. I doubt the tank can elevate that much.”

“That thing’s *huge*,” Bloodbeak said. “And it flies. That’s kinda awesome.” She paused, then asked, “That’s the other changelings?”

I lowered my binoculars. “Yeah.” Despite all of the eager chatting, it was the first time Bloodbeak had even acknowledged the existence of changelings, even while speaking to me.

The Militia ponies were still spreading out, the closest ones already taking what cover could be found in the rough, rolling terrain, while those further back were still trotting into position. Two Bits was up front, shouting at Sandstorm as her tank and motorwagons continued rolling along.

“Damnit,” Dusty grumbled. “Starlight, take us up to Sandstorm, I need to yell at her to stay put.”

“You got it,” Starlight replied, and we started picking up speed. By the time we got there, she and Two Bits were already arguing about whether they should be stopping or not. Dusty started adding his own contribution to the argument. It didn’t take them too long to convince Sandstorm to halt, and the next few minutes were spent arranging everypony. I didn’t see much of the tactical arrangements, mostly noting that ponies were spreading out widely enough that a blast from one of the Raptor’s weapons couldn’t hit multiple ponies. Mostly, my attention was focused on the Raptor, waiting for that inevitable moment when it turned towards us.

It didn't. It just kept flying straight.

Mile after mile, minute by minute, it continued on its course, as if unconcerned by our presence. While everypony settled into their positions and waited, we fell further and further behind it.

"Well this is a fucking waste of time," Sandstorm said several minutes later. She stood atop the turret of her tank, and banged a hoof against the roof. "Fire it up! We're moving."

"Crap," Two Bits grunted, then turned, walking back from us as he spoke into his broadcaster. "All units..."

As he started giving directions to his subordinates, Dusty raised his binoculars again, looking at the receding Raptor once more as he quietly murmured. "Where are you going?"

"They couldn't have missed us," I said, also watching. "Not with all the dust the scout wagons were kicking up. Besides, they have to still have some agents tracking our progress. There's no way they all returned home after the first attack."

Dusty gave a tiny nod. "And if this was a diversionary tactic, they would have hit us with their maneuver force already. It's got some destination in mind." He glanced down at his PipBuck, then returned to the binoculars. "It's not heading to their hive. That's northwest and it's heading south."

I lowered my binoculars. "What's south?"

Dusty was frowning. "A whole lot of nothing, mostly." He watched in silence for a few more seconds before lowering the binoculars and returning to his map. "...No, Gemstone is well east of its path."

Starlight pulled herself up to sit on the edge of her side window, pushing up her goggles to look back at us. "Well they've got to be going somewhere. What else is south?"

"Nothing," Dusty said. "There's World's End, but that's all the way across The Pale, and I doubt they're going there anyway." His ears flicked as a thought occurred to him, and he looked over to me. "You don't think they're going to your hive?"

I grimaced, but quickly shook off the feeling. "I don't like the idea of them rooting around there, but I can't imagine them finding anything useful. It'd be a waste of time that we can use to our advantage." Still, I frowned. "They might have pulled the location from Starlight's PipBuck,

but it has a good century's worth of location tags, and shouldn't have any identifying information for the hive. They might have taken a guess at what the location was, but... that seems like a lot of resources dedicated to a guess, especially when they know an army is coming for them."

Dusty grunted and gave a flash of a frown, but I suspect he had been thinking the same thing. "Yeah, even if they did know what's there, it's a big gamble. We might even make the hive before it could get back. I can't see what else they'd be doing. There's nothing in World's End they'd want." He paused, ears perking slightly. "Though it's kind of a refuge for ponies trying to get away. Maybe they've had another changeling go rogue? Still seems like overkill to send a Raptor for what a half dozen soldiers in power armor could do."

A moment of silence followed as we all thought it over, until Starlight's head came up, her ears perked high. "Oh shit."

Dusty and I both turned questioning looks to her as she looked back. "What about Pale Sands? Ponytown?"

There was a moment of confusion before my heart dropped. Dusty's eyes widened, and a moment later he was pulling himself up out of his window, shouting back at full volume. "Bitsy! We might have a problem!"

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Fifteen minutes later, we were speeding across the barren landscape, pushing our motorwagon to its limits. All around us, a dozen of Trotsen's lightest and fastest motorwagons bounced and weaved in a loose pack. Most of the extra Trotsen ponies had been left behind to lighten their loads, leaving just the vehicle's crews and a few of the more experienced riders. Two of the wagons were now adorned with hastily lashed-down and bolted-on energy cannons, courtesy of Gemstone. Dazzle and a few of the other Gemstone ponies were riding along with them.

Overhead, the Loyalist forces flew in pace with us in full force. The whirligigs were there, too. A few of their Ranger passengers were visible, sitting at the sides of the passenger cabin, hooves and weapon muzzles hanging over the edge. Two Bits was in the lead whirligig, having left the commander of one of the Militia units in charge of the main force.

Splitting our forces seemed like a bad choice, but Dusty and Two Bits

had decided it was the lesser of two bad options.

I clung to my seat, having returned to my natural form for my own safety. I might have been in much better condition than the previous day, but the ride was hard and rough, and I grit my teeth a few times as one of the many jolts and shudders sent a twinge of pain through my side. I wasn't enjoying it nearly as much as I had our last outing, nor as much as Bloodbeak or Sickle enjoyed this one. Bloodbeak looked thrilled, standing up and bracing against the edge of the roof to catch more of the rushing wind, even when some of the bumps and dips sent her staggering. Sickle, on the other hoof, had a dangerous-looking grin that said she was looking forward to enjoying what came after the drive just as much.

I glanced back, checking on our equipment once more. We'd recovered most of our gear, mostly the weapons and explosives, but I wasn't really concerned about those. I was more focused on the armored case secured just behind my seat, and the three balefire eggs contained within it.

If Serenity was going to play with balefire, we'd play with balefire.

My earbud crackled, followed by Hail Burst's voice. "Okay, listen up everypony. The motorwagons are going faster than the '*Nimbus*', but you're losing ground fighting terrain. You might be able to catch up in Pale Sands, but it'll have a good head start."

"Good news is, my scouts got good eyes on her. The bugs might have gotten her up and flying, but she's hurting. She's missing more than half her engines and turrets. I doubt she can manage any faster than she's pulling right now. The hangar still looks wrecked, so they won't be launching any heavy equipment."

"Bad news is, looks like they relocated some of the functioning turrets, so there's no obvious unguarded approach. Boarding would be suicidal unless we take out some of those guns, and even then, we don't know how many bugs they've got packed in there. All we know is they have enough to send a patrol out to chase off our scouts, but they turned back maybe a quarter mile out."

Dusty pressed the transmit button on his own broadcaster. "I know you'd like to recover your ship, and hell, I'd love having that much firepower at our back, but—"

I pressed the button on my own broadcaster. "I hate to interrupt, but

I want everyone to remember that we're broadcasting in the clear, and every single Serenity changeling has a PipBuck. Expect them to hear everything we say on the radio. We need information security. All planning needs to be done face-to-face, and none of the details ever go out over the radio."

"Figures," Hail Burst said with a sigh. "I'll be down in a sec."

"Me too," came Two Bit's reply. "Find some place to stop and Vulture will drop me off."

"That'll take too long," Hail Burst said. "Have them fly you nearby, I'll have one of my soldiers transfer you."

The earpiece crackled again, filling with the sound of rushing wind.  
"Hello? Is this device functioning?"

Dusty pressed the button again. "We can hear you, Echo."

"Excellent." She was flying above us, and was now descending to join in the meeting. "Do not worry about carrying him. Simply bring him nearby, and I shall do the rest."

Hail Burst snorted softly as she keyed in again. "Fine, whatever. Just get down there."

Within moments, Echo and Hail Burst had drawn even with us, flying alongside our bouncing and rattling wagon. The larger of the two whirligigs, Vulture, descended a bit more slowly. The Rangers at the edge of the passenger compartment moved aside, clearing the way for Two Bits to lean out, looking down at us.

There was a purple flash, and he vanished, appearing in the cargo bed with a shout and flailing of limbs. He ended up on his back, blinking up at me as I leaned over the back of my seat. "...Holy *shit* that was weird."

He sat up, seemingly unconcerned by the buffeting of the rough ride.

"Neat trick," Hail Burst called out, shouting over the roar and rattle of our vehicle. "So what was that you were going to say, Dusty?"

He climbed back through the passenger cabin, squeezing past me to slip into the cargo bed. After a quick nod to Two Bits, he looked over to Hail Burst and shouted back, "I'd love to take the ship, but the megaspell comes first! If we can take it, great! If not, we just get close enough to hit them with the B.E.L. We've got three eggs, that should take out one of those clouds!"

"The '*Nimbus* is tough!" Hail Burst shouted back. "They fixed her up

after she fell out of the sky. We either take her, or I'm using those eggs to scuttle her. Either way, we need to get on that ship!"

Dusty shouted back. "That's great, but how are you getting past the turrets?"

Echo's voice boomed out, loud and clear even over all the sound. "You are all thinking far too linearly. The turrets can only attack when you are in the space *around* the ship, but thanks to my talents, you need not traverse that space to arrive *on* the ship."

Two Bit's looked stunned by the revelation. "Holy shit. How many ponies can you teleport like that? And how far?"

Her booming voice sounded surprisingly casual. "A half dozen should be no difficulty, and I can do so from much further away than they could hit a maneuvering, pony-sized target."

Hail Burst seemed less optimistic. "How safe is it?"

"Perfectly safe," Echo replied. "If these changelings have not rearranged the interior of the ship, I am sure you can direct me to some location that should be open. The spell also has a certain degree of safety measures incorporated into it, such that it will attempt to locate an individual into an open space rather than, say, intersecting a wall. So long as the base magical throughput of the caster exceeds the resistance of the displacement, which is the distance squared times the coefficient—"

Dusty cut her off. "Safety measures, got it! Good!"

"No, not good!" Hail Burst shot back. "I'm not going to have one of my soldiers teleported into a wall!"

"There is little risk of that!" Echo replied. "Besides, if their initial destination were to intersect a wall and the magical throughput is insufficient to reach an open space, it will still likely be enough to teleport out the obstructing material and leave the individual unharmed."

"*Likely?*" Hail Burst shouted back, and Dusty quickly stepped in again.

"Settle down! Let's avoid blind teleports! Hail Burst, the *Cumulonimbus* took a lot of damage, and with half the turrets, I'm guessing it doesn't have perfect coverage close-in. Is there some place she could teleport a team onto the hull or into an opening without being exposed to the turrets?"

She looked off after the distant cloudship. "Maybe. I'll have to scout it out. Maybe the hangar section."

"Good! Then I'm thinking that should be our plan. Ground forces to draw away and distract as many defenders as possible, while the Loyalists and Rangers teleport in, try to take the ship, or demo it if there's too much opposition. Sound good?"

Hail Burst gave a nod before shouting back. "Yeah, that'll work."

"I like it," Two Bits said. "That's a hell of a nice mobility option. I'd prefer to get some training in to practice it, but we're a bit tight on time. Let's do it."

"All right," Hail Burst called out. "Give me that case."

Sickle hauled up the armored case of balefire eggs, and Hail Burst swooped in, grabbing hold. "Okay. I'm heading up and briefing my ponies."

As she ascended, Two Bits turned to Dusty, smiling. "It's damn good to have you back, Dusty."

"Thanks," Dusty said, smiling, though the expression slipped a moment later, his ears flicking back. "Sorry. I hope I wasn't stepping on your hooves there. Been too long since I was in the Militia. Got used to being the one that has to call the shots."

"Shit, step on them," Two Bits said with a dry laugh. "I'm feeling a little in over my head. I could use the help, and she seems more ready to listen to you than me."

Dusty gave a soft chuckle. "I don't know about that, but yeah, if you need any help, I'll be here."

"Thanks." He pushed himself up, rocking with the motions of the vehicle, and looked to me. "Small again?"

I reached up, tapping a hoof against the roof just an inch above my horn. "It'd be a little cramped. Plus I don't have any armor that fits me when I'm big, and... well, I kind of make a big target like that."

"Fair enough," he said with a nod. Then he took a deep breath and turned to Echo. "Can you get me back on Vulture?"

"Of course," Echo replied, and with a sudden flash of purple, he was gone.

"Now we've just got to find us the fastest route south," Dusty said as he settled back into his seat, already consulting his PipBuck's map. "Starlight, in about a mile, there'll be a saddle—a low pass—between the hills on our right. Go through there, then head due south again."

"You got it," Starlight replied.

We continued on, skirting a line of rough, rocky hills. I raised my head again to look off to the south, past them. The *Cumulonimbus* was even further away.

A minute or two later, Starlight turned, the motorwagon rocking and rattling as we aimed for the low-ground between a pair of hills. The motor strained, propelling us up the short slope at a breakneck pace, the Trotsen wagons turning to follow us.

We came over the ridge at full speed, and my stomach lurched as the wheels left the ground. For a split second, we were weightless, and I floated up from my seat until I hit the bare metal roof. A moment later the vehicle crashed down, and gravity reasserted itself, throwing me back into the poorly cushioned seat, a sharp stab of pain shooting through my side.

The loud smashing of metal-on-metal announced Sickle's near-simultaneous landing just behind me. "Motherfucker!"

"Sorry!" Starlight called back.

Bloodbeak was laughing and cheering, too preoccupied to notice my condition. I was possibly a little unfair in taking note of that.

I gathered myself up, wincing softly as I sprawled out on the seat, and braced my hooves against the interior of the wagon. It wasn't the most comfortable of positions, but I'd had enough impromptu flight lessons for the day.

Starlight spared a momentary glance back at me before turning back to her driving. "You okay?"

"I've had worse," I said, in a tone rather more grumbling than I had intended. "I'm fine."

She cast another glance back, but said nothing, focusing instead on her driving.

Between the front seats, past the sloping hood of our motorwagon, the distant cloudship was dead ahead.

We sped on.



I had never felt so beat down and exhausted from lying in one place.

The pace was brutal as our wagon tore across the rugged, uneven terrain, throwing us back and forth, up and down. Despite my chitin and armor,

I still felt bruised and battered by the experience. The ride was violent enough that I soon found a slowly rising sense of nausea, and had to focus on the horizon ahead to fight it off. Everything was caked in dirt. Dusty vocally worried about damaging our vehicle by the pace, and just an hour in, one of the Trotsen motorwagons swerved and threw up a tremendous plume of dirt as it skidded to a stop, one of its wheels broken.

We couldn't wait for them. Every second counted in this race. They were left behind to fix their wagon on their own.

Even our return to Pale Sands and its relatively smooth terrain only did so much to alleviate the punishing ride, though I was finally able to sit upright. The pain had faded once more, lingering in the background.

The *Cumulonimbus* had slowly, inexorably drawn further away from us in the rough and rugged Wasteland, but as we blew past the downed chain-link fence marking the edge of the Pale Sands Spell Range, there was only smooth, open ground between us and Ponytown. Motorwagons strained and roared across the broad land, throwing up trails of dust in our wake, and the cloudship's lead started to ebb. Mile by mile, we drew closer. The black, angular form and lightning-laced clouds slowly and steadily grew.

After an hour of that breakneck pace, an unpleasant conclusion became clear: we weren't fast enough.

"We're out of time," Hail Burst called over the radio. "Enclave, advance in line! Echo, get up here with us. You ground-pounders catch up as soon as you can!"

"Damnit," Dusty grumbled before hitting his transmit button. "Be careful. Remember our priorities here!"

"Yeah, we got it."

Two Bits called in next. "Air, follow the Loyalists in. Hold short and maintain two miles distance from the Raptor."

I leaned over to the side window to peer up. Pegasi were beating their wings faster, surging ahead in a loose formation. Echo was climbing to join them, while the whirligigs followed in their wake.

Ahead of us, I could just make out the distant, bright shapes of buildings, still many miles away.

One of the Trotsen motorwagons veered and pulled up beside us. Axle was in the back, rising up over the spiked and armored side to shout at us.

“Where the fuck are they going?”

Dusty poked his head out of the window. “They’re moving in to harass the Raptor and buy us time. We’re making a beeline for the megaspell tower. It’s about a mile east of the town itself. We either get there before the Serenity changelings do and fight them off, or we get close enough to blow it!”

“Blow it?” Axle shot back, his expression clearly stating how insane he thought Dusty was. “You want us to blow a fucking *megaspell*?”

Dusty shouted back. “If it comes down to it, yes! We can either blow it here or wait to see whose town they drop it on!”

Axle stared for a few seconds before shouting back a rather succinct conclusion. “...Fuck!” Then he ducked down, shouting commands to the driver.

Dusty returned to his seat, giving Starlight some quick directions to skirt the left side of the upcoming town before turning back to me. “You good to take the gun?”

As much as I would have rather remained sitting, I nodded. “I can do that.”

“Hopefully you won’t have to do much,” he said. “We’re basically the command and communications element for the ground forces. Once a fight’s coming, I want us behind the front line so we can keep an eye on everything and get orders where they need to go. Your job is local security. If any fliers get past the formation, you and Sickle keep them off us.”

“About fucking time to put this thing to use,” Sickle rumbled, rolling over to rise to her hooves.

I gingerly climbed out over the back seat, rising up to brace my forehooves beside the gun. We hit a small bump, and I lurched, but kept my balance. I felt like a hard bump would knock me over, or even throw me from the vehicle, but at least standing on my hooves gave me a tiny bit of cushioning against the impact.

I looked out past the gun. The *Cumulonimbus* was still several miles away, but the black, cloud-clad form looked terrible and imposing. The receding line of pegasi already seemed so small in comparison, like mosquitoes approaching a dragon.

It was about then that the distant sound started to rise over the roar of the

motor and the creaking of the frame. The tone rose from the background, half hidden behind the noise, but soon becoming clear enough; the air-raid siren near Ponytown had started up once more.

A flash of light drew my attention upwards once more, and it was with a start that I realized the *Cumulonimbus* had opened fire! A bolt of searing, unnaturally vivid pink-purple flew through the air, but my shock of alarm was short-lived; it was fired away from the incoming formation, at something on the ground.

There was another flash from the ship's belly, and another bolt of magical fire streaked away. The first disappeared somewhere behind the distant buildings.

Dusty's voice crackled in my earbud. "What are they engaging?"

Hail Burst's reply was almost automatic in its speed and conciseness. "Unclear. First impact was south-southwest of town, distance two miles."

The ship's belly turret fired again and again, sending down a meteor-storm of magical plasma.

Hail Burst radioed again. "I see it now. They're firing on an observation bunker. I see signs of habitation."

"Ponies?" Dusty asked.

"Unknown," she replied. "Too far out. Someone's down there, but not for long. Shit, we've got fliers!"

Dark forms were emerging from the cloudship. I squinted against the wind and distance; using my binoculars would be pointless with our rough ride, so I could barely make out any details. There were dozens of changelings at the very least, and as they surged away from the cloudship, it looked as though they outnumbered the Loyalist forces by a fair margin. Moments later, a pair of skywagons dropped from the bottom of the ship to join the rest of the fliers.

As the barrage continued, most of the force wheeled around and flew, not toward the Loyalist forces, but in the direction of the bombardment. Only a small, loose cluster of Serenity's soldiers remained to guard the *Cumulonimbus*. They were outnumbered, but backed by the cannons of the ship.

Dusty banged a hoof against the roof before calling out to get my attention. "Whisper!"

I ducked down, almost face-planting into the edge of the roof with an ill-timed bump. “What?”

“Observation bunker. Why would they be going there?”

I frowned. I knew only a little of the details of Equestria’s wartime megaspell testing, mostly what had been publicly disseminated by the Ministry of Image, but I could make some educated guesses. “If it was intended to observe megaspell testing, there’s a chance the megaspell could be detonated from there.” My ears perked as another thought occurred to me. “And it probably has controls for the warning sirens. Someone turned those on, so there might be someone sitting on the trigger.”

“Oh, wonderful!” Dusty replied, already going for his broadcaster. “Hail Burst! Can you intercept that group that broke off?”

“Negative. Continuing as planned.”

The *Cumulonimbus* had started to turn, while its ventral turret continued the bombardment. It was skirting along the west side of the town. Sensible; the maneuver kept it well away from the megaspell, while keeping the speed up against the closing Loyalist forces.

Our motorwagons, on the other hand, were aiming for the opposite side of the town.

It was an eerie moment of calm as we roared across the dusty basin, the town drawing closer, and the Serenity changelings descending behind it. We were still a few miles from the town, while the *Cumulonimbus* must have been passing it. The bombardment continued, and as the changelings descended on their targets, tiny flickers of light announced the firing of their own weapons. It was too far away to tell what was happening.

I sat down, grabbing onto the rear of the back seat, and called out to Dusty. “I’m going to be off the radio for a sec! Let me know if something comes up!”

He gave a sharp nod before turning his attention front again, and I looked down to my PipBuck. My horn lit as I turned the dial to manually scan frequencies. The PipBuck only detected one broadcast aside from our occasional communications, and it was weak, distant music almost entirely obscured by static. Not what I was looking for.

I’d scanned the whole dial four times before a burst of noise jabbed at my ears. I adjusted the tuning, and the static dropped away, my earpiece

filling with a warbling, computerized sound.

A second later it ended, replaced with soft static.

I waited, ears straining and eyes glued to my PipBuck screen.

Seconds passed, and then the sound exploded in my earpiece again, the same chaotic digital nonsense.

“Damn.”

Despite the noise of our ride, Dusty’s ear flicked at the word, and he looked back. “Something wrong?”

“No. It’s what I had expected. They’re using broadcasters as well, but it’s not analog voice, and it’s not any digital data-type the PipBuck recognizes. It’s probably encrypted.”

“Figures.”

His ear twitched, eyes glancing away as he heard something. I switched back to the frequency we were using just in time to hear Two Bits speaking. “—see ponies down there,” Two Bits called. “Shit, at least twenty dead around the bunker. They’re burning. I’m not seeing any weapons. Wait, scratch that. Just saw a pony with a spear.”

There was a pause. “Ground, they’ve lifted bombardment. They might turn that big gun on you, so stay spread out.”

I stood again, bracing against the roof. No more bolts flew from the monstrous ship. From that distance, I could only imagine the belly turret turning our way.

“Will do, thanks,” Dusty replied. Not that we had to do anything to spread out; there was no semblance of a formation.

Hail Burst called out to her soldiers. “Prepare for attack. Be ready to condense on your team leaders.”

“That detachment is hitting the bunkers now,” Two Bits reported. “Correction, they’re splitting. Dusty, two skywagons and some thirty soldiers just turned your way. Four miles distant, flying an intercept course. ETA two minutes, tops.”

“Copy,” Dusty replied. “Keep us advised.” As soon as he finished, he leaned out the window, shouting out to Axle in the neighboring wagon. “Heads up! We’ve got Serenity forces flying our way! We’ll be making contact in a minute or two!”

Axle made some quick gesture, then turned, lifting a rifle with one hoof

while giving out a loud yell. Several more weapons and shouts were raised from other wagons, spreading the word.

The air raid siren warbling tone continued, echoing eerily even over the sounds of the motorwagons. Then the tone fell, slowly winding down until it fell silent. I'm not sure if the silence was better or worse.

A few seconds later, I saw the dark gray form of a pair of skywagons, skimming low over the horizon, and then the faint black dots of the changelings flying alongside them. My heart lurched, adrenaline flowing. They were coming for us.

Two Bits called out on the radio. "They've split again. Most turned and are heading more directly for you. The skywagons and a few changelings are continuing on away from town."

"Reference the gantry tower east of town," Dusty radioed back. "What's their heading relative to that?"

"They're heading straight at it." They were going for the megaspell.

I looked that way, spotting the distant tower and the barely visible swirl of colors in its midst. Then I looked down to my PipBuck, calling up the map, and finally to the pair of distant skywagons.

They were going to beat us there.

I wanted to tell Dusty that, but he had to know it. We couldn't get there first, but maybe we could get close enough to stop them. We just had to get past the thirty soldiers flying our way.

The earbud crackled with Hail Burst's voice. "Loyal one, go."

A new voice popped up. "One, collapse!"

I looked over to the distant pegasus formation. It was hard to make out individuals as a few distant, dark dots drew closer, but I didn't miss the flicker of purple as several disappeared.

Silence on the radio. I could practically hear my heartbeat even over the roar and rattle of the motorwagon. Then, relief: "Loyal one set."

Hail Burst immediately called out again. "Loyal two, go!"

Another new voice. "Two collapsing!"

Another flash of purple. A single dot appeared. Another flash. Half a dozen disappeared.

"Two set!"

Radio calls continued rapid-fire as the Loyalist force disappeared one-

by-one. Too late, flickers of light flashed at the side of the Raptor, sending pink bolts out at their formation, but they were too far out, too nimble.

As the fifth team was calling out “Set!” my earpiece exploded with a piercing shriek of sound. I winced, flailing at the volume dial, and the vehicle swerved beneath me. I fell, hard, and cried out, clutching at my side. The earpiece had fallen out.

“You okay back there?” Dusty called out.

“Ow,” I replied, gritting my teeth as I pushed myself up to sitting again. A deep breath drew a jab of pain, but carefully moving my shoulder produced none. Bracing myself, I rose up again, grabbing onto the back of the gun. My side protested, but the adrenaline muffled the pain.

One of the motorwagons flashed brightly, and for a moment, I thought it had exploded! Then I saw the bolt of energy sail away, the magical energy cannon glowing brightly as it charged its next shot.

I swung the rear of the gun around, pointing it at the incoming changelings. The violent rocking made it all but impossible to line up the sights, which swung randomly across the distant group. They were still too far away, and the vehicle far too unstable, for me to have a hope of hitting.

Behind me, Sickle turned, and even past all the noise, I could hear her rumble. “The fuck is this shit?”

I glanced back to see her looking off to our side, and followed her gaze to see a Trotsen motorwagon, adorned with a blade-like plow and a spiked roof. It bounded across the dry earth as it swung in close beside us.

It was only because of Sickle’s comment that I was looking to see the pony in the cargo bed swing around a large tube and line up on us.

My vision was abruptly cut off by Sickle’s armored leg, the world lurched as I was pulled of my hooves, and everything exploded.

I tumbled, with no up or down. E.F.S. indicators flashed in my vision. I don’t remember hearing anything, even as I slammed down against something hard. I don’t even remember feeling pain. I was lying on my side. There was dirt in my mouth and smoke in my nose, and as I turned my head, I saw the side of Sickle’s gun, up-close and personal.

She roared. I don’t know if I heard it, or saw it, or *felt* it, but she roared, and I threw up a hoof. The gun thundered, the sound hitting as hard as the impact against my leg. I turned and curled up, desperate and terrified and

completely lost as to what was going on, while her gun pelted me with spent casings.

A searing pain lit up the sensitive membrane at the base of my wing. Whatever scream I produced was lost behind the sound of Sickle's gun, and I flailed until I had dislodged the massive shell casing that had lodged against one of my armor plates.

The shooting stopped. Sickle was still moving. The first sound I remember hearing was her shouting past me, though the only words I made out of the exchange was "Fucking changeling cunts!"

An impact. For a moment I was weightless. Then I slammed down again. I only then recognized that I was still in the bed of the motorwagon. We had just hit a bump. A couple of scalding-hot casings rolled against my side, and I swatted them away. One bounced, tumbled, and disappeared through a gap torn in the bottom of the bed. I paused, looking at the hole.

The side of the cargo bed was torn open, roughly alongside where I had been standing. Metal was twisted, scorched, and shredded.

Opposite the torn-up armor, Bloodbeak lay against the other side of the bed, her eyes wide as blood ran down her side.

That shook me out of my shock. "Bloodbeak's hurt!" The words felt mushy and slurred in my ears. I quickly rose. My leg gave out. I sprawled, caught myself, pushed myself up to her side. She blinked, eyes turning to me without quite focusing, and said something I didn't catch. Another bump almost sent me sprawling again, sending fresh stabs of pain through my side.

I grit my teeth and focused on Bloodbeak, hooves going to her side. There was a nasty cut across the side of her belly, and more blood along her back. I pushed to roll her to the side, and she complied, looking thoroughly dazed and lost.

A jagged chunk of metal, some three inches wide, protruded from her back. It had cut through her side, and while it looked shallow, I couldn't be sure.

I removed my PipBuck, the ever-present E.F.S. indicators vanishing. Bloodbeak was moving her arm, but I was able to grab it and hold her in place long enough to attach the device. The medical screen popped up many warnings, such as severe bleeding and a minor concussion, but it lacked the

one I had been worried about: internal organ damage.

I reflexively turned to search my bags for a healing potion, only to realize I hadn't been wearing them. "I need a healing potion here!"

No answer. I repeated the call, a little more urgently.

A blow struck me on the shoulder. I fell across Bloodbeak, caught myself against the side of the cargo bed, and turned to look for the source. I saw only Sickle's receding hoof as she said something to me—I heard only a vague rumble—and pointed to the armored case at her side.

I staggered my way over, nearly collapsing against her side as I clung to the battle saddle, and popped open the lid of the case. It was full of a chaotic assortment of junk, but I quickly found the healing potion.

Throwing shut the lid, I hurried back to Bloodbeak, almost falling on her again. Her mouth moved, and this time I could make out the words, even if they were muffled. "This kinda hurts."

"Sorry," I said as I nudged her to her side again. "This is going to hurt even more."

I know the general advice for an impaling injury is to not remove the object, but that kind of goes out the window when you have magical healing available. She was already bleeding seriously. She needed a potion, and she needed it now.

So I grasped the metal shard in my magic and pulled. Bloodbeak's eyes and mouth went wide, then she clamped her beak shut, smothering a moan of pain.

The piece of shrapnel came free, and a thick stream of blood followed, as if I had uncorked a bottle. I quickly consulted the PipBuck screen. It was reporting the worsened bleeding, but most importantly, there was no more indication of foreign objects.

I opened the potion, bringing it to her beak. She didn't have to be told what to do, grasping the bottle and downing it. While she did, I retrieved my PipBuck, clasping it onto my leg. The E.F.S. returned, flashing warnings once more. It helpfully informed me that I had a minor concussion, partial fracture of my ventral chest plate, and was currently suffering from the effects of shock.

I found myself very tempted to level some snarky comment at the inanimate object, but I refrained.

There was another thump at my side, lighter. I looked back so see Sickle offering me several pills; a pair each of painkillers and Buck.

One painkiller went to Bloodbeak. The other I downed myself.

I went to return the Buck, but Sickle put up a hoof to stop me, and said something I couldn't understand.

"What?"

Her lips curled, then she shouted loud enough for me to understand. "Fucking take it! You're going to need it!" Then her hoof raised, pointing past me.

I turned, looking past her hoof, past the mounted machine gun, to the black forms flying through the air, weapons flashing with magical fire.

Right. There was a fight going on.

I turned to grab the gun, only to have my side scream in pain, my leg giving out once more. I collapsed to the floor of the cargo bed. Sickle roared out something obscene and fired a few more rounds.

I might disapprove of Sickle's casual chem use, but this was hardly a casual situation. I spared only a moment of regret and uncertainty before throwing back one of the thick tablets, swallowing, and pushing myself up once more.

Grabbing ahold of the machine gun again, I once again took in the scope of the situation in all its chaos. Changelings were swooping in over the line of motorwagons, keeping a few hundred yards up as they strafed us. Guns were fired in return, forcing some of the attacking soldiers to swerve away, but not enough. As I swung the gun around into position, I saw a salvo of pink-red bolts tear savagely into a motorwagon a hundred yards ahead of us, throwing off molten bits of metal and pink ash. A half-dozen changelings banked away from that ruined motorwagon to line up on us. Half of them were in Enclave power armor.

I hit the trigger, letting loose a bone-rattling burst of fire. The shots were wild and inaccurate, but the incoming changelings banked and veered away, avoiding any easy shot on them. I tracked one of the power armor soldiers that flew parallel to us, desperately trying to get the sights roughly on-target.

The sound of gunfire was finally registering, the sounds echoing across the basin. Clouds of dust and bursts of fire engulfed another armed mo-

torwagon at the edge of the loose group. I lost track of the changeling I had been tracking, and swung the weapon around in an attempt to line up on a trio of power-armor-clad changelings diving at the other wagon, unleashing a storm of magical fire. I was too slow. An instant after I saw the changelings, the wagon flashed and erupted in a blast of multicolored magical energy, fragments peppering the landscape around the doomed vehicle.

The changelings didn't emerge unscathed from the Trotsen ponies' return fire. Only two of the trio pulled away from their strafing run. The third hurtled through the air, unresponsive, and crashed into the wake of the burning motorwagon.

More gunfire. Another explosion. Bolts of magic flew both ways as some of the changelings closed on one of the wagons with the Gemstone ponies, only to be driven back by the flurry of return fire, the air filling with searing lines of light and magical bolts. Ponies in the back of speeding wagons fired rifles into the air. Serenity changelings swarmed around, keeping their distance.

They were everywhere. It was too much to keep track of. I spotted one, in power armor, making another strafing run. I swung the weapon around, but she was already banking away, her speed and distance far too great to hit with how much our own wagon was shaking.

Tracking that changeling, I spotted a pair banking around behind us, the gems of their battle-saddles glittering as they lined up on our wagon.

"Sickle!" I shouted, giving a quick point, then hauled myself up on the roof to get the gun turned around. I held the gun tightly as I steadied it, and managed to keep the sights roughly on-target. The Buck must have been working.

Sickle was already firing as I hit S.A.T.S., using the extra little bit of help to get things lined up, and fired.

It was just a short burst, maybe five rounds, but the changelings veered off again, one plummeting straight down. I felt a moment of elation, but it vanished as the changeling rolled and pulled out of her dive, speeding away from us.

The vehicle lurched under me, and I clung to the gun as we swerved, roaring past a ruined and still-tumbling motorwagon. A cloud of dust washed over us, stinging at my nose and eyes, and then we were clear again.

More shooting. More chaos. There was too much to keep track of, too much going on. Several sharp cracks drew my attention to the side, where I saw Dusty's rifle sticking out the window, firing. I swung the gun around in that direction, spotting a changeling in Enclave armor who had swooped in behind another motorwagon. A pony in the back threw a spear at her. She replied with a burst from her own weapons, tearing into the back of the wagon.

S.A.T.S. was ready again. I engaged it, lined up, and hit the trigger. I put out a longer burst this time, and when I let off the trigger, was met with the sight of the changeling tumbling across the ground, throwing up dirt in her wake. I'd actually hit.

A loud *bang* and flash of pink shook me from the moment, and I winced as a wave of cinders slapped across my side. I skittered back, abandoning my precarious perch on the roof for the safety of the cargo bed as bolts of magic landed all around us. I snapped the gun around, blindly firing up into the stream. The barrage stopped a moment later, and I finally spotted the pair of changelings, still at high altitude, banking away from the attack. I didn't have a hope of hitting them at that range, but I'd dissuaded them from their attack.

But I knew I couldn't keep that up. They'd just try again, and eventually they'd hit us. I'd bought us only a few seconds.

I looked around, hunting for targets, or just to make sense of the scene. I only saw a few wagons, but there was so much dust and chaos that I had no idea how things were going. The volume of fire had diminished, and the few changelings I saw were getting distance. I couldn't even guess at how many of them were still up.

The occasional flash of magical light cut through the air after the changelings, but even Gemstone's weapons were having difficulty finding their targets.

Then, as one, every changeling banked into a slow turn, coming around until they had lined up on our formation.

"Fucking bring it!" Sickle roared, planting both hooves on the side of the wagon. I lined up the gun, watching the terrifying force bearing down on us once more. My heart pounded.

A couple lines of light flashed in the sky as a few of the Gemstone ponies

started firing. The magical energy cannons fired a moment later, sending their bolts of magic arcing through the air.

I distinctly remember one single changeling firing, a single string of magical bolts flying forth like the first drops of a torrential storm. More were starting to fire as I hit the trigger, my own gun thundering in reply. Explosions ripped across the ground all around as bolts of magic kicked up sprays of dirt. Guns fired and bolts flew. My entire world narrowed down to that narrow view down the sights, bobbing and sweeping uncontrollably across the incoming forms.

A bang, and the vehicle jolted, swerved, and skidded. I let off the trigger, clinging to the gun as a spray of pink and red cinders washed over me again. Then we straightened out once more, and I looked up to see the changelings veering away again. The return fire was intense, if inaccurate, and I lined up to add a few shots of my own into the mix. I saw a puff of light as some magical weapon hit its target, though I didn't see if it downed them.

I spared a second to glance around. I couldn't find most of the changelings that had been attacking us. I'd completely lost track of them in the confusion, and only saw the dozen or so that were climbing away. I kept the sights aimed in their direction, waiting for them to turn back. They kept going.

There was a bang of a hoof on metal from inside the cab, followed by a shout from Dusty that I couldn't make out.

"What?"

Sickle's hoof thumped me in the side, then pointed to the front. "He said to shoot the fucking skywagon!"

I looked to the front again. Past the spray of dust from the badly scorched motorwagon in front of us, the test tower was less than half a mile away and closing swiftly. The pair of skywagons hovered alongside it. I didn't see any sight of the balefire bomb.

I swung around, lining up the sights as best as I could with how much the vehicle shook. I was about to fire when I stopped myself, turning my attention to the sights and dialing up the range. The dial could range up past two thousand yards, which seemed excessively optimistic even in ideal circumstances. The eight hundred I set it for still seemed rather optimistic, given my skill and our movement.

I lined up again and hit the trigger. It was just a short burst, perhaps three or four rounds. Then I was fighting the vehicle's shaking to get back on-target, while trying very, *very* hard to not think too closely on what I was shooting at. Half a mile away was far too close, but the decision had been made. We had a mission. Stop Serenity from getting that megaspell, by any means necessary.

One of the Gemstone cannons started firing, lobbing an inaccurate spray of plasma at the distant skywagons. I had no idea where my own rounds had gone, but I fired again, putting out a few more rounds.

The skywagons started moving. I adjusted to lead them and engaged S.A.T.S. This time, I put out a slightly longer burst.

I couldn't tell where my rounds were going. I was just blindly guessing as I fired again, hoping that I'd put enough rounds down-range to hit out of pure luck.

I hit the trigger again. The weapon thundered once, twice, and then fell silent. "I'm out!"

Dusty squirmed out past the back seat, pushing past me. I have to admit, I gawked a bit as he searched for more ammo; the side of his bardings was speckled with scorch marks, and the hair on his face was singed. It took him only a moment to find the new box. He pulled the old can off the mount and replaced it with the new one, opening it and the massive top cover of the gun to feed the new belt in. A second later it was shut and he racked the massive handle, chambering a round.

He gripped the weapon, calling out. "Starlight, halt!"

The motorwagon lurched as she hit the brakes, throwing me against the edge of the roof, then sending me tumbling back to the floor as it settled violently into place. Dusty kept his place, and a moment later was firing in long, well-controlled bursts. I pushed myself up with surprising ease—thank you, Buck—and leaned to peer around him. We were almost right behind the skywagons now, and I saw a few puffs from the one on the right. He was hitting! The vehicle started to bank, but he adjusted and fired again, and a second later was rewarded by a few more puffs along its side.

He fired again, a shorter burst, but he'd gotten their measure. I could see the impacts along the front edge of the skywagon. Its maneuver immediately ceased, and the nose slipped downward. A few dark forms flew from the

stricken vehicle as it fell.

Dusty was already firing on the other one, which had entered a dive, weaving back and forth. His fire was joined by the Gemstone cannon, and I looked over to see it stopped maybe a hundred yards away. Even Starlight joined in, with the searing red flash and loud crack of her Lancer firing from inside the wagon. The shot threw off a cloud of incandescent sparks from the skywagon's side.

Despite the fusillade of fire, the distant skywagon kept going, bobbing and weaving. Dusty kept firing, in short, careful bursts, but I couldn't tell if any of them hit. The tail end of the belt disappeared into the gun, and it finally fell silent moments before the skywagon, skimming the ground, disappeared behind the brightly colored buildings of Ponytown.

"Damnit!" Dusty snapped, ducking down to shout to Starlight. "Move! Head towards the Raptor! We might cut them off!"

I staggered back into Sickle as the tires churned at the ground, kicking up a spray of dirt as we took off once more. Once I'd recovered my balance, I scanned the desert, looking for the other skywagon. I found it, crumpled on the desert floor, abandoned.

Dusty still stood there, holding onto the gun for balance, his jaw tight as he glared at where the skywagon had disappeared. Then he turned to look at the *Cumulonimbus*. It was well past the town and still headed slowly southward, putting us even closer to it than the fleeing skywagon. We still had a chance.

Dusty's ear flicked, and he turned to his PipBuck, hoof turning one of the dials. I realized what he was doing and searched for my displaced earbud, tracing the cable until I found it caught in the strap of my armor's shoulder-plate. I slipped it in.

"—Disabled. CIC secured. Be advised, we found and defused demolitions here, they may be trying to scuttle the ship."

"Copy that," Hail Burst replied. "All teams, eyes out for more demo. Four, status?"

Dusty hit the transmit button. "Hail Burst, it's Dusty, they have the megaspell! It's in a skywagon, last seen heading northwest from Ponytown thirty seconds ago."

"Understood," Hail Burst replied before continuing as if he hadn't spo-

ken. "Four, status?"

"Lead, Four. We hit strong resistance here, but it's thinned out. Looks like they fell back somewhere to the aft, maybe engineering."

"Negative," another voice called. "Six holds engineering. Some of the bugs were trying to set demo, but we stopped them. We've had no contact for the past minute."

I looked out at the cloudship. I could see several dark forms flying away from it, with a few more trickling out from some place along the bottom. It seemed the Loyalists were winning.

Two Bit's voice came over the radio. "Ranger lead has eyes on that skywagon, about a quarter mile northwest of town, still continuing northwest."

"Lead, three! Bridge secured. They abandoned the position. There's demo set—"

"Fuck," Dusty said, his head snapping up. My earbud suddenly crackled with multiple shouts and calls all at once, and I looked up to see bits of armor plating and machinery hurtling through the sky, a thick cloud of smoke quickly washing away in the wind to reveal the yards-wide wound that had just been torn out of the Raptor's nose.

Hail Burst's voice cut through the cacophony. "Clear comms! Three, status?"

Silence.

"Three, report!"

Another stretch of silence, finally broken by the voice of a stallion, sounding very much like he was fighting back pain. "Pinwheel here. I... I think I'm the only one left. The whole bridge just... fucking exploded."

"Copy that. Stay put. Five! Pick it up and get to the bridge. Everyone else, you fucking scour your compartments for demo! Four and six, coordinate with each other on ship comms, I want flight control!"

Several calls of affirmation went out, while Dusty cursed and turned to me. "How are changelings for endurance?"

"About the same as a pony," I said. "More if they're good with shapeshifting. If you're asking about how long they can fly that skywagon, hours at least, and they can just trade out pilots while others rest in the back."

He frowned grimly. "So we can't catch them."

"The Loyalists might be able to," I said, though I looked off to the north-

west and the distant, barely visible forms of flying changelings. “Though they’d have a lot of opposition to get through, and they’ve got to be running out of steam after flying that long. It’s looking iffy.”

“And the whirligigs would get torn up by fliers,” he said with a grunt. “Damn. They’re going to fucking get away with it.”

I felt a little helpless. I had no good ideas to suggest. I could have shifted into a fast-flying form, perhaps Rainbow Dash in the prime of her youth, but I could hardly do anything on my own. Heck, with my side feeling the way it was, I couldn’t even be certain I’d catch them even then.

“Slow it down,” Dusty called to Starlight, then turned to wave. I looked over to see Axle’s wagon a short ways off, beaten and burnt from the attack, but still rolling.

As the wagon drew closer, Axle reared up in the back, looking even more dusty and disheveled than before. “What the hell is going on now?”

“They got away,” Dusty called back. “The Loyalists are securing the Raptor. The fight’s over. It’s time to round up every pony that made it.”

“What?” Axle said, casting a glance at the *Cumulonimbus*. “You mean the fucking birdies were so goddess-damned obsessed with their ship they just let the fucking megaspell slip right by them?”

“We’ll work out the details later,” Dusty said with a shake of his head. “Right now, let’s backtrack. I saw a lot of wagons knocked out. Some ponies are going to need a ride.”

“Fuck!” Axle shouted, then ducked down. I heard more yelling inside the wagon before it turned, heading back the way we came.

“Follow him,” Dusty called out to Starlight before turning back to his broadcaster. “Bitsy, we’re backtracking to pickup casualties and recover any functioning wagons.”

“Copy that. The Loyalists seem to have the ship. Alpha’s heading down to check that bunker they were bombarding. Bravo, stay up here to keep an eye on things and respond as needed.”

Both Dusty and another pony replied in affirmation as one of the whirligigs banked away, descending to our south.

The ride back was more sedate and melancholy, especially as we approached the first smoldering motorwagon. The area all around it was torn up from incoming fire and fragments. The entire front end was an open,

gaping wound; one of the incoming bolts must have ruptured the vehicle's spark pack. My PipBuck clicked rapidly in my ear as we passed by, then fell silent again.

Looking around at the motorwagons trailing along with us, we were concerningly thin in numbers. Only four wagons were still with us, including Axle's and one with a Gemstone cannon atop it. Fortunately, not all of the missing wagons were destroyed. The very next wagon we came across had the missing Gemstone cannon, and it was mostly intact. The crew sat wearily atop the roof, awaiting our return. They had lost a wheel, and some lucky shot had struck the cannon and blew out some vital parts, but except for a slightly singed gunner, they had escaped injury. The gunner even smiled, saying that she was sure Arclight could fix the cannon easily.

The next was even worse than the first. A young stallion, barely an adult, had been the only survivor in his wagon, and was horribly burned across almost all of his body, crying out at even the most gentle of touches. The rest of his crew, six ponies, were still trapped within their smoldering, twisted wagon. The charred and nearly skeletal face of the driver leered out the side window. The stench was horrific.

Serenity's force hadn't escaped unscathed, either. Time and time again, I spotted the limp, black lump of a downed changeling. They were few in number compared to our losses, but it could have been far worse.

One of Serenity's soldiers had been shot down and crashed near one of the disabled motorwagons. The three members of the crew that had survived the attack had tied her broken corpse across the hood of their wagon. Some of them laughed and made crude gestures in my direction as we passed. One of the gestures showed off the newly acquired PipBuck strapped to a foreleg.

I ducked my head below the roof. "Starlight, go ahead and stop us here."

As we came to a stop, I was transforming again, returning to my queen disguise. The world warped and shrunk around me. When it was finished, I stood tall, calling out, "Axe!"

His vehicle had just passed us, slowing as ours did, and finally came to a halt as he stood up in the rear. "What?"

I hopped down, wings flickering to soften the landing, and my horn lit again, my saddlebags floating out from the motorwagon. "Come with me, please," I asked as I turned, walking toward the gruesomely adorned vehicle.

I heard a loud mumbling of obscenities, but somewhere in that string of curses must have been some order, because his driver pulled up beside me. “What the fuck is it now?”

Two of the ponies we were approaching had stopped their gestures, instead staring with narrowed glares of open hatred. The third still looked amused, pushing the changeling’s head so the corpse was looking at me.

“I’d like to borrow that PipBuck,” I said, coming to a halt just a few yards from the ponies. I looked to Axle, making it clear I was asking this of him and not them. “And any other PipBucks we can recover, as well.”

“What?” the PipBuck’s wearer said. “Why the *fuck* would I give it to you, bitch?”

“Several reasons. I expect the most important to you would be that Serenity has the tags of every PipBuck here. Unless I change it to something they can’t track, they’ll know your precise location, no matter where you go. You’ll be like a beacon, advertising our exact position, and they’ll be gunning for you.”

I turned back to Axle. “More importantly, the data on that PipBuck could be useful to our fight. I have extensive experience in data intrusion, cryptography, and intelligence analysis. If I collect all the information I can, I may be able to find something that helps us. I also have additional reasons to examine the device that I’d rather not discuss in public.”

“Like I fucking care,” the stallion said. “It’s mine, fair and square.”

“I’m not asking to keep it,” I elaborated, still talking to Axle. “He’ll get it back.”

“Hey, I said—”

Axle cut him off. “Oh for fuck’s sake, Skim, just give it to the bitch. I’m way too tired and *way* too fucking pissed about far more important things to have any patience for this brahminshit!”

Skim gaped for a moment before replying. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

Axle practically snarled. “Do I look like I’m fucking kidding? Give it to her before I stomp your damn face in!” Then he turned his glare at me. “And you, you’re giving it back to him by the end of the day or I’m tracking you down, breaking off that ugly fucking horn, and jamming it up whatever passes for a cunt in you bugs, got it?”

"Understood," I replied with a polite nod.

Axle grumpily sat back, barking out a command, and his motorwagon started rolling again.

Skim took his time removing the PipBuck. "If I don't get this back, you won't have to wait for Axle to find you. I'll have fun making you scream."

"Mmm," I hummed as I took the PipBuck in my magic. "And two hundred years ago, I might have even found that intimidating." I pulled up a bit more of my magic reserves, and with a flash, the changeling corpse burst into flames. The mare beside it yelped, scrambled back, and fell off the hood of the motorwagon. I simply turned and walked away, not even watching as the corpse was reduced to a fine ash.

Mind you, my heart was pounding, and I was fighting adrenaline to remain smooth and calm in appearance. I was playing a role, and I had to keep it up, even as much as everything in me told me not to turn my back on someone who had so much reason to hurt me.

Several curses and shouts followed me, but they didn't try to attack me. Maybe it was because they knew Axle would get on them for it. Or maybe it was because of Sickle's eager grin, and Dusty's rifle protruding from the side of our motorwagon, held low but ready.

As I drew nearer, Starlight leaned forward. "Everything okay there?"

That broke my calm acting, as I winced. I had somehow not seen her face since the fighting had started; her muzzle was caked in blood. "What happened to you?"

She flashed an awkward smile. "Smashed my face into the steering wheel when that rocket hit. Again. It's fine."

I hesitated. "Are you sure?"

"Yep. It doesn't even hurt anymore. It just kinda itches now." Seeing that I was still concerned, she lifted her PipBuck-clad leg for emphasis. "I'm fine. It says so."

"If you say so," I said, and my wings beat for a few moments, carrying me up to the cargo bed once more. "Do you need a healing potion? Painkillers."

"I'm *fine*," she said, nearly laughing as she said it. The motor thrummed as the vehicle started to roll again. "What I need is a rag and some water."

That I was able to do. We continued on, only now we were aiming for all those little black lumps dotted across a couple of miles of the basin. We

stopped at each one, and Starlight got cleaned up while I scoured them for PipBucks. Every soldier without power armor had one. At Starlight's insistence, we opened up a pair of the least damaged power armors, loading them into the back of our wagon.

One of those had been the one I had downed. The round had struck low on the side of the chest. Starlight said that was great, since there was little in the way of articulation around that point, so it probably did very little damage to the armor itself.

The same couldn't be said for the poor changeling that had been wearing it. It was an unpleasantly thorough look at what that gun could do to a person. The entire ventral plate of her chest had been obliterated, and the impact had cracked the carapace all the way across her back. The inside of the armor was a gruesome mess of blood and former changeling. My stomach tightened unpleasantly at the sight, and the knowledge that I had done this to her.

By the end of it, I had gathered seven PipBucks from twelve downed changelings, piled together like some morbid trophy collection.

We eventually caught up with Axe and the rest of the Trotsen ponies. They had stopped by the first motorwagon to have been knocked out, the same one that had fired on us. Sickle had torn it up with her machine gun, and it had eventually come to rest there. The Trotsen ponies had pulled out the corpse of the driver, a changeling, still garbed in the clothing of the pony she had been impersonating. She'd been hit by at least two of Sickle's rounds. Most of her head was simply gone, and a severed foreleg was tangled in the crude bardings.

Ponies stood nearby, arguing. I heard a couple names. I think they were wondering what had happened to the ponies they had replaced. I couldn't say for sure, but I suspect they were dead.

All told, the Trotsen ponies had picked up ten ponies from knocked-out wagons, and repair crews were working on two of the wagons that had been damaged but not destroyed. Many were wounded, even among the crews of surviving wagons. The Gemstone ponies were all fine; the singed gunner was the worst of their injuries, and even that had been superficial. The firepower they had brought to bear had forced the enemy to keep its distance, and once they were immobilized, the magical energy rifles would

have been much more stable and accurate.

Bloodbeak was doing better, too. She had recovered from the shock of her injury, and was sitting against the side of the cargo bay. She was idly turning over the mangled fragment of metal, a souvenir, while looking out at the trail of disabled vehicle left behind us. “Wow. Holy crap. I missed a hell of a fight.”

As soon as we stopped, Starlight scrambled out from the driver’s seat, hurrying to the front of the vehicle. I rose up, looking across the roof, to see her examining a jagged hole in the hood, surrounded by a broad scorch mark. She opened it up, examining the inside for further damage, while I noted a second hit on the side of the vehicle, right beside where Dusty sat. It had been a shallow, glancing hit, but still enough to open a small hole. It explained the burns on the side of his bardings.

As for Dusty, he remained standing in the rear of the motorwagon, his forelegs crossed atop the roof, still looking out to where the skywagon had disappeared. He’d been silent for quite a while, but he finally spoke to me. “This cost us,” he grumbled. “Serenity got their balefire bomb, and we lost, what, a quarter of Trotsen’s motorwagons? A fifth? Plus however many Loyalists died in that ship.”

“At least we got the *Cumulonimbus*,” I said. “It’s a poor consolation prize for that megaspell, but at least we’re not entirely empty hooved.”

He grunted. “Yeah. If they can hold it. If it even matters, with that megaspell in their hooves. What do you think they’re going to do with it?”

“I don’t know,” I said, frowning. “Maybe hit the army. Maybe hit Mareford. Maybe use it for intimidation. I don’t know.” Silence followed, until I added, “I’m still curious why the *Cumulonimbus* was even here.”

Dusty gave another grunt, but didn’t reply.

“I’ve been trying to figure it out since we left the army. It seems to me that if their goal were the megaspell, they’d do just as well to send a small group out to retrieve it. We’d never know it was happening, so we wouldn’t have a chance to stop it. Moreover, it would leave the *Cumulonimbus* in a position to hit the army, and they’d have a lot more support to hold onto it. Instead... they made a move that tipped us off to their intent.”

Dusty’s ear flicked, and he looked my way.

“It seems like a poor decision on multiple levels,” I continued. “An

illogical one, even, especially from a group that has been operating in secrecy for at least two hundred years. It doesn't make sense, and any time something doesn't make sense, I start to suspect deception. That goes double when changelings are involved."

He gave a faint snort. "Yeah. Same here."

"I see two possible deceptions they were trying to play. One is that this was intended as a trap. They dangle the *Cumulonimbus* in front of us, knowing the Loyalists will want to take her back. They send it out to help retrieve the megaspell, and if we figure out where it's going, that's even more motivation. The Loyalists have to get through the ship's cannons, then fight through the interior of the ship. Even if they start to win, Serenity can blow the ship and kill even more of them. Maybe even use the megaspell for that purpose. It'd be costly, but they're our hard-hitters and air power. That trade might be in their favor, at least before Echo's teleportation shortcut past their defenses."

"Might be," Dusty said with a grumble, then paused. A moment later, he pressed the transmit button. "Echo, are you okay?"

There was a momentary pause. "Of course I am. Why are you asking?"

"Just checking," he said, and looked to me again.

I continued. "Possibility two is also that this was bait, but that it was intended to draw off as much of our hard-hitters as possible, divide us up, and then hit the main army while we're gone. I didn't get a good count of how many changelings there were, but I'd guess at around a hundred. They've got a lot more than that."

Dusty grimaced. "Or they were trying to do both of those. But yeah, that's something we had considered before splitting up. I trust the militia to do the best they can while we're gone. If it gets too bad, they'll dig in and wait for us to get back, but they're probably fine." He paused before adding, "Hopefully. We'll see."

"We will." I looked with him at Ponymtown. "There's a good chance we'll get another shot at that megaspell. We'll just have to be ready."

He grunted, but didn't answer, and we fell into silence. The radio was still alive with transmissions, and while we waited, I listened in on the Loyalists, finishing up their sweeps of the *Cumulonimbus*. It was interesting to listen to, but there was nothing terribly important.

Dusty's attention slowly drifted away, until he was looking over the rest of our gathered force. Eventually he brought up his broadcaster. "Hail Burst, it's Dusty. Does that ship have medical facilities in good condition?"

Hail Burst replied. "The '*Nimbus*' has a good sickbay, but it's a bit stripped bare at the moment. Do you have wounded?"

"We've got a good twenty ponies down here that could use care, and I don't think we have space on the wagons to haul all of them. Some are in pretty bad shape."

"Understood," Hail Burst said. "Ranger Lead, if you can get those whirligigs to pick them up, you can drop them off at the hangar. I'll have a couple soldiers posted to bring them in." The radio clicked off, but a second later her voice returned. "While we're at it, is Whisper still on this net?"

I blinked, then gently pressed the button to broadcast. "I am here."

"Yeah. I think you should get up here."

Many questions leaped to mind, but I stuck to the simplest one. "Why?"  
"Because we have prisoners."

## Chapter Forty

# Analysis

I arrived on the *Cumulonimbus* in something approaching a royal manner. Two Enclave soldiers stood at attention as I touched down. I landed gracefully, standing tall and proud like a proper changeling queen, my mane blowing in the steady wind of the cloudship's flight. Echo touched down just behind me, following like some royal attendant or guardian.

This was the first time I had seen a cloudship up close, and while the *Cumulonimbus* was battered and scarred, she was still an impressive vessel. I had landed at the edge of what had once been the hangar deck, prior to it being mostly crushed in. Metal had been peeled away or beaten down to make a flat landing, and a gaping doorway led into the ship. The matching door lay against the wall beyond, its edges jagged and drooping where the Loyalists had blasted their way through it.

The soldiers looked us over, practically radiating suspicion despite their face-concealing helmets, until one of them jerked their head to the side. "Follow us. Commander Hail Burst is waiting for you in the CIC."

I cast a glance back to Echo—she gave me a tight frown in reply—before following the soldiers through the door. I had to duck my head. Even with their country led by alicorns of impressive size, the corridors were built for regular ponies.

The inside was poorly lit, with walls missing panels, pipes and wiring exposed, and support beams badly warped. Most of the lights were broken or missing, and a scattering of mismatched lights were added in various places to keep areas from being plunged into darkness. The faint creaking and groaning of metal made for a constant background murmur, as if the ship itself were moaning in pain.

As we turned the first corner, it was even worse. The walls were thoroughly peppered with scorch marks and craters, especially along the far end of the hall. Ash had settled into nooks and crannies, while a few larger clumps on the floor were partly scattered by the passage of hooves. Despite the signs of carnage, bloodstains were infrequent, but not absent. The volume of magical energy weapon fire had left few corpses.

The changelings crewing the ship must have mounted a hasty defense here as soon as they realized what the Loyalists had done, and while they had apparently put up a good fight, the effort had cost them dearly.

The signs of combat continued throughout the ship, but more sporadically. I made a conscious effort to avoid stepping in the scattered ash, knowing that these were the incinerated remains of what had been people less than an hour ago, but it was hopeless. The ash had been tracked all over the place; Loyalists and Serenity changelings alike had far more pressing matters to consider at the time.

We went deeper and deeper into the ship, and even with my head held low, I had to crouch to slip under the occasional low-hanging, badly-patched length of pipe or some dangling wires.

The pegasi escorting us didn't say a word. We would have walked in complete silence, but Echo still had some concerns in mind.

"I still can not believe you would be so incredibly reckless," she said, scowling as she followed along behind me. "I know you understand how important your life is to both of our plans. You jeopardized everything we are working towards."

"Not everything," I said, playing the serene, dignified queen. It's a hard act to pull off without seeming aloof, especially with Echo being the closest present analogue. I tried to keep Ephema pictured in my mind. "It would have stopped Serenity from getting the megaspell. It would have saved lives."

"Ponies survived hundreds of megaspells," Echo shot back. "They will survive one more. I understand that you hold certain ideals, but those ideals will hardly matter if we can not improve the situation of ponies beyond this meager struggle to survive."

"On the contrary," I said, putting on a hint of a smile, "those ideals are *how* we can improve the situation, for ponies and all other people."

She gave a tired sigh—I have to admit, it was possibly a little cheesy—but fell silent, sulking the rest of the way.

Finally, after a maze of grim, dimly lit passages, we passed through a pressure door and into a room tall enough that I could raise my head, my jagged, queen-like horn not quite touching the ceiling. The room was packed with terminal stations, screens, and rows of indicators. Some were destroyed, and there were extensive signs of repairs and reinforcement, including a large

beam that had been welded in place in the middle of the room. Only a few of the consoles were actually crewed, while Hail Burst stood back, her helmet removed, eyes scanning the displayed information. Other pegasi crewed a few of the many stations, calling out back and forth as they checked over the systems.

She turned to me a moment later, eying me just as severely before giving a curt nod. "Welcome aboard."

"Thank you," I replied with a courteous nod, before putting on a more serious expression. "Before we continue, a question. When we met in Rust, who was the first of us to speak to you?"

She blinked, expression tightening for a moment, but she snorted before jerking her head toward Echo. "She was. Wait, no. She was the first one we saw. That was Dusty that called out, wasn't it?" She frowned. "Satisfied?"

"Yes, thank you. And I'm sorry that I had to ask, but the dark and isolated passages of a damaged ship seem like the perfect place to pick off a pony for impersonation. I'd advise you to conduct some brief interviews with your ponies. They—"

"Already taken care of," Hail Burst replied. "You're not the only one to think of that."

I nodded. "Again, I'm sorry. I don't mean to be stepping on your hooves. You said you have prisoners?"

"We do," she said, relaxing slightly. "Three, to be precise. All wounded. Not a single changeling surrendered. I get the feeling they're not going to talk, either, but I thought you might take a shot."

"I'll certainly try, but you're right. The chances of them telling me anything useful is slim. I might be able to discern some information through indirect means, but I doubt I'll get much. Actually, I think I have a more likely source of information."

"And this would be?"

"PipBucks," I said, raising my leg to show my own. "Every changeling that wasn't in power armor should have one, and they are a wealth of potential intelligence. I'd like to get a copy of the data contained on every PipBuck that can be found. I may not be much as a combatant, but I have experience in data intrusion, cryptography, and intelligence analysis, and I believe I can contribute more effectively toward our joint cause that way."

Echo snorted. "Good. You have a troubling propensity for getting yourself into dangerous situations. The further we can keep you from the fighting, the better."

An opportunity presented itself. I gave Hail Burst an uneven smile. "Apologies for Echo. She's taken issue with some of my recent actions."

Echo's voice didn't boom out at full volume, but it was certainly elevated in that tight space. "You were shooting at a megaspell with a machine gun. I know you understand their danger. If you or Dusty had managed to hit it, you would have all been killed."

"Probably," I said, slowly nodding, "but we had to do what we could to stop them. Our wagon was the one that got closest. As much as I'd rather not, we had to take the shot."

"You would not have survived a megaspell detonation at such close range," Echo said, her eyes narrowing dangerously. "I have intimate experience with their destructive potential. You would have killed yourself."

"But not you," I noted. "My hive would still have a future, and your own goals would merely be delayed, not destroyed."

She frowned, glaring at me for several seconds before grunting. "You are the singularly most frustrating individual I have ever spoken with."

Hail Burst had been eying me in silence, taking in our conversation, but she finally gave a faint snort of amusement at Echo's reply. "You've certainly got that right." She lifted a hoof, waving to the door. "Come on. Prisoners are this way."

"Thank you," I replied with a gracious nod. "To get back to the subject of PipBucks..."

"We were already collecting them to get what intel we could," Hail Burst said as Echo and I followed her, with the pair of guards bringing up the rear. "I'll get you a copy of the data we pull off them."

"Thank you," I said, ducking my head as we exited the room.

While extensive damage had rendered the *Cumulonimbus* a maze of collapsed and blocked passages, Hail Burst navigated the ship with ease, leading us through halls, stairs, and the occasional room. Every space had some unique damage: walls creased their whole length by the tremendous impact of the crash, floors replaced with crudely welded scrap, wires and cables routed through doors that could no longer be shut. The variety of

damage and destruction was impressive, and made the fact that the cloudship still flew all the more amazing.

Finally, we ended in a dead-end hallway with a single sealed door. Hail Burst came to a halt, turning to face me. “We don’t have a proper functioning brig, so we’re keeping the prisoners under guard in here.”

I quirked an eyebrow. “They’re all in the same room?”

“They are,” she said with a nod. “Not ideal, but we’re short on ponies, and I wanted to keep at least two ponies watching them at all times.”

“Good,” I said, giving a nod that was made much more awkward by the low ceiling. “Changelings can be slippery. I escaped from inside their hive because they assigned only a single individual to watch me directly.”

She frowned. “I think I’d like to hear the details of that story, though it may have to wait. Right now I’d like any insight you have on keeping these prisoners secured. What capabilities do your people have that might aid their escape? What kind of magic? What should we look out for?”

“The most obvious is our shapeshifting,” I said. “It’s not limited to pony forms, or even to identical mass, as you’ve no doubt noticed from me. The exact capabilities of any changeling will depend on their skill, but assume any changeling should be able to transform into anything ranging in size from a newborn foal to a buffalo. This includes inanimate objects, or facsimiles of such, although I personally find the experience to be... unpleasant.

“Then there’s the standard range of other magical capabilities. Telekinesis, light, and conjuring fire are the only other universal abilities, but they’re fairly versatile, especially in combination. Offensive bolts of magic are relatively common, too. Changeling magic is also apparently capable of mental domination and limited teleportation, though I’m only aware of a single individual in all of history to have ever possessed those skills, and she was a queen.” I frowned for emphasis. “Which isn’t to say they couldn’t possess such skills, just that it would be very exceptional.”

“I see,” Hail Burst said, wearing a frown of her own. “Let’s just hope they can’t do that. Anything else?”

I considered that for a long moment before replying. “Just the obvious: don’t trust anything they say. It’s unlikely that you’ve captured proper infiltrators, but there are many professions that benefit from training in deception techniques.”

"Changelings are good liars," Hail Burst said, giving me a flat stare. "Somehow, I think I've picked up on that."

I gave a short chuckle, cracking a smile. "Which ironically means I haven't done such a good job of it."

She paused. "I can't even be sure if that's a joke or not."

I gave another amused snort. "I've been shot, blown up, thrown around, came very close to being incinerated by a balefire megaspell—"

"That was your own fault," Echo reminded me.

"—and I have a crack in my carapace that's been a literal pain in my side all day long. I could use some stress relief, and humor is good for that."

"Yeah, you sound like a barrel of laughs," she said with a shake of her head, then lifted a hoof to gesture back the way we came. "The first door leads to a vacant room, if you want to use that for interrogation." She stepped up to the door, knocking twice before opening it. "She's here."

A voice acknowledged her, and she turned back to me. "I'll leave you to it. The Rangers are bringing aboard the last of the wounded. I'll either be in the sickbay or CIC when you're done here."

"I'll let you know what I find," I said. "One last question. Approximately how many of Serenity's changelings were on the ship? And approximately how many were killed?"

"We're still trying to work that out," she said. "Judging by initial accounts, I'd estimate they had about a company at most, including the changelings that went after the megaspell. Most looked to be crew rather than soldier, with only basic equipment, though there was at least a squad of soldiers in stolen Enclave power armor. We're also estimating they took forty to sixty KIA in the *Cumulonimbus*, and maybe a few more wounded that managed to escape."

"Thank you," I said, bowing my head a little more.

She nodded, then turned and walked off.

I paused, taking a slow and careful breath, and stepped through the doorway.

The room had been a bunk room, and sadly no taller than the hall. Most of the furniture had been removed. Two soldiers in power armor stood guard near the door, heads turning slightly to look at me as I entered. Their weapons remained trained on the far side of the room, as if guarding the

most dangerous prisoners they have ever faced.

Those prisoners were a trio of changelings, strapped down to the only remaining bunks, and practically mummified in bandages. Two were missing legs, with heavily bandaged stumps where the limbs should be. The third had bandages across her face, covering her eyes.

Only one showed any signs of consciousness. Her breathing was slow and labored, but as her barely open eyes drifted over to me, they narrowed. Even incapacitated, all three showed as hostile on my E.F.S.

I turned to one of the soldiers guarding them. "I see only one of them is conscious."

"The bugs don't give up easy," the soldier replied, her helmeted head remaining fixed on the prisoners. "They fought until they were dead or unconscious, and M.E.W.s don't give much margin between the two."

"And their condition?"

"Stable." Simple and brief.

"Very well," I said, nodding. "I'd like to move the conscious one to a nearby room for some questions."

"Commander Hail Burst has given us strict orders for the handling of these prisoners," the soldier said. "You will not be permitted to be alone with the prisoners. At least two Enclave soldiers must be present with a prisoner at all times. Furthermore, the ranking Enclave soldier present has authority to terminate any further contact with the prisoners. Understand?"

Translation: they didn't entirely trust me, and the soldiers were there to guard against my misbehavior as much as the prisoners'. Some might find that to be irritating or insulting, but I found it strangely comforting. It was a very professional caution.

I nodded. "Of course."

Our escort led us to the interrogation room, while Echo floated the helpless and wounded changeling soldier into the room, bunk and all. The room itself was another small bunk room, just large enough to not feel crowded with the number of occupants, though not so large that I could stand normally. Instead, I laid down on one of the cots, facing sideways from where Echo was setting down the wounded changeling.

I lay there, head held high, my eyes focused on the wall at the end of the room. I let the silence stretch on, visibly brooding. When I spoke, it was

soft and quiet.

“Is there any way this does not end in bloodshed?”

The injured changeling made a weak exhalation that could generously be interpreted as a snort.

I finally turned to look at her. Even lying on the cot, I was taller than everyone but Echo. I could have loomed over her, powerful and terrifying, but I did not. I kept my expression soft and somber. “I know that things are steadily heading towards a cataclysmic battle, but I still hope for some peaceful resolution. I have seen far too many changelings die already.” I paused, and in consideration of our observers, added, “And ponies, too.”

She grunted, teeth gritting for a moment before giving a weak, barely audible reply. “Go... fuck... yourself.”

I frowned at that. “Do you think I’m talking about my own hive? I’m not. Regardless of how this all turns out, I am the only one of my hive in danger. I’m talking about your hive.”

Her dismissive snort had a bit more strength behind it this time.

“Your hive can’t win this,” I said, slowly shaking my head, adding a touch of sadness to my expression. “Your queen is forcing a situation where only one side survives. If we don’t find some other course of action, your hive is going to be wiped out.”

She gave a weak, pained laugh, followed by a grimace, grunting as she sucked in a few shallow breaths. It was a few seconds before she started to relax again, hissing out a quiet reply. “You already lost. We got the bomb.”

“And look at what it cost you,” I said. “You gave your opponent a powerful weapons platform, and lost a hundred changelings in the process. In exchange, you killed less than thirty ponies, destroyed a couple of motorwagons, and got a megaspell that will do you little good. A few more ‘victories’ like this, and your hive won’t exist. That army is going to wipe you out if we don’t find a peaceful solution.”

I might have rounded the numbers a little, but she could hardly know that.

She gave another weak laugh through gritted teeth. “Your... army. Heh. Not... not going to find much of it...”

“You mean the attack intended to take advantage of us splitting our forces?” I said, adding a hint of boredom to my expression; it was a guess

and a bluff rolled into one, but all well-reasoned. “I think you’ll find things have played out differently than you imagined, much like it did here.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly, then looked away. “Doesn’t matter... We have... the megaspell...”

“And you really think that’s going to make a difference? I think you underestimate these ponies. They won’t make it that easy for you.”

Another choked laugh. “Doesn’t matter. Ponies... ponies are selfish. Now they know we have the megaspell... they either turn around... or we burn their homes. Heh. No army.”

She closed her eyes.

“You underestimate them,” I said, slowly shaking my head in case she opened her eyes again. “I’ve seen them. I’ve fought alongside them. They’re not going to be deterred by that threat. You’ve only got the one megaspell against five major enemies.”

She gave another dismissive exhale.

“And when they fight past your defensive forces, and they will, then they’ll be right on the steps of your hive.” Her eyes had opened, so I raised a hoof, gesturing around. “And you’ve already seen how easily these ponies can storm a confined interior environment like this. You had a perfect defensive position, and yet, how many of your fellow changelings died trying to hold them off?”

Another weak snort. “Engineers. Your ponies sure look good fighting crew with basic weapons... no armor. Heh.” She managed a weak sneer. “I heard the explosion. How many did we get?”

One of the Loyalist soldiers shifted a hoof slightly, the first reaction I’d seen them give since the interrogation started.

“Only a couple,” I replied, while silently noting how the term was frequently used in a much more vague manner than its strict dictionary definition. “And I saw the scorch marks on the walls. Magical energy weapons are impressive armaments for mere engineers. That’s hardly basic weapons.”

Her sharp-toothed grin was marred and contorted with her pain, but it conveyed the right emotion. “Should try the soldiers. Then you’ll see. Then you’ll die.”

“Considering the number we shot out of the air so recently, it seems you’re overestimating them.” I gave a mild shrug. “The power armor was

interesting, I'll admit. Though I'm afraid your hive just lost a good twenty sets or more."

"Doesn't matter," she said. "Got ten times that. Maybe more. Your army dies." She grunted, laying her head back again, eyes closing. "Wish I could watch."

I paused a moment, considering her, but finally turned away. "Echo, could you please return her?"

As Echo levitated the changeling, one of the Loyalists spoke. "Done already?"

"She's not going to give us anything more useful," I said, rising to my hooves once more, with all the awkwardness of the low ceiling.

A minute later, the prisoner was safely under guard in the makeshift brig, and our escorts led us up a flight of stairs and through the maze of corridors. Soon after, we reached the sickbay. It wasn't a single room, as I had imagined, but an entire section of the deck, with multiple rooms. We passed a group of Rangers heading the other way—Two Bits gave me a smile and a nod—and entered the main ward, full of ponies.

When looking over a room filled with twenty wounded ponies and four armored pegasi trying to treat them, I would have expected to describe the scene as chaotic, but what I found was as orderly as you could imagine. A few of the ponies were breathing hard, jaws tight in pain, but neatly tucked into medical beds. Some of them had IVs hooked up. The pegasi were calm and professional, and already making use of scavenged Serenity PipBucks to diagnose their patients. Even the half dozen cots brought in from other sections were neatly arranged into the scant available space, and gave room for the less severe cases to rest and await treatment.

Hail Burst stood at the edge of the ward, looking over the scene. She didn't react as I stepped up beside her, so I spoke up, softly. "Commander."

"Queen Whisper," she replied, a frown touching her lips. "It was a bloody day. Still, far better than it could have been."

There was a thump of a door opening in the back of the ward. Soaring Heart, and some pegasus I only vaguely recognized, wheeled out a gurney with an unconscious patient. Two of the armored pegasi went over to help, easily transferring the pony into a bed.

"Okay, who's up next?" Soaring Heart asked. His voice was exhausted,

but he didn't show it.

The armored pegasus beside him replied. "Over here," she said, nodding her head towards the opposite bed.

The ponies in armor helped move the groaning patient into the gurney, while Soaring Heart quickly clasped a PipBuck around their remaining foreleg. He was already rattling off instructions to the pony assisting him as they wheeled the patient out into the adjacent room.

Hail Burst watched them go. "Bit of a step up from combat medic, but Soaring's been handling it well." She shook her head, then looked to me. "Come with me."

She led me out of the sickbay and into a neighboring and unoccupied compartment, which looked to have been about twice the size before the ship's crash landing had smashed in the far wall. Inside, with the door shut, she turned to face me. "Your interrogation didn't last long. I'm guessing it went as expected?"

"Only one was conscious," I said, taking the opportunity to lie down and give my neck a rest. "She's under the impression that the balefire bomb is to be used as a deterrent. A threat that, if the army doesn't turn back, they'll incinerate their homes."

She frowned slightly. "So no surprise there."

"There's also a good chance that Serenity is taking advantage of our absence to attack the rest of the army, though I couldn't say for absolute sure. The forces you faced on the *Cumulonimbus* were mostly not soldiers and had what she considered minimal weaponry. Proper soldiers will be more well-equipped. They also have upwards of two hundred sets of power armor, though that number has a very wide margin of error. I'd estimate the actual number at between one hundred and one hundred fifty."

Her frown deepened. "That's a lot."

"It is concerning," I said with a slow nod. "Unfortunately, I couldn't give you an accurate estimate of how many of those are Steel Ranger armor and how many are pegasus armor. I haven't seen enough of their force to make that guess. At best I could say that a minimum of about ten percent of their armors are Steel Ranger models. Probably more."

"Hopefully more," she said. "Steel Rangers pack a lot of armor and fire-power, but they can't fly. They'll have to use skywagons for rapid mobility,

and they're down one of those." She silently pondered that for a moment before shaking her head. "Anyway, their deterrent. Do you think it'll work?"

"Sandstorm's out for blood. If anything, I think the threat would just piss her off more. Gemstone is small enough that a balefire bomb is no more of a threat than a couple squads of power-armor soldiers, so this doesn't really change their situation. And while I imagine you dislike the idea of them using the balefire bomb on Enclave citizens, it would be the hardest target for them to strike, and I get the impression that this threat will not deter you."

"Your impression is correct," she said, her voice perfectly even.

"Which leaves only Mareford. They're a professional force, so I don't expect intimidation to work well on them. I don't know Two Bits well enough to make precise judgments of his mentality, but he does take Dusty's word seriously, and he was one of the few pushing for going with us. That said, it was a narrow thing getting them involved in the first place, and those soldiers' duty is first and foremost to protect their homes. I think they're likely to stay, but I'd like it to be a more sure thing. There are too many unknowns."

"And even if their threat doesn't work, they might just use the bomb on the army itself," Hail Burst noted. "I don't suppose you got any information that could help take it off the table?"

"No," I said with a shake of my head. "Unless she was secretly the captain, I doubt she would have any idea about where they're taking it, and even if she did, I doubt she'd let that information slip. I'd like to go over whatever data we can get from their PipBucks to see if they contain any useful information. If that doesn't turn up anything, the best I could do is make estimates about where it would make sense for them to hide it."

"Okay," she said. "Assume you don't get any useful information. Where do you think they'd put that bomb?"

I frowned, thinking on the question for a moment. "It depends," I said, and lifted my PipBuck-clad foreleg. "About how far can one of these broadcasters reach?"

She looked down at it. "I'm not sure. If it's anything like ours, maybe thirty miles line-of-sight. But that's topside. Perfect conditions. Down here, I'd say line-of-sight might get you fifteen, twenty tops. Less in bad weather.

Down in the dirt you'll be lucky to get five."

"Then that gives us a couple of slightly higher-likeness areas. Someone would have to make the decision to actually deploy it, so there's a chance it's being kept within about twenty miles of either the changeling leading the defensive forces on the surface, or the hive itself. If this Queen Chrysalis is anything like her namesake, I expect she'd want to be the one to decide on its use, which would suggest it's hidden near or in her hive. Then again, if she's anything like her namesake, she'd probably also want to lead any attack herself, which would suggest it's being kept near any intervening forces."

"Mmm." She frowned again. "That sounds like a lot of ifs, maybes, and guesses."

"An unfortunate reality of my profession," I said with a wry smile.

That drew a single faint chuckle from her. "Mine too, I suppose. That said, I'm not sure that helps us any."

"It might not," I said with a shrug. "But it does give us a potential vector for further action if the opportunity presents itself, and something to look out for." I paused. "But the more I think on it, the more things don't quite line up."

Her gaze sharpened, eyes fixed attentively to me. "How so?"

"It's not much of a deterrent if your opponent doesn't know your intent."

She paused. "And I don't suppose they'd expect us to infer that threat from their actions."

"It's possible, but it seems sloppy to me," I said. "Which means we need to return to the army as swiftly as possible. If Serenity does not deliver some form of ultimatum, then it would suggest they intend to use the megaspell on the army itself."

Hail Burst grimaced. "And if they're holding a condensed position to defend against a concentrated attack..." She considered this for several long seconds before her expression hardened, taking on the look of authority. "The *Cumulonimbus* is under-crewed, while the Trotsen force is small and under-gunned. Separated, we would be vulnerable to attack. We have only a few more hours of daylight. I do not expect the Trotsen force will be able to travel effectively at night, and we do not have the capacity to carry their motorwagons.

"Queen Whisper, I need you to get the Trotsen force moving with all

urgency. The intent will be to cover as much ground as possible tonight and set out first thing in the morning to rejoin the army as soon as possible. I will be dispatching a messenger immediately to pass this intelligence on to the main force.”

She abruptly turned her head, reaching into a compartment. When she drew back, she was clutching a datastore, holding it out to me. I took it in my magic.

“That contains all of the data we retrieved from the recovered PipBucks. Hopefully you can make some sense of it while we’re traveling.” She ended with a firm and decisive nod. “Good luck.”

I bowed my head in reply. “And to you.”

She turned, opening the door. “Show Queen Whisper out,” she said, already breaking into a trot. Then she activated her radio, her receding voice echoing strangely from my earbud. “Firefly to CIC, immediately. Repeat, Firefly to CIC.”

As the guards motioned for us to follow them, Echo stepped forward. “That will not be necessary,” she said, and we vanished in a flash of purple.



We were moving in less than half an hour. The conversation with Axle was so simplistic in its mechanics that I could have predicted the entire course of the conversation, if not the specific words. I told him we needed to hurry to return to the army, and he countered that he had several damaged wagons that he wasn’t going to further damage for *my* needs, demonstrating his position of strength to his ponies by refusing me. I state that the main army, including Sandstorm, was under attack, and he angrily tells me I should have just said that before yelling at ponies to get those same wagons moving *right now*, having made my idea his own.

I might have found the entire charade annoying if it didn’t get me exactly what I wanted. Instead it left me pondering whether Queen Whisper should exhibit any signs of regal pride that might have just been slighted, or if I should maintain the professional Infiltrator practicality of real-Whisper. Both had their benefits, after all. Pitfalls, too.

But seeing as I had six captured PipBucks—I had returned the one Skim had laid claim to immediately after the conversation with Axle—I quickly

settled on “real Whisper” as a way of shelving those thoughts and starting on something far more exciting.

Settled into the rear seat of our motorwagon and returned to my natural form, I turned to my collection of PipBucks and the data they contained.

I was immediately interrupted by the intrusion of a very cheerful griffin’s face. “Hey!” Bloodbeak said, showing no sign of impairment from her earlier injury. “What was that ship like? It looks so cool! I mean, it’s all banged up, but still cool. Was it cool?”

I found myself uncertain of how to reply, managing only a quiet “Uh...” for the first few moments. “It... it was pretty trashed in the fighting, and it got kind of ugly in there, but... well, it is still an impressive piece of hardware. Yeah, it’s cool.”

She gave a happy squee, sliding forward until her belly was resting on the back of the seat. That produced a wince and a sharp hiss, but a moment later she giggled again. “Ow. So are you going back up there? Could I go with you? They won’t let me ride in the whirlydingies, but maybe those pegasi would let me look around?” She raised her good wing. “Feathery solidarity! Right?”

I silently glanced down at my equipment, and the great deal of potential data I might find on them, and found myself somewhat disappointed in myself. I know, it’s logical and professional, but that doesn’t mean I had to like it: I didn’t trust Bloodbeak. No, she almost certainly wasn’t a changeling spy, and while she was incredibly talkative, the chances of her leaking information that then got to an actual changeling spy was very low, but it was the kind of risk an Infiltrator has to avoid. It wasn’t even a criticism or personal judgment of her. It was simply professional.

That didn’t make me feel like any less of a horrible jerk for doubting the friendly and outgoing griffin smiling so happily before me.

I glanced past her to where Echo sat. “Resting her wings” was the excuse she had given for riding in the motorwagon instead of flying above. I suspected the only reason she was tolerating Sickle’s close presence—and frequent lewd comments—was to guard me. I was her key to a better future, and she didn’t intend to lose me to my own “carelessness”.

“Perhaps Echo could give you a lift?” I said. It was a convenient way of getting rid of Bloodbeak, and I felt a stab of guilt as I thought of it in

those terms. It was a practical method of steering another person's actions, the kind of thing an Infiltrator would frequently take advantage of out of necessity.

Then again, I wasn't exactly an Infiltrator any more. I was something much more complex, now. As hesitant as I was to use the term, I was the queen now, and I was guiding the future of my hive.

"Bloodbeak, wait."

Despite the energy of her pleading with Echo, she immediately stopped and turned my way. "Yeah?"

"There may well be some information or conversations here that could be very sensitive, and that we need to keep secret for the good of the army and everyone in general. I don't want mislead you, but I also don't want you to feel insulted or excluded. It's just that there are a lot of lives on the line, and I'd really like to minimize the number of ears hearing this." I gave a soft, if somewhat awkward smile. "I'd be happy to spend more time with you, but when we're working on this, I'm afraid we're going to need some privacy."

Her head had cocked slightly to the side as she listened attentively and quite seriously. The moment I finished, her smile returned. "Oh, yeah, sure! I won't get in the way of that. Besides, that's a great excuse to go on the ship! 'Queen Whisper said you have to let me on!' Hah!"

I blinked at her enthusiastically casual response to my serious moral introspection, and I felt a momentary urge to chastise myself for thinking so little of her. I could have dug even deeper into those thoughts, but I instead focused on what she had said, giving a weak chuckle. "I, uh, doubt my rank has any official influence over Enclave personnel, friendly or not."

"Well it should," she replied. "But yeah, I can go up and hang out there while you work. When do you think you'll be done?"

My slim smile faded as I considered that. "I suppose that depends on what I find. I'll probably be busy until we get back to the army. Maybe... maybe until we've dealt with Serenity for good." I gave a lopsided smile. "If it lasts that long, I'll make sure to take some breaks from the work. Working constantly all day long just leads to problems."

"Not to mention it's no fun at all," Bloodbeak said, taking on a decidedly sly and knowing look. It was gone an instant later as she flashed a grin

at Echo. "See? It's vitally important that I'm allowed to check out that cloudship. Lives are on the line!"

Echo's frown grew ever darker. "That is not what she—"

"Lives are on the line!" Bloodbeak repeated, throwing up her forelegs and spreading her good wing in a dramatic flourish before dropping back to all fours and leveling her most wide and innocent grin at the grumpy alicorn.

Echo held her disapproving gaze for an impressive two seconds before sighing and rolling her eyes. "Fine. I will take you to the cloudship just to get you out of our manes."

Bloodbeak cheered, jumping in the air quite gracefully despite the motorwagon's rocking. Moments later, they were flying off, with Echo's magic holding the energetic griffin a safe distance away from her body.

"I like her," Starlight cheerfully noted, and I couldn't help chuckling.

With that done, I turned to the data that we had collected. There was disappointingly little, and at the same time, far too much.

Many of the PipBucks had contained a good number of audio files, though only a couple of them matched the collection of thirty six journals I had recorded. I skimmed the audio file names in the first few PipBucks, and almost all were music, or at least titled like music. There were hardly any personal recordings. I played a file titled "Notetoself", dated just five days ago, and was disappointed when a wheezy sounding changeling simply listed a few scheduling changes that needed to be made to cover an injury.

I set the audio files aside for the moment. With none showing obvious value from their title, they were too low in information density by time, so they got low priority. Text files were easier to skim for relevant information and I could read a good deal faster than someone could talk. There were also relatively few of them, and even fewer that had been written or modified recently. Most were useless. One had a list of meals eaten with detailed grading as to desirability. Another gave a detailed list of kills of and deaths by various other changelings in simulated battles. One curious file had a date—the day before yesterday—followed by ten blocks of numbers, each of which was seven lines of sixteen characters each. I filed that away for later; powers of two usually meant something.

There were a few, however, that were slightly more interesting. Mostly,

these were notes on units in the “current force”, and one of these gave a basic if slightly unclear breakdown:

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*1 PLT - mobile force 1 - PAP - assault<br/>2 - PAP - retrieve<br/>3 - INF - retrieve screen<br/>4 - INF - assault screen / reserve<br/>Sky 1 & 2 attached for retrieval on ch 3 and 5*

*2 PLT - reserve / ship (under st) 1 - PAP - exterior screen<br/>2 - INF - delay/reserve*

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It was information, though I wasn’t quite certain what to make of it. From the context, it was a division of forces. With my rather insignificant knowledge of military units and tactics I could assume that “PLT” stood for platoon, which probably made the following numbers squads. The breakdown seemed to correspond perfectly to the groups we had seen in battle. “Under st” was under-strength, which I assumed noted that the second platoon had half the squads of the first. Sky 1 and 2 were probably uncreative and obvious designations for the two skywagons we had seen. “Ch” was curious. Channel?

“Hey Dusty?”

He looked back from the front seat. Past him, I could see the other motorwagons, rolling along at a decent clip, though nowhere near as breakneck as on our way out. “Yeah?”

“The context is a list of the Serenity forces we fought, divided by platoon and squad. Any idea what squad being designated P-A-P versus I-N-F could mean?”

“I-N-F makes me think infantry,” he said. “Don’t know about the other one. Did they only have one or the other?”

“Yes.”

“If one’s infantry, the other might be power armor.” He gave a little shrug. “Just a guess. Can I see?”

“Just a moment.” I took up one of the spare datastores I had, plugging it into my PipBuck to copy the file.

Dusty waited, looking at the array of equipment I had set in the seat next to me. The half-dozen PipBucks had been joined by my entire collection of

data stores, a collection of electronics tools, and all my cables. “You building a maneframe back there?”

“I wish,” I said, passing over the datastore. “I’ve got a decent amount of raw data. Extra screens and inputs is good for organizing and comparing.” I gave a dry laugh. “What I wouldn’t give for a simple keyboard right now. How large might a squad be?”

Dusty blinked at the abrupt change of topic. “It varies. Ranger squads are seven, to fit in Pigeon. Regular Militia squads have a third fireteam and give the squad leader an assistant, so they’re eleven. Pretty much anything from seven to, say, fifteen.”

“So... forty two to ninety soldiers deployed here. Even on the upper end, that seems pretty slim for what we saw in Serenity.”

“Saving every soldier for the army, probably,” Dusty said, a hint of grumble coloring his voice.

“Likely,” I agreed, returning to my data.

I dug into the remaining data. There were more force lists, but from their dates and few notes I could gather, they seemed to be describing simulated combats. These did provide one minimally useful piece of information: a few had a level of organization above platoon, designated COY—a strange shortening of ‘company’, I assumed—which appeared to usually consist of three platoons. Even more alarming was the occasional note of one or even two other companies with other tasks. A quick bit of math and the assumption that those other companies were fully staffed suggested about 400-plus soldiers.

And even more concerning, this was only one side of the simulated mission. I knew from overheard conversations that some, if not all, of their simulations had Serenity’s soldiers playing both sides. I didn’t even know if their simulation could create fictional constructs to fight against. Surely they wouldn’t be fighting the ponies they fed on?

Most of these force lists came from a single changeling, so I searched her PipBuck for more information. I wasn’t disappointed. In a folder labeled “post mission notes” I found three files. Opening the first, I found a rough shorthoof-filled account of a recent simulated combat. Many of the specific terms and personalized notation escaped me, but I could follow the rough course of the battle, where this changeling’s side had to escort a set of heavily

laden wagons from one compound to another, through an area of dense and rocky hills.

“Dusty. Datastore. You’ll want to see this.”

The moment he removed the datastore from his PipBuck, I snatched it in my magic and plugged it into my own. A quick transfer later, and I passed it back. “Open the file ‘Rocky Road’ and tell me what you think.”

The brief look of confusion and curiosity was shortly replaced by surprise, and then interest. We read through the files together, trying to work out this changeling’s shorthoof, along with me asking for the occasional clarification of a term or abbreviation. Some required a bit more explanation than others; explaining that “BOF” stood for “base of fire” meant little to me without then explaining what that term meant. It was an area that I had no experience in, and needed to learn quickly.

Heck, I was pleased with myself just for realizing what “LZ” stood for, even with its context being so painfully obvious.

I continued searching for more information as we talked, and turned up another interesting discovery: this changeling’s PipBuck had dozens of map files. For those who don’t know how PipBucks work, that’s not just unheard of, it’s outright nonsensical. PipBucks have one map file, and it details the entire world, with the ability to adjust and expand upon it as new information is received. There was no support for multiple map files because they had no purpose.

That is, no purpose the designer had conceived of, or had considered important. After all, how likely was a PipBuck to end up in some other world?

I have no idea if PipBucks still interacted with their wearer while they were in one of Serenity’s simulations, or if they had been copied over to the PipBucks for later use, but they had created dozens of worlds to fight in.

“Rocky Road” described a combat in the “Motor Canyons region”. One map file was titled Motor Canyons. A quick file transfer to a spare PipBuck, and we had a map of the battlefield to go with our textual description. The world of Motor Canyons was only fifty miles on a side, but this was apparently sufficient for the battle enacted there. The landmarks referenced in the battle let us follow the exact movements of various units. It was perfect.

It was also concerning. Among the many maps were detailed and fairly

accurate renditions of more than a dozen settlements, including Mareford, Trotsen, Gemstone, and even a still-intact Rust. A quick check of the main map files showed location tags spreading well beyond the local area, with every PipBuck having the exact same data. They'd been thorough in mapping out the surrounding area and ensuring their soldiers had the most accurate data.

I hadn't noticed the darkening skies until we slowed. Even with the superior low-light vision of a changeling, the terrain was getting increasingly hard to pick out. The line of vehicles slowed more and more, limping along, guided by the struggling light of a unicorn in the lead wagon.

Soon Axle had given up the attempt, and the Trotsen vehicles started pulling into a loose group. Dusty directed Starlight to park off to one side, while ponies started to dismount, lit by the occasional flashlight or glowing horn. Soon they were setting a campfire. The dark clouds of the *Cumulonimbus* flickered like a brewing storm, hovering low above our camp.

We kept to ourselves. Dusty checked in with Two Bits, who clarified that the Rangers were being situated in the *Cumulonimbus* to give extra security, before signing off for the night.

After a brief dinner, the fatigue of the day had caught up with everyone. Eyes were half-lidded, conversation slow. Not that I minded the sparse conversation. I was still going over the data in my mind, even if I wasn't sure how it would help us.

Dusty called it quits first. "Time for sleep. Who's on first watch?"

I glanced at the ragged gash torn in the side of our motorwagon, wondering if he was expecting us to watch for an attacking army or suspicious ponies. Either way, I spoke up. "I've got enough rattling around in my head, I doubt I'll be able to sleep yet. I'll take it."

"Good enough for me," he said. "Just remember to actually keep an eye out instead of burying your muzzle in a PipBuck screen."

Which I realized was probably what I would have done if he hadn't said so. "Of course not," I said, giving a weak smile.

"Okay, then," he said with a nod, stretching before lying out on his side. "Wake me for second shift."

The others followed shortly after him, while I walked a short distance away, sitting atop a boulder that rose from a rocky shelf. A quick adjustment

of my eyes, with some inspiration from owls, and the wasteland opened up before me. Just an hour out from the Pale Sands basin, the rocky hills and valleys surrounded us, looming in the darkness. The view was all shadows and silhouettes, and almost devoid of color, but those silhouettes were sharp in my eyes. Nothing would approach us without me being able to see them.

As my head jerked back upright from its steady descent, I amended that thought: nothing would approach us without me being able to see them, so long as I could keep my eyes open. Even the new knowledge that was running laps in my head wasn't enough to stave off the fatigue. I needed to do something. I briefly considered listening to the collection of audio files we had retrieved from the Serenity PipBucks, but I dismissed it; I should keep my ears out for anything my eyes might miss.

A minute later, I concluded that, while I couldn't listen to audio files, perhaps I could still *create* them. A short internal debate as to whether that would compromise my hearing any less than listening to audio eventually fell on the side of giving me something to do to keep my eyes open, and I started up a new journal file.

Time passed quickly and uneventfully as I quietly narrated my life. Maybe it was the fatigue speaking, but there was something vaguely unsettling about describing events that were ever closer to the present. It was almost ominous, as if some outside guiding force was steadily converging on some point that was drawing slowly, inexorably closer. Soon I would reach the point where there was no more past to record, and where I once had a neatly organized plan for my future recordings, I would be left only with an unknown and increasingly unsure future.

Or maybe I was just really tired and allowing myself to see connections where there was only coincidence, patterns where there was only noise, imagining some guiding hand of fate that brought some sort of purpose and order to everything, and which was guiding everything to its desired and likely unpleasant end. Ending the recording with me being shot in the back of the head had possibly led me into a slightly more morbid state of mind.

I considered all of those thoughts for a few moments before cracking a smile and dismissing them. Applied psychology can be quite entertaining, even when practiced on myself.

I trotted silently back to camp and gently roused Dusty. Once he had

risen and shaken off his drowsiness, I climbed up into the motorwagon. The seat would be more comfortable than the dirt. Besides, I was apparently a high-priority target. At least there I'd have some armor around me.

And it just coincidentally had my collection of PipBucks and their valuable data. As tired as I was, I wanted to check a few things before going to sleep. One of those things was the substantial amount of spells the PipBucks had been programmed with. I wanted to get a basic idea of what the common Serenity soldier would have available to them.

So I called up my spell compiler, loaded one up, and promptly forgot about sleep as the greatest treasure Serenity could have possibly given me unfolded before my eyes.

## Chapter Forty-One

# The Gauntlet

The sun had not yet started to lighten the eastern clouds when Dusty started rousing everypony. When he made his way to the motorwagon to wake me, I stuck my head out the window, grinning. “Dusty! Get in here!”

I missed his precise reaction, as I immediately returned to my network of PipBucks, but several seconds later he was climbing into the front seat. Once there, he stopped and stared at me with a questioning, quirked eyebrow.

I answered with an even wider grin, leaning towards him. “I *own* Serenity!”

He blinked. “Uh...”

“I mean, not in the literal, physical, possessive sense. The colloquial sense. What I mean is, I just got us *huge* advantage over them! Maybe. It’s not a perfect one, there’s security measures they could take that make all of this a lot harder, we need to be very careful about what we do and say and make sure that they think that we *don’t* have this, or they can make changes, but if we keep them from doing that, I’ve got them!”

Dusty continued to stare. “Have you gotten any sleep?”

“Of course,” I lied, reining in my grin to a less manic smile. “I’m just excited. This is... this *could be* big.”

“Oookay,” he said with a slow nod, then asked, “What is it?”

My smile vanished as I grabbed him by his shoulders, fixing him with a serious stare. “What I’m going to tell you has to remain secret. Super secret. Like, more secret than ‘Whisper is actually a changeling’ secret. If any *suggestion* of what I’m telling you gets out, this opportunity is gone.”

He looked even more concerned. “Maybe you shouldn’t be telling me, then.”

“No!” I said, giving a little squeeze with my hooves. “This whole thing will involve me passing on information, information that needs to get out to the army itself. I *need* you. Can you do this?”

The eyebrow came up again. “Maybe if you’d tell me what ‘this’ is?”

I let him go, sitting back. “Right. Yeah. I should do that.”

“And maybe get some sleep, too.”

I waved off the comment. “After. This first. And I’ll start with the basics, so that I can build up and make the final reveal of what I’ve gotten us all the more dramatic and impressive!”

“Uh...”

“So, basics: every Serenity PipBuck has a program in its spell matrix to encrypt radio traffic. It’s an amazingly well-crafted piece of spell programming. It runs an encrypted, multi-channel communications network, letting everyone communicate easily with anyone on the same channel. Soldiers can talk inside their squad, leaders can talk straight to other leaders, all that, and we can’t understand a word of it. It’s an incredibly useful tool, and the spell itself is amazingly complex.

“Heck, they even partially encrypted the spell itself!” I waved a hoof at my network of PipBucks. “If I didn’t have all the software tools from my hive, the override cables, multiple PipBucks, and my programming experience, I couldn’t have done anything with them. But I do, and I did, and it’s... and I figured out how to repurpose their audio encryption for our own communications! I even tweaked it so you can set different encryption keys for different channels, which was a pain in the flank, but worth it to prevent stealing a key from a low-level user giving access to our entire network. We get this out to anyone with a radio, give them the key for their channels, and Serenity can’t listen in on us!”

“Okay,” Dusty said with a slow nod. “Hell, that’s pretty nice. I’m not downplaying it or anything, but I don’t see how—”

“That’s not the big thing,” I said, waving another hoof in some vague gesture that made sense at the time. “This is just the setup for the big thing! Now, see, their own channels are encrypted to Tartarus and back. Cracking the encryption they used on the spell itself was difficult enough, but I could halt the process and analyze the spell matrix during execution to see what was going on. The spell matrix has to decode it to run, right? Right.

“But the encryption on the communications itself is a different beast. Cracking it is basically impossible. I mean, technically it’d be possible, but it’d take forever. Like, several orders of magnitude longer than Equestria has existed. Did exist. Whatever. Point is, we can’t crack their encryption, and even if we could, they took extra security measures that would make all that work pointless: they change keys every day.”

I stopped, staring at him with an expectant smile. It took a few seconds before he finally spoke. “Okay. So they’ve got crazy good encryption and they’re being smart about keeping—”

I leveled a hoof at him as he spoke the key word, my grin beaming. “It’s stupid!”

He blinked at my interruption, and I quickly continued. “Yeah, changing all their keys every day sounds clever, but it’s the sort of short-sighted choice a rookie Infiltrator might make. It’s theoretically smart, but only to someone who lacks the experience to consider practical field concerns. It’s the same mistake pony security ‘professionals’ made with computer security and passwords. Nobody can remember super-complex rotating passwords or long blocks of random characters.”

My grin grew as I said, with every ounce of emphasis I could muster, “*They write them down!*” My hoof swung to point at the PipBucks. “I have every encryption key for the next two and a half months! As long as they don’t realize we have them—” I grabbed him by the shoulder for emphasis. “—And we need to keep this so super-secret that they don’t even *think* of the possibility that we have them!—then we can listen in on every single radio conversation they have without them ever knowing!”

I was still holding him, beaming like some sleep-deprived maniac. Eventually, he nodded. “...Yeah, okay, that could be useful. Damn useful. Maybe don’t get your hopes up too much that—”

“I know, I know,” I said as I finally released him, sitting back. “I’m just excited. And I’m optimistic. I think we might have found one of their flaws. Their army, it’s thoroughly trained, but it’s completely inexperienced. Rust might be the first time they’ve had a proper combat operation outside of their simulators. They know how to fight, tactics and all that, but there’s a good chance they’ll be weak on the operational side of things. That means overlooking things that *should* be obvious because they haven’t experienced it before. How likely do you think it is that their simulations include the possibility of the enemy capturing their PipBucks and extracting encryption keys?”

He was frowning. “I couldn’t say.”

“Exactly!” I said with an eager grin, which immediately faltered as I parsed his statement. “Wait, no. You were supposed to say ‘unlikely’. Which is

maybe optimistic, but I think the odds are good. We'll see."

"Uh-huh," he said, still frowning. "Wouldn't rolling out our own encryption clue them in to what we did?"

"Maybe," I said, fidgeting for a moment before stopping myself. "That's why this has to remain a secret for now. We might have to choose one or the other, but I think I can figure out a way to get both. I just need to think on the problem."

Dusty was slowly nodding, but stopped and fixed me with a serious look. "Which means you need to get some sleep."

I opened my mouth to protest before recognizing the truth of the situation and the futility of arguing against it. "I could maybe use a nap," I admitted, slowly slumping back against the seat. Now that I had finally told someone, the all-consuming excitement that had fueled me faded rapidly.

His hoof touched my leg. I blinked. He was giving a soft smile. "Hey," he said, his voice softened a touch. "You did good. This could save a lot of ponies' lives."

I smiled, and he climbed out of the wagon again. I slid down a bit, the thin cushion surprisingly comfortable all of a sudden. Time slipped away from me. I remember Starlight passing me a warmed can of beets before things slid away again.

The next thing I remember was Dusty's hoof gently tapping on my armored side. The vehicle was rattling and creaking with our movement. "Rise and shine. It's time to see if you're right."



As the motorwagons rolled, I double-checked my equipment, ears perked alertly for the slightest sound from either of the two separate earbuds. One of the PipBucks in my array was steadily flashing a "waiting" message, ready to automatically record any transmissions coming in on the Serenity frequency. Another was showing a screen of various numbers, a quick and crude display I had whipped up to show Serenity transmissions. If I picked up a transmission, and the key I used decrypted it, the display would highlight what channels they were talking on. Yet another was showing a spell compiler and a copy of one of the programs I had been working on. My late-night coding had produced functioning and so-far bug-free

programs, but they were *sloppy*, and thus needed to be corrected.

Then there was the final PipBuck, which currently held my attention. I had the receive/broadcast screen active, waiting. It was set to play all channels concurrently, but I could filter it down to just one once things started getting too busy.

My right earbud crackled; friendly communications. Two Bits was calling out again. “Militia lead, Ranger lead. Please reply.”

The reply was, again, a burst of warbling static. There were still several hills between our approaching wagons and where the Loyalist scouts had spotted the dug-in army, barely five miles from where we had parted.

“Say again. You are quiet and garbled.” Two Bits spoke slowly and clearly, firmly enunciating every word. It seemed that he wasn’t reading them too much better, even with the altitude.

Then my left earbud crackled, the number “28” highlighted, and a voice spoke in raspy tones turned unnatural with the mild audio artifacts. “Lead, Two. Eyes on cloudship inbound, south-south-east, distant, low. Looks like the *Cumulonimbus*.”

It was working. A shot of adrenaline teased at my senses. I was listening in on Serenity. Despite all my earlier excitement, there was a real sense of relief as those decrypted words reached my ears.

“Copy,” another voice replied, as the same channel number highlighted once more. “I see it. Hold position, keep your heads down.”

I had to caution myself. This didn’t mean I’d found a weakness. It could be that they suspected what I had done and might try to lure me out with false information. Maybe they were testing the waters, seeing if they had been compromised by seeing how I reacted.

And so, for the moment, I didn’t react.

The second voice spoke again, this time on channel 22. “Command, Two. We’ve spotted the *Cumulonimbus* inbound, one-six-zero, twenty miles, five hundred. It’s moving slow, probably still escorting ground forces.”

Okay. The first channel was probably a squad or platoon-level radio, and this was the leader of that element passing information up the chain of command. So far, so good.

Two Bits called out again for our army. I ignored him, putting a hoof up to the other earbud to listen more closely.

There was a new changeling, broadcasting on the same channel as the last. The computerized distortion of their voice was more pronounced, but they were still understandable. The signal was worse. Presumably, this meant they were further away. “Understood. Scouts are tracking at least eight motorwagons directly under the—”

More voices spoke on another channel, overlaying the conversation in my ear. I quickly switched the receiver to single-channel.

“—along the dry creek bed two-three is occupying. Your platoon’s job will be to conduct an ambush of the ground convoy. There are at least three high-value targets in the motorwagons. Prioritize leadership elements if possible, but don’t go chasing them, and don’t get into a prolonged fight. They’ll have heavy fire support from the *Cumulonimbus*, so do some damage quick and break contact before they can pin you down. One, move to take up a line five hundred yards back from Two. If these ponies give chase, you’ll punish them.”

Two platoons. I was still a little loose on the numbers that entailed, but it wasn’t good.

Affirmative calls went out, then the channel fell silent. Channel 28 was highlighted again, and I switched to it.

“—Listen up. We’re conducting an ambush on ground forces. Two and three will be the primary elements. Three, do you have good eyes down the creek?”

“Affirmative. Clear visibility of the low-ground out to about four hundred yards.”

“Copy that. Two, find a position on either slope that gives your squad good eyes into the creek. You’re setting an L-shaped ambush with three. One, Four, you’ll be staying up on the ridges, but move to get good overwatch. You’ll be covering the withdraw, but I want you keeping your horns down and out of sight until things kick off. Everyling find good concealment, they’ve got eyes in the sky. Call when set.”

Multiple affirmative replies followed, but I was focusing on my map, zooming out until I could see the reported location of our own army. We were barely over twenty miles away. Assuming one-six-zero was a compass bearing, I scanned along the reverse direction.

Two Bits spoke again, but the words were different. “Pineapple, excur-

sion, triangle." The seemingly nonsensical words brought a smile to my face. Our army was still there, and with the secret code-phrase delivered, they knew that we weren't Serenity forces pretending to be their absent friends.

The reply was too distorted by static for me to hear if they gave the proper counter-phrase. Running signals intelligence from ground level was showing its limitations, but there was nothing I could do about that at the moment. It was something to consider for later. At least I could assume the counter-phrase was correct, and Serenity wasn't impersonating our army. Two Bits was unlikely to overlook an incorrect counter-phrase.

I shook my head and returned to my map.

There. A string of low hills just two miles south of our destination, split by the narrow depression of a long-dry creek that meandered and wound its way all the way south to us. Dozens of heavily armed changelings were waiting there to kill us. The touch of adrenaline returned, urging me to action even though I could see there was no immediate threat; at our current rate of travel, it would be more than half an hour before we reached their lines. We had plenty of time to arrange a reaction that both avoided the waiting Serenity forces and protected the secrecy of our advantage.

So I sat on the information for ten minutes, listening in on the occasional radio conversation. Channel 31 spent a couple of minutes filled with rock puns and overacted groans. Someone started laughing on 30, saying that "Three is all kinds of 'special' today."

There was something surreal in listening to changelings joyfully bantering with each other, just having fun, all while they fully intended our imminent and violent demise. It also notably lacked the indicators of a stress-scoping mechanism. These changelings were completely unconcerned with the oncoming confrontation.

Finally, I slid forward. "Dusty. We might have a problem."

He turned to look over his shoulder. "Yeah? Wait, is that stuff working?"

"It is," I said with a nod. "Serenity has scouts tracking our movements, and their ground forces are getting ready." I held my leg out, pointing to the locations on my map. "There's an entire platoon setting up to ambush us here, and a second platoon here to support them."

He leaned in close to the map, looking over the terrain. "Yeah, that seems like a natural place for an ambush. We'll have to go around."

"We'll have to do so in a way that doesn't tell them we know where they are," I said. "At least, not this early. If we start looking overly well-informed about their intentions and reacting to things we shouldn't know about, they might get suspicious, and we lose this advantage."

He frowned, still looking at the map. "Well we can't just roll straight into an ambush, even with the *Cumulonimbus* giving fire support. That's just not happening. So, since intel and deception is your field, I'm open to suggestions. How would you handle it?"

"Basic misdirection," I said, giving a hint of a smile. "We create a plausible reason for our actions, and allow them to discover it. Until we've rolled out our own encryption, our radios give a perfect vector for misinformation."

A minute's collaboration hammered out a rough script, and with a final nod, Dusty pressed the button on his broadcaster. "Hey, Bitsy. We can't make out the militia traffic from down here. Have they relayed any information on Serenity forces in the area?"

"Nothing recent," Two Bits replied. "Last contact was some sporadic fire just after sunset. Things have been quiet since then."

Dusty blinked, then cast a glance my way. That was much earlier than either of us had expected. Despite that, I gave Dusty a quick nod, and he turned back to his radio.

"Well, uh... I don't suppose they have any idea where they went to? Because I expected them to try to hit us before we regrouped, and this whole silence thing makes me think they're up to something. I've been around a changeling long enough to know how tricky they can be." He paused, visibly measuring out about half a second before adding, "Uh, no offense intended, Whisper."

I flashed a sly smile before returning to neutral and hitting the button on my own broadcaster. "None taken. It's a fair assessment. And I've got to agree with Dusty. You don't throw away an advantage unless it gets you a better advantage. If they're going to take advantage of this situation, it's going to be soon."

There was a long pause before Two Bits spoke again. "You think they're setting an ambush, then?"

I blinked; even when one couldn't be seen, keeping one's physical reactions in line with one's act is a good way to keep in-character. "That wasn't

quite what I was thinking, but it's certainly a possibility."

"What were you thinking?"

"We're moving slowly, under a very visible cloudship, and this dry creek bed gives a very clear idea of our course. They've probably kept tabs on us since Pale Sands, and even if not, they probably saw the *Cumulonimbus* an hour ago, if not more. We're behaving predictably. So if I were them? I'd bury a few hundred pounds of explosives or some balefire eggs along a stretch of the creek. Either set some trigger or command detonate it when the lead vehicle hits the furthest explosive. They've probably had scouts or spies watching us to tell them exactly how long to make the kill box."

A nice and plausible reason to avoid going through that particular stretch of Wasteland, with the added benefit of being completely incorrect.

There was a notably longer pause before Two Bits spoke again. "Shit. Yeah that makes a lot of sense. We'll need a new route. Dusty, can you handle that?"

"I'm on it," Dusty said, a smile touching his lips. "And you might want to get ahold of the militia, tell them what's going on so they're ready to move. If we do run into something, we might need their help."

"Will do," Two Bits replied, followed by radioing ahead to the main army. "Militia lead, Ranger lead..."

Dusty sat back in his seat, nodding to Starlight. "Okay. Take us up to Axle."

The wagon rocked as we pulled out of the line and accelerated forward. Over the noise of our travel, I would have missed Echo's snort if she hadn't followed it up with words. "I am fairly certain you just told an elaborate lie without a single technical falsehood."

I smiled over my shoulder. "In my profession, that's what we call 'a good lie'."

Her expression tightened slightly, broken only by another snort, as if she were too proud to admit that she found the statement amusing.

Sickle, naturally, was less restrained. "Yeah, Whisper's all proud about how much of a weaselly little shit she can be." At least her tone was amused, though it immediately darkened. "Also way too proud of steering us *away* from fights."

"Don't worry," I said, holding a steady expression despite my sudden

urge to frown. "I'm sure we've got a big fight ahead of us. Plenty of time for you to have fun."

"Plenty of time for me to have fun right now," Sickle said, grinning beneath her muzzle, but she didn't press the matter.

We bounded past several Trotsen motorwagons before pulling up beside Axle's. I lost most of their conversation as I pressed a hoof over my ear, isolating the voice coming across the radio. The channel indicator showed 01. "Alpha, new sigint update. Incoming enemy forces might be diverting to take a less predictable path. Orders for now are to continue to hold position, but keep eyes out and be ready to move quickly. If they change course, you'll need to displace quickly to new positions."

Whoever Alpha was acknowledged the call, and the information started filtering out through lower-level commanders across multiple channels. As for myself, I looked at the clock on my PipBuck, noting the time.

I remained silent until Dusty had directed Starlight onto a new heading. We pulled away, and behind us, the Trotsen's motorwagons turned to follow us. Then I spoke up. "There was barely a minute between radio intercept and intel being passed on. They've got good signals intelligence, probably directly attached to..." I paused, counting the levels the radio information had filtered through. "...either company or whatever level is above company, I'm not quite certain."

Dusty gave a low whistle. "Battalion, I think? Or was that regiment? I'm not sure. The Militia rarely deploys even a single company as a whole. It's more a few squads here and there, maybe a platoon if something big is going down. Going above company level is some old-world shit."

While our motorwagons raced north across the barren Wasteland, almost parallel to the line of hills where Serenity lay in ambush, I returned to my map and radios. There was still regular chatter, mostly on lower-level channels. I made the occasional note, slowly getting a better picture of their communications structure.

A couple minutes later, the indicator for channel 00 gave a brief flash. The PipBuck I was using to listen in on Serenity blinked a message: "Map updated."

As I switched over to the map, channel 01 opened up again. "Alpha, reference tags 'Hill 1' and 'Hill 2'. You'll be setting up a defensive line

between those two positions. Move on the west side of the ridge to keep out of sight until you're in position."

Sure enough, two new map tags had appeared on my map. Fancy. Channel 00 was probably a data channel, then. I made a mental note to whip something up to extract any data coming across that for more immediate use, then filed it away for later as I switched to my own map screen, adding marks at the same location.

With that done, I scooted forward. "Hey," I said, sticking my PipBuck out beside Dusty. "Serenity's moving an entire company to form a line between these two points."

He leaned over the screen, squinting for a moment, then muttered something obscene under his breath. "Of course they are. Are they there yet?"

"Not yet. The call to move went out about thirty seconds ago." I glanced back another PipBuck to see most of the lower-tier channels broadcasting. The one automatically picked up in my ear was relaying the basics of the command. "Seems the command is still filtering down. They haven't started moving yet, but it's probably just seconds away."

"Shit," Dusty muttered, switching to his own map. He scrolled around, eyes darting from feature to feature. "Damnit, it'll be close. Star, turn northwest and step on it. In a quarter mile, you'll hit a dirt track. Follow it left."

"You got it," Starlight said, the vehicle lurching slightly as we turned, the engine roaring louder. I slid back into my seat, grasping my equipment in my magic.

I'd just gotten ahold of the last datastore when a new channel lit up. 82. I switched away from the squad-level discussions and caught a broadcast in-progress. "—voy is starting to make their run. Looks like they'll be coming in on the caravan route."

The broadcast was strong and clear, without a hint of audio artifacts. That would be our tail, the scouts that Serenity commander had noted. That channel immediately went on the priority list.

A much more distorted voice replied in acknowledgement, and the channel went silent. I switched over to channel 01, waiting.

Fifteen seconds later, the commander's voice returned. "Alpha, command. The convoy is starting its run. They should be coming in along the caravan road. Are you moving?"

"Command, Alpha is stepping off now. We'll beat them there. How long until they reach that line?"

"Unknown. I'll find out."

So, a fifteen second gap between the scout's report and the commander passing the information on. Assuming there were no other factors involved, that would suggest a single relay to get the information to the commander. That seemed like a natural division of labor. The commander in charge of the overall leadership, with subordinates coordinating other elements and passing on relevant information. It reminded me of the command center back home.

Back on channel 82, someling was asking the scouts for an estimate on our arrival. Our vehicle lurched, then turned again, the ride smoothing out just a little. Looking forward, I could see we were on a winding but relatively flat section of land that could be generously described as a road.

"Hey, Dusty!" I called out over the sounds of the vehicle. "Is this the same road the Trotsen caravan usually uses?"

"Yeah. Why?"

The scouts gave their answer: five or six minutes.

"Because they know we're coming in on it. Some scouts are trailing us, relaying our position."

"Guess that's no surprise," he called back, bracing as we roared around a corner. Through the front window, I could see the hills where Serenity changelings were hoping to ambush us.

Channel 01 broadcast again. "Alpha, command. Enemy forces will be hitting your line in five minutes. Will you be able to get in position in time?"

"It'll be tight, but we'll make it."

I inwardly cursed before calling out to Dusty again. "That company is saying they're going to beat us there."

I could see Dusty saying a quiet curse, though it was lost behind the rattling and engine roar. He looked over his shoulder, calling out louder. "By how much?"

"They're saying it'll be tight."

"Good! And they're coming in from the south?"

"Yes."

He was looking at his map again. "Okay. We'll keep going. If we start

getting close, we'll just pretend like we saw them and swing north. They'll have a hard time crossing the valley without the '*Nimbus* seeing them."

I hesitated, uncertain of how good of a plan that was, but finally nodded. "Sounds good." He was the tactician. I was just providing the information. I'd have to trust that he was as much of a professional as I was.

The hills drew rapidly closer.

My right ear filled with a crackle of static, followed by Two Bit's voice. "Got eyes on changeling fliers, two-eight-five. Maybe... two miles out, flying left to right along the backside of those hills."

He was answered by Hail Burst, her voice firm and grim. "We see them."

I looked out to the hills again. I couldn't see anything. They must have been flying low enough to remain concealed from those of us on the ground.

My left ear crackled. "Alpha, be aware, enemy air has spotted you."

Less than ten seconds from intercepting communications to relaying emergency information. They had a solid sigint setup. I was looking forward to destroying that advantage.

A deep sound thundered over the sound of our motorwagon. I leaned over to the window to see the bolt of magic fire streaking through the air, a fuchsia so vivid and bright that it looked like some unnatural tear in reality. It sailed out toward the hills ahead like a vengeful meteor. A moment later, there was a second flash from one of the cloudship's great cannons, sending another bolt on its way.

I turned back to my equipment. The radio net was going wild. I tuned to channel 02, which I had concluded was their Alpha company channel. Redundant reports of the incoming fire were coming in, until the commander spoke over them, barking short, quick orders. The last command was for the first platoon to hurry north to the opposite hill.

The replying changeling was less optimistic about this plan. "One will try, but that's a lot of open air to cross."

Dusty wore a grim grin as he directed Starlight, and we veered right, aiming to swing well clear of the hill the Loyalists were pummeling. It was a terrifying amount of fire. The massive ventral guns threw up huge plumes of smoke and dirt with every shot, and their heavy firepower was supplemented by several smaller turrets letting loose a withering hail of smaller bolts. Even in its diminished state, the firepower a Raptor could

bring down was nothing short of awe-inspiring.

The streaks of magic, bursts of flame, and swirling smoke and ash rapidly choked the side of the hill. It almost hid the flying forms emerging from behind the hill, still a mile away. I quickly leaned forward to point them out, automatically mimicking the very professional-sounding mannerisms I'd been hearing on the radio. "Dusty, I've got eyes on Serenity soldiers in the open, moving to cross the road to the northern hills."

He gave a quick look the way I was pointing, followed by a sharp nod before keying up his radio. "Hail Burst, some of those changelings are slipping north across the valley. Can you pin them down?"

Her reply was as methodical as before. "We've got them."

Several seconds later the fire shifted. The impacts of the smaller guns rapidly swept sideways along the hill, and suddenly the bolts of magic were raining down among the flying changelings. Much as with the Loyalist's approach to the *Cumulonimbus* the previous day, they were too far away to be easily hit, but from what little I could see, it was disrupting them. Changelings veered this way and that to avoid being hit. Their northward advance was halted in a moment, and soon I saw several flying off to the south again.

Two Bits was on the radio again. "Militia lead, Ranger lead. We are in contact to our west, your east-southeast. If you've got any mobile forces ready to assist, we'd appreciate it."

To my relief, the reply was understandable, if still a bit heavy with static. "Copy that. We can see the fireworks from here. Keep it up. Mobile forces are on the way."

"Fuck yes," Dusty said, allowing a grin before quickly turning serious again. "Whisper, any sign of other forces in the area?"

"None that I know of," I said. I was starting to lose sight of the Serenity force as we came around the slope of the hill we were approaching, the valley slowly slipping away behind it. "None that have been broadcasting. With how urgently they were trying to get to this hill, they probably don't have any other forces in the area, but I couldn't swear to it."

"Probably," he noted, but nodded. "Okay. Starlight, keep straight ahead. We'll go over the hill here and swing wide of all that stuff to the south."

The engine roared as we climbed the slope, weaving around the occa-

sional rock or scraggly bush. A couple of the more agile Trotsen wagons weaved and roared past us, and as we climbed the slope, we drew closer and closer to the Raptor's protective cannons, pouring out fire into the valley. I switched the receiving PipBuck to play all channels again, the earbud exploding with multiple overlapped conversations. I could only pick out occasional snippets of elevated voices and urgent reports. The idle amusement of earlier was gone, but despite the tremendous amount of fire, there was no panic evident.

We came over the crest of the hill at full speed, and I looked out the window to see the shallow valley still being peppered with cannon fire. Dead trees and bushes burned with unnatural colors, and a pall of dust and smoke choked the air. I could only barely pick out the forms of a few changelings. Only a few had made it past the road, and one of the small cannons was tracking them, bolts slamming into the earth around them as they moved.

A louder voice, laced with excitement, cut over the cacophony of radio chatter. "Vics cresting due north!"

Barely a second later, my heart lurched as a thin stream of magical bolts flew from those same changelings, still half a mile away. The shots arced up into the air, but fell behind us, peppering the entire slope of the hill with inaccurate fire. I clung to the edge of the window as we plunged down the slope. The *Cumulonimbus* was answering their fire with the heavy ventral turret, but still more shots came our way. I didn't see where they were going, as my attention was suddenly drawn to the radio. A voice was loudly and clearly shouting over all the others. "Fall back! Fall back!"

Channel 02 lit up, and I switched back to single-channel to listen more clearly. "All platoons, disengage and fall back immediately. Keep altitude to avoid ground splash. If you have wounded, evac them, do not stop."

As acknowledgements came in, channel 01 lit up, and I switched to follow. "—mand, Alpha. Friendly forces are under Raptor fire and withdrawing south. Enemy ground forces have bypassed us to the north. Unable to pursue without engaging enemy air."

"Copy that," the replying changeling said, her tone professional, but I thought I could hear a hint of disappointment or disapproval in her voice. "Do not engage the *Cumulonimbus*. Fall back to your original positions and await further orders."

"Understood."

I grinned. "Dusty! They're pulling back!"

"Good!" He said, flashing a smile, and ignoring the wildly inaccurate shots peppering the ground on either side of our convoy. One landed maybe fifty feet in front of us, eliciting a blurted curse from Starlight as she swerved away from the flash of flame and bits of kicked-up dirt. It was the closest that any shot got to hitting us.

Moments later, even that fire ended. In the distance, I could see black forms swerving and speeding south, the cloudship's magical fire still raining down around them.

A minute later, the last changeling disappeared behind a ridge some two miles away. The guns of the *Cumulonimbus* fell silent.



We pulled into the edge of the army camp some five minutes later, flanked by the motorwagons that had rushed out to meet us. Mareford Militia ponies were already dismounting from the lead vehicles, trotting to take up defensive positions.

The camp itself was spread across the valley floor, with more ponies set on the low hills on either side. We could just see the front line of troops ahead, dug into whatever cover they could get. A few clusters of boulders and some rocky ridges made for natural defenses, and I could see a few heavy weapons situated among these. It made for a decent defensive position, about a mile across. Dusty was already on the radio, passing on the need to spread out further. The knowledge that Serenity had a balefire bomb made even that wide space feel claustrophobic.

The only comfort was that they had fought hard to keep us from regrouping intact. Their initial plan wasn't to gather the army in one place and wipe us out with the megaspell.

Of course, plans change.

Many of the Trotsen ponies were cheering and laughing as we pulled in, sharing waves with their compatriots as they rejoined. Any disappointment over the failure to secure the megaspell had been relieved by evading Serenity's trap. Even the Gemstone ponies were getting into the mood, laughing amongst themselves. Dazzle was probably the most composed,

kicked back against the roof-mounted plasma cannon as the motorwagon bearing it pulled up. She was smiling softly, her short mane flowing silkily in the breeze like some mane-care commercial. Even lightly coated in dust, she managed to look cleaner and more well-kempt than everypony around her.

The motor of our wagon hummed softly as we pulled up beside another vehicle, and with a final faint whine of metal, we came to a stop. Echo dismounted immediately. I was honestly a little surprised she'd lasted that long. I know she was insistent on remaining close to protect me, but she had spent most of the time pressed firmly against the side of the cargo bed, as if to get just a little less contact with Sickle. Sickle, of course, sprawled as lazily and lewdly as ever. She remained sprawled out as I slid out over the back of the seat and conjured up my magic, retaking my queenly disguise.

There were a few looks from various ponies, of course, but none that particularly lingered. It seemed they were becoming more accustomed to me. I idly pondered whether looking like a queen was a help or hindrance. On the one hoof, it was bigger and scarier. On the other, it was very unlike the changelings they had been fighting. I let the thought fade, leaning gently against the roof of the wagon as I looked around the camp from my slight vantage point.

Despite how well-established the defensive lines appeared to be, I could see that Serenity had caused some damage. Small craters pock-marked the ground near the defensive lines. A pair of much larger craters crossed the front line, providing new defensive positions. The explosions that caused them must have been massive. Balefire eggs, perhaps, or a heavy bomb dropped from high above. Another pair of craters were in the midst of the camp, with one still surrounded by tents. Of the scant brush and rare dead tree near the defensive line, almost all were charred.

And then there were the dead. Out past our lines, I could just make out some twenty or so black forms, scattered across the ground or clustered around rocks and other cover. Behind our lines, I could see patches of freshly-dug earth, arranged in neat lines. There weren't as many as I had feared, but still more than I had hoped.

Dusty climbed partially out of the window to sit on the rim. "Hey, Whisper. Two Bits is trying to get all the leadership and faction representatives together to see if we can't unfuck this mess. We need to get this army

moving, sort out the chain of command, that sort of stuff. I'm thinking our resident changeling queen should be there."

"I'll be there," I said with a nod. I may not have gotten much sleep, but that didn't seem like a problem. "When and where?"

"ASAP," he replied, then inclined his head toward the nearby tents. "The Militia commander has a headquarters tent we'll be using. I'm going to go round up the ponies that don't have a radio."

The mention of the radio reminded me of my own plans. "I assume Hail Burst will be at the meeting?"

"Of course. Why?"

"I was thinking of what we discussed earlier." I gave a little smile. "Go ahead and get the others. I've got a radio call to make."

As he departed, I raised my PipBuck and pressed the "transmit" button. "Hail Burst? This is Queen Whisper."

There was a long pause before her voice came across the radio, sounding so tired that I imagined the preceding silence had covered up a deep sigh. "Yes?"

"I understand you're coming down. I was hoping I might ask a favor of you. I know you've recovered a good number of PipBucks. I'd like to make use of them. All of them, if possible, or at least what you can spare."

There was another pause before she replied. "Why do you need them?"

*Thank you for asking that.* "Not me, specifically. A sizable portion of our force has no radios, and it's already caused some issues with communications. In addition, I've been poking at that program Serenity uses to encrypt their communications. I can't access most of it, but from what I can tell, we should be able to feed it new encryption keys, at which point we can talk without them listening in on us."

When she spoke again, there was lightness to her tone. Not quite excitement, but more of a relaxing. It seems I was delivering good news. "Well that could be damn useful. If you've figured out their encryption, does that mean we can listen in on them?"

My first thought was that I really wish she hadn't said that. Despite that, I put on a wry smile, looking for all the world as if I was taking the statement in light humor. "I wish. No, cracking encryption is impossible, or close enough. The PipBucks we'd captured presumably still had their

encryption keys entered, and I was hoping it would let us listen in on them, but it seems they've changed keys since our encounter yesterday. Given that these are changelings who have remained hidden in secrecy for centuries, I'm guessing they take information security very seriously. They're probably changing keys regularly to prevent exactly what I was trying to do."

*That's right, Serenity. Your daily key changes are making my job harder. You should keep doing that.*

"Okay," Hail Burst said, with a subtle flatness that suggested she didn't really care about the fine details of what I had said. But then, they hadn't been for her.

Before she could say more, I continued. "But we should probably reserve any further discussion until we're either face-to-face or have our own encryption up. If we can't listen in on their communications, at least we can level the field. So, could you spare those PipBucks?"

This time she keyed in before sighing. "Yeah, I'll bring them when I come down."

"Thank you."



Half an hour later, we converged on the army's makeshift headquarters. It was little more than a canvas shelter over a folding table. I was among the first to arrive, having followed Dusty in, and lay quietly beside him. While I planned to offer what help I could, I remained silent for the time being. I was getting enough uneasy looks without inserting myself into conversations where I wasn't needed.

Fortunately, most of the ponies that attended the meeting were already familiar with me. There weren't any random observers. While every faction had a couple representatives, guards were set to keep most ponies well away from the meeting. The last thing we needed was a Serenity Infiltrator walking into the meeting with a balefire egg and incinerating the entire command structure of our little army.

I found myself in a place long since made familiar through my years as an Infiltrator: lying there, nice and relaxed, apparently distracted by work, while secretly on high alert. The E.F.S. indicators were constantly in my awareness, ready to show the first sign of hostile intent. The PipBuck concealed in my

saddlebags sat ready to feed any Serenity transmissions into my ear.

While it was a fairly exclusive meeting, there were still a good number of ponies there. Two Bits was accompanied by Sandalwood, the senior member of the regular Militia units and Two Bits' second-in-command. Hail Burst had another soldier I didn't recognize. And there was an ever-irritated-looking Sandstorm, with Axe at her side.

Dazzle was there to represent Gemstone, having somehow found a way to clean the dust from her coat. Arclight had come with her. Seroon was there, too, whether as an advisor or as the representative of the few members of his tribe who had come along with our army. And of course, there was Echo, who insisted on remaining by my side for protection, Sickle, who was probably just bored, and Starlight, who figured that if everyone else was going, she should too.

While the various ponies talked, I tended to the small pile of PipBucks Hail Burst had brought down. Each one needed a copy of the slightly modified radio encryption, as well as wiping and resetting their tags so Serenity couldn't easily track them. It was trivially easy, which also meant it didn't distract me very much. It was just a little time consuming.

I also made the point of recording the new tags to my own PipBuck. I didn't want Serenity tracking them, but being able to track them myself seemed like a useful piece of information. My meager experience with combat had taught me that quality information is particularly hard to come across in the heat of battle.

The initial matter the gathered leaders discussed was also the most immediately important: survival. Specifically, ensuring that Serenity's new megaspell couldn't simply wipe out our entire army. Most of the discussion dealt with the precarious balance of needs. If the army was too tightly packed, then it could be gutted or even outright destroyed with that single weapon. If it was spread out enough to minimize losses, then Serenity could launch conventional attacks on isolated forces, devastating them and pulling back before we could bring our weight to bear. "Defeat in detail", as Dusty called it, a term that I silently filed away for later use.

The solution was to keep forces spread out in clumps, with a heavy and highly mobile force ready to relocate on a moment's notice. Fortunately, we had plenty of room; Serenity forces had fallen back to positions about

five miles out. Or at least, that's what our limited ground-based scouts had determined. Dusty was optimistic that airborne scouts would greatly improve that information.

Of course, the plan relied on that mobile force getting to where they were needed in time to help. Between the Trotsen motorwagons and the Loyalist cloudship, we could move a lot of firepower, but we needed to do so quickly, at the first sign of trouble. If not, they might be too late to help.

The first part of the solution was scouting. I missed some of the details with my work, but the gist of it was that the *Cumulonimbus* would give a high vantage point to watch for approaching forces, while the whirligigs would roam outside our lines, hoping to detect any incoming attacks even earlier. Then came the more difficult part.

"The main trick," Dusty had said, "is coordination and communication. That's especially true once we get this army moving. We need scout reports to get back quickly, and for us to get the reaction forces moving in the right direction as early as possible. Trotsen's motorwagons might be quick, but the lack of radios makes it hard to get word out fast enough."

He stepped back, more even with me, and inclined his head my way. "Fortunately, Whisper has a solution."

I looked up from the PipBuck I was working on. I considered standing, but given the size difference, I chose to remain sitting and, hopefully, a little less threatening. I quietly cleared my throat, and spoke. "One of the problems we've faced is a disparity in information and communications. Serenity likely still has some spies, and certainly has gathered detailed information on us and our forces. Meanwhile, we've had problems just getting information to the individuals who need it, especially without Serenity being able to listen in. We've had to resort to face-to-face meetings like this for conveying any sensitive information. That works for planning stages, but once things become active, the rapid and secure distribution of information becomes key."

My horn lit up, casting its soft green glow as I lifted one of the borrowed PipBucks. "This is one of the greatest advantages Serenity has. Serenity came from a Stable, and every one of their soldiers appears to have either a PipBuck or power armor. That means they can all be in communication. A scout or spy can discover some information, and seconds later it can be

filtering out through their army. Worse yet, they've found a way to do so without us overhearing them."

I slowly rotated the PipBuck, as if showing it off. "We captured a small number of Serenity's PipBucks yesterday, and I've spent the time since going over them. They each contain a very complex multi-channel radio encryption spell. They can pass information quickly and securely, meaning they can coordinate their army far more effectively than we can, and without giving us any information.

"I've found a way to change that balance." I turned the PipBuck to show the radio screen, with the Serenity-modified interface. "The spell itself is partially encrypted, but I've been able to make some minor modifications to serve our purposes. I understand the Mareford Militia already has enough PipBucks to support their communications, but with the ones we have captured, we have enough to outfit other key positions. For example, the commanders of most of the motorwagon force."

I saw Sandstorm's ears twitch and perk a little higher. I'd just said that I intended to give her a good number of PipBucks. I'm not sure if she was pleased by the gift, suspicious of my intent, or both.

"Additionally, the encryption spell means Serenity won't be able to listen in on us, either. We can pass on information quickly and securely. We both alleviate one of the problems we've been facing, and remove one of Serenity's advantages."

I finished by turning to look at Dusty, who nodded in reply. "Thank you. With this, we'll be able to easily coordinate our response to any action Serenity takes. We can talk to Sandstorm on the command channel, and she can pass on information to her riders through their own channel. With each wagon carrying additional troops, we can have them scattered around the army for support and scouting, but if Serenity starts to push us somewhere, we can rapidly redeploy them for support."

Sandstorm's expression darkened. "Right. So you're relying on us for all the fighting."

Sickle barked out a laugh. "Shit, I thought you were *here* to fight, now you're whining about it?"

"Fuck you, bitch!"

"Any time," Sickle said with a grin.

"That's enough," Dusty said, taking a step forward. "And no, we're not having you do all the fighting. We might just have Militia troops riding along with you. Maybe some heavy weapons teams, too. Gemstone's cannons proved themselves yesterday." He finished with a nod to Dazzle, who smiled in return.

"I've been sitting on that gun for a few years, now," she said with a soft chuckle and a shrug of her shoulders. "I'm kind of glad I got to put it to use."

Sandstorm muttered something, but didn't push the matter.

Dusty returned to sit beside me as Two Bits spoke again. "We can work out the details later, but I think between radio-equipped motorwagons and the *Cumulonimbus*, we've got a decent reaction force. Before we get to that, though, I think there's something else we need to resolve." He paused, gesturing around with his hoof. "This? What we're doing now? Well, it needs to change."

Several voices spoke at once, and he quickly held up a hoof. "Listen! We're basically running things by committee here. Once we're in the shit, we can't be wasting time debating and negotiating. You heard what Queen Whisper said. They've got good communications. That means they'll have one voice at the top that can call all the shots. Maybe their own queen. That means they can act quickly and in unity, without having to convince parts of their army to go along with a plan."

"Right now, they act faster than us. Hell, just trying to coordinate things yesterday was a pain in the ass, and that was just a small part of our force. Sooner or later, we're going to face Serenity in a major battle, and we can't do that if we're divided. We need somepony, one voice, calling the shots when things get hot."

"Oh, right," Sandstorm said, eyes narrowing again. "And I suppose you're oh-so-graciously volunteering for the job."

Two Bits snorted out a laugh. "Fuck that. That job sucks. Actually, I've got somepony much better in mind."

He raised a hoof, and to my surprise, gestured my way.

I blinked, my ears folding back. "What? Oh, no, no, no. I'm a horrible choice! I have no military experience. I barely know enough to keep myself alive in a fight. I'm completely unqualified to be a military leader, and that's not even considering the social impact of trying to put a *changeling*

in charge!"

Two Bits' hoof had lowered slightly, and the corner of his mouth twitched upwards slightly. "Not you," he said, a hint of humor to his voice before his hoof came up again. He wasn't pointing at me. He was pointing just beside me. "Him."

I looked over in time to see Dusty blink, his ears shooting up. "What?"

"Oh," I said, and gave a small nod. "Yes, that makes much more sense."

"No it doesn't!" Dusty said, looking back and forth between me and Two Bits. "I was a sergeant. The most I've ever led is a single squad, and even that was years ago."

Two Bits had a very pleased smile, bordering on smug. "I seem to recall some ops where you were directing a lot more than just a squad. How many units were involved in the Firestorm raid, or the east crater cleanup? Hell, yesterday and today would have gone a lot worse if you hadn't stepped up like you did."

I was nodding thoughtfully. "You're also an independent. Someone that can be looked on to make decisions fairly, rather than being biased for or against any one faction."

He shot me a sharp look. "I came from Mareford."

"And you left when you became concerned about their actions. You put what was right over blind obedience and partisanship."

He grunted, but didn't argue it.

Two Bits joined in again. "You've also got the ear of every single leader here. You helped bring everypony together, and they're at least willing to listen to you. As far as I see it, you're the best pony for the job."

Dusty frowned, silent for a moment before jerking his head toward Hail Burst. "What about her? She's active military, even."

She snorted, and I thought I caught a hint of amusement behind it. "Hey, I was a sergeant too. Besides, I've got my hooves full handling the *'Nimbus'*. I'm not going to pledge loyalty to some commander outside of the Enclave, but if you're stepping up to run things, I think I could follow your lead for now."

Dusty's ears fell flat.

Two Bits looked around. "Any objections? Sandstorm?"

She grimaced, glaring our way for a few long seconds. "...Fine. For now."

"Good!" Two Bits said, turning back to Dusty. "Then I guess it's decided. Welcome to command." He flashed a smile. "Sir."

Dusty grunted. "Don't call me that, Bitsy."

Two Bits laughed. "Yes, sir." A few ponies snickered. I couldn't help a smile.

Dusty just grunted again, deeper.

"So," Two Bits said, still smiling. "Now that that's settled, what's the plan?"

"Fuck if I know," Dusty replied. "You dump this on me and expect me to have a plan already? Shit." He sighed, shaking his head. "It's getting late, and we still need to get those PipBucks and encryption out to everyone. We've already lost a lot of time. We need to get moving first thing in the morning. I'll... I'll work something out by then. Just tell everyone to be ready to move at dawn."

Two Bits nodded, his smile now thoroughly smug. "You got it, sir. Anything else?"

Dusty rolled his eyes before replying. "Nothing I can think of. Not much to do until morning, except helping Whisper get our comms squared away."

He looked to me, as if looking for a response. "I have a few more PipBucks to finish working on, then I'll be ready to start making rounds. Say, thirty minutes?"

"Good, get on that." Dusty stopped, looking around the group. "...Dismissed, I guess."

The small crowd dispersed. I followed Dusty back towards our motor-wagon, silently amused by his reluctance.

As soon as we were no longer surrounded by ponies, he grumbled. "Well, shit." He stopped, looking back—and up—at me. "Did you really have to back him up on that?"

I smiled gently in reply. "Can you think of a better pony for the job?"

He grunted again. "Doesn't mean I'm happy about it."

Sickle walked by us, speaking out in a mocking tone. "Oh, whaaah, I'm in charge of the biggest army in two hundred years, my life suuuucks." She continued on her way, snickering.

He just sighed.

I raised a hoof, gently touching him on the shoulder. “Two Bits was right, though. You guided things through the fights yesterday and today. You took charge when it was needed. This just means that you’ll have an easier time doing it.” I smiled a little more. “It also makes my intel work simple.”

He heaved another sigh. “Yeah. I guess it does.”

“If you want to help me out, though, I could use a good communications plan for our force. Some plan to break down different units into individual channels. I’ll need that before I start giving out encryption keys.”

“Hmm.” He looked thoughtful as we started to walk. “The Militia and Rangers already have a comms plan. I could probably use that as a basis for the rest of the army. Might need some help with that, though.”

I gave a nod. “Just tell me what you need.”



Reprogramming the last of the PipBucks was mostly just rote repetition of the same task, which left me plenty of time to help Dusty lay out a basic plan of how to arrange our radio network. While my PipBuck screen was filled with spell matrix outputs and internal system settings, his displayed a text file, steadily doling out radio channels to the diverse collection of forces we had assembled.

Throughout the day, there were the occasional, scattered transmissions from Serenity forces. Mostly, they weren’t immediately important. Status updates, low-level movements, stuff like that.

We were almost done with our planning when a transmission caught my attention. “All forces, be advised: package Braconid is entering the AO from the northwest. Expect arrival at enemy camp in ten minutes. Be prepared for updates and orders as the situation develops.”

My ears flicked back, and I turned to my small PipBuck array. The transmission had been on channel 01, their apparent headquarters channel. “Dusty, Serenity might be up to something. What’s an AO?”

“You mean Area of Operations?” he asked, as if I would know. “Basically just means the area a mission or operation is taking place in. What’s up?”

“I’m not entirely sure, but they just alerted their entire force. They’re sending a ‘package’ to our camp. It’s northwest, ten minutes out.”

"A package," Dusty echoed, his own ears twitching a little. "That sounds ominous. Vague, but ominous."

"It's possible it's their megaspell," I said, my heart beating a bit harder. "Could be just about anything."

"But clearly something important." He frowned, still for a moment. "Ten minutes?"

I nodded.

"Okay," he said, slowly nodding. "I'll give the scouts three minutes, but if nopony sees anything, I'm sending out an alert. If that's the megaspell, it could do a lot more damage than just losing your spying."

I frowned—I really didn't want to lose this advantage I'd just gotten! —but nodded. Even with the army dispersed, a megaspell could still do tremendous damage. "Agreed. Though at least try to pass it off as if you saw something. It might not fool them, but it's worth a shot."

He agreed, and we sat in tense silence for any word. A minute passed. Two minutes.

Two and a half minutes, and my earbud crackled. "Command, Ranger Lead. Vulture has eyes on suspicious activity. A flight of changelings, about eight strong, just flew past Serenity positions to the northwest. They're flying high and level, straight toward the main camp."

Dusty quickly raised his broadcaster, his expression serious. "Copy that. Get me some details. What kind of force is this?"

"They look lightly equipped. No power armor. Might be a scout team, but eight—no, seven, seems a bit heavy for that."

Dusty frowned, silent for a moment before speaking up. "Understood. Keep tracking them. Everypony else, I want you on full alert. Keep eyes out in all directions. This could be a diversion."

Several voices sounded in reply. Dusty turned, our planning abandoned for the moment, and hauled himself up to sit on the edge of the window. While he peered through his binoculars, I carefully set aside my PipBucks and scooted over to do the same.

Two Bits called again. "Command, the changelings just split. All but one peeled off and are heading back towards Serenity's lines. The last one is holding course."

Dusty raised his broadcaster to speak. "I see them now." Letting off the

button, he cast a glance my way. “Suicide mission?”

Hail Burst’s voice sounded in my ear. “*Cumulonimbus* has eyes on. Standing by.”

“I don’t know,” I said, raising my own binoculars and hunting the skies for the distant changelings. “I’m inclined to say no, but some changelings could be very fanatic toward their queen, and Chrysalis is a name practically synonymous with fanaticism.” A dark dot flashed across my field of view, and I panned back, finally finding the inbound changeling—and my ears immediately fell flat. “Oh.”

In the corner of my vision, I saw Dusty turn my way again. He’d no doubt caught the sudden concern in my voice. “What?”

“It may be worse than that,” I said, staring at the white banner clutched in the changeling’s hooves as it flapped wildly in the wind. “They want to talk.”

## Chapter Forty-Two

# A Thousand Lies

There are many forms that danger can take.

The most apparent are also the most immediate. They tend to be the ones that people think of when the word “danger” comes up. In my previous life, that would have been the threat of discovery. The threat of the Ministry of Morale ambushing me, dragging me off, and extracting every vital secret I carried in my head.

In my new life, it meant raiders, corrupt mercenaries, and assassins. I had been in an alarming number of firefights. I had conducted armed and violent infiltrations of facilities. I had been the perpetrator of, witness to, or victim of multiple assassinations and attempted assassinations. I had ridden at the head of an army that marched steadily towards the inevitable violent clash that would decide the future of this land.

But immediate is not the same as greatest. Apparent is not the same as significant. The greatest and most significant dangers are often the most subtle. You do not always need an army or a megaspell to cause devastation to your enemies. Sometimes, all you need is the right word, whispered in the right ear. Nations have risen and fallen on as much.

So after all the raiders and ghouls and monsters I had faced in the Wasteland, I regarded this small, unassuming changeling as one of the most dangerous threats I had come across.

I stood beside Dusty at the headquarters shelter, watching her approach. She had initially flown near the outermost defensive line, holding back as she waved her white banner, until one of the Militia ponies had finally indicated for her to land. An entire squad of ponies walked her further into the camp. She carried nothing with her. She wasn’t wearing a PipBuck. Even the white flag had been taken from her, but the soldiers escorting her were still thoroughly wary. It was a good instinct, I thought, but probably not as useful as they might hope. The danger she posed wasn’t likely to be a physical one.

Even her appearance was a threat. She was slightly smaller than the average pony mare, both in height and weight, but she didn’t have to be.

Her ears hung a fraction too low, her demeanor shy and uncertain, but showing emotion was different from feeling it. She could have looked like whatever she wanted, and Serenity could have sent any individual they liked. This was their choice, and it had meaning.

Small. Weak. Non-threatening. I'd spent most of the time since her sighting thinking on what they might try to pull, but on seeing her up close, I quickly revised those expectations. They weren't starting off with a threat. They were starting with something more subtle and dangerous. They wanted ponies to empathize with them, even if only to a small degree.

Not that I expected her to get much mileage from the charade, of course, but it was only a part of her tactics. A hint of what was to come.

As for myself, I was already at a disadvantage, fatigued by my lack of sleep. The Mint-als made everything seem a touch too sharp, as if everything were too real. I would have gone to Dusty to make use of his coffee, but we didn't have the time to brew it. Instead I went to Sickle, who had been so overly pleased by my request. I now had a dose of just about every drug in existence tucked away in my bags, just in case I needed it. She'd even cheerfully slipped a Dash inhaler into the mix, despite my objections.

I disliked the idea of relying on chems, but they could be useful tools, and my personal preferences came secondary to survival. Yesterday, it had been Buck and painkillers to fight off a minor concussion. Today it was Mint-als to fight off the dulling of fatigue. Both dangerous situations where I couldn't risk being anything less than one hundred percent.

The Serenity changeling continued her slow approach until one of the soldiers called out to halt. She obeyed, slowly looking around the group with an uneasy eye. Once again, all the leaders of our army had gathered. This time all the looks of suspicion and distaste were focused on a different changeling, and with significantly more intensity.

She paused, swallowed, and quietly spoke. "Um... hello."

There were a few raised eyebrows and glances at that, expressions that practically shouted "Seriously?" Sickle snickered as if thinking the same thing.

It was a couple of seconds before Dusty noticed the eyes turning his way, silently electing for their newly appointed commander to take the lead. He gave a momentary grimace before replying. "I take it you want to talk?"

"Ah, yes," she said with a hesitant nod before pausing again. "Um... before we begin, I was wondering, would you prefer me remaining like this, or would you be more comfortable if I looked like a pony? I know some ponies find our appearance... unpleasant."

More displays of shyness, and now empathy and a desire to compromise for mutual benefit. I could practically see the plan steadily unfolding, and I really didn't like where it was going.

"We're familiar enough with changelings," Dusty replied, his head inclining toward me. I remained passive, standing tall and confident, though without looking down my muzzle as Echo was.

"Ah," the changeling said, her eyes flicking to me before darting away shyly. "Yes, I suppose you are."

Dusty's expression was still mostly neutral, but I detected a hint of distaste in how the corner of his mouth shifted ever-so-slightly. "How about you tell us your name, and then explain just what it is you want."

She nodded. "Of course. My name is Cheerlight," she said, though I suspected that was a fabrication created specifically for this conversation. "I was sent because... because my queen was hoping to defuse this situation before hundreds die. We are capable of defending our hive, but the Wasteland has already seen so much death. We may live hidden from the rest of the Wasteland, but we still don't want to see hundred of ponies dying just because they believed a lie."

As she ended, her eyes flicked momentarily towards me.

"Ah," I said. I might have laughed if the situation weren't so serious. "So that's how you're trying to play this."

She looked at me again, her eyes narrowing slightly even as she shifted her weight back, wings flicking anxiously. Intimidated, but defiant. Uncowed by the terrifying queen standing before her.

Dusty shot a look to me as well. "What's up?"

I just shook my head. "I'll let her explain."

He gave me a questioning look that I answered with a faint smile and shrug. Then he turned back to Cheerlight. "Okay, fine. Let's hear it."

The changeling opened her mouth, then stopped, closing it again. Her expression was concerned. All of it was an act, I was sure. Finally, she spoke again. "I'm not sure if you're the one I should be discussing it with."

Dusty frowned. "And why's that?"

"Because you've been with Queen Whisper for months," she said, warily eying him, glancing to the other leaders, then looking back to him once more. "We're still not sure if you're actively aiding her goals, or if she's been misleading you like all the others."

I could see Dusty's jaw tighten. "Since we've been working together, the only goals she's had have been helping her hive and stopping *you*."

"Technically true," Cheerlight said, her voice slightly quieter. "But that's how she likes to lie, isn't it? Yes, she wants to stop our hive. She's been trying to destroy us for almost a decade."

I turned my head slightly towards Dusty. "And now you see where she's going with this."

Somewhere that I couldn't defend myself. Somewhere that my own skills and training worked against me.

"Yeah, I see," he said, his eyes hard. "That's a bald-faced fucking lie."

She gave a slight nod, though her eyes had taken on a soft, subtly pitying expression. "Because she told you otherwise, and she wouldn't lie to you."

Dusty bristled, but he shook it off almost immediately. Instead, his expression turned firm, serious, and calm. It was how he looked in combat. "Because we've been working together for two months, and she didn't learn about Serenity until a month ago."

Cheerlight was nodding again. "Because that's what she told you."

"Because we were there when she discovered it, and it blindsided her. Then she insisted we investigate, and we get blindsided again."

Her head tilted slightly, her expression sad. "I don't think you realize how convincing an Infiltrator can be. You are aware that she claims to have spent years in old Equestria, hiding among ponies and collecting their love, yes?"

"I'm more familiar with her past than you are."

"And do you have any idea how demanding that is?" she asked, and touched a hoof to her chest. "I tried to become an Infiltrator myself, so I could help feed my hive. I couldn't manage it. It's beyond just 'demanding'. You have to be able to play a role perfectly, without even the slightest slip. You have to be comfortable with living a lie for years, without letting anyone in. She claims to have done this for *centuries*. How hard do you think it would

be for her to hold an act together for just a couple of months? To *pretend* to be surprised by information as a way to convince you of her sincerity? How long did she lie to you, pretending to be something else, only to change her story later on?"

"That's a load of shit," Dusty said, raising a hoof to point at her. "And if all you're going to do is keep telling a bunch of lies, you can fuck right off."

I didn't smile, despite how much I wanted to. Dusty knew what to do. I'm glad, because for the moment, I had to remain silent. I was a known Infiltrator. A liar and a manipulator. Anything I said could be regarded with suspicion. It hardly mattered that the same could be said of her. She didn't need them to trust her. She only needed them to not trust me. This entire little war hinged on the idea that I, a self-admitted professional liar and manipulator, was telling them the truth.

Cheerlight's eyes had widened slightly, ears drooping, as if shocked by Dusty's sudden profanity. She looked around, focusing on several of the other leaders. I could see the switch in tactics before she spoke, engaging the other important ponies before Dusty could completely shut down the conversation. "Please, listen to me! She's been lying to you from the start. First she pretended to be a pony. Then she was a changeling. Now she's a *queen*. What will she be tomorrow?"

Sickle snorted out a laugh from behind me. "I've been trying to get her to turn into a hellhound for weeks. Maybe that can be tomorrow."

There were a moment of silence, as ponies blinked at the unexpected comment. It lasted only an instant before Sandstorm stepped up. "Yeah, fuck all of your shit. You fucking roaches killed Raindrops, so you can take all these fucking lies and cram 'em up your ass. I'm going to enjoy watching you all burn."

"That wasn't us!" Cheerlight cried out in despair, then leveled a hoof at me. "Don't you think it's a little suspicious that a known changeling spy comes to you in the middle of a changeling scare, points you at a rival hive, and then *immediately* uncovers another changeling spy? She's been manipulating all of you from the start!"

"Oh, yeah," Sandstorm said with a derisive sneer. "And you're all innocent and peaceful, ain't you? Let me guess, it wasn't you that murdered all those ponies back at Mareford, either?"

Cheerlight flinched, ears folding back, and I could already see the machinations behind the suddenly reluctant behavior. You don't try to sell a lie you know your target won't buy; instead, you give them the truth they know, and use that as leverage to work a different lie. "That... was unpleasant, but we're running out of options. You were assembling an army with the goal of wiping us out! We had to do something to protect ourselves! And for the record, I was against the idea. It was an act of desperation that would make any attempts at negotiation that much harder, but... but as much as I disagreed with the decision to conduct the attack, and despite how callous and calculating the logic is, I have to agree that the conclusion was sound. If it did work, it would have stopped this conflict and removed the threat Queen Whisper poses to the Wasteland. Far fewer ponies would have died than if this turns into a war."

Two Bits had tensed, his eyes hard. "Unpleasant? You murdered our mayor and a bunch of other ponies, and you call it *unpleasant*? And now, when that doesn't work, *now* you want to talk?"

"This is new to us!" she said, raising a hoof pleadingly. "We've only survived so long because we've remained hidden from ponies who wanted to kill us for centuries! We've never worked openly like this." Her eyes glanced my way, her expression hardening. "And besides, you've had this queen whispering lies to you this whole time. She's already poisoned you against us, and anything we could say, she could come up with a lie to counter."

I allowed a soft snort of amusement and a faint smile. This seemed like a relatively safe place to slip in a few words. "Cute symbolic use of my name to stir up an emotional response. And I only wish these people trusted me as much as you seem to think they do."

"Some of us trust you." It was Seroon who spoke, standing placidly a few yards away.

Cheerlight turned to him. "Because she saved you? She didn't have to do a thing. She just let you walk along with her as she went where she was going anyway. She didn't do it to help you. It was an act. She acts nice and sympathetic, and in return, she gets a loyal ally convinced that she can do no wrong."

Seroon smiled softly. "And if all the people of the Wasteland were to

act nicely to each other, even out of self-interest, I would dare say the world would be a much better place.”

“Is that so?” Cheerlight said, her expression turning serious. “And do you know what happened when *we* tried to be nice to her?”

I tilted my head slightly, signaling my curiosity. Oh, I knew where she was going with that, but it would be better to feign ignorance.

Cheerlight’s cast a sharp glare at me before jerking away, looking to Seroon and Sandstorm with a less hostile expression. “When we came across her, she claimed her hive was dead. We welcomed her into our home. And how did she repay us?” Cheerlight’s ears flicked back as she grimaced, looking away with her expression hard and tight, as if remembering some horrible injustice. “She broke into our computer to steal and destroy records, stole equipment, sabotaged the hive, destroyed our food reserves, killed six, and wounded more than a dozen changelings, many of which were unarmed workers in the wrong place at the wrong time.” Her glare returned as she faced me. “*That’s* the kind of person Queen Whisper is. We extended a hoof in friendship to a lost and lonely changeling, and she stabbed us in the back.”

Dusty gave an angry snort. “You *welcomed* her? You gassed us! You stuck us in some mind-fuck prison so you could feed on us!”

Cheerlight stared in surprise and confusion at Dusty. “What? But you weren’t—” Her ears flicked, mouth snapping shut. Then her expression turned to concern, and she took a hesitant half-step back. “So, that answers that question. She hasn’t tricked you. You really are helping her lie to these ponies.”

“Hey.” A rattle of metal rose behind me as Sickle stood. I looked back to see her grin behind the bars of her muzzle. Her rumbling voice was amused, dark and deadly. “I was there, too, you dumb cunt. You chickenshit gassed me. Wanted to kill me in my sleep. Go on. Call me a liar again.” Any sense of amusement instantly vanished, like a light being switched off. “*I fucking dare you.*”

Cheerlight opened her mouth to reply, but hesitated. No doubt she’d been thoroughly briefed on all of my companions and knew as well as I did that Sickle would have no qualms about killing her. Likely, she was considering whether provoking an attack would serve her purposes, and

whether the other ponies here would be willing and capable of stopping Sickle in time. If she was really clever and devoted, she was putting more weight on the former.

Fortunately, I didn't have to intervene to prevent that. Sickle took Cheerlight's momentary silence as conceding the point. "Yeah, I thought so." She gave a deep snort before addressing the other ponies. "And why the fuck are you dumbasses listening to this lying little bitch, anyway?"

"Good question," Dusty said, and gestured to the nearest couple of soldiers. "Get her out of here."

Cheerlight staggered back another step, her eyes wide in panic. "Wait!" she said, eyes desperately darting around until they locked on Hail Burst. "What about Rust?!"

The soldiers stopped, casting curious looks back towards Dusty. I tilted my head again, genuinely curious how she was going to play that one. Obviously she was going to play it off as not being her hive, which almost certainly meant blaming me, but I was interested to see her technique. It was a desperation play, a gamble, unless she had some information I wasn't aware of. It would be better to not let her speak any more poisonous words, of course, but I was effectively powerless to affect that.

Hail Burst's head had tilted as well, and while it was hard to judge her expression with only her mouth visible under her helmet, she was clearly suspicious.

"I said enough," Dusty said, waving a hoof at the soldiers. "Get her—"

"Hold up," Hail Burst said, her tone much too casual. "I think I'd like to hear this. Are you really trying to say you didn't have anything to do with Rust?"

"Of course not!" Cheerlight said, desperate and pleading. "We were *trading* with Rust! We've gathered a huge amount of equipment and caps, more than enough to trade for some scrap metal. Why would we wipe out our own trading partners? And as for—"

Echo's voice cut over her. "Rust could harvest and prepare at most a few hundred pounds of quality metal in a day. Judging from the repairs to the *Cumulonimbus*, you likely required somewhere in the neighborhood of a hundred tons of good-quality structural steel to make the vessel flight-worthy once more. As such, I would assume you concluded that a year or

more was simply too long to wait, and chose to expedite the process.”

Cheerlight’s ears were laid back as Hail Burst added, “And we hit one of your scavenging groups that had just looted the place.”

“Of course we scavenged what we could!” Cheerlight said. “That’s how *everyone* lives in the Wasteland. But we didn’t kill anypony!” She calmed herself, presenting a more stable and reasonable persona; a gentle and shy diplomat, driven to near-panic by the impending violence she hoped to avoid. “We lost contact with our traders, and sent some scouts to investigate. They were almost there when they spotted Enclave soldiers flying in, so they hid to wait until everypony was gone.” She glanced my way again. “And wouldn’t you know it, moments later, Queen Whisper and her companions show up. I’m sure it’s purely a coincidence that they always show up to a crisis at exactly the right moment.”

Hail Burst stared for several long seconds, expression unreadable. “...Nope. Not buying it.”

Cheerlight’s expression softened. “Of all the ponies here, you know most of all what it’s like to be lied to by the ponies you should be able to trust, and to be put in conflict with those who should be your—”

“Don’t even fucking try that,” Hail Burst shot back, lips curling. “And just so you know, I don’t particularly trust Whisper. I trust what I see, and I’ve seen what your so-called Serenity has done with my own two eyes. You’re murderers and butchers. We’ve got a witness to everything you did at Rust. Hell, just yesterday you slaughtered a bunch of uninvolved ponies so you could get your hooves on a fucking megaspell. And you...” she leveled an armored hoof at Cheerlight. “You’re a slimy little lying piece of shit, and a transparent one at that. I may not trust Whisper, but at least when she gets all manipulative, she helps ponies.”

I allowed a small, soft smile. Not enough to look smug, even as much as I felt it. Just pleased, as one might expect. Maybe a little relieved. The last part wasn’t even an act.

Cheerlight’s ears had fallen flat again. “Please. I’m sure your witness saw changelings, but they weren’t *our* changelings. I know it’s not pleasant to think that you might have been misled again, but think—”

“I said, don’t fucking try that,” Hail Burst said. “I’m done with the scheming changeling crap.” She turned to Dusty. “Are we done with

her yet?"

"Yes," Dusty said grimly, motioning again to the soldiers.

"Wait!" Cheerlight cried out as the closest two soldiers grabbed her shoulders. "We just want to talk! Surely we can find some sort of middle-ground?"

"Hold up." The soldiers stopped as Dusty walked slowly up to her. When he stopped, he was face-to-face with her, noses almost touching. "You want a middle-ground? Here it is: your hive surrenders, disarms, and releases every pony you've got imprisoned for food. That's our middle-ground."

Cheerlight's focus danced between Dusty's eyes, shifting and anxious and entirely an act. After a moment she looked past Dusty towards the other ponies. "Please, we don't take ponies, and he knows—"

"Wrong answer," Dusty said, cutting her off. "I was there."

"Please!" Cheerlight called out to the others. "He's lying! We've never done anything like that! These are all more of Whisper's lies!"

Starlight had finally had enough and leaped up to her hooves. "Oh fuck off!"

Dusty snorted and waved a hoof to the guards before turning to walk away. "Get her out of here."

"We still have the megaspell!"

Dusty stopped cold in his tracks, jaw tightening. The mood over the gathering had abruptly chilled.

"We don't want to use it," Cheerlight said, visibly trembling. "We don't want to cause any more deaths than we have to, but we will defend ourselves. The analysts back home... since your army is spread out, they've decided the army is too hard of a target. That it wouldn't cause enough damage. They say the best target now is the army's industrial and logistical base. If we don't find some way to peacefully resolve this, they're going to use the megaspell on Mareford!"

Dusty leveled a murderous glare at her. Everyone was silent. Finally, he turned to look to Two Bits.

Two Bits caught his eyes, but looked away. For a few seconds, he simply stood there, eyes unfocused. I could practically see the mental struggle going on in his head.

Finally, he turned, his eyes locking onto Cheerlight. "Fuck you."

"You heard him," Dusty said, waving his hoof once more. "Get her out of here."

The Mareford soldiers started guiding Cheerlight away, pushing her ahead despite her protests. "Don't trust her!" she shouted. "She isn't trying to help you! If Whisper really cared so much about you ponies, how come she only showed up two months ago?! Wait!"

"Hey!" one of the soldiers snapped, giving her another shove. "Shut it before I gag you with your own damn flag."

Finally, her protests and verbal maneuvers ceased. She'd taken her shots. They led her away in silence.

"Well," Dusty said, shaking his head. "Did they really think that would work?"

I looked over at Two Bits' concerned expression, and Hail Burst's tense stance. She might not have broken up our little army, but it remained to be seen if she'd caused any damage.

As soon as Cheerlight was out of sight, Two Bits turned to Hail Burst. "Hey. I'm not going to give in to her threat, but the safety of Mareford is still my responsibility. Can I get you to send out some scouts, so if they do try to get that megaspell to Mareford, we have a chance at stopping it? I know it's a long shot, but we've got to try."

"Of course," Hail Burst said, giving a grim nod. "It'll leave us a little thin on the *Nimbus*, though. If you can spare some soldiers to give ship security, I can spare some scout flights."

He nodded in return. "I'll get a couple of squads together for you."

"Deal."

A moment of silence followed before Hail Burst turned my way. "You're awfully quiet all of a sudden."

I shrugged. "She made the entire conversation about me being a liar and a manipulator. There isn't much I can say in my own defense there." Then I put on a soft smile. "Though given my line of work, it's refreshing to have the truth working in my favor for a change."

She gave a mild snort as she looked away, though I caught the corner of her mouth lift. "Yeah, well, it doesn't help that she was so full of shit you could smell it. And like I said, you might be scummy as hell at times, but at least you've helped ponies. That's more than I can say for Serenity."

Another snort. "Hell, most ponies."

I couldn't help smiling a little more. That might have been the nicest thing Hail Burst had said to me.

She mused quietly, a thin smile slowly spreading as she looked out at where Cheerlight had disappeared from sight. "It kind of seems like they're getting desperate, if they're throwing a move like that."

"I doubt it," I said, earning a concerned frown from Hail Burst. "Remember: changeling. She could have come in with any tactic she wanted, any appearance she wanted. She *chose* to look weak."

"Hmm." She looked back again. "But why?"

I shrugged. "Hard to say. Maybe they hoped to tap into some pony empathy. Break up the army to reduce casualties. Maybe they wanted to make us overconfident. Maybe it's a diversion, getting us to expect one thing before doing something else. Maybe it's something we're just not seeing. Maybe it's a *lot* of things. Whatever it is, there's a good chance our reaction to this will play into their plans."

She grunted. "Changelings."

"Yep." I smiled.

"...So what was that whole 'two month' thing about?"

My smile vanished. There were so many ways I could answer that, all of varying degrees of honesty. The full truth was complicated and unusual enough that I really didn't want to rely on it, especially right after being so strongly accused of deception. The temptation to tell a much more believable lie was strong, but I sighed, settling on a more abbreviated truth. "I woke up from a changeling chrysalis—a cocoon—a little over two months ago. It was my hive's plan to survive some hard times. It... didn't work very well. Mine was the last one. Even... even my queen, my predecessor, died."

"Ah," she said. "Sorry for that." A pause. "So, your searching. Did you ever find any others?"

My smile returned. "I did. Eggs. It will be some time before they can care for themselves, but my hive will have a future... assuming any of us do."

"And we should probably get to work on that," Dusty said. "Whisper, I want that encryption deployed by the end of the day. It's going to be a fight once we start moving, and I don't want Serenity listening in on us."

"Of course," I said, nodding. The sensation was ever-so-slightly off, as

if my sense of balance was delayed by a fraction of a second. It seemed the Mint-als were wearing off. "I think I might take that coffee now."



Half an hour later, with caffeine buzzing through my veins, I made my rounds of the army. Fatigue was becoming a factor, but this part didn't require any significant brainpower. I could autopilot through most of it.

I still double-checked my radios. Both of them. The modified encryption program let anyone tune into multiple channels, so my PipBuck was tuned into both the command channel and the new private channel I had setup. That channel was just for us, my closest companions and me. Somewhere that we could talk without worrying at all about outsiders overhearing. Somewhere I could pass intercepted data to Dusty without anyone ever knowing.

And in the other ear, I continued to monitor Serenity radio traffic. There was still no uptick in activity. No plans being discussed, no attack imminent. No reaction at all to the apparent failure of their negotiations. Nothing.

It was enough to make me a little paranoid.

Most of the PipBucks Hail Burst had supplied went to Trotsen ponies. Sandstorm still had the one she had taken off the spy in Trotsen, so I gave her a copy of the encryption program and the key to the command network, then helped her distribute the new PipBucks to her riders. Once that was done, I took the last three to Dazzle. They would make sure that she and those impressive magical energy cannons were always within reach.

Then it was on to the Mareford Militia, and there's where things got tedious. Way back when Mareford's ancestors left whatever Stable they had lived in, they had brought along a great number of PipBucks. The town had several dozen of them, which meant the regular Militia could have one for every squad, plus the various levels of HQ units. I had to update every single one, and that meant flying all around our now-spread-out army.

If I'd had access to all of them in one place, I could have done the job in half an hour, tops. Instead, it was nearing evening as I wearily returned from my rounds. The caffeine had long since faded, leaving me feeling heavy, dull, and with a strangely acidic feeling in my stomach.

It irrationally irritated me that Echo showed absolutely no sign of fatigue as she flew close beside me. I knew the precise psychological leaps that led to those feelings, somewhere between envy and a selfish desire for special consideration by the universe. I was just feeling too worn-out to really care. Fortunately, I was also feeling too worn-out to make a fool of myself by acting on it. I just wanted to finally be done with it.

Dusty was back at the army HQ, with our motorwagon parked close by. Sickle was nearby, too, kicked back and lazily chatting with a cluster of Trotsen ponies. As I landed, I could tell from her slow and slightly slurred speech that she'd had plenty of booze, and probably some other drugs, too. Her lewd sprawl also made it plainly obvious to all that she'd had sex with at least one stallion while I was flying all around the army.

The knowledge of this irritated me. This in turn led to the strange recognition that it irritated me that this irritated me so much. I needed sleep.

Only a few ponies were in the headquarters. Dusty was comparing his PipBuck's map to the large one on the table, while Starlight sat nearby, head bobbing slowly to the music playing in her earbuds. A couple of Mareford Militia ponies were going over some papers of their own, but remaining close by in case Dusty needed them.

Dusty looked up from the maps. "Hey. You finished your rounds?"

"I've gotten Trotsen, Gemstone, the Militia, and the Rangers," I said with a weary nod. "I even caught up with the whirligigs. I'm going up to the *Cumulonimbus* next to update the Loyalists. I wanted to stop and check in with you first. I'm thinking of staying up in the cloudship. The hills limit radio reception, and I'd like to be able to monitor the whole network."

I inclined my head slightly, my great horn tipping towards the two Militia ponies, who were still preoccupied by their own work.

Dusty nodded knowingly. "Of course. Let me know if you hear anything interesting that isn't filtering up." He understood perfectly.

"Aww," Starlight said, pulling out one of her earbuds. "You're bailing on us? But I like having you around."

So many conflicting thoughts and emotions stirred at that comment, all urged on by the feeling of affection I was sensing from her. "And I'd love to stay around," I said, putting on a soft smile that really didn't convey the complex and sleep-deprived feelings rioting around in my head. "But I prob-

ably wouldn't be much good for company. I've got a lot of work to do."

She gave an overacted groan. "Fiiine. How long are you staying up there?"

"Not long. It'll only be a few days until the army reaches Serenity." I lifted my PipBuck. "And we've got the private channel if we want to chat."

Dusty gave an amused snort. "I swear, if you two start getting all lovey-dovey on the radio, I'm confiscating your broadcasters."

Starlight stuck her tongue out at him.

I couldn't come up with any appropriate response, so I simply moved on. "Anyway, I need to get on that. I still need to get the Loyalists on the new net, and I don't even know if I need to tweak the program to get it to work on the spell matrix in those armors."

"Well, good luck with that," Dusty said. "Stay out of trouble."

Echo quietly snorted, but said nothing.

"See you later," Starlight said, giving a lopsided smile that nicely summed up the mixed feelings.

I lingered as my fatigued mind conjured up some very compelling arguments in support of me staying right there, but I reluctantly pushed those thoughts aside. Duty first, especially when hundreds of lives and the future of my hive was at stake. I reminded my tired mind that it was a very temporary and short-term arrangement. I don't think it listened.

It was a short flight to the *Cumulonimbus*, which was making a slow orbit over the heart of the army. A call on their unencrypted frequency announced my presence, and a pair of armored soldiers met Echo and myself at the ruined hangar once more. The halls of the ship were still a maze to me, but I was starting to recognize a few intersections.

We were led to the C.I.C. once again. The space was a little more well-lit than last time, and a few more pegasi were at the consoles. The large screen at the front wall was currently showing a map, much like a PipBuck's. The *Cumulonimbus* was right in the middle, with several other marks denoting both friendly and suspected enemy positions.

Hail Burst looked over to us and nodded. "Welcome aboard. This is about the encryption?"

"It is," I said, mirroring her nod. "I need to distribute the encryption spell and the appropriate keys to every Loyalist armor. How would you like

to do this?"

"We can handle the distribution," she said. "Give me a copy of them. I will see that they're properly distributed."

I frowned slightly. I didn't like the idea of letting that information slip out of my control, but neither could I blame her for wanting to take charge of her own forces security. "Very well. There is one possible complication, though. I don't know the specifics of the pegasus power armor's spell matrix. I'll need to examine one to see if the spell needs to be modified for you."

Hail Burst paused for a moment, a small frown crossing her muzzle for just a moment before she nodded. "Very well. You can hook up to my armor." She turned her head, awkwardly nipping at the back of her shoulder until a panel popped open, revealing a cable port.

I promptly got to work, and was pleased to see that the power armor's systems were based on Stable-Tec computers. Better yet, while both Serenity and the Enclave appeared to have made minor post-war modifications to the spell matrices, a good half-hour of examination found that none of the encryption spell's functionality depended on those modifications. It should work just fine.

With that out of the way, and a copy of the spell and a list of Loyalist encryption keys delivered, I moved on to the next topic. "I hope it isn't imposing, but I was wondering if I could ask a favor."

With her helmet off, I could see the raised eyebrow that question brought, and didn't wait for her to vocalize the question. "Dusty wanted me to monitor all our radio traffic, in hopes I might be able to improve situational awareness. The hills give some interference, so we were hoping you might have room for me somewhere. Preferably some place that won't block out radio signals."

She sighed. "Sure, why not? We're a flying hotel at this point, anyway. There's another room next to where we stuck that... *energetic* griffin. You can quarter there. The guards will show you the way. I assume you have your own radio equipment?"

"I do."

"Good. Then we'll find you a good place for you to set up in the morning."

"Thank you."

Echo cut in. "I have another request."

This time, I mirrored Hail Burst's raised eyebrow.

"What is it?" Hail Burst asked.

"We have a suit of damaged pegasus power armor," Echo said. "It is mostly in good condition, but some parts are irreparably damaged and will require replacements before it will function. I would like to request the spare parts necessary to effect those repairs." Her eyes turned to me, while her head remained fixed forward. "If Whisper is going to insist on putting herself in danger, we should at least ensure she has adequate protection."

I sighed; I had no desire to be stuck in some power armor, and I didn't particularly like the insult it might cause among our pegasus allies to be wearing what was essentially their uniform.

Hail Burst hesitated, frowning, but eventually replied. "I can not permit the distribution of Enclave military equipment to non-Enclave personnel—"

Echo's mane stirred on an intangible breeze, wings rising at her side, voice sharp. "Given Whisper's importance to our future, and all that we have done for you, it seems the *least* you can do to show appreciation for our great effort is—"

"*But!*" Hail Burst snapped, eyes narrowing to glare. "Given that we've captured several suits of Serenity's power armor, we may be able to find the parts you need from the salvaged *enemy* equipment." She took a step toward the alicorn. "Unless you'd like to continue objecting to my extremely generous and questionably legal compromise?"

Echo's wings returned to her sides, her mane settling. "No. That should suffice quite nicely."

"Sorry," I said, giving Hail Burst a tired smile. "We're still working on teaching her the finer details of social interaction." I then turned to Echo. "The proper response to someone granting you a favor is to express gratitude."

Echo's head tilted ever so slightly. "I had thought that was implied by my statement."

I sighed again. "Say 'thank you'."

She frowned, and after a moment turned to regard Hail Burst formally. "I appreciate your cooperation in this endeavor."

"Close enough. I guess."

Hail Burst eyed Echo before turning a smirk toward me. "A stuck-up

alicorn learning social skills from *you*. Celestia help us all.”

Echo’s wings rose again. “I will have you know that Queen Whisper is an *excellent* teacher and does not deserve such ridiculous scorn!”

“Relax,” I said. “Maybe the next lesson should be on general banter and friendly ribbing. Or maybe just tact.”

“Mmm,” Echo said, pausing thoughtfully, and nodded. “If you think that best, then it sounds like an excellent course of study.”

Hail Burst snorted out a barely restrained laugh, then shook her head. “Yeahhh, okay. Back on-topic, get us a list of parts that you need, and we’ll see what we can do. We might be able to spare a technician if you need any help.”

“I will not,” Echo replied quite primly, her nose lifting a little higher. “We remember a great deal of arcanotech engineering. Repairing the armor should be trivial, given the correct parts.” She turned her head to regard me. “Given that you are in the heart of a Raptor-class cloudship, do you suppose you will be able to refrain from getting yourself killed without me for a few minutes?”

I gave a wry smile. “Yes, I do believe I can manage that.”

Echo frowned. “Hmm. I would prefer more certainty, but I suppose that shall suffice. I will retrieve our salvaged power armor and return shortly.”

With a flash, she was gone.

“Well she’s even more charming than I remember,” Hail Burst said.

“Believe it or not, this is progress,” I said. I mean, she didn’t even mention genocide once. “She’s still new to this. She hadn’t had any proper social interaction prior to about a week ago. Kind of.” I frowned. “She’s complicated.”

With the encryption delivered, we parted ways. The escort guided me through the maze of dim and damaged corridors to my temporary quarters. We had almost arrived when I heard a faint pop. I might not have even noticed if I hadn’t heard it again, a few seconds later and slightly louder. Then again, and again, rapidly drawing closer.

I stopped at an intersection of hallways just as a dazzling purple flash appeared right before me, signaling Echo’s return. “There you are!” she said, turning to face me. The damaged set of pegasus power armor floated behind her as she glared at me. The look lost most of its impact when both of us were ducking under the low ceiling. “I leave you for hardly a minute

and you're already trying to get lost.”

“I'm being escorted by a pair of Loyalist soldiers in their own ship,” I noted, leveling my best flat glare. “I am hardly in danger of anything, least of all getting lost.”

She blinked, then shook her head. “Well. I suppose that is technically true, but I can hardly protect you if you run off without letting me know where you are going.”

“Echo, any soldier on this ship could have told you where I was, and you can always call me on the radio.” I lifted my PipBuck for emphasis before setting it down and fixing her with a hard stare. “And this overprotective thing is getting extremely old.”

“You tried to blow yourself up with a megaspell,” she countered, horn tapping the ceiling as she tried to stand a little taller. “I hardly think I am overreacting.”

“You're being overbearing and rude,” I said, not relenting. Irritation was growing in my fatigued mind, despite attempts to quash it. “I have no problem with you playing bodyguard and trying to protect me, but the more obnoxious and overly critical you are about it, the more I want to just get away from you.”

Her eyes went wide, head drawing back as if I had slapped her. It resulted in her banging the back of her head against a low-hanging pipe, but she didn't even seem to notice; the only pain evident in her expression was in response to my words.

I groaned, a hoof rising to my face, and spoke before she could come up with the words to reply. “I'm not saying I hate you, Echo. It's nothing like that. It's...” I lowered my hoof again. “Do you remember our first talk?”

The growing look of shock and outrage were immediately wiped away by a thoughtful expression as she thought back. “Yes? To which part are you referring? We discussed several subjects.”

“The part about how you present things,” I said, mellowing my tone as much as possible. “Being demanding and overbearing will drive ponies away, even if you're trying to act in their best interests. It's counterproductive to your goals. Not to mention, it's just plain rude.”

She had frowned, and it took several seconds before she replied. “I had expected that you, at least, would not have been as susceptible to such an

emotional reaction.”

“I’m exhausted,” I said. “And it’s not as if you restrict this behavior only to me. I think you would have a lot more success if you didn’t act quite so... condescending towards others.”

She continued to frown thoughtfully for another few seconds before giving a slow nod. “I see. That will be difficult, given the great disparity in power and capability, but... I shall try.”

“Good,” I said, choosing to ignore the low-key condescension for the sake of my own sanity. I even reached up to give her a friendly pat on the shoulder, which merely produced a confused look at the offending hoof. Then, remembering the skeptical-looking soldiers, turned to give them a smile. “Which way?”

The closest soldier snapped out of it immediately. “That room, right there,” she said with a raised hoof.

“Thank you,” I said with a smile, and entered my new quarters, with Echo following close behind. It was a decent enough space. It probably even counted as roomy by warship standards, with the tiny desk, one chair, a locker, and single bunk-bed. I had just removed my saddlebags and was considering the regular-pony-sized bed when a familiar high-pitched voice came from the open doorway.

“Oh, hey,” Bloodbeak said, peeking her head in. “I thought I heard you over here.”

“Hello again,” I said, flashing another smile. “Looks like I’ll be quartered here in the *Cumulonimbus* for a few days.”

“Cool,” she said, casually strolling in. The room was getting very cramped.

Echo sat down the armor. “I am going to find Hail Burst to get those parts she promised.”

“Please try to be nice about it,” I said. “Please and thank you and all that.”

“Of course,” Echo replied primly, and slipped out the door.

Bloodbeak blinked after her, then flashed a wry smile at me. “She’s funny. You fixing up this armor?”

“She is. She thinks I need more protection.”

“Huh. Neat.” She paused, letting out a long, loud yawn that I struggled to not echo.

"Tired, huh?" I said, stating the obvious in a way to open up further conversation.

She cracked a smile again. "I've been running around this ship for hours. Even *I* have to run out of energy eventually!" She chuckled as she turned and flopped back in the chair—then hissed, grabbing at her side where she had been injured. "Oww, crap! Why do I keep doing that?" She was already chuckling again by the end of the sentence. At least she didn't seem to be in much pain.

"Is that still giving you trouble?"

"Only when I'm being stupid," she said, beaming, though she steadily slid down to slouch in the chair. She looked every bit as tired as I felt. "So it looks like we're neighbors for a bit. Does that mean we get to hang out?"

I looked at my saddlebags, sitting beside the bunk-bed with the vital PipBucks nestled inside. I'm pretty sure I lingered just a little too long, long enough that Bloodbeak had surely noticed my hesitation. I quickly spoke up before she could consider it. "Sure. I'm going to be pretty busy over the next few days, but I'm sure I'll have free time." Or at least, I could manage a bit of socializing with the radios playing in my ear.

Bloodbeak smiled. "Cool. I mean, I'm inside this super-awesome flying ship from the ancient past, going to fight some super-secret underground baddies. It'd just be all sorts of wrong if I was *bored* in the middle of all this."

I chuckled. "Well, we can't have that." Still, I was eying the too-small bed. I called up my magic, stripping away my regal disguise, and sat on the cot with a soft groan. "But I think that's going to have to wait. I'm exhausted."

Of course, what I *wanted* to do was listen in on the radio. Serenity was still quiet. Not silent, mind you. There was still the regular chatter, but it was all suspiciously uneventful.

"Hah, I hear you there," Bloodbeak said, lifting a hand to cover another, smaller yawn. "Catch you for breakfast, then? Oh, hey, then you can tell me what happened with all that shooting earlier!"

"Hmm? You didn't see what happened?" I looked over at the wall. "I guess warships don't have much in the way of windows."

"Yeah, these pegasi just got all all super-serious and told me to stay in my room. It was dumb and boring." She paused, giving a weak, uneven smile.

"Uh, maybe a little unnerving, too."

I grunted and frowned. "I can imagine. Hearing the fight and not having any idea of what's happening..."

"Still kinda silly," she said, and with a huff, hauled herself back up to her feet. "I mean, this is probably the safest place in the whole army. Just, you know... a window would be nice."

"How about I talk to Hail Burst in the morning?" I said. "Maybe we can arrange something that doesn't have us stuck in some dark hole the whole time."

She grinned. "Hey, thanks. Well, I think I'll go turn in." She was just exiting the door when she stopped. "Hey, uh, Whisper?"

I had laid back, sinking into the thin cushion of the bunk. "Yes?"

"It's just..." She turned, looking to me with a softly concerned expression. "Well, I remember when we met, you were talking about finding your family, and, well..." her gaze wavered awkwardly. "Is this your family?"

I shook my head. "No. This is a different hive."

"Ah," she said, a bit of a smile returning for just a moment, before she spoke again. "So... did you ever find them?"

I smiled. "Yes. I found them."

Her smile returned, soft and warm. She didn't say anything. She just smiled, and nodded, and then she slipped out of the room.

I floated my bags over, depositing them close by my side so the earbuds' wires weren't too tight, and curled up in a thin cot made luxurious by way of fatigue.

The radio crackled occasionally with distant conversations. Echo returned with several parts, quietly tinkering with the armor. None of it mattered to me. I wrapped the blankets snugly around me, nestled my head into the inviting pillow, and I settled in to finally get some much-deserved sleep.

## Chapter Forty-Three

# Close Quarters

Dreams are a strange territory. Many have spent careers trying to find the meanings behind the strange and convoluted paths they might take. Entire fields of psychology and philosophy have been guided by such pursuits.

Fortunately, Infiltrators are taught far more practical psychology, based on study and statistics rather than pure speculation and tenuous correlation. Sure, there's the occasional prophetic dreamer or invasive dreamform, but those are distinct magical phenomena, not the normal product of a typical subconscious mind. Normal dreams typically mean nothing more than that a thought happened to come to mind, whether it's some long-held fear about getting stuck in an alien form, a recent interest in a particular brand of snack cake, or some casual thought or memory. Defeating a giant ambulatory blueberry waffle by eating it is less likely to be a deep-seated issue with your parents or repressed sexual fantasy, and more likely to simply mean you're about to wake up hungry.

I am glad to have been taught this way, because trying to decipher the metaphor behind the neon-green cybernetic male unicorn griffin in custom power armor could take months, fill a thesis paper, and possibly lead to eventual insanity.

As is, I only even remember that one detail, out of the rest of what must have been a supremely strange dream, because he teleported to my left side and buzzed, in his electronic yet clearly feminine voice, "Target in sight."

The rest of the dream was lost to the volatility of short-term memory as my slowly-stirring conscious mind latched onto those words. More words followed as I became aware of waking up. "One is taking lead." Other voices overlapped, the calm urgency piercing all the way to my consciousness. Some were distorted, but the two I had made out were crystal clear. Not a single artifact. Close.

My heart was pounding as I jerked awake, adrenaline already burning in my veins. My eyes opened to a dimly lit room, with Echo lying curled neatly beside the bulk of the power armor she had been working on. I quickly snatched at my saddlebags and the networked PipBucks within, nearly falling

out of bed in my haste.

All the voices were filling my left ear. The right was silent.

Echo made some soft sound, but I ignored her. My attention went first to the PipBuck monitoring the Serenity channels. The voices were coming in on multiple channels, and I caught snippets of formation, maneuver, and enemy sightings. Channels blinked out and flashed to life as information spread rapidly through the Serenity chain of command.

I quickly switched to my own PipBuck, confirmed that I was set to the private channel, and hit transmit. "Dusty, are you awake?" Echo grunted and stirred at the noise, but no reply came over the radio. "Dusty!"

The soft, alien sound of magical energy weapons barely reached my ears through the thick walls. My ears shot up, head snapping around. A dozen red marks filled my E.F.S. I switched to the command channel, nearly shouting as I broadcast a warning. "The *Cumulonimbus* is under attack!"

More shots sounded as the entire world leaped into action. Dusty's groggy voice came across the radio, asking, "What's going on?" just as a klaxon sounded, and the cloudship twitched beneath me, banking into a turn.

Hail Burst's voice answered. "The *Cumulonimbus* is being boarded. Enemy strength is at least a platoon, likely more. I'm getting word of enemy fliers spotted approaching the army from west and southwest—"

The radio squawked with electrical interference, the dim light by the door flickering for a moment. Hail Burst's voice returned, a little harsher than before. "Be advised, we are now on internal defense and can not provide air support. Enemy is using matrix disruption grenades. We may lose communications."

Echo was wide awake as the sound of distant but rapidly growing combat echoed through the ship. "What is going on?"

"We're being boarded," I said, scrambling out of the bed.

"*What?*" she blurred, eyes widening. "They dare!"

Dusty spoke across the radio. "Understood. Do you require assistance?"

"Negative," Hail Burst replied. "Too many hostile fliers, and we can't give air defense. Those whirligigs would get torn apart. We'll hold or take as many of these bastards down with us as possible."

"Don't get killed!" Dusty said. "We need you ponies a lot more than we

need your ship!"

The voices from the Serenity force were coming quicker and louder, overlapping each other with the frantic calls of combat. I pulled out the relevant PipBuck, switching around to find the right channel.

Echo stood tall, her mane flared and blowing as if her power was coursing directly through it. "Whisper! We are leaving!"

"No we're not!" I said, still switching channels. "We're safe for now, and you can teleport us out if it gets dangerous. Now be quiet, I need to work!"

"But—" Her mouth snapped shut, followed by an aggravated growl. "Fine! But we are leaving the moment *I* think you are in danger!"

Another distant explosion rattled the locker behind me, and I found an active Serenity channel. "—partment one is breached, light resistance. I'm seeing lots of contacts moving now."

"Understood. Get to defensive positions and get ready to push. Just like we practiced."

I quickly checked my notes, comparing the channel numbers. If my earlier information was correct, and they hadn't changed anything, this was platoon-level traffic in the first platoon, Alpha company. I bumped it up a channel, listening to company-level communications. It was only a few seconds before I was rewarded. "Command, One. Hoofhold secure. Minimal resistance, we should be able to take the second line before things bog down."

"Copy," the reply came, just as clear as the others; the company headquarters was nearby. "Proceed. Two, hustle aft and get that breach going. Push hard before they can relocate."

Crap. I hit transmit again. "Hail Burst, someone spotted a bunch of changelings going toward the rear of the ship, and they might have explosives. They may be trying to breach there."

"Shit," she replied, then, "Understood."

I was already switching to the private channel. "Dusty, I'm pretty sure we've got an entire company hitting the '*Nimbus*.'

There was a pause, possibly as he switched channels to reply. "Copy that. They're launching an offensive across the entire western edge of the army. If it starts getting bad up there, you get the hell out."

"I will," I said, and switched back to the command net.

"An entire company," Echo darkly intoned. "I would say it has already gotten quite bad."

I slowly turned my head, watching all of the contact markers moving around, both friendly and enemy. "It's not bad until Serenity gets close. It'll only take a second for you to teleport us."

She grumbled, turning to focus once more on the door.

I noticed one non-hostile mark moving relatively quickly to our door, just before the latch moved. "And don't kill Bloodbeak, please."

The door opened to reveal the griffin in question, her rifle slung around her neck as she peered in. "Hey! I think there's a fight going on!"

"We noticed," I said, quickly waving a hoof for her to enter before transmitting again. "Hail Burst, this is Whisper. What do you want us doing?"

Bloodbeak slipped in, shutting the door behind her, while I waited for Hail Burst's reply. It came a few seconds later. "Whisper, monitor channel eight-nine for internal defense, but don't get in their way."

"Understood." A moment later, I was on the new channel. "This is Queen Whisper and company joining this channel. Anything we should know?"

A stallion's voice immediately replied. "Welcome to the party, Whisper. This is Bastion. What's your location?"

"Echo, Bloodbeak, and I are all in my quarters."

"Copy that. Intruders on that deck have pushed halfway to your position, but we've halted them. You're good for now, but be ready to move."

"I understand. We'll be ready."

Another explosion shook the floor. It was almost as if they didn't care about the state of the ship.

"This is a bad decision," Echo growled, horn glowing as she glared at the door. "You're not contributing to the defense, so there is no reason for you to remain."

"My job hasn't changed," I said, not wanting to elaborate more with someone else listening in. "And I'm not bailing on these ponies. We're staying until Serenity starts overtaking us or the order is given to abandon ship."

Bloodbeak started. "What? You don't think they'll do that, will they?"

"Serenity outnumbers us up here," I said. "Probably two-to-one or more."

On the other hoof, the Loyalists have great defensive positions. I could see it going either way.”

Another Serenity transmission caught my ear, and I quickly singled it out as platoon-level traffic in the second platoon. “Charge set. Pull back. Call when clear.”

While the squads rapidly called out in reply, Bloodbeak sat, shifting her rifle to point roughly at the door. “So, uh, what’re we doing?”

In my ear, some changeling called out “Fire in the hole!” three times. The sound that followed wasn’t the deafening, ship-rattling explosion I had expected. It was a distant, dull thump, as if someone had dropped something on the deck. “Go, go, go!”

“We’re sitting tight here,” I said, even as my heart beat harder. Hostile contact markers were all around. Some must have been Serenity soldiers flying around outside the ship. It made it hard to tell where the boarders were. “I’m on the radio with the Loyalists. If we need to move, they’ll let us know.”

“Oh,” she said, clearly nervous. “Okay.”

My right earbud crackled loudly with a new voice. “Intruders breaching in engineering! At least a squad of power armor. We do not control the compartment.”

“Five, are you in position?”

“Almost. Deck one is clear back to engineering. Still moving up on deck two.”

Left ear, again. “Engineering secure! Enemy forces seen withdrawing into deck three and four main passages.”

As I listened to the rapidly escalating combat, Echo snorted and jerked her head toward the power armor. “Whisper, you should get in the armor. I have not yet completed the repairs, but it will still provide protection.”

I glanced at the armor, grimaced, and shook my head. “Not a good time to learn how to use power armor,” I said. “Besides, I don’t want to look like a Serenity soldier. The Loyalists are expecting me to look like a queen.”

On that note, I focused my magic, pouring it into retaking my regal disguise.

“Great,” Echo grumbled. “Now you’ve made yourself an even *bigger* target.”

I ignored her, focusing on the radios. Calls were coming out quickly from both sides, and I looked over the local map on my PipBuck, painting a mental picture of the battlefield. The changelings at the front of the ship, the first platoon, were probing the defenses, but several Loyalist and two Militia squads were fighting them off. The second platoon, in the rear, was pushing hard on all decks. They were trying to keep up the momentum, but my warning had cost them the element of surprise, and the Loyalists were slowing them down.

Slowing, but concerningly, not stopping.

Bloodbeak fidgeted with her rifle, checking the chamber before resuming her aim at the door. “How the heck did they sneak up on a cloudship? It’s in the middle of the sky!”

Several distant explosions echoed through the ship, and the light flickered in time to several high-pitched discharges. More matrix disruption grenades.

Without looking up from my screens, I tapped a hoof to my chest. “Black chitin and black armor, at night, under a fully overcast sky. Changelings are about as well-adapted to nighttime operations as you can get, even without our shapeshifting.”

The weapon fire had intensified, ringing through the corridors. Several loud radio calls indicated Serenity’s first platoon had launched a hard push on all defensive positions. Neither side seemed to know how well it was going.

“Or someone was sleeping at their post,” Bloodbeak grumbled. “I know guard duty gets boring, but still...”

One of the Loyalist units had fallen silent. Bastion was giving orders to another. “Three, pull back to the next stairwell. Four isn’t responding. I need you to get a few ponies down there to secure the starboard passage, deck four.”

On Serenity’s side, a squad leader was reporting. “We’ve broken through on deck four. No more resistance. We’re pushing up to secure stairwell S-two.”

I double-checked the map. We were on deck three, and if my guess was correct, that stairwell was just down the corridor and around the corner. The swarm of hostile contacts swirling around made it impossible to tell

who was where.

Ten seconds later I heard the rapid discharging of magical energy weapons as Loyalist and Serenity forces clashed. Radio calls reported the contact.

Seconds ticked by, turning to minutes. The defenders on deck three and four had been pushed back from engineering, but had regrouped and were now holding the line. Neither side seemed to have a good picture of how the fight was going in the aft of deck two. Explosions rattled the ship, quickly reported as being on deck one, near the bow. Three reported making contact with survivors from Four. Moments later they reported being fired on by those same survivors. The Militia squad leader gave a rushed report of being overrun and fell silent.

How long had the fighting been going on? Ten minutes? Twenty? I checked my PipBuck's clock. Six.

"Queen Whisper." Bastion's voice was firm and controlled in the midst of the chaos. "Do you know the way to the sick bay?"

I keyed in. "I can find my way."

"Good. Move there now. That's our fallback. Say when you arrive."  
"We're on the way."

Echo's glanced to me. "We're what now?" Apparently she hadn't switched to listen to the new channel.

"Going to the sick bay," I said as I slid the networked PipBucks back into my bag, then turned back to my own. I took a moment to double-check the local map, then rose to my hooves. My rifle floated beside me. "Okay. Follow me."

I opened the door, the sound of weapon fire suddenly much louder. Close. I peeked out the door, looking down the corridor. Vacant. I could make out two, maybe three magical energy weapons firing in that direction, all in slow, steady bursts. Suppression fire, I assumed. Far enough away that I didn't see any flashes. Close enough to be terrifyingly loud. Somepony shouted directions, though I couldn't make out his words.

Echo remained close on my flank as I led the way, with the power armor floating along right behind her. I trotted to the closest junction, well away from the fighting, and took the dim corridor. The air shook with a nearby explosion, and the volume of fire surged. A changeling on the Serenity

channel was reporting an enemy counterattack, though I didn't catch where. Bastion was loud in my other ear, giving quick updates to various squads. I don't remember all the details now, just the general gist of the commands: collapse and consolidate. They were losing ground.

A couple more turns and a short set of stairs later, we reached the sickbay. I rushed in first, immediately greeted by a pair of pegasi. "Holy shit!" the first one shouted, snatching up a tray in his bandaged hooves before taking to the air, while the other pony scrambled back to put her empty bed between us.

"Easy," I said. Neither were armed or armored, and a quick glance at my E.F.S. suggested they were non-hostile. I floated my rifle back to my side, the barrel pointing straight up. "We're on your side."

Echo and Bloodbeak had entered behind me, shutting the door, the sound of combat abruptly muffled. The stallion paused, looking over us before something like recognition flashed in his eyes. He still held the tray defensively, hovering in place. "What's going on out there?"

I glanced to his leg, noting the lack of PipBuck. Without power armor, he was entirely out of contact. "We've been boarded," I said, advancing into the room to get away from the door, and took in the surroundings. There were about a dozen ponies still in beds, and only a few were awake. Several carts of medical equipment were parked by various beds, cluttering up the room, but also offering some degree of cover. Then again, the carts were probably made of thin sheet metal, and might not stop anything more energetic than fragments and thrown rocks.

Behind me, Bloodbeak moved to what seemed to be a nurse's station, with a metal desk that looked a bit more promising. She used the desk to brace her rifle, covering the door. Echo, meanwhile, set the power armor down just before the closest medical bed, and strode lazily into the center of the room.

I looked back to the pegasus stallion, still holding his tray. "Bastion told us to fall back here."

Which reminded me of his request. I lifted my PipBuck. "Bastion, this is Whisper. We're in sickbay."

"Copy," he said. "Hold tight. All forces! Final positions are C.I.C., sickbay, and corridors between on decks two and three. Peel back now. Two, how strong are you?"

“We’re all up. Six strong.”

“Good. Once we’ve consolidated, you’ll be lifting the wounded out.”

My ears flicked back. The implication was clear: we were going to lose.

The pegasus mare had emerged from behind her bed. Her wing was wrapped in bandages. “We need to get into the fight!”

I looked up from my PipBuck. “Do you have any weapons?”

“No, but the armory is nearby.”

I looked back to my map. “Is that the room one deck down and about three rooms forward?”

“Yeah.” She had started to trot forward, but halted; I wasn’t exactly blocking the way, but she’d have to get close to slip by, and seemed reluctant to do so.

“That location has already been overrun,” I said. Or at least, it was right on the front-line and about to be abandoned, but the fine details didn’t matter right then. “Everyone is falling back here.”

I saw her eyes widen a hair, recognizing the meaning of what I said. She immediately shook it off. “Fuck that. I’m taking this armor, then.”

“That is not yours!” Echo snapped, eyes narrowing. Then, more reasonably, “And besides, it is not yet fully functional.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake!” the mare snapped.

A soft thump almost escaped my attention, only to be followed by an urgent broadcast from Hail Burst. “Breach! Port-side access! We have more intruders!”

I looked at my map. If I was reading it right, the port-side access was right alongside us, one deck down. Between the relocation and local conversations, I’d missed any communications planning that move.

The pegasus stallion had finally set down the tray and flew over to us. “Look, we’re not staying here—”

I held up a hoof, cutting him off, then moving the hoof to my ear to signal the reason for my action: there were more radio calls. “Intruders, port-side corridor, deck three! Three is cut off!”

“Two is in contact. We’re pinned down!”

“There’s a fuckton of bugs on the port side. C.I.C., they’re moving your way!”

“Five, I need you at the C.I.C. as quick as you can. One, support Two.

I need you breaking through to the sickbay and extracting the wounded.

A burst of weapon fire made everyone in the room flinch. It wasn't outside, but it was close.

Echo raised her head, declaring, "It is time to leave."

"One second," I said, and hit the transmit button again. "Bastion, this is Whisper. Echo can teleport the wounded out."

"Do it," Bastion replied. "Evac everyone in the compartment. Call when clear. We'll keep the bugs off of you."

I gave a quick look around the room, making a count. Two conscious and mobile. Five in varying degrees of consciousness but not mobile. Seven unconscious, likely sedated. I turned to Echo. "Okay, I need you to start teleporting these ponies out. Get them to safety. Bloodbeak and I will keep guard here until the last 'port out."

"No," she said, head held high and expression firm. "You will leave now. Staying is—"

"We don't have time to argue this," I said, and pointed a hoof at the nearest bed-bound pony. "Dusty isn't here, so I'm taking charge. Get them out." With that, I turned, trotting over to Bloodbeak at the nurse's station.

Behind me, I heard an aggravated growl from Echo, followed by a pop and flash of purple. Taking cover behind the desk and readying my rifle, I saw she had taken the two mobile pegasi and two of the bed-bound ponies. Four trips, then.

"Well," Bloodbeak said as I crouched beside her, giving a lopsided and insincere grin. "This is fun."

Several more burst of magical weapon fire echoed through the ship, followed by a pair of explosions that made the lights flicker.

I had my sights lined up on the door. "You know these rifles aren't going to do anything against power armor."

Her grin slipped away. "Ah. Yeah. That's a little less fun."

Hostile marks were moving all around, too many to localize. Rapid radio calls came on both sides of the fight. The Loyalist "Two" unit was heavily engaged and taking casualties. A Serenity squad leader reported that they were assaulting the C.I.C.

A purple flash announced Echo's return. Thirty, maybe forty seconds had passed. Four of the beds glowed purple, floating up from the deck to

surround her, and with another flash, they were gone.

Bloodbeak glanced my way. "Don't suppose you have anything harder-hitting tucked away in those bags? Like a missile launcher or something?"

My mind immediately flashed to the explosive charge. I'd have to dig it out, wire a blasting cap, set it, set the detonator, get it outside the room... "Nothing I could use in time. We'll be gone in a minute."

Hail Burst's voice sounded in my ear. "C.I.C. is lost. Five, we're coming to you by that starboard stairwell, thirty seconds."

"Understood. We're in heavy contact. Will try to hold for you."

A series of hostile-contact markers abruptly swung by on our left. Some Serenity soldiers had passed by, probably just below us, or maybe in the corridor just outside. More were following after them. The sound of combat hammered through the walls in all directions.

Another flash and pop. Echo snatched up four more beds. Then she was gone again.

The cluster of moving marks I had noted didn't move past us. They came to a stop, just a few degrees left of the door. I snugged the stock of the rifle against my shoulder, eying down the sights as best I could. My voice came out in a quiet, low growl. "I think they're just outside the—"

The sharp, rapid blasts cut me off, bits of molten metal flying from the joints of the door in flashes of orange and pink. I flinched back, then steeled myself. Adrenaline burned in my veins. The shooting stopped. There was a metal-on-metal crash, the door flying across the room with a power-armored buck. I focused down my sights, ready to engage S.A.T.S. at the first hint of movement. I couldn't penetrate power armor; I just needed to delay them for a few seconds.

Movement. I hit S.A.T.S. The world seemed to sharpen as I followed the motion. The sights aligned with smooth ease. Rear aperture. Front post. Grenade.

My heart lurched. I lunged to the side, hooking a foreleg around Blood-beak and bearing her down to the ground. We collapsed in a heap behind the desk, my head buried against the floof of her neck, a foreleg shielding my head and other ear.

I heard the muffled clatter of the grenade, the crash of something falling over, and then the hammer came crashing down on us. I reeled, gasping to

regain my breath as I rolled off of Bloodbeak. Hostile marks were already in the room. At least three or four of them. S.A.T.S. was down. The air was thick with haze, dim from the blown-out lights. I could barely hear the stomp of metal hooves and the crash of a medical cart being knocked over past the pounding in my head.

Bloodbeak rolled her head—maybe moaned something, I couldn't tell—and I quickly placed a hoof on her beak. I pushed against the nearby wall with a hindhoof to push me more tightly against the desk, hiding us as best I could.

I turned my head again, trying to pick out the contacts that were in the room from those further away. Most moved quickly through the ward. More equipment was knocked aside, clattering loudly, and hopefully hiding my rapid breathing.

One had not continued on. That contact moved slowly. I heard the armored hoof-steps, drawing closer to the desk. I brought my rifle up, close to my chest and aimed at the corner of the desk, then dug in my pack for a grenade; I didn't know if it would kill someone in pegasus power armor, but it might delay them for a few vital seconds.

*How much longer?*

The mark continued to move. I aimed my rifle at about face-height. Maybe their muzzle wasn't covered. Maybe the eye lenses were weak points. I had to hope.

I found the grenade and pulled it free. A twist of magic pulled the pin, and I flung it over the desk, hoping I wasn't about to kill any ponies who might have survived the first grenade.

The response was a startled gasp of breath, followed by a loud shout. "Grenade!" Armored hooves clattered and banged, and the hammering blast of the grenade bucked me in the chest. As the world settled again, I grabbed for the next grenade. I'd just gotten ahold of it when the space lit up in eye-searing red and pinks, bolts of magical weapon fire peppering the wall behind me. Several parts of the desk flared brightly, some disintegrating.

Behind the red and pink, I must have missed the flash of purple before the room exploded. Blinding light strobed through the room as a deafening, crackling boom shook the air, and over it all, Echo's voice boomed out, clear and terrifying: "**Begone!**"

Then the world plunged into darkness. The thundering sound cutting off, only a rattling echo and a numbness in my ears. All the lights had blown out. I pushed myself up, blinking at the ghostly images burned into my eyes, and peeked out over the desk.

The room was destroyed. Bedding was charred and burning. Walls were scorched. A nearby medical cart looked partially melted. The husks of four power-armor-clad changelings smoked and smoldered. The shadows thankfully hid the more grisly details of the changelings' demise. The air reeked.

In the middle of that destruction stood Echo, her horn still illuminated, eyes glowing pure white, mane and tail flared with power. Her head turned, fixing me with her pupil-less stare. **"We. Are. Leaving."**

With a flicker of purple magic, our suit of power armor and the last two cots floated into the air, the only two objects apparently untouched by whatever terrible magic she had unleashed. I grabbed for Bloodbeak, but Echo's magic grabbed us instead, lifting us unceremoniously into the air.

The world twisted around us.

My hooves hit dirt. I staggered, gasping, and tumbled onto my side. It took a second to reorient. Dirt. I was on the ground. The flickering orange light to one side was a campfire. I was beside a large tent. We were in the camp. As I blinked away more of the after-images in my eyes, I saw ponies moving around us. It took a moment to recognize the Mareford Militia bardings and the medical symbols on the armors' flanks. The medics were moving around the beds arrayed haphazardly outside the tent, many of which I recognized as coming from the *Cumulonimbus*.

Bloodbeak was sitting at my side, blinking and shaking her head. "Oof. Wow that was weird."

I pushed myself up to sit. To my side, a pair of medical ponies hurried to the cots floating to the ground. The closest had several growing bloodstains, its occupant still. Ragged cuts had torn up his side, and the medic shouted for assistance. I wavered, wondering if I had done that to him, until the flicker of light above drew my attention upwards.

I could barely see the *Cumulonimbus* above, a faint silhouette highlighted by the flickering lighting in its supporting clouds. Lines of light flashed, piercing the sky; the Gemstone ponies were going to work, trying

to pick off Serenity's soldiers. Even their magical lasers were having a hard time finding targets in the dark at such a range.

Numbly, I turned to my broadcaster. "Bastion? It's Whisper. The sickbay is empty and we're all off the ship."

"Understood," Bastion replied. "Thank you. All aft units, peel back to deck one and join with us, we'll be breaking out there."

My head was slowly clearing up after the battery of explosions. I still felt off-balance.

Hail Burst spoke on the radio. "All forces, lift all fire around the '*Nimbus*. We're breaking out now. We'll be coming in fast on the main camp."

As Dusty passed on instructions, I pushed myself up to my hooves. I wavered, my sense of balance swinging around for a moment before stabilizing. I looked to Echo, who stood imperiously, unfazed. "...We should get to Dusty."

She simply nodded, and I turned to start walking, with Echo following close on my flanks. Bloodbeak scrambled to her feet to follow, calling out, "Wait for me!"

I wound my way through the maze of tents. I would have flown, but I didn't want to make myself that much of a target. A few ponies started when they saw me, but most paid me nothing more than a passing glance.

The whole time, the radios continued to sound in both ears. A Serenity platoon commander was giving a situation report to her commander. "We're secure here, but they smashed all the controls. We have no control over the ship. We have no steering control, no throttle control, no weapons control. It looks like hasty sabotage. Should be quick for the engineers to fix."

I glanced up. The *Cumulonimbus* was still hard to make out, though it looked to be flying out over our front line. A storm of magical weapon fire filled the sky near its bow as Loyalists and Serenity soldiers exchanged fire. I turned back to look where I was going. There was nothing I could do about that fight at the moment.

In the other ear, some Loyalist soldier called out on the internal defense net, "Last mare!"

Hail Burst replied. "Hit it."

Seconds later, the sky lit up. I looked up again to see the massive fireball lighting up the underside of the clouds, enveloping the Raptor. The

lightning-laced clouds were ripped away with a final, dying flash. Shadows flickered in the sky, massive fragments of the ship carried away by the tremendous blast. The fireball rapidly burned out, leaving a cloud of smoke trailing behind the now-ballistic vessel. The guttering light revealed the massive rent torn through the side and belly of the craft.

Hail Burst had just hit Serenity with its own trick, and by the looks of it, to devastating effect.

Bloodbeak shouted something in surprise, and I could hear similar yells from around the camp. The rolling thunder of the explosion washed out those sounds for a moment, quickly fading into echos. Starlight's voice cut through all of it, loud in my earbud. "Whisper!"

I quickly switched back to the private channel and replied, "I'm here. We're all safe and on the ground." My message delivered, I accelerated to a trot, while casting quick glances at the falling cloudship. With the fireball burnt out, it was visible only by the wisps of flame in the torn-open sections. I could barely make it out as the *Cumulonimbus* fell toward the valley to our west, slowly tumbling, before disappearing below the horizon of the nearby tents. The deep sound of its impact reached us seconds later.

It was the second time the great cloudship had fallen from the sky, and I had a feeling it would be the last.

The radio traffic had gone into overdrive. Serenity was a chaotic mess of voices, coming too quick and loud to pick out individual conversations, and I was too busy running to pull out the PipBuck and switch to individual channels. Dusty was calling for status updates. It was Two Bits who gave the first clear information.

"Command, Ranger Lead. The *Cumulonimbus* came down roughly two hundred yards out from the west-most defensive line, on the southern slope of the valley. The local hostiles have broken off. I'm going to push some forces forward to secure the crash site. Should give us a better defensive strongpoint."

"If you can take it safely, do so," Dusty replied. "Hail Burst? What's your status?"

There was a pause. A moment of acidic tension before her voice came across the radio. "Unclear. We're falling back to the main camp to regroup and assess."

"Understood," Dusty was saying as I rounded a corner, spotting the silhouette of our motorwagon some fifty feet away. Seconds later, I slowed and trotted into the headquarters. Dusty was lit by the dim screen of his PipBuck and the weak lantern hanging over the table. A few other Mareford ponies were gathered around him. He looked up from the map, a flash of recognition and relief crossing his face before turning back to his work. "Air, call when your last pony is on the ground."

Starlight scrambled up from her seat. "Whisper! Holy crap I'm glad you got out of there!"

Echo stepped past me. "It is as I said. I will not permit any harm to befall her."

"Yeah, uh-huh," Starlight said, trotting up to me. "But you're okay, right?"

"I'm okay," I said, flashing a smile.

"It was pretty awesome," Bloodbeak said with a grin. "Scary, but awesome. Echo fried a squad of power-armors!"

Dusty glanced up from the map. "Glad you're all okay, but we've got a battle going on. If you're not HQ, I need you out of here. Sorry, Bloodbeak."

"Nah, no problem!" She said with a chuckle. "I'll go keep watch or something." She gave a playful salute before turning, trotting off.

Once she'd left the loose circle of the headquarters, Dusty looked to me again. "Any new info for me?"

"Not yet," I said, setting out my PipBucks and scanning through Serenity's channels. "I'll let you know if I get something."

"Good," he said, then raised a hoof to tap at his ear, maintaining eye contact. I assumed he meant to use the radio. I nodded, and he returned to his map.

Starlight sat beside me, fidgeting. I think she was trying not to pry, not when we were still dealing with a battle out there. I reached out to rest a wing across her back. I'll admit, a nice, heavy pegasus wing is much better at that than a thin changeling wing, but from the smile she flashed, she still appreciated the gesture. "So, what happened up there?"

"We were boarded," I said, reply coming slow and careful as I tried to focus on the radio traffic. Trying to follow multiple conversations at the same

time is a difficult task, even for one trained in social surveillance. “About a company of Serenity soldiers attacked. They got in close without being seen. It was a mess.”

Most of the traffic at the moment was in regards to the advance on the wreck of the *Cumulonimbus*. On the command net, Hail Burst finally reported in. “Command, Loyal. All Enclave forces are on the ground.”

“Copy that,” Dusty replied. “Gemstone, Command. Air is clear of friendly forces. You are free to fire on anything in the air. Flare going up momentarily.” He turned, gesturing with a hoof to one of the nearby Militia ponies, who immediately trotted to the edge of the shelter, floating out a stubby grenade launcher and loading a round. He fired it into the air with a deceptively soft retort for such a large round, and a second or two later, the area lit up in a soft white light.

A flurry of snaps and flashes followed as Gemstone ponies opened up on newly illuminated targets. I had to assume it was going well by the sound of things, as I couldn’t see it myself. I remained under the shelter; my radios were a more important focus for my attention.

Mareford and Trotsen ponies were radioing reports as they advanced along the southern ridge of the valley. A Serenity commander reported the advance, and was told to withdraw and yield the position. No crisis yet. Then the request went out, again, for company Alpha’s status, and this time, there was a reply.

I listened carefully before raising my own PipBuck, still on our private channel. I started the transmission, murmuring quietly so that nobody else could hear. “Serenity forces just reported their Alpha company as combat ineffective. Most were on the *Cumulonimbus* when it blew. No casualty counts, but they have a new acting commander, and she said Alpha effectively no longer exists.”

Across the shelter, I saw Dusty’s mouth tighten into a faint, grim, smile, and he gave a little nod, all the acknowledgement he could give with other ponies around him.

“That’s good, right?” Starlight asked.

I nodded. “It means we took a good chunk out of them. Now it’s just a question of how big a chunk they took out of us.”

Fortunately, I could see a group of Loyalists coming our way, as if to

answer that question. Unfortunately, my E.F.S. showed they were not all friendly.

I turned to my PipBuck again, murmuring into the radio. “I’ve got a hostile contact in that group. The pony to the left of Hail Burst. Our left.”

Dusty’s head snapped up, eying the approaching pegasi. Echo had turned to face them as well, eyes narrow and head back, as if she could stop hostile intentions through the strength of her condescending glare.

When that failed to work—the pony in question walked right past Hail Burst towards me—she took a more direct approach. Without warning, the offending pony was jerked off his hooves in a glow of purple magic, the barrels of his weapons pointed straight upwards.

Shouting filled the headquarters for a moment, until Echo’s powerful voice cut through the shouts of surprise. “This pony has hostile intent toward Whisper, and I will not allow him to bring harm to her!”

The pony in question kicked out and flapped his wings, trying to pull free of the magic. “I’ll show you hostile intent!” he shouted. “That traitorous bitch let them in!”

The shouting was much more focused as Hail Burst’s head snapped around to him. “What?”

“That is a lie!” Echo boomed. “She was in my presence the entire time, and had no part in this attack!”

“The fuck she didn’t!” He twisted, but despite his efforts, the barrels of his armor-mounted weapons didn’t budge; there was no way he was going to win that fight against Echo’s magic. “We were doing just fine, but the moment she shows up, suddenly hundreds of those fucking bugs show up out of nowhere! She fucked us!”

Hail Burst grimaced as she stepped in front of him. “Enough. Let him down.” She waited until Echo—frowning and reluctant—did so, before speaking again with a voice of firm authority. “Crimson, I know we just got screwed pretty hard, but she wasn’t in any position to aid our enemy. Celestia knows I’d love nothing more than to kick the flank of the one responsible for it, but lashing out at our allies isn’t going to help.”

“Fuck them!” he shouted in her face. “We shouldn’t even be here! We’ve got our own war to fight, instead of mucking around in the mud!”

“This *is* our war!” Hail Burst snapped back, jaw tight. She wasn’t

shouting furiously like him, but there was definitely some heat behind her words. “We’re fighting for what the Enclave stands for, and that means we’re not turning our backs on ponies again. This isn’t a debate. Return to the rally point and wait there with the others.”

“And fuck you,” he said, baring his teeth in a snarl. “I’m done with this shit. I’m going topside and finding some commander who’s still fighting our *real* enemy.”

She stared at him, eyes hidden behind those amber lenses. When she replied, her voice was icy. “Your input is noted. You’ve been given a lawful order by your superior officer, and I expect you to follow it.”

He opened his mouth, building up to shout back at her, but checked himself at the last moment. His wings lowered to his side. “Fine,” he said, practically spitting the word at her, then turned and walked off, muttering under his breath.

She waited until he’d disappeared behind another tent, and gave a tired sigh.

Dusty had stepped over from his map. “Is this going to be a problem?”

“No problem,” Hail Burst said, turning back to him. “Crimson just runs a bit hot at times. He’ll cool down. What’s our situation?”

“Serenity forces harassing the lines to the west through south, with scouts elsewhere. They’re falling back in the west, but I think they’re trying to make us pull forces off other positions. Now we’re without our eyes in the sky, so we’ve got a pretty poor picture of things. The whirligigs are grounded. Too vulnerable. How’s your force doing? What’s your strength?”

“Pretty shit,” she said with a bitter snort. “About twenty five combat-capable. Some of the wounded will be back in the fight once they’ve gotten some care, but that’ll only bring us up to thirty, maybe a bit more.”

“Damn,” Dusty muttered, then shook his head. “If you’ve got a couple scouts you could spare, I’d appreciate some recon near our lines, but don’t risk your ponies. The rest I’d like to keep here in case we need to defend from an air attack. Get some rest and recover.”

She nodded. “I can do that. I’ve still got the two scout teams out past our lines, looking for that megaspell.”

“Sounds good,” Dusty replied, hesitated, then added, “I’m sorry for how this went.”

"Not your fault," Hail Burst said with a dismissive wave of her hoof. "We knew the damn bugs would come back for the '*Nimbus*. I just wish I knew how many we took down with it."

I looked up. "I might be able to help with that."

Everyone's attention turned to me, and Starlight sat a little more upright, tense under my wing. I drew it back to lie beside the other before continuing. "Between friendly radio traffic and E.F.S. contacts, I'd estimate about one hundred to one hundred twenty hostile soldiers boarded the *Cumulonimbus*. I also have excellent low-light vision, and a good view of the ship when it went down. I didn't see many of Serenity's soldiers get away, unless they disguised as friendly pegasi. You likely took out about a hundred of their soldiers."

She frowned in thought for a moment before giving me a simple nod.

"That was quite an explosion," Dusty noted.

"They may have rebuilt her," Hail Burst said, a hint of a proud smile touching her lips, "but we lived her for years. They brought the fight to our turf. All we had to do was hold them off long enough to sabotage flight controls and set charges in the bomb-chariot magazine. The bombs might be impact resistant, but that's nothing a few demo packs couldn't solve."

"Well it certainly worked," Dusty said. "Sorry about your ship, but I'm glad you took some of them down with it."

"Thanks."

A thought occurred to me. "Did Soaring Heart make it? I didn't see him in the sick bay."

"He did. He was forward, helping with the combat wounded. Bastion said he was going to go back to help evac the wounded until he heard you got them out. Thanks for that, by the way. I'm not sure if we could have fought our way out if we had to move them, too. It was a close thing as it was."

I nodded. "I'm just glad it turned out well. Relatively speaking, anyway."

"Though it reminds me," she said, looking back to Dusty. "Sorry to say, but none of the Militia soldiers made it. They got overrun by power armor. By the time we pushed back out, there was nothing but ash."

Dusty grimaced, then quickly shook it off. "Understood."

There was a pause as another radio report came in. "Command, Ranger Lead. Lead elements are at the crash site. Hostiles have broken contact and

fallen back west. Securing the site now.”

Dusty raised his PipBuck. “Command copies.” Then he looked back to Hail Burst. “I’d like to try salvaging any functioning weapons, if you don’t object. The Gemstone ponies have been doing good work holding off Serenity in the air, and I’d like to supplement that as much as possible.”

Starlight’s ears perked up at the mention of salvage, which prompted me to start thinking on the subject.

Hail Burst thought a moment, then nodded. “I’ll send a couple of technicians to direct salvage, if the Militia can provide some spare hooves for the work.”

“We can do that.”

“Good. Though, I hate to say it, I’ll have to insist that all salvaged Enclave technology will be returned to us once this campaign is over.”

“Of course,” Dusty said with a nod.

“If I could make a request?” I said, drawing their attention once again. “I know you pegasi have a lot of technology that can float. Do you think there might be anything salvageable that could lift an antenna and cable up a hundred feet or so?”

“We have a lot of cloud tech,” Hail Burst said, her head tilting slightly in a way that suggested a suspicious expression behind those amber lenses. “Why?”

“Because I’ve had a hard time listening in on outlying units here on the ground. It’s why I went up to the *Cumulonimbus*. Once we’re moving, terrain is going to be more of a problem, and communications will be even more important. I figure it’ll make sure Dusty can communicate with everyone regardless of circumstances.”

Dusty cocked his head slightly, looking almost as if he was going to object for a moment. “...Well, it’ll certainly be better than relaying from unit to unit.”

Hail Burst shrugged. “Sure, whatever. If we’ve got the time, we’ll see what we can get, but the weapons come first.”

Starlight hopped to her hooves, grinning. “Nah, don’t worry about it. I’ll get it! Salvage is my thing. Well, that and being an awesome shot, but mostly salvage!”

Hail Burst hesitated, head slightly askew. “You’re a unicorn. You can’t

do anything with cloud tech.”

“Oh,” Starlight said, her ears flicking back. “Right.”

I nudged her gently in the side. “You could ask Bloodbeak to help you. I think she’d like having something to do.” I glanced to Hail Burst. “If that’s okay with you?”

Her head rocked a little, as if she were rolling her eyes behind those lenses. “Fine by me. I’d say ‘don’t break anything’, but...”

Starlight laughed and gave me a quick hug before dashing off out of the headquarters. Hail Burst excused herself as well, returning to her own troops. Dusty and I returned our focus to the continuing skirmish, interrupted only by Starlight and Bloodbeak running past, clambering into our motorwagon, and riding off with the trailing sound of eager laughter.

There was little in the way of fighting, it seemed. Serenity had fallen back from the west, while the company to the south was engaging in light, harassing fire. Only the occasional probing force was sent in at the other directions, advancing only far enough to find pony forces, exchange a few ineffective shots, and fall back. I quietly passed on the details to Dusty.

In turn, he issued the orders to start resting in shifts. Sentries and lookouts would hold the line, swapping out regularly, so everyone could get some sleep.

“They’re probably trying to keep us up,” he said to those of us in the headquarters. “Tire us out so we can’t march far tomorrow.” It seemed reasonable to me.

Then I caught a Serenity transmission that made my blood run cold. “Command, Mantis One. Eyes on new hostile vic near the crash site. Looks to be the command wagon. Requesting permission to engage.”

“Wait one, Mantis.”

I was already lifting my own PipBuck, checking that I was on the private channel before whispering into the broadcaster. “Starlight! Some Serenity soldier has the wagon in his sights. Get to cover!”

There was a long pause with no sound but my heartbeat before Starlight’s voice came across the radio. “We’re inside the *Nimbus*. They’re not going to shoot my wagon, are they?”

“I don’t know. Just stay safe in there, and keep an eye out.”

“I’ve got E.F.S.,” she noted. “Not a single hostile around.”

“Okay... okay, good. Just be careful.”

“You know it.”

I gave a soft sigh of relief, and waited. It was half a minute before Serenity’s commander spoke again.

“Mantis One, Command. Hold fire. The enemy command element is still in the main camp.”

“Mantis One copies, holding fire.”

I slowly relaxed, settling back into the routine of listening to broadcasts, and trying to push away that sense of danger. I disliked the amount of intel they had on our position, but it was hardly surprising, and more importantly, there was nothing I could do about it at the moment.

Minute by minute ticked by, while the probing of our lines continued. Ten minutes after my little scare, Serenity command ordered a platoon to make a probing air attack from the northwest, with the intent of slipping by to hit the main camp. I quietly passed on word to Dusty. He, in turn, was ready to react the moment a Loyalist scout reported possible enemy forces, and seconds later he had sent another flare up.

The Gemstone ponies opened fire again, and this time I leaned out from under the shelter, watching the flickering lines and soaring bolts of magic fill the air. The distant Serenity formation, nicely visible in the flare light, scattered and reversed course. On the radio, a changeling commander was calmly calling to fall back.

The flight returned some time later, probing a different part of our defenses, and then another. Each time, our response was the same, and each time, they fell back. Half an hour later, Serenity’s commander called them off.

Then she called a unit I had heard nothing from that night.

“Package Brachinus, Command. Enemy air defenses are degraded but too effective for strike. Stand down for the night. Expect updates when enemy forces start moving.”

The reply was almost buried under audio artifacts brought on by distance. “Brachinus copies, Command.”

What was this? The only other “package” they had mentioned had been the negotiator. That was something special, something outside the usual military action. Perhaps this package was, too?

First Braconid, then Brachinus. Were they related? Did they only sound similar? They both sounded vaguely scientific, though I had no idea what, specifically, they might refer to. Maybe if I had a good dictionary. There was a vague possibility someone in the army might know what they meant. More likely, the only ones to know would be Serenity spies, who would probably be very curious why I'm asking about their special units' names. That ruled that option out.

Negotiators came under a flag of truce to talk, not sneaking in past air defense. Possibly this was another infiltrator?

No. They probably had spies already, and sneaking more in wouldn't require such a massive military distraction.

This was something that needed surprise. Something that needed safe skies over the heart of our camp. Something that they were unwilling to take any chances on.

I couldn't be certain of what they were planning, but I could make a good guess.

I raised my PipBuck, murmuring quietly into the broadcaster. "Dusty? I think they just called off an attempt to drop their megaspell on us."

He glanced up from the map, meeting my eyes. I could see my own concern mirrored in his expression. I keyed in again, passing on what information I had. It wasn't much.

The battle, such as it was, continued, but it had fallen into a routine. Dusty retired for the night, leaving one of the Mareford aides to listen to the radio and wake him if needed.

With ever-growing fatigue from lack of sleep, I finally turned in, as well.

Sleep came fitfully, my ear filled with the sporadic calls on the Serenity radio.

## Chapter Forty-Four

# Push

If there's one thing I admire the most about ponies, it's the optimism.

I know, it's not a universal trait. Back during the war, faced with the seemingly unending news of violence, death, and destruction on a grand scale, there were many who fell into a more cynical mentality. The hardships of the Wasteland kept that way of thinking alive. It wasn't surprising that many, faced with such insurmountable and existential vileness, might lose hope of seeing better days. It's a cloud that's hung over the world for more than two centuries now.

But even in the face of seemingly unending suffering, that optimism was still there. I had seen it in the ponies I lived with in Appleloosa, who frowned and worried about the news, but still treated each other warmly. I saw it in the ponies of Gemstone, who embraced Kindness and Generosity as the solution for the world we found ourselves in. I even saw it in Bastion, laughing along with the Mareford ponies who walked beside him, despite the pronounced limp as he kept his weight off his heavily bandaged leg.

Changelings have a long history of living in relatively harsh conditions, maneuvering in the shadows and hiding from other species that we depended on for food. That kind of history bred a certain amount of stoicism in our cultural learning. We endured. That's particularly true of my peer group, those with the skill and mental fortitude to become Infiltrators. Those who were expected to go into hostile territory with calmness, determination, and an unburdened mind, capable of playing a role without personal fears betraying us.

But even among those of us who held to great ideals, who looked ahead to a better future, there was much to admire in the optimism of ponies, even as the weight of the war slowly buried it. I think, of all the things my hive learned from our infiltration of Equestria, all the espionage and subterfuge, that was possibly the most important. In the aftermath of the sundering of the hive, it was the ideal that our hive had embraced. The ideal that would lead us to a better future. The ideal that we were working not just to survive, but to become something better.

We, this gathered army, had taken a pounding. The night had been long, full of sporadic gunfire and harassing raids. More wounded filled the medical tents, and new graves had been dug. Even the *Cumulonimbus*, previously an awe-inspiring symbol of the army's gathered might, lay in ruins, a crumpled tomb to more than a hundred changelings and ponies. All of that weighed on the army.

In the dim pre-dawn twilight, the atmosphere in the camp was far from joyful, but these ponies held strong. While the dead were missed, there was an air of satisfaction that, after Serenity's nighttime assault, they still stood strong. They had held their own, and emerged from the darkness victorious. The destruction of the mighty *Cumulonimbus* wasn't a crushing loss of their greatest weapon, but a tale of a few dozen ponies holding out against hundreds, and when all seemed lost, turning Serenity's own trap on them. Soldiers worried about what the following days would bring, but when one pony smiled at some small pleasantry, I saw that bit of brightness reflected in the faces around them.

All around, the camp was coming to life, packing and preparing for the day. We planned to set out in less than an hour. Most of us in the headquarters were getting a quick breakfast of canned goods—seasoned corn that had lost most of its flavor, in my case—and reviewing our plans. The radios were pleasantly quiet in my ear.

Bastion looked away from the ponies who walked alongside him to see me, and he smiled. He was quite athletic and handsome, for a pony, with a white coat and close-cropped blue-and-silver mane. It was a look that seemed so stereotypically military, but there was a genuine warmth to that smile. As he drew closer, he addressed me with a nod. "Your Highness."

I gave a single soft chuckle, deciding not to interrupt the niceties by insisting on a less formal title. Not unless it started catching on. "Sergeant Bastion," I said, dipping my jagged horn in greeting. "It's good to see you. I'd been hoping to catch up with you after breakfast." I floated up the can before setting it down again. "When I heard you were injured, I had feared the worst."

"What, this?" he said, raising his bandaged leg. "It's nothing. I've burnt myself worse trying to cook. No, my armor took the brunt of the damage."

"Better it than you," I said. "Still, I'm glad to see you're up and active."

I wanted to thank you for everything you did last night. We were badly outnumbered, but your leadership saw us through. You likely saved my life, and many others." I bowed my head a little. It seemed like the queenly thing to do.

"Oh, I was just doing my job," he said with a dismissive wave of his hoof. "I just told ponies where to go. It's the ponies who held the line who deserve the credit. Actually, I came here to thank you." He glanced past me, to where Echo stood, my ever-vigilant bodyguard. "When you two evacuated the wounded, you might have saved our flanks. If we had tried to fight past that third force to evacuate them ourselves, I don't think any of us would have gotten out of there. You might have saved a lot of ponies last night."

He finished by extending his good hoof, and I smiled more as I shook it. He then turned to Echo with the same gesture. She hesitated, uncertain, before accepting and shaking it as well.

"I hope you're well enough to travel?" I asked, hoping it didn't seem insensitive, but he waved it off.

"A singed leg isn't going to keep me from flying," he said with a smile. "I take it we're moving out soon? I haven't caught up with Hail Burst yet."

That was more of a military matter, and Dusty answered it. "We are. We've got a good ways to go before we get to Serenity, and I'd rather not give them any more time than necessary."

"I hear that," Bastion said with a nod. "Better get as much progress as possible before the rain hits."

Dusty's ears perked up. "Rain?"

"Yeah," Bastion said, his head inclining a bit. "You saw the way the clouds out west are churning, right?"

Dusty glanced that way, as did I. To my eyes, there wasn't anything unusual.

"I guess I don't know clouds as well as you," Dusty said. "How long do we have?"

"With that much density and current? Two, maybe three days. Going to be bad, too. Those clouds are completely unregulated. With a heavy load, it'll probably be a full, uncontrolled release. One or two days of heavy rain and near-blackout conditions."

I frowned, thinking back to my first days in the Wasteland.

Dusty was looking over his map. "That's a little tighter than I was hoping for. We might make Serenity in two days, if we don't get bogged down. It'll be a hard push, but doable."

"Great," Starlight said around a mouthful of half-chewed carrots. "So it's a race."

"We wanted to get this done as quick as possible," Dusty said, turning back to his own food. "This just gives us a time-table. Heck, the weather might even give us an advantage. How well can they fly in rain like that?"

Bastion gave a dry chuckle. "If they're anything like pegasi? They'll be grounded. Even the Wonderbolts wouldn't want to fly in that kind of weather. That's a good way to get killed."

"Well, we'd have that, at least," Dusty noted, then shook his head. "But we'll aim for getting to Serenity before the rain. The army won't be able to march in weather like that. Not safely. If we can force them back to the Stable, the rain won't matter."

"Sounds good to me," Bastion said with a smile. "Anyway, I need to go check in with Hail Burst. I expect we're going to have a busy couple of days."

That earned a wry smile from Dusty. "I don't doubt it."



An hour later, the army was moving.

"We'll be heading north to here," Dusty said, showing me the location on his PipBuck's map. "Serenity likely put most of their defensive plans on our west side, so I'm hoping we'll run into less resistance that way."

"There's some discussion about that on Serenity's net," I said with a nod. "Sounds like they're working out a new plan, but they have nothing concrete yet."

"Good. Let me know if you get any details. We'll only be going a couple miles before turning west. The hills restrict our movements a bit, but the main obstacle is probably going to be the Rotwater. The old river cut a deep ravine, steep enough to be a problem for ponies on the hoof, much less wagons. There's a pre-war rail bridge near where we'll meet it, but Serenity will probably blow it to stop us, so we need to find a place where the banks are shallow enough for motorwagons. The only places indicated on the maps are here..." He indicated a position, then scrolled over to indicate

another. "...and here. Serenity will probably try to take advantage of that. Anything you hear about those locations could be critical."

I nodded again.

"And of course, any word about their megaspell would be good," he said with a shrug, and sat back in his seat. We were still parked, while the core of the army marched. I could just hear the distant sound of scattered shots to our west. Almost a mile away, some hundred-plus ponies were engaging Serenity forces in a small-scale skirmish that Dusty hoped would keep the enemy defenses pinned down and unable to move against the maneuvering army. "Is everything set up back there? We need to get going soon."

"I'll go check," I said.

While Dusty took the opportunity to pull out a cigarette, I turned back to my radio equipment, which had been nicely expanded. Starlight hadn't stopped at merely acquiring some cloud tech and cables. She'd brought back about two hundred pounds of electronics, much of it radio equipment, which was currently strapped down just behind my seat. I had to wonder if the Loyalists had actually approved of all the sensitive equipment she had taken.

I climbed out over the back of my seat, a task made more difficult by just how heavily loaded we were. It wasn't just the new electronics, of course. Sickle was kicked back atop a makeshift bed of ammo canisters and cases, taking up most of the space on her own. Then there were the two power armors wedged in alongside her, with Echo perched protectively above them. There wasn't a single inch of floor to be seen beneath the gathered equipment. Even Bloodbeak was there, though she made room for me by climbing onto the roof of the wagon, sitting back against the heavy machine gun.

A quick beat of my wings lifted me over the various obstacles, and I alighted on the rear wall of the cargo bed to look down on Starlight and her project. My hooves had just touched down when the mare helping her called out. "Eyes!"

I turned my head, bringing up a hoof to shield my eyes. A second later a searing-bright and flickering light illuminated everything around me, accompanied by the crackling sound of the welder. It lasted for only a couple of seconds before everything dimmed again, but I kept my hoof in

place until the voice spoke again. "All clear."

I lowered my hoof, looking on the small project. Starlight had snagged an entire antenna array, bristling with a dozen antennas of different sizes, and now mated to a pair of cloud-based cargo jacks and tethered by a lengthy cable. That wasn't all she had brought back for this project, though. She'd also brought the red mare, who currently had her goggles raised to inspect the weld, the welding torch still clutched in her teeth.

Singe looked much better than the last time I had seen her. The ash and dirt had been cleaned from her coat, and while she still showed some signs of her injured ribs in her movements, she seemed otherwise in good health.

She gave a firm tug on the cargo jack before setting down the welding torch and looking up, only to visibly flinch the instant she saw me. I was still in my natural form, to better fit in the wagon, not that I'm sure any of my standard disguises would be any more comforting. Still, she immediately returned to business, as if pretending the reaction hadn't taken place. "The welds are all good. If the cable's secure, it's all set to go up."

"It's on there good," Starlight said, reaching over to pat the again-repurposed towing rig she had welded on so many days ago. Several bolts now held the end of the long cable secure. "I even doubled-up on the connectors to make sure it won't pull free. We probably won't want to go crazy while we're dragging this thing, but it'll hold up to regular use."

"Good," Singe said with a nod, then looked up to me again. Her shoulders tensed, as if wanting to pull away, but she forced herself to face me, unflinching. "Then all that's left is to wire things in on your end."

I nodded and smiled, trying to open my mouth only the minimum required to talk without flashing all my sharp teeth at her. "Sounds good. Thank you again for all your help."

There was a momentary falter in her expression, but she held firm. "I'm just glad to be helping. Doing something." Her mouth opened again, then shut, falling silent.

"Well, we need to get going. Are you all set to travel?"

"Yes," she said, not quite meeting my eyes. "The Mareford ponies are giving me a ride in a medical wagon. I can't really walk that well yet."

"I'm sure that will be better soon," I offered, hoping it might be comforting.

"Thanks," she said, quietly, before finally meeting my gaze again. "Good luck."

I smiled a little more. "You too, Singe."

She nodded, passing the borrowed welding equipment back to Starlight before turning to walk to the waiting medical wagons.

Starlight climbed up on the rear of the wagon, her magic grasping the contraption she had hooked up to one of the many wires coming from the long cable. It was little more than a spark battery and a dial. "Okay," she said, holding the device up. "Let's see if this thing works."

The dial twisted, and the desk fan bolted onto the bottom of the antenna array buzzed to life, kicking up bits of dirt as the whole assembly floated slowly but surely into the air.

"Aw, yeah!" Starlight said, grinning. "We are awesome."

"You did good," I said, mirroring her grin.

"Aw, heck, it was nothing," she said with a chuckle and wave of her hoof. "Let's just wait till it gets up and brings up all the slack, and we're all set to roll out!"

She hopped down to trot around to the driver's seat, and I gathered up the bundle of wires, all wired up to new connectors and conveniently labeled with bits of pencil-marked tape, thanks to Starlight's foresight.

Echo didn't wait for me finish. "You should be wearing this armor," she said, still fixated on the subject. "That is why we had it repaired. It doesn't do anyone any good just sitting there empty."

"Sorry," I said with a dismissive shrug. "It won't really fit in the cab."

"It is not that bulky!" Echo snapped, and I flinched slightly, regarding her a little more carefully. I hadn't expected her to be quite so upset over the subject. "I have spent days repairing this armor for *your sake*. Why are you so stubbornly opposed to making use of it?"

Her ears were pinned back, eyes narrowed. Even her mane flowed more wildly, a form of body language I was still getting used to. I took a few seconds to more carefully formulate my reply. "Echo, my experience and training as an Infiltrator has always taught me to make use of the best tools at my disposal, regardless of my personal preferences." I reached up to touch my rifle, hanging across my chest. "It's a lesson that my time in the Wasteland has reinforced. I promise you, if we're approaching a situation

where I would be better off using that armor, I will, but right now, it would just get in the way of what I need to do.”

The anger in her expression faded, covered under a thoughtful frown. “I suppose that seems sensible, though I question the accuracy of your risk assessment. I should point out that the one time in the past week where the armor would have made a difference came with no warning. You must certainly be aware of how unexpected a changeling assassination attempt can be.”

“I am,” I said with a sigh, “and it’s something I will be keeping in mind in the future.”

She held her frown, but after a couple of seconds, finally gave a faint snort that vaguely sounded like an acquiescence.

I replied with a nod, then spread my wings, making a short, buzzing hop over the pile of equipment, wires in tow.

I stopped again as I once again saw Bloodbeak sitting by the gun. I slipped the end of the wires in over the back seat, then stood again to speak to her. “Are you sure about this?”

“Hmm?” She looked back at me. “About what?”

“About coming with us.”

She broke out in a grin, waving her claws at the gun and motorwagon in front of us. “Seriously? Heck yeah, I’m sure! I get to ride with you guys on the coolest wagon, *and* you’re setting me up with a flank-kicking super-gun!”

“You remember what Dusty and I told you, right? If you do come with us, that’s it. This is the headquarters for the whole army, and Serenity is sure to have spies. We’re taking information security seriously. There are things that will be said that Serenity can not learn, under any circumstances. If you’re in, you’re in until Serenity is done. No alone time, no wandering off without one of us with you, no off-duty time. Are you sure?”

She wiped away the grin, replaced with a thin but determined smile. “I pulled guard duty with the Dawnbringers for years. Never napped or wandered. Duty first.” The grin started to return. “I’m in all the way, superspy. No place I’d rather be.”

I hesitated. “I’m not really a superspy.”

She just waved it off. “Well, that’s what Starry was calling you. I mean,

I get it. I'm guessing you'll be talking lots of spy stuff you don't want others hearing, and that means you don't want me repeating it. Makes sense. So yeah, I'll chill with you guys for a few days. My beak is sealed."

"And Seroon?" I asked. "You sure you don't want to travel with him and the other Dawnbringers?"

She chuckled. "Heck, he was telling me I should try to help you guys. He's got all of Mareford watching his back. Said you could use someone to help watch yours."

"And you're absolutely sure you want to stay, then?"

She wrapped a foreleg around the machine gun, grinning. "You'd have to break out Starry's prybar to get me out of this wagon."

I cracked a smile. "Well, okay then. I hope you enjoy the ride."

She gave a mock salute, and I ducked down, squeezing into the backseat once more. It took only a few moments to sort out the cables, and only a few more to plug the connectors into the proper ports of my increasingly convoluted arrangement of networked PipBucks. It was a chaotic jumble of cables and distributed computational power, but it worked. Somehow. I had the distinct sense that it might be overkill for what I was doing with it, but I didn't really have the luxury of time to streamline things. Sometimes, you just had to settle with a jury-rigging.

The moment I had the right cable in place, the Serenity channel I was monitoring turned garbled for a moment, then cleared up perfectly. The antenna was doing its job.

I pulled out another cable, reaching forward to offer it to Dusty. "Here you go."

He took it, eying the connector suspiciously. "You're sure this will work?"

"It's all hooked up and ready," I said. "I'm using the main antenna, but that'll hook you up to one of the secondaries. Just give it a test to make sure the antenna is working right."

He settled back into his seat, slipping the cable around the chair and plugging it into his PipBuck. The radio gave its electronic squawk as he hit the button to transmit. "Ranger Lead, Command. Radio check."

It was mere seconds before the reply came back, loud and clear. "Command, Ranger Lead. Roger."

Dusty looked back to me, giving a nod of approval.

"All right," Starlight said, finally sliding into the driver's seat. "The cable's as taut as it's getting. We're good to roll."

"Good," Dusty said. "It's time we got going. Bring us up to the Trotsen wagons."

"You got it," Starlight said with a grin.

The wagon rocked gently as Echo took to the wing, and the engine thrummed with magical power, accelerating smoothly. Half a mile ahead, we could make out the gathered wagons, with Hail Burst and her Loyalists flying along above.

I looked back to double-check the cable. The welded-on rig creaked slightly, and the floating antenna dragged behind us at a fairly steep angle, but it wasn't showing any signs of coming loose. "Looks like it's all holding together just fine."

"Good," Dusty said, already consulting his map to plan and coordinate the movements of the force we had assembled.



We made it less than an hour before the fighting kicked off.

It was inevitable. For all my intelligence gathering, all of Dusty's clever maneuvering, all the scouting and rapid movements, we still faced the one insurmountable advantage Serenity had over us: their entire force could fly.

Minutes after our wagon started rolling, Serenity started to pull back from the forces attempting to pin them in place. I listened to broadcasts while scanning my PipBuck's map, trying to track movements. The maneuver was simple and elegant. A few squads kept their position while the rest of the company withdrew, repositioning with incredible speed. A minute later, the maneuvering units had established long-range fire, covering the front-most squads as they fell back.

The Militia ponies tried to press the attack to keep them engaged, but they had to dart from cover to cover, advancing on hoof and under fire, while Serenity's soldiers could rapidly fly back to their new lines, sweeping low to the ground at high speed. It was hopeless. In less than three minutes, the entire company had broken contact, flying rapidly away from the battlefield.

Ten minutes after we started moving, I heard Serenity organizing raids

on our column. My heads-up to Dusty was largely superfluous. He was already aware of the possibility, but at least I could tell him where and when the attacks were going to come in. While he didn't want to give away our advantage by acting preemptively, it meant he wasn't surprised by the maneuvers. He had time to plan ahead, and when Serenity made their move, his counter-moves were immediate.

The first raid came in on the main army. I turned to look out the window just as the black dots surged over a ridge barely a mile away. An instant later, Dusty was on the radio. "Loyal Lead, Command! Eyes on enemy fliers, south. Move to engage. Remain within three hundred yards of the column. Gemstone! Take positions and concentrate air defense south. Move at your discretion to remain alongside the column."

Lines and bolts of light were already cutting through the sky as acknowledgements came in. Gemstone's three magical energy cannons had been supplemented by four more from the *Cumulonimbus*, with Arclight working on repairing two more. A little over half were in our portion of the army, and they sent up a dazzling wall of magical death to meet the oncoming attackers.

Above, the Enclave Loyalists banked, coming around in a clean and coordinated formation. They were only a fraction of the oncoming force's size, but it was enough; as changeling soldiers weaved to avoid fire from the ground, it left them unable to properly engage the pegasi.

Hail Burst didn't have that problem. She led the first group of pegasi straight on, opening up a withering salvo of long-range fire. Fuschia-colored magic etched the sky, cutting through the loose Serenity formation, though none found their mark. It did, however, break up the formation even further.

Then the flurry of fire stopped, and the pegasi banked around in a neat, tight turn. As they did so, the next group was already turning to make their own run, and the air once again filled with magic.

A few changelings tried to brave the volume of incoming fire to straighten out and return some shots of their own. A few bolts flashed out in return. One of the changelings paid for her bravery, a purple-pink flash of a direct hit enveloping her for a moment before she plummeted towards the ground.

Still, they closed on the column. Half a mile, now. The lead pegasi had banked away, flying back the way they came, while the next batch had turned in towards the oncoming changelings, loosing their own salvo. Nearby, a few ponies had rifles pointed into the sky, firing a few rounds into the air at desperately long ranges, but that volume of fire—and its accuracy!—would only grow as the enemy came closer.

Even if the incoming fire hadn't hit many of the attackers, it was clearly having an effect. My left earbud crackled. "Lead, One. We're taking a hell of a lot of fire! Multiple M.E.W. cannons. We're not going to be effective here."

A flash of green sliced across the sky, lancing one of the closing changelings. I traced it back to one of the Trotsen wagons, with one of Arclight's cannons bolted to its roof. I could just make out Blueberry, adjusting his aim before firing again. It was slower firing than the powerful plasma cannons, but its beam was like Starlight's Lancer; accurate, lightning-fast, and judging by the way the dark form crumbled into glowing green ashes, remarkably powerful.

Another shot barely missed a weaving Serenity soldier, who immediately broke off her approach to enter a spiraling dive to avoid any follow-up shots.

"One, Lead," the left earbud buzzed again. "Disengage. Break off south-east and rejoin."

"Copy."

The incoming changelings veered off, diving towards the ground to pick up more speed and avoid incoming fire. A few let off long-ranged bursts of fire before turning away. I cringed as the bolts arced through the air, seeming to curve as if homing in on us, and ducked as they came crashing down.

Given my expectation, it was rather anticlimactic. There were no loud explosions. Just a rapid pattering of dull puffs and thumps and several shouts. I peeked out the window again to see the column marching along, relatively unscathed. Some of the shouts were from a line of Mareford ponies, one of which was on the ground. Several other ponies had gathered around him to render aid, while the others were continuing to march under the orders of their commander. Well down the line, I could see one of the Trotsen griffins beating at the smoldering spot on the side of her wagon's armor.

Above, the Loyalists gave a brief pursuit, diving and laying out a parting

salvo of fire before breaking off and returning to the column.

Suddenly, it was quiet once more. The Loyalist skywagon swooped in along the line, picking up the unlucky pony who had been struck by one of the long-distance shots and delivering him to the medical wagons. It took a minute for a full casualty report to come in; no dead, three wounded, and only one seriously. Serenity had taken a shot at us, and we'd weathered it almost unscathed, returning better than we got.

But we were only fifteen minutes in.

Ten minutes later, the head of the army was approaching the first of the Serenity ground forces. Two squads were waiting on the back slope of a hill, ready to ambush our force the moment they had advanced far enough along the narrow valley floor. It was a good place for an ambush, if a bit too far to cause real damage.

"They don't need to hurt us much," Dusty said when I brought it up, eying the map with all the markers I had provided. "They just need to kick up enough of a fuss that we have to take them seriously. It's delaying tactics. The slower we are, the more time they have to prep their positions."

And so, in a calculating move, we once again took no preemptive action. Five minutes later, the lead element crossed into Serenity's sights.

A moment later, the radio squawked in my left ear. "Lead, One." Despite the distance, the channel was crisp and clear, without any signs of distortion. The antenna was working wonderfully. "Enemy recon wagon has just passed RP Snare, continuing west along the valley. No contact."

The reply came swiftly. "Copy. Enemy vanguard should be about five to ten minutes behind. Hold tight."

"One copies."

Dusty muttered to himself as I passed that on, then called for a location report from all Mareford units. As that went on, the recon wagon halted at the end of the valley, its position relayed by both the Serenity ambush force and the scout team onboard. I quickly checked my map, doing a little quick geometry. The recon wagon was about half a mile from the ambush force. Closer than Dusty and I would have liked, but still far enough to be somewhat safe.

Still, we waited. Dusty watched the map closely, silently counting down to the moment when the vanguard of our army reached the location tag

that marked the intended ambush.

I was almost two miles away, hidden behind a line of hills, and I still felt the adrenaline teasing at my nerves.

By my count, we were about thirty seconds from the ambush when Dusty hit the key to transmit. “Trotsen Lead, Command. Enemy spotted to the south of vanguard elements. Orders for Reaction Force One: move to hill 313, dismount at the top, and assault west into enemy positions on the west slope of that hill. Best speed.”

“About damn time,” came the reply from Sandstorm.

Radio chatter quickly filtered down the lines, and the reaction force—six Trotsen motorwagons bearing several squads of Mareford Militia—was already moving before Serenity’s broadcast went out.

“Eyes on enemy infantry, squad-plus, at RP Snare.”

I looked to Dusty. “Our ponies just entered the ambush site.”

He gave a sharp nod, eyes fixed on his map.

I turned back to my own map, with the jumble of intercepted location tags denoting Serenity positions and points of interest, while mentally overlaying our own force’s positions. The calm was unnerving.

Radio traffic practically exploded, and I filtered out most of the low-level communications. The platoon-level report came in calm and clear, despite the loud gunfire. “Contact, enemy infantry, due south of One, five hundred yards. One is under heavy but distant fire.”

“Understood, One. Take cover, hold position, and pin them down. Mobile units are already on the way.”

Said mobile units were already climbing the opposite slope of the hill. It was a tense minute of listening to them moving and disembarking, all while I silently tracked their position on my map.

The Serenity channel opened with an urgent voice. “One and Two! Enemy forces approaching from your—”

The broadcast was immediately drowned out by explosions and gunfire. “Close contact east! Two is—”

The broadcast cut off, giving an instant of silence, while the numbers indicating squad-level radio traffic flashed and stayed lit. Chaos had descended upon the ambush.

Seconds later, the platoon-level channel opened again. “Lead, One!

Two Lead is down. We are being overrun! Infantry and vehicles!"

"Break contact. Pull back. I'm calling for support."

"We're trying!"

In the other ear, the leader of the vanguard element reported that he was lifting fire. The Militia pony relaying information for the reaction force simply reported that they were in contact.

Dusty was nodding in satisfaction, and after a few seconds, keyed in again. "Ranger Lead, Command. If the reaction force has that ambush locked down, I want you to keep the column moving at good speed. We can't get bogged down here. I'll get some more air recon up there for you."

"Ranger Lead copies. Wilco."

It was just two minutes later when the final details of the conflict came over the radio. One dead and two wounded in the vanguard, with one more dead in the assault on the Serenity positions. In exchange, the timely counter-assault at point-blank range had devastated the ambushers. The final tally was twenty one casualties, all deceased. At least one had been merely wounded. It seems she had played dead until one of the Militia ponies came near, then tried to bring her rifle up to shoot him. They hadn't taken any more chances after that.

I frowned when that information was passed on, but said nothing. I didn't like it, but I understood it.

The leader of the assault estimated that no more than half a dozen changelings had managed to get away. The order was passed down to rapidly secure weapons and equipment, then fall back to the main column.

Dusty took a moment to pass on a request to Hail Burst, sending a pair of recon flights over to scout ahead. With that resolved, he brought up his map once more, scrolling another mile past the ambush point. I did the same, eying the multitude of location markers that had been passed over the Serenity network.

"Okay," Dusty said, looking back to me. "What's next?"



Ten hours.

I thought I had acquired a decent experience with combat. I thought I had seen battle, or at least enough to have a good idea of what it was

like. The carnage at Paradise Beach. The mercenary attack in the outskirts of Dodge City. Multiple firefights with raiders. All terrifying, chaotic, dangerous, and even traumatizing events filled with death and desperation.

But the longest of those fights was still measured in minutes. When our diverse army encountered Serenity's first significant resistance, it kicked off ten continuous hours of relentless battle.

For those ten hours, battle raged, and I saw almost none of it.

Serenity launched five more raids over the course of the rolling battle, hoping to capitalize on the distraction of combat to strike exposed groups in the rear. Two tried to target the center group, where I was. One even descended straight down from the clouds, in what could have been a devastating attack if Dusty hadn't been warned and ready to respond immediately. I could see the changelings in the sky, turned back by the Gemstone and Loyalist defenders. A few bolts of magic struck amidst the column, but as callous as it sounds when describing casualties, the damage they caused was minimal. It was the closest I got to the actual fighting.

The rest of the time, I might be able to see groups of ponies on hills or ridges, as much as a mile away, or the rapid movement and dusty plume of motorwagons displacing in reaction to some new threat. Sometimes I even saw them firing on distant enemies I couldn't see.

Yet at the same time, I probably had a better picture of what was going on than anyone else, in either army.

That isn't to say my view was perfect. There was still plenty of uncertainty. To determine where any group was, I had to rely on radio reports. Sometimes they came from that unit, while sometimes they came from others. Information came in too quickly for me to process all of it, so I had to prioritize general strategy over fine detail. Despite those limitations, I had a wealth of information. I tracked where everyone went to the best of my ability, listened in on their plans, and passed the information on to Dusty.

It was fascinating to watch him work, his eyes fixed upon the map as he passed down orders, a cigarette all but forgotten on his lips. The movements of the armies unfolded with agonizing slowness, like some glacial dance. Dusty would give the order for one of the reaction forces to move to counter an anticipated threat, and we might wait five minutes to hear that they were disembarking at their destination. Other times, the dance accelerated to

a frantic pace; multiple platoons of Serenity soldiers moving at high speed, trying to exploit some perceived weakness in our lines, and our rapid and urgent responses to counter that threat.

Serenity had so many advantages on us. They were faster. Their soldiers were well-trained and exceptionally equipped. They were a single, unified force, without any inter-faction conflicts that might diminish their effectiveness.

Yet every time they made a move, their foe adapted instantly. Every time they exhibited some weakness, their foe exploited it. Every time they attempted a ruse, their foe refused to take the bait. By all appearances, Dusty was a master of war.

Of course, we were cheating. Neither of us had any problem with this.

As he told me, so much of what makes good tactics and strategy is intuiting what your enemy is doing and balancing the risks you take. Was that flank really weak, or was there another unit that could punish any attempts to exploit it? Was that ambushing force on its own, or did they have other units giving security? Did that enemy force really retreat, or had they just fallen back to better defensive positions? Was that withdrawing unit in good order or in shambles? What lay over that ridge? Where was the rest of their army?

Risk is a part of warfare, but when you know exactly where the enemy is and what they plan to do, you cut out most of the risk.

When the lead units came into contact, Dusty already knew where they were, and how to counter them. I watched as he directed platoons down poorly defended approaches, pinned down exposed defenders, and launched assaults on weak positions. Serenity's more agile forces found themselves outmaneuvered time and again.

Through it all, there was one prevailing order: keep pushing. Stop to fight when needed, but then get moving again. If you weren't in contact, you were advancing. Serenity lay before us. We had to push them back to their hive. The word had gone out: if we take Serenity, we win.

The dark clouds churned above us.

Despite our overwhelming advantage in information, Serenity's soldiers tried their best, and their discipline showed. While Dusty managed to reverse their traps on them, they fought back fiercely. They rarely panicked, and

never surrendered.

They even managed a few surprises. No mention had been made on the radio of land mines until the recon motorwagon lost a wheel to one. That kicked off a quick scramble as Dusty directed the reaction force to save them, narrowly fending off an assault by a Serenity force, to minor casualties on both sides. From then on, the recon element included one of the Militia combat engineers, a unicorn adept at detecting and disarming explosives. They found only six more mines during the march; few enough to be a minor expenditure, but enough to keep us wary.

Our motorwagon followed as the army continued its slow but steady pace, and half an hour after the vanguard made contact with the first real opposition, I saw another side of the battle.

The first corpse I saw was a changeling, not far from the path we rode along. She lay beside a dead bush at the edge of a shallow depression. Even as we passed just thirty yards away, I couldn't see any signs of the injury that had killed her. If not for the awkward contortion of her neck and hindlegs from her sprawled position, or the bit of dirt scattered atop an extended wing, I might have thought she was asleep.

I didn't spare many glances away from my map and radios, but it was enough to take in a bit of what the casualty reports had already told me. Serenity wanted to slow us down, and they tried to withdraw before Dusty could pin them down in a fight. Casualties were relatively light on both sides, but it was a slow trickle that continued on, hour after hour. The Loyalist's skywagon flew back and forth, ferrying medical ponies to the front, or bringing the worst of the wounded back to the medical wagons. The less injured were patched up and resumed the march, or sat and waited for the next available wagon.

The dead were left for the logistics ponies to collect. I would see the occasional scattered corpse where Serenity had managed a clean escape. Where they hadn't, I saw clusters of bodies. Little clumps of intense violence, signified by a dozen or so corpses. Most of these were changelings, but a few were ponies, killed where Serenity's soldiers had fought back more effectively, or even managed some small-scale surprise.

I caught Dusty looking over some of those groups of fallen ponies with grim eyes. Then he took a deep drag on his cigarette, turned back to his

map, and ordered more ponies to their deaths.

We rolled on, following the trail of bodies for ten hours.



We had almost two hours of light left when we reached Rotwater Creek. The lead elements of the army had taken up sheltered positions just a quarter mile from where the narrow ravine opened up into wider banks. On the map, it looked to be a passage about three hundred yards wide.

It sounded like a wonderfully spacious and open piece of terrain, until you factored in just how many soldiers were determined to kill us there.

“Show me,” Dusty said, turned in his seat as I presented my PipBuck. Intercepted location markers dotted the far shore, noting Serenity positions, built-up defences, fall-backs, and support. Markers on our side of the creek noted sectors of responsibility for various units, and now, markers for “enemy” positions. They were making excellent use of the PipBuck technology. Any commander could put down a custom location tag, and their communications network would rapidly distribute it to every single Serenity changeling, and unknown to them, one particular non-Serenity changeling.

Our own mark showed us just a quarter mile back from the head of our army. It was the closest I’d been to the front all day.

I scrolled to the cluster of marks near the creek. “Their Charlie company has been setting up here. Our swing north forced them to relocate, and they arrived on-site about eight hours ago. They’ve been setting up defensive positions.” I pointed out several marks. “There’s a fortification on either side of the crossing, right by the edge of the ravine, to give a good crossfire, with mines scattered around the creek itself. There’s supposed to be a line of defenses forming a semicircle, extending about a hundred yards back from the creek. Then there’s a second pair of fortifications on a line two hundred yards back from that for supporting fire, with a few defensive positions between them. Details are pretty vague on how substantial the defenses are, but there was talk of prefabricated structures and heavy materials, as well as digging earthworks along each line. Good news is, they’ve been scrambling. Lots of chatter about how we’re coming on a lot quicker than they expected. The defenses are not nearly as complete as they’d like, and

they're probably tired."

Dusty gave a satisfied grunt as I continued. "Their Bravo company arrived three hours ago, and they hauled a lot of material from the crossing they were originally guarding. It sounded pretty confused on the radio, and I think I'm only getting part of the conversation. Probably some face-to-face. They've split responsibility, so Charlie has the northern side of the defenses, and Bravo has the southern.

"Delta and a freshly reinforced Alpha company were the units trying to delay us, and they got mauled pretty bad. They've been merged to form a single company, though they reported that they're still 'substantially' under-strength and disorganized. They didn't have a solid number on how many casualties they took today, but they're guessing about a hundred-plus."

"That sounds about right for what logistics has picked up," Dusty said with a nod. The non-combatants in our army hadn't been at rest; as the army marched and fought, they'd roamed behind the lines, ferrying up ammo, and collecting bodies and equipment. "Last tally I heard was ninety six." He frowned. "I'm still a little uncomfortable that there weren't any wounded."

I grimaced. Our own reports had come back, and while the total casualties were about the same, at least half of ours were wounded, with many expected to recover quickly. Then there was the substantial amount of equipment we had recovered, including sixteen sets of pegasus power armor in good enough condition to be rapidly pressed into service. The advantage of controlling the field after a battle, Dusty had said.

I continued. "The merged company, which took on the Alpha designation, was pulled back to the rear to rest and reorganize. They've brought forward Echo company instead, which sounds to be a mixed unit, like... reserves or something. It's unclear. In any case, they deployed out here..." I scrolled the map two miles to the northeast, where a lone map marker—Echo flank—was tucked in a narrow valley. "Their orders are to wait until we start the assault, then press us from the flanks. They discussed using deception techniques to disrupt cohesion before shifting to regular tactics once we catch on. The plan is to disrupt the rear of our army and force it to close in with the front for safety, get us as condensed as possible, then hit us with the megaspell."

"So we won't be letting that happen," Dusty said. "That's going to be

rough. We'll need enough air defense forward to fend off any megaspell attempt, but that might expose them to the enemy defenses. Any word on heavy weapons?"

"Yes," I said, scrolling back to the crossing. "At least two plasma cannons, one at each of the second pair of fortifications. Lighter equipment at the first pair, but still something. Maybe heavy machine-guns, by the sound of it. No word of artillery."

"They probably don't need it when they control the skies," Dusty noted. "We might be able to capitalize on that."

"Would be nice. There's also a few separate units. Sky One through Three are air transports, probably skywagons, maybe sky-tanks. They've been mostly ferrying materials, and by last reports were lingering behind the force for further orders. Ghost One through Six are recon teams, and they've been roaming mostly on their own discretion, it seems. Then there's another unit designated Mantis. No clear info on what that unit is, but it's been relocated by Sky Two to this high ground here..." I scrolled to a rocky hill about half a mile west of the crossing. "Probably something that can't be moved easily. Mantis has also been focused on vehicle sightings. It could be some sort of anti-vehicle unit."

Dusty nodded again, eying the position. "Okay. Anything else?"

"Their HQ and some unit designated Cicada—I have no idea what it is—are stationed in a hasty bunker two hundred yards back from the second defensive line. Logistics units are based just past that, with several motorwagons to ferry supplies. I don't know if any of that helps us. There was talk about bringing in reserves from the hive, but they aren't expected to be deployed until the morning, and there were concerns about proper equipment." I shrugged. "And their megaspell is out there, somewhere. They plan to have it come in from the west, but that's likely to change."

Dusty slowly looked over the map again, eying every contour and defensive position. "All right. So, three companies, plus one understrength, and some light support. That's almost certainly more than the Mareford Militia itself, but we still should outnumber them with everypony else. Not counting however many reinforcements they'll be getting." He frowned thoughtfully, mulling it over before continuing. "Guess it comes down to how good their defenses are. Let's take a look. Starlight? Bring us up. Be

ready to pull back if they lob shots our way."

The engine thrummed as the wagon slowly creped up the slope. The crest of the hill steadily drew closer, until the top of the distant hills showed above it. A few yards later, and we came to a halt, the valley open before us, with the distant line of the Rotwater snaking through the rough terrain.

Dusty brought up his binoculars, surveying the battlefield. I did the same, giving a quick look over the features. The crossing itself was a low depression of rough, rocky ground, where the steep walls of the ravine gave way to a low valley and gentle slopes. It formed a ring of high-ground over the crossing, and it was here that Serenity chose to fight. For having just eight hours to prepare, they'd established some significant defences.

The front-most fortifications were made of concrete blocks, with metal brackets visible to hold them together and cover any gaps. They must have brought those in by skywagons. The front two were set right where each ravine ended, with the steep, rocky slopes effectively protecting their flanks. Each had a long, low slit to let the occupants fire out of. Curiously, they were not pointed forward to where we would be coming. Instead, each fortification—or pillbox, as Dusty called them—faced the other, three hundred yards apart.

Low walls had been established on the high ground, surrounding the crossing. Most of those walls were simply places where Serenity had dug up dirt and piled it in front of their positions. In some places, large canvas bags had been filled with dirt to form large blocks, which were then used to form walls. Then there were a few places, notably on either side of the pillboxes, where concrete slabs had been used as a backdrop, and the dirt piled in front of it. Some of the walls even extended out on the flanks of the pillboxes, lining the edge of the ravine for some twenty or thirty yards. It looked as though these positions would give good cover over the ravine and anyone attempting to climb out of them, preventing us from simply going around to get behind the fortifications. The intent was clear: they wanted to funnel our largely ground-bound force through the crossing itself, where they could maul us with the greatest amount of firepower.

The second defensive line was further up the gentle slope, allowing the positions to fire down on the crossing. It, too, was built around a pair of concrete fortifications, though it was less extensive. The pillboxes were

actually slightly larger, with a second level of barriers surrounding the plasma cannons atop them, but the line of defensive walls were scattered points rather than a continuous line. It looked like this line relied more on the rocky terrain and curvature of the slope to give cover, with earthen walls formed where cover was lacking.

Between the two lines, changelings were hard at work. At least sixty were digging, piling up mounds of dirt as they hurriedly added low lines of walls leading back between the two defensive positions.

"Pretty serious defenses," Dusty noted as I lowered my binoculars. Now that I had a good idea of the layout, my attention was better spent on the radios. "Looks like they know what they're doing, too. They're setting up secondary positions and cover for falling back. They're going to make us fight for every inch, but they're planning to give ground instead of dying on it."

"Any way to go around?" Starlight asked.

"The nearest passable crossing is almost a day's march south, and we can't spare that much time if we're going to beat the weather. Once the rain hits, that's a couple more days for them to dig in. Besides, if we go for the other crossing, they can still get there first. We'd be facing the same thing there."

"I mean something more, uh... local? I mean, sure, the motorwagons can't climb a cliff, but maybe a bunch of soldiers could go around and hit them from behind?"

Dusty slowly shook his head. "They've got good recon, and I'm going to assume Whisper's right about them having good espionage. If we detach any significant force, there's a good chance Serenity would know exactly where they are. I don't want to split our forces in the face of a more maneuverable enemy. Something small-scale, maybe... but the bulk of our thrust is going to have to be right down their throat."

Sickle snickered.

In my left ear, a conversation about logistics and rations was suddenly interrupted. "Break, break. Command, Mantis. Eyes on enemy command wagon, one one zero from our position, skylined on 'enemy ridge'. Request permission to engage."

Adrenaline came crashing down. "Dusty! Mantis sees us, and they want to shoot."

He nodded calmly. "Starlight, roll us back."

The motorwagon rocked as we drew back. I caught one last glimpse of the tall hill and its sheer cliffs, a mile away, before we slipped out of sight. "Heck of a reach they've got."

Dusty grunted.

"Mantis, Command. Negative. Hold fire for now. Keep eyes on them. Current intent is you will wait until the enemy forces are engaged in their attack, then take them out to disrupt leadership."

"Understood. Enemy command vic has withdrawn, now out of sight. They have something floating tethered to their vehicle, so we'll track their position."

"Command copies."

Crap. "Dusty? I didn't really think of it, but they can still see the antenna, so they still know where we are."

"Of course," he said, his eyes back on his PipBuck's map. "I'm still trying to think if there's some way to make use of that, lure them in or trick them or something. Still coming up blank there."

I paused for a moment, thinking on the possibility of misdirection, before giving a shrug. "Nothing comes to mind."

"Yeah." He sighed, silent for several long seconds. "Well, no point in delaying. Time to call everypony in."

He brought up his broadcaster, and a minute later, leaders started converging on our position.



Fifteen minutes later, we were all gathered. Dusty hadn't bothered setting up the tent this time, so we gathered in a level patch of ground, flanked by our motorwagon and Sandstorm's tank. All the leaders were there. Sandstorm and Axle, Two Bits, Hail Burst, Dazzle, Seroon, and at least a dozen subordinates. All gathered around the table where Dusty had sketched out a rough layout.

He gave one final look over the group. "Okay. I'm not a big speech type of pony, so I'm not going to bore you with some big monologue about honor or destiny or any of that, but there's one thing I do need to say: the fight here is going to be a big one. Probably *the* big one. What we do here

may well decide whether we win or lose. We've hammered them all day long, driven them back, but now they're making a stand. If we can do what we've done all day, if we can deal them one more decisive defeat, then there will be nothing lying between us and their hive. They've been running from us all day. Now they're standing and fighting. If we can push on just a little longer and crush them here, we win."

There were murmurs and nods of approval.

"I know we're all tired after a day of marching, but they've had it worse than us. We've chased them across the Wasteland. They've been battered and bloodied. Right now, they need a chance to rest and recover. We're not going to give it to them. We need to hit them before they dig in so hard that we'll never uproot them. That means we need to hit them soon, we need to hit them hard, and we need to hit them *smart*."

He took a half step back, leading into the part we had rehearsed. "Now then, I've been discussing the situation with Queen Whisper, and she has a few things to say about our enemy."

I nodded in gratitude before stepping up to the table. All eyes turned to me. There were no glares or looks of suspicion. All listened attentively.

"We're about to face a larger and more chaotic fight than most of us have ever experienced. Chaos leads to confusion, and this is something changelings are adept at exploiting. We've seen only a little of such trickery so far, but if they're making a stand here, we can expect they'll pull out every trick in the book. My kind's greatest advantage is our shapeshifting ability. Changelings can look like anyone." I put on a particularly grave and serious face. "This includes friendly soldiers on the battlefield."

There were a few frowns and grimaces at this. Good. "Not only do we run the risk of having Serenity forces approach under the guise of friendly units, we run the risk of fighting our own forces if they mistake each other for changelings. We can't allow that to happen. To that end, it's going to be vital that commanders keep accountability. We have good communications. Know where your subordinates are, and know where nearby friendly forces are. As long as you do this, we'll be able to punish them for any attempt, and deprive Serenity of its greatest advantage.

"Above all, I would suggest restraint and caution. We don't want to kill friendly forces just because we had a lapse in communication. If absolutely

uncertain, keep suspicious groups at a distance and call for information.” I raised my PipBuck. “I will also be monitoring friendly radio traffic and tracking movements. If any suspicious circumstances arise, you can always ask Dusty, and we will be able to get to the bottom of it.”

I frowned. “And beware of individuals giving suspicious instructions or attempting to go somewhere or do something they aren’t normally allowed to do. It’s very likely Serenity have some Infiltrators in the army. If there’s any doubt about what someone says, stop them until you can contact someone higher up to confirm it.”

There were a few more nods, even if some ponies still looked concerned. When no questions or objections were voiced, Dusty stepped up again. “So we’ve got a lot to do,” he said. “This is what I want...”

I stood back, listening intently to every plan and detail, as Dusty slowly wove together a picture of what was about to unfold.

## Chapter Forty-Five

# The Rot

Any endeavor is a long and complex chain of events. Despite the natural attraction one might feel toward the dramatic, it's important to always remember that there is no one critical moment that is the sole deciding factor. Every single moment, no matter how mundane, leads us steadily to the outcome. It is this principle that must guide an Infiltrator.

Yes, the end goal may be some climactic event, but it is never alone. When we look at some great task, such as infiltrating a hostile government, it might well seem as monumental as climbing a mighty mountain, but even the greatest mountain is climbed one step at a time. These are the steps we plan out. The ones we train for.

Despite this, there is no denying that some moments are more significant than others. Some moments are crucial. These moments test us in new ways. While the bulk of our training is rooted in the mundane moments, those simple masquerades and deceptions that serve us daily, we have to be ready for whatever comes our way. This is why our training teaches the basic elements of a wide range of subjects we hope may never come into play. We have to have breadth to handle unexpected circumstances. We have to be flexible, adapting to a situation that is never wholly in our control.

And we have to be ready to do things we may not be entirely comfortable with. This is why I was in my natural form, while Echo stuffed me into the set of power armor she had been fixated on for the past two days.

"I must say, I am very thankful for Sergeant Hail Burst's accommodation in allowing me access to the salvaged Serenity armors," she happily informed me as she double-checked the connection of one foreleg's armor. "I had been concerned about the potential weak point that would be created if I had to cut a hole in the helmet for your horn, since I am certain you would have objected to being unable to use your magic, but Serenity has quite nicely alleviated us of that concern."

"Yes, we are quite fortunate," I dryly replied as I used said magic to adjust how the helmet sat. Serenity's simple addition to the helmet fit snugly around my horn. Its curve matched almost perfectly, with thick padding to

protect against impact, while the external metal shell curved up to a sharp tip. The world outside was tinted faintly amber by the helmet's lenses, and the E.F.S. was arranged in a completely different fashion. I didn't particularly care for it, but I could adapt.

She gave a sharp tug on the armored hoof before releasing it. "There. It is all secure. I would still recommend against getting shot, but at least you are not so terribly vulnerable."

"I'm never going to be closer than half a mile from the fighting," I said, looking up to track the Loyalist skywagon that flew swiftly overhead, helping with some final relocations. The army was all hurrying through last-minute preparations for our hasty assault, with most of them well forward of where I was.

"Yes, and they have weapons that can easily reach that far," she said with a frown. The dull thump of a distant explosion punctuated her in a way that might seem dramatically convenient if it wasn't happening every ten or twenty seconds. Serenity was putting out a low volume of fire with the plasma cannons and a few other heavy magical weapons. It wasn't enough to be a danger, yet, but Dusty said that wasn't the point. They were just trying to discourage us from poking our heads up. The longer they delayed us, the better off they were.

"I'll be fine," I said, lifting a leg to reach out, testing it. The armor felt rigid and somewhat bulky, yet no more heavy than the armor I had taken from my hive. Maybe lighter. "Besides, even if they didn't have more important things to focus on, I'm wearing this. I'm about as safe as I could be."

She stood tall to stare down over her upturned frown. "You know as well as I that their soldiers are not the only threat to you, and I suspect you are only wearing that armor because I made it a condition of leaving your side."

"I was going to wear the armor anyway," I said, which I think was probably true. "But it still made for a good bargaining chip."

She snorted, holding her disapproving glare.

"Anyway," I said, then paused as I looked around for a time display on the armor's E.F.S. Not finding one—probably one of the options I didn't understand yet—I sighed and levitated my PipBuck. "Yeah, you'd better get going. It's getting close to that time. You've got everything?"

"I do," she said as she levitated the saddlebags that lay beside her. They

floated up to drape across her back, the straps buckling as she spoke. "You should attach the face mask. Leaving your muzzle exposed is a vulnerability."

"I need to talk to Dusty, and I'd rather not be announcing things loudly over some speakers. I'll close up if anything bad happens."

"Hmmph. I suppose that will do." She spread her wings. "Be safe."

"As safe as I can. Good luck."

She gave a sharp nod, then gave a powerful beat of her wings. As the dust parted, she arced off to the east and climbed, heading away from the battlefield. Soon she would be ascending into the clouds. I double-checked the time. Twelve minutes. That should be plenty.

I turned, careful and conscious of every movement. Despite the heavy appearance, the armor only barely restricted my range of motion, and my movement was hardly impaired. It was almost eerie. There was some powerful enchantment going on to turn what should have been easily a hundred pounds or more of metal into something as light and easy to wear as a thin jacket.

I paced back and forth a few times, getting used to the feel. Even my hoofsteps felt light. Looking at my armored hoof, I expected deep thumps every time I touched the dirt, but there was only the faint sound of dry earth softly crunching. It was a strange disconnect between appearance and behavior, similar to the feeling of a peculiarly botched shapeshifting, but even though that strangeness lingered, it was trivial to adapt to the physical sensation of it.

I wouldn't say I liked the armor, but I was certainly impressed by it.

The wings still annoyed me, though. Serenity had made some slight modifications to accommodate changeling wings, but they felt remarkably clumsy to me. No amount of enchantment could get rid of the fact that they covered my light, diaphanous wings with thick plates intended to cover a heavy, feathered wing. I had resolved the issue of the helmet and neck armor crushing my dorsal frill by shifting it away, and I was tempted to give myself more pony-like wings, but I decided there wasn't much point. It'd be bulky either way.

As for the tail, it was still something of a mystery. I could get it to move around some with flicks of my tail, but how exactly a pegasus could stab someone with that tail-tip stinger completely escaped me. I just hoped

I wouldn't accidentally discover it at an inopportune moment.

Setting aside those concerns, I made my way back to the ridge. There was plenty of activity all around. Gemstone and Mareford ponies hustled back and forth, ferrying supplies and preparing heavy weapons just behind the crest. Our motorwagon sat a good fifty feet back from the ridge, facing down the slope. Bloodbeak stood alertly in the back, a set of talons resting atop the rear of the machine gun. She smiled as I looked up to her.

"You all good here?" I asked, and her smile grew.

"You bet!" She patted the gun. "I got your back."

"Good to hear," I said, returning the smile. Turning, I followed the cable that led from the base of our tethered antennas to the position we had prepared. Echo hadn't just tucked me in that bizarrely light metal can. She'd used her powerful telekinesis to tear up a good section of ground, digging a wide trench along the crest of the ridge in a matter of seconds. The position gave us excellent cover, and all we had to do was poke up over the front edge to get a good look over the soon-to-be battlefield.

Dusty was doing exactly that as I stepped into the trench. Two Bits was there, too, discussing a few last-minute details. I simply gave them a nod before turning to the collection of PipBucks arranged at one end of the trench. It took a moment to fish out the earbud cable, which I had tucked into the neck armor, and plug it into a pair of the PipBucks. It wasn't the most elegant solution; I'd have to take some time to work out a patch to plug those radios into the armor itself, but that would have to wait.

Serenity's radio traffic was unchanged. Some low-level chatter, some reports from scouts, but nothing high-level. Nothing interesting.

A couple of minutes later, Two Bits excused himself, slipping out of the trench to move to his own position, just fifty feet away; close enough for him and Dusty to yell back and forth if necessary, but separate enough that they wouldn't be talking over each other, or taken out by the same lucky shot. Dazzle and a couple of other Gemstone ponies occupied a similar position beyond that, near where most of the energy weapons were currently hidden. Sandstorm, on the other hoof, sat in the hatch of her tank, leaving Axle on hoof to coordinate things for her, and Hail Burst was flying around with her Loyalists, keeping an eye on the skies.

As soon as Two Bits was gone, Dusty sat down behind the wall, looking

to me. "Anything going on on Serenity's side?"

"Nothing," I said, frowning. "They're waiting for us to make a move. It feels like a trap."

"Sure, it's a trap," Dusty said, rising up to peer out over the valley again. "At least, that's what they want it to be, but they're wrong. They're making a mistake, and I intend to punish them for it."

"It doesn't seem like much—" I stopped as Dusty crouched, followed a moment later by the loud, unnatural *fwump* of a plasma-bolt striking the face of the ridge in front of us, casting a light shower of dirt over us. He was already up and looking again before I spoke again. "I mean, I know I'm not all that versed in strategy, but it doesn't seem like much of a mistake to me. It seems to me like this is going to be a nasty fight."

"Oh, it's going to be bloody," Dusty noted, a faint grimace touching his expression. "But they're playing this whole thing wrong. They only put a quarter of their force to delaying us. They underestimated us, and they got their tails handed to them for it. It scared them, so they're focusing hard on defenses. It's a conservative strategy. It's also the wrong one."

"Why's that?"

"Because they're ceding the initiative. They're going full reactive. Worse, they're letting us press a decisive battle where we can level the strengths of our forces. You know what they *should* have learned from today? That they should harass and delay us with *all* of their force, so we could never leverage a local superiority in numbers. Hit us too frequently and in too many places to respond, and with enough supporting force that they don't leave weaknesses for us to exploit. We saw enough of how they fought. Their soldiers are solid, and they seem to have good tactics. If they fought to their strengths, it'd be brutal. Your intel would keep it from being as bad as it could be, but it'd cost us, and probably slow the army to a crawl. A few days of that, and they'd steadily pick us apart until we can't fight them off. But this? They got stung, and now they're too cautious of getting stung again."

I was silent for several seconds, pondering that explanation. In most ways, it was perfectly familiar. It was very much like my lessons on practical psychology, as well as my training in threat management and deception. It's natural to react to a threat or setback with caution, but it's too easy to overdo it. Falling back to a purely reactive stance might defend against some

danger, but it rarely does anything to resolve the *cause* of that danger. If somepony is suspicious of an Infiltrator, a reactionary stance would be to come up with some lie that alleviates that suspicion. That's all well and good, but it's often not enough. Whatever reason that existed to arouse their suspicion could still exist, leading to other ponies getting suspicious, and some may take steps that are not so easily reacted to. That's why it's important to be proactive in identifying and removing those threats.

This is also useful knowledge when it comes to manipulation and deception. If you can force someone into a reactionary stance, perhaps by overwhelming their argument with your own statements until they're focused entirely on responding to you instead of pressing their own arguments, then you can control the course and flow of the conversation for your own benefit. Similarly, you have to know how to avoid being trapped in such a disadvantaged position by others.

Some of my teachers had used an analogy that compared conversations with battles, but Dusty's words made that comparison all the more apt.

Dusty had turned back to his PipBuck. "It's about time. Echo's good?"

"She had plenty of time," I said with a nod. I glanced at one of my PipBucks. Six minutes. Halfway there.

"Good," Dusty said, then raised his PipBuck to broadcast. "All forces, Command. Report status."

Two Bit's reply was almost instant. "Command, Ranger Lead. We've got a few units still getting into position. Should be set in one minute."

"Command, Loyal Lead. All Enclave forces are ready."

"This is Sandstorm. We've been ready for half a fucking hour."

"Gemstone's ready."

Dusty silently nodded to himself as he switched to our private channel. "Starlight, are you all set?"

"Yep." Her voice sounded light. Not quite cheerful, but close enough to be encouraging. "It isn't too tricky of a shot, assuming I can damage that thing. I got this."

"Just remember," Dusty said. "One shot, then get behind cover immediately. Don't wait to observe the shot. We can do that for you. Pull back and relocate. We'll be giving you as much distraction as possible, but let's not take chances."

"Yeah, I remember," Starlight said, with only the tiniest hint of the eye-roll she was likely giving. I caught Dusty's momentary frown, but he said nothing.

I raised my head to look off to our left, down along the ridge. Starlight was somewhere out there, just a couple hundred yards away, but I couldn't see her in the rough terrain. The rocky protrusions and uneven roll of the hill made for excellent cover, which would have been an even greater advantage if it wasn't half a mile from the crossing.

For some weapons, half a mile wasn't quite so daunting.

The radio came to life again. "Command, Ranger Lead. Mareford is set and ready."

"Command copies," Dusty said, looking down at his PipBuck again. "All forces, be prepared to go in one minute. Ranger Lead, start ranging shots."

I scanned steadily through the Serenity channels. Nothing yet. The scout channel was reporting on several ponies loading into motorwagons on our northern flank, but nothing critical.

A few seconds later, I heard the shouts from further up the ridge. I raised my head again to look.

About a hundred yards away, and just behind the ridge itself, about a dozen Mareford ponies were gathered around their mortars. There were three of them, including the one Dusty had lent them. They had a good stockpile of ammunition, courtesy of Mareford's industry, and Dusty was intent on putting them to good use.

One of the ponies brought a mortar round to the muzzle of their mortar, holding it for a moment before releasing and turning away, hooves going to her ears. There was a flash and a thump, kicking up a thin cloud of dust that steadily drifted away behind them. Seconds later another pony repeated the action with another mortar.

I stood to look out across the valley. I could just make out some movement around some of the fallback positions, where soldiers were still digging. It was maybe five seconds from the first shot when an urgent report came across the scout channel. "Command! The pony mortar group just fired two rounds."

It was another ten seconds before the Serenity commander came on the main channel to spread the warning. She barely had time to finish before

the flash and spray of dirt announced the arrival of the first round. It had landed maybe fifteen yards past the wall along the left side of the front line of walls. Seconds later the second round burst, just past the right pillbox. A pair of ponies with binoculars were already shouting back information to the mortar teams.

Two Bits radioed seconds later. "Command, mortars are on target and ready."

Dusty drew in a deep breath, exhaled, and keyed in again. "Fire for effect. All forces, standby to initiate when the first rounds land."

I only distantly heard the shout before a trio of thumps sounded in rapid sequence, followed seconds later by three more.

"Command, splash in... twenty seconds."

The shots were going out rapidly, every few seconds. I understood the purpose of the ranging rounds, but it seemed unfortunate that we would give them so much warning. Serenity's soldiers could hunker down, minimizing casualties. Dusty, however, was unconcerned. He had told me earlier that any casualties would be a nice bonus, but killing wasn't their intent.

He sat there, eyes on his PipBuck's clock as he counted down the seconds. Finally he radioed again. "All forces, Command..." His eyes flicked up, and a second later the rounds impacted. "Go."

All along the ridge, ponies sprang into action. Heavy weapons, ranging from machine guns to salvaged plasma cannons, were hauled up by teams of ponies, rushing them into hastily prepared positions. A deep rumble and roar sounded as Sandstorm's Beast climbed the steep slope, until the tank's cannon rose above the ridge. Already, the first flashes of Gemstone rifles were filling the air with a rainbow of bolts and lines.

I glanced down at my PipBuck again. Four minutes.

Serenity was returning fire. Bolts of burning fuchsia magic sailed through the air in sporadic streams, but at this range, they were no more effective than Gemstone's shots. More impressive were the plasma cannons atop the rear pillboxes. One was already putting out slow, steady fire, about one per second. The powerful bolts impacted the ridge far to my right like a meteor, throwing dirt and rocks.

I didn't see if it hit anypony. I didn't look. I focused on my radios as Serenity traffic spiked. Word was going out that there was a full-scale attack.

I knew the Mareford and Trotsen attack force should be moving by then, using the suppression of the mortars and the supporting fire to get into better positions, where they could level their own heavy firepower on the defenses facing them.

In the distance, I heard Sandstorm's shout. Then I saw the flash of the Beast's cannon, and the sound hit me like a ton of bricks, even through the armor. The blast kicked up a thick cloud of dust. For a second, I was blinded, but as the dust washed away, I saw the plume of smoke and dirt where the round had landed, maybe five yards short of one of the rear pillboxes.

Our private channel came alive with Dusty's voice. "Starlight, you're up."

"Got it."

For several seconds, the combat continued unchanged. The heavy weapons were all firing by now, the variety of magical energy cannons backed by a few machine guns. The front line of walls was blanketed in flashes of magic, dirt, and smoke. The second line was taking less fire, but still some. Despite all that, it was easy enough to pick out the Lancer's brilliant red beam as it speared the left-most plasma cannon. There was a sickly multi-colored flash that blossomed from the side of the cannon as a spark battery discharged.

Dusty was already calling out as I raised my binoculars. "Good effect on target. They're still up, but I think you did some serious damage. Put your next shot into the other one."

I finally lined up, seeing the cannon swing around to face where the shot had come from, but it wasn't firing. I could just make out one changeling helping another up from where she'd been knocked over, and from what little I could see of her movements, she was either injured or dazed by the small explosion. Others were hauling equipment around behind it, connecting something flexible. A power cable, I would guess.

My vision turned to dust, and I reflexively ducked as the Beast fired again. When the dust had cleared and I peered out again, I could see the smoke wafting away from the face of the pillbox. The intact plasma cannon atop it was firing back, with powerful bolts slamming into the hill in front of the tank or sailing overhead. It was a hard target; the tank had advanced just enough to bring the cannon clear. Still, the shots were close, and when

one sent a spray of dirt over the tank, Sandstorm finally ducked down into the turret, swinging the hatch shut.

I cast a quick glance to my PipBuck. Three minutes.

My left earbud spoke again. "Mantis, Command. Priority target, enemy armor on 'enemy ridge'. Engage at will."

"Mantis copies. Engaging."

"Dusty!" I called out over the sound of the impacts. "Mantis just got the order to fire on the tank!"

He gave one glance Sandstorm's way, then turned back to his radio. "Sandstorm, you're taking cannon fire. Pull back."

On the distant hill, a mile away, I saw a tiny puff of smoke.

Dusty saw it too. He immediately keyed in, his voice quick but calm. Efficient. "Gemstone, Command. Possible enemy heavy weapons team, bearing two nine zero degrees, the flat hilltop one mile away. I want one of your guns to plaster that entire hilltop."

As he was speaking, I noticed a small flicker by the distant hill. I couldn't even be sure I saw it at first. Then I caught a hint of movement again, like something wobbling in midair. It seemed so still, even as I started to pick out a hint of smoke weaving behind it. I realized what I was seeing the instant the illusion of stillness was shattered, as the black missile shrieked across that final distance and smashed into Sandstorm's Beast.

A flash, and the tank was engulfed in a fireball. The blast was deafening. The massive turret crashed down beside the tank, blown entirely clear of the chassis. Fire roared in the mangled wreck of what had been its hull, now torn apart by the massive explosion.

Explosives love small, enclosed spaces, and the ammunition the Beast had carried was a tremendous amount of explosives.

I stared, stunned by the sight. A voice bloomed in my left ear, calm and dispassionate. "Command, Mantis. Armor neutralized."

Dusty uttered a quiet curse before calling out to me. "Whisper, get on Trotsen's channel. Make sure Axle knows he's in charge and get him on the command channel."

I'm pretty sure Axle knew, at least on some level. He was already scrambling up from his position to run toward the flaming wreckage, as if he might somehow save Sandstorm. Despite that, I quickly shook myself

from my daze and followed directions, changing channels before hitting the button to transmit. “Axe, you’re in charge of the Trotsen forces. Dusty wants you on channel one if you’re not already.”

I saw him freeze, looking down at his PipBuck. Several voices called out over the radio, voicing questions and concerns, until he slapped at his broadcaster and shouted over them. “She’s fucking dead!”

“What?” one of the voices asked.

“The fucking bugs,” Axe said, wavering in place as he looked at the flaming hulk of the tank. “They fucking blew her up!”

“Sandstorm?”

“Yes!” He shouted loud enough that I could hear his voice, even over the continuing impacts of incoming fire. “Those motherfuckers killed her! Those... fuck! We’re going to kill every fucking last one of them!”

I keyed in again. “Axe, tune into channel one. We’ll make sure you get your chance.”

I heard him shout, some sound of anguish, before fiddling with his PipBuck.

Then Dusty shouted. “Get down!”

I ducked an instant before the blast of an explosion hammered my ears. Dusty was already calling out on the radio before I could get up. “Gemstone, command! I need fire on that hilltop immediately before they pick us all off. Do you copy?”

Dazzle’s voice answered immediately. “Got it!”

When I picked myself up, I looked up along the ridge, spotting the smoke and dust blowing away from one of the many rocky positions. Part of the plasma cannon was still there, burning with magical fire. Bits of the cannon—I hoped—were scattered around it.

A few lines of searing light cut through the air, kicking up glowing motes of dust from the distant hill. A moment later, a flash of multicolored light drew my attention back to the valley. The northern plasma cannon had just exploded in a burst of spark-energy.

Dusty echoed in my right ear. “Good effect on target, Star. Shift target, engage Mantis hill. You’re on that until I call again.”

“Okay! Did you see that explosion?”

“Focus,” Dusty chided before switching back to the command channel.

I refocused on my radios. There still wasn't much happening on their command network. There were reports of our movements, noting how they saw a significant force taking position on the northern side of the approaches, and relatively few on the southern side. I didn't catch any significant inaccuracies that we could exploit. For a moment, it was relatively calm, so long as one ignored the sounds of weapon fire and mostly-distant explosions. The mortars had stopped firing, for what that was worth.

Starlight radioed in. "Hey, Dusty. Yeah, they've got like a half-dozen Steel Ranger armors on that hill. I spotted at least one big-ass missile launcher, but I think Dazzle tagged that guy. They're keeping their heads down now."

"Copy," Dusty replied. "Keep them suppressed."

"Can do!"

I glanced at the clock again. Two minutes. Standing, I rose high enough to look down the slope into the valley. The rough terrain opened up near the crossing. Mareford ponies had made good use of the suppressing fire to take up positions just two hundred yards from the crossing itself, and were exchanging fire with the defenders. As Serenity had noted, about two thirds were gathered on the right side. The nearest pillbox, with its side-facing opening, couldn't fire on them, but the one on the far side was spewing a rapid stream of bolts. One of the lighter, faster-firing plasma cannons, I assumed.

Just behind the Mareford soldiers, a few motorwagons were tucked into narrow depressions. They had been guided by ponies on hoof, and protected from return fire by the rolling terrain. It was the closest they could get without being completely exposed.

Two Bits called in again. "Command, Ranger Lead. Mareford forces are in position and reee-eeee ooooh begin assauuuu on yoooo c-mand."

My ears flattened as the broadcast was abruptly filled with audio artifacts. A quick glance showed the floating antenna was still up.

"Command copies," Dusty said, speaking with deliberate precision. "Be aware, your transmission is loud but distorted." He released the button, shooting me a glance. "What's going on?"

"Under-oood," Two Bits replied, barely recognizable as the decryption software struggled to decipher the audio stream correctly. "Hevvv interf-

errrr.”

“I’m not sure.” I sorted through my collection of PipBucks, finding the one monitoring all of our channels. Every single one was lit up, with only the occasional flicker. “...Oh! Right. I think they’re trying to jam us again.”

“Can you do anything about it?”

I frowned down at the PipBuck. “Maybe if we could get everyone on another frequency, but... well, we’re not doing that in combat. That’d take forever, especially if they can’t hear us. And they’d just change the frequency they’re jamming. No good.” I stared for another moment before lurching into action, pulling the antenna cable from my PipBuck array. The sounds in my ear grew even more distorted. “Here, swap me. The main antenna should give a stronger signal. That might make a difference.”

He unplugged his own cable, and we traded. Friendly transmissions were even more garbled. I couldn’t even place whose voice it was I heard.

Ironically, I could make out the Serenity transmission far more clearly than our own. “Echo, Command. Move to engage enemy forces.”

“Echo copies. ETA four minutes.”

I looked over to Dusty. “Echo is moving.” I paused, blinked. “I mean, Echo company. Serenity’s Echo. Not our Echo. Oof, that’s a mess.” I shook my head, then added. “They’re four minutes out.”

He glanced down to his PipBuck, then nodded. “Good. We’ve got time.”

I looked as well. One minute.

Serenity’s commander was on the radio again. “Brachinus, proceed to holding position and standby.”

The reply was distant and softly distorted. “Brachinus copies.”

The faint tingle of adrenaline ran down my spine. Their megaspell was readying to strike.

Mantis was reporting that they were unable to engage when Dusty keyed in again. “All forces, Command. Prepare for phase two in... thirty seconds.”

I glanced to the time again, seconds ticking away. Garbled voices called in on the radio, presumably to give acknowledgement.

Seconds passed, while the two armies exchanged fire. Serenity’s remaining heavy plasma cannon had fallen silent, perhaps too damaged by Starlight’s strike to function, but the soldiers were putting out heavy fire,

filling the air with death. The Mareford soldiers were weathering it well, taking good cover and replying in kind. For the moment, it was indecisive.

Dusty's hoof raised, holding in wait. The final seconds counted down with agonizing slowness.

Then Dusty's hoof came down, pointing to me.

I keyed in on our private channel. "Echo, start your run."

It was a formality. She'd been told to carry out her instructions unless we told her otherwise. Too much rode on her.

Dusty and I looked up, to the darkened clouds above Serenity's position. His hoof hovered over his broadcaster.

For several long seconds, nothing. Then, a dot of dark purple plunged from the clouds.

Dusty's hoof jabbed at the button. "All forces, go for phase two. Go!"

In the distance, Echo's wings pumped as she accelerated towards the earth. Within moments, the mortars were firing in rapid succession. Magical energy cannons fired as fast as they could. Machine guns rattled in long bursts. In the valley, soldiers would be loading into motorwagons while others lay down heavy suppressing fire. Behind us, Hail Burst and her Loyalists sprang into the air, their heavily laden skywagon following close on their tails.

Echo streaked downward, wings tucking in along her sides in a high-speed stoop, straight toward the Serenity forces. It was several seconds before Serenity soldiers spotted Echo's meteoric descent. Her shield snapped into existence as several bolts sailed up to meet her. Her wings spread, abruptly pulling up from her dive, still a couple of hundred yards above the ground.

Their commander was on the line again. "Mantis, Command. You will relocate to ridge three-one-three. Sky Two will mo—"

At that distance, I couldn't see the flash of Echo's magic.

What followed, however, was impossible to miss. The flash of green lit up the western edge of the valley. The sickly green balefire burst out from the rear of the Serenity army. It rose into the sky, flinging the concrete and other debris into the air. Echo's aim had been perfect. The Serenity commander's transmission cut off mid-word.

The radio cleared immediately to Hail Burst's voice. "—beginning our run now." Serenity's jammer had been right there with their headquarters.

A second flash announced another detonation, just past the first. Another green fireball rose above the ridge, followed by a rapid series of secondary explosions. The sickly multicolored hue of spark-battery detonations mixed with the balefire green as the fireball grew well beyond the first. Echo had teleported the second balefire egg right into the middle of their logistics company, detonating motorwagons and stocks of spark batteries.

Echo streaked away from the explosions as the Serenity radio descended into chaos.

“Command, Mantis. Say again.”

“Command, what the fuck was that?”

“Enemies rear! Logi just got hit!”

“Command, Ghost Two. Please respond, urgent.”

“I think command is down.”

I turned to the southern end of the Serenity lines, just in time to see the Loyalists sweep over the nearest ridge, flying low. They opened fire immediately, laying out a heavy storm of magical fire all along the southern walls. The defenders were shooting at the ground forces in the opposite direction; by the time the first shots turned to the new threat, the Loyalists were already banking away.

Among all the flashes and bolts of magic, it was easy to overlook the slower green orb that arced downward from one of the Loyalists, until the third and final balefire egg landed right at the rear of the pillbox. I got to see the full power of the deceptively tiny device. Alchemical fire burst forth, tearing through and consuming everything in its wake. The pillbox disintegrated, flinging slabs of concrete out across the slope before it.

Sheltered by the nearby ridge, the Loyalist skywagon was disgorging ponies. Rangers rushed to the crest of the ridge, and within seconds were laying out heavy fire on the surviving Serenity forces. The moment the skywagon was empty, it lurched and took off, and the Loyalists followed it back to friendly territory.

The chaos continued.

“Bravo lead is down! Bravo is under attack by heavy Enclave forces from the south. In danger of being overrun.”

“This is Alpha. What happened to command?”

“Command is down. All of HQ and Logi is down.”

“Who’s in charge?”

“I think you are!”

On the right side, Mareford soldiers had advanced almost to the creek itself, braving the rough and exposed ground as the fighting intensified. Mortars rained down on the line of walls, throwing up plumes of dirt and smoke. A few changelings braved the intense suppressive fire in an attempt to engage the closing ponies, but they were quickly forced down again. The defenses on the left side of the crossing, which should have been providing a crossfire, were too tied up in their own fight to help. It gave the soldiers time, as specialist unicorns quickly found and removed enemy mines, clearing the way.

A couple of weapons teams dashed up behind the lead squad, finding a cluster of small rocks that gave a small degree of cover. Even from that distance, I could clearly see the large tubes mounted on the side of two of the stallions. They took position, aiming at the pillbox less than a hundred yards away. Dust kicked up in an abrupt spray behind them, and a pair of explosions blossomed from the side of the pillbox. Immediately, assistants moved to the rear of the launchers, loading the next round. From that far away, I couldn’t tell if they’d done any more than scorch the side of the pillbox.

“Command—*whoever!*—this is Bravo!” the distant changeling called out on the radio, shouting over the sound of weapons fire and explosions. “We are overrun! We can not hold. We are pulling back!”

I leaned over toward Dusty. “The southern defenders are trying to retreat.”

He nodded grimly, but said nothing. There wasn’t much to say. It didn’t take a tactical genius to see that the defenses they had prepared to cover their withdrawal did nothing to protect from an enemy that had gotten behind them. They’d be retreating through open ground and air, right in the sights of everypony. The situation was getting worse for them by the moment. Already, the skywagon was lifting from the Mareford positions, with a fresh load of ponies inside and the rest of the Loyalists flying cover overhead.

Back on the right side, ponies had pushed up to the edge of the ravine and the steep slope below the pillbox. Motorwagons bounced across the rocky ground, taking only light fire as they made the quick dash. Equipment

bounced haphazardly in the back of the wagons, while ponies clung on. I could see Sickle's distinctive armor among them.

Small explosions peppered the top of the ridge as ponies threw grenades over the walls. Only a few grenades answered them, and the whole area was quickly choked in smoke and dust. Then the Mareford ponies stepped up the game. I knew the plan; one of the groups in the assault force was a demolition team. I could see the massive demolition charge float up in the grip of some unicorn's magic until it was placed right against the pillbox.

It was nothing in comparison to a balefire egg, but the blast still made the grenades look anemic. It was also sufficient for the job, blowing a large, ragged hole in the side of the pillbox, probably killing or incapacitating anyone inside.

The motorwagons closed the final distance, halting at the base of the rocky slope. Ladders went up as other ponies started advancing along the low-ground before the pillbox. The mortars had stopped, the suppressing fire moving back to the second line of defenses.

Ponies climbed up the slope. I saw Sickle shove her way past another pony, bounding up to the pillbox and rushing in.

Dusty looked back down to his PipBuck, considered a moment, then hit the key to transmit. "Gemstone, Command. I need the right half of your guns all facing north. Enemy fliers spotted inbound from the north. Ranger Lead, they should be coming in over your reserve forces. Make sure they're ready to meet the threat. Loyal Lead, I'll need you back over the northern ridge for a counterattack. Skywagon's flight should be safe."

Acknowledgements came in on our command channel. Serenity's command channel was still disjointed. Someone had finally assumed command, and was calling for everyone to fall back to the second line. The alarmed report of enemies attacking their logistics team circulated, diverting some of the second-line forces to defend against an enemy that didn't exist. Some changelings tried to fight back, while others tried to break out, all to little effect. Their flanking force, expecting some degree of surprise, came over the final ridge to find themselves facing fully prepared defenders with multiple heavy magical energy cannons. The scouts that had seen the preparations were unable to get that information across the proper channels. Confusion ran rampant.

"Command, this is Brachinus. Are we engaging?"

"Yes!" the urgent reply came. "We're in danger of being overrun. Engage immediately!"

"Brachinus copies. Turning inbound. Time on target, eight minutes."

I passed the information on to Dusty. He nodded, glanced at the time on his PipBuck, and returned to watching the battle, all without a word.

"Brachinus, expedite! We need you ASAP."

"Brachinus copies. Unable. Best time is eight minutes."

"We're not going to be here in eight minutes!"

I leaned toward Dusty, speaking quietly. "Serenity command is stressed. I think they're losing it."

Another transmission. "Brachinus copies. Time on target, eight minutes."

I know it was probably just calm professionalism, but something about the reply just felt cold to me.

At this point, there was very little for me to do but relay basic information. Even that was made difficult by the utter confusion on Serenity's part. Bravo company had been asked three times for a status report, but had stopped responding on the radio. Alpha had been called in to reinforce, but were taking time to sweep the hills behind Serenity's position to clear out the mysterious attackers some startled changeling had called out in error. Echo had taken light casualties in their attack, but only because of the quick thinking of their commander ordering them to pull back. They prowled around the edges, but between the Whirligigs and Loyalists circling above, their movements were tracked, and Gemstone's weapons were ready to meet them anywhere they went.

There was still a battle raging on, but it felt almost calm. Controlled.

Then shouts and a burst of gunfire shook me from the illusion. I looked back behind our trench, to where dust wafted away from the ridge just before the motorwagon. A pair of Mareford soldiers were trotting forward, guns leveled at the crumpled form of a changeling. Bloodbeak watched it down the sights of the machine gun, her eyes wide.

The changeling's foreleg moved slightly, and one of the advancing soldiers snapped off two shots. She jerked, slumped further, and didn't move again.

Dusty stood up, calling out. "What happened?"

"It's a changeling spy, sir!" one of the soldiers came back, lowering his rifle once he was satisfied the changeling corpse was no longer a threat. "They were trying to get to headquarters. Tried to run when we went to detain them. Shot them, they lost their disguise."

Dusty glanced my way, and I could only shrug. I suspected there were a lot of details being left out for the sake of brevity, but it hardly mattered at the moment. "We expected them to try something," I said. Fortunately, we'd made it reasonably hard on them.

Uneasily, we returned to our work, such as it was. Ponies were storming Serenity positions. There were no more attempts at assassination.

Brachinus was just two minutes out when they radioed again. Her voice was, as always, perfectly perfunctory and professional. "Command, Brachinus. Aborting. Outbound west. Returning to hold." I looked west, searching the skies.

"Negative, Brachinus! Continue your run!"

"Brachinus is unable. Enemy air defenses are intact and target is dispersed. Brachinus disengaging as per ROE."

I finally spotted the skywagon, still a few miles out, skimming the underside of the clouds. If it hadn't been banking away, I probably wouldn't have seen it.

"We're being overrun! ROE is rescinded. We need immediate support to preserve the army! Engage now!"

"Negative. The Queen was clear in her orders. ROE does not permit weapon deployment at this time. Brachinus returning to hold."

It may not have been professional, but I could hardly blame the beleaguered Serenity commander for the profanity that followed.



The motorwagon shook and rattled as it slowly crept along the rocky ground, leaving Rotwater Creek behind. Ponies marched past former Serenity defenses, pocked and charred by the intense fire that had been laid out upon them. Only a few ponies lay before the defenses, left where they fell while medics tended to those who were still alive. They would be collected soon enough.

As we rose up from the low-ground of the crossing and passed the first line of walls, the toll on Serenity started to become clear. Dozens of dead changelings lay behind the walls where they had fought, or on the ground behind where they had tried to flee. Some passing ponies were stripping gear from those who hadn't already been looted, gathering weapons and spark batteries.

More than a hundred Mareford Militia soldiers marched in our column, past all the devastation. What had been an enemy strongpoint was now just another path on to our final goal. There were no cheers or celebrations, but these ponies held their heads high with pride. They'd faced the enemy head-on and prevailed. The way to Serenity lay essentially unguarded.

The second line showed more signs of carnage. The fighting had clearly been intense. I saw the corpses of at least a dozen ponies, but as we passed the cracked and smoking pillbox with the twisted remains of the heavy plasma cannon, we found even more changelings.

Sickle was waiting for us by the pillbox, trotting our way once we drew close. She looked significantly worse for wear. Her head and hooves were slathered in blood and dirt. Her armor was scorched in several places. An entire plate was missing from her side, revealing bare hide where her coat had been burnt away. She limped heavily, but she was grinning wide.

"You cunts missed a hell of a fight!" she called out as she drew near.

We halted as she climbed in. She groaned, but sighed happily as she flopped out in the back. At least she was content.

"So where do I get more ammo for this thing?"

Ahead of us, arrayed behind the former Serenity positions, the bulk of the army was digging in for the night. Motorwagons were ferrying up heavy weapons. They spread across the valley. Serenity's megaspell was still out there. Even if I knew it had retired for the night, we didn't want to leave them an easy target.

While the rest of the ponies took up their own positions, Dusty directed Starlight to a rise close to where Serenity's headquarters had been. We could see clearly the devastation Echo's attack had caused. The former headquarters was nothing but a crater. Chunks of concrete and metal were scattered around the field, but all that remained of the original structure was one end of the hasty foundation. Past that lay the remains of the logistical

element. A half dozen motorwagons, now mangled and ruined hulks, still smouldered with green fire. The ground was torn up for dozens of yards, with smoke wafting up from the burnt remains of dead vegetation. The balefire had consumed most of the equipment. Only a few broken and damaged crates and cases remained around the edges of the charred area, scattered by the blast.

The devastation was impressive, and sobering. The amount of violence unleashed in that tiny slice of land on the edge of the little creek was incredible. So many people had lost their lives that day.

It was a bittersweet relief that most of them had been changelings. The outcome was exactly what we had hoped for, yet I couldn't look back at the still black lumps and broken carapaces without feeling something tighten inside.

In the rear, the medical ponies tended to those who could be saved. The final tally hadn't come in yet, but there were close to a hundred casualties in all, with more than half of them dead. It seemed such an extreme number, but it paled in comparison to Serenity's losses. I didn't hear a final tally until the next morning. Just over two hundred changeling bodies had been recovered. We couldn't even guess how many had died in the balefire blasts, or how many had been vaporized by magical energy weapons.

From the intercepted radio transmissions, Serenity was reeling from their loss. Their army commander and half the company commanders were dead. Two of their companies had essentially ceased to exist, with an overwhelmed new commander trying to rally survivors. Their other two companies were so badly understrength that the commander of one had suggested merging into a single company. None were sure how many changelings were dead or missing. There was confusion over what to do with the few wounded who had escaped the battle. Supplies were short. There was talk of retreating to the hive to make a final stand there.

Not once did anyling suggest striking back. If the previous clashes had been a stinging slap of a hoof, this was a double-hooved buck to the face. For the moment, they were staying well away from us.



The relative peace lasted until we set out the next morning. With reinforce-

ments from the hive, Serenity had organized into two companies, and they tentatively set about trying to delay us once more.

Once again, they found an enemy that was too clever for them. Small and sneaky raids met heavy resistance. When an entire company tried to move into position to engage our column, they found themselves outnumbered two to one. In most cases, they disengaged immediately, sometimes without a shot fired.

One platoon commander tried a more aggressive turn, trying to rely on speed and violence to catch us off-guard. If they'd achieved surprise, it might have even worked. Instead they flew into the jaws of a trap. Ready soldiers met them on the ground. Loyalists flew above, diving down upon the attacking force, while motorwagons rushed more soldiers to their flanks. Only a few changelings escaped, while our casualties were light.

That said, Serenity wasn't incompetent. Despite the chaos and casualties we inflicted upon them, and the tremendous advantage I held in my hooves, they adapted. They couldn't press a fight, but they learned how to harass us. They stayed at a distance, sporadically engaging at long range and disappearing behind hills when we returned fire. The fire was mostly inaccurate and low-threat, but every now and then shots struck home. Casualties started to accumulate ever so slowly, while our ability to strike back was limited.

The worst was when Mantis returned. They had taken losses during the previous day's battle, but they were still able to fight. Our position at the center of the army meant we never presented ourselves to them, but other motorwagons were not so safe.

If that wasn't bad enough, we didn't even know they were there until a missile slammed into the leading motorwagon, killing the entire recon team. There hadn't been any warning on Serenity's command net. As Dusty quickly pulled motorwagons back to safety, directing infantry to lead the reconnaissance, I carefully listened into what Serenity was doing.

Minutes later, a unit I had heard nothing from engaged the vanguard of the army from almost half a mile away. Less than thirty seconds of firing, and only one pony killed, but the changelings withdrew without any losses, and without anything coming across the command net.

I listened more to lower-level channels.

The next engagement was much like the last. Thirty seconds after the distant shots rang out, the platoon leader called to fall back. Communications were short and brief, and could basically be summed up as “follow me”. Nothing was reported back to the company commander.

In the chaos wrought by their command losses, they had lightened the load by having units operate more independently. It made things easier on their commander, and unknown to them, it made my job much more difficult.

I'd just found Mantis's channel when another motorwagon, parked on a ridge half a mile ahead of us, exploded in a violent fireball.

“Good kill,” one soldier said.

“Shift left, one seven seven. The motorwagon with the plow. It's rolling back. When it comes back out, hit it.”

I quickly spotted the wagon in question. “Dusty, tell the wagons to stay in cover,” I said as I switched to my map, quickly plotting the motorwagon's position and tracking back along the bearing. Leaning forward, I held up the PipBuck for Dusty, and pointed to the hill almost a mile out. “Mantis is right around here.”

He gave a quick nod as he brought up his broadcaster. “Loyal Lead, Command...”

It was about a minute later when I heard from Mantis again, this time on Serenity's command channel. “This is Mantis! Enemy fliers inbound on our position. We need assistance!”

A minute later, the Loyalists crossed over our lines again at high speed, pursued by dozens of Serenity soldiers. Magical energy cannons opened up, driving the enemy away. Hail Burst stopped by to give Dusty the details. Mantis had been six changelings in Steel Ranger armor, with a variety of heavy weapons, including the missile launcher Starlight had spotted. None had survived the raid. All heavy weapons had been destroyed.

Not that it had been without cost on our behalf. Two pegasi had not returned.

Even without the threat of Mantis, Serenity still kept up the harassment. They continued to take potshots, while avoiding a direct confrontation. It wore on, for hours. Casualties mounted ever so slowly. A couple. A dozen. Two dozen.

But it simply wasn't enough. Their attacks were nothing but stings to a bear. We didn't slow. Mile by mile, we drew closer to Serenity and the end of all of this. We pressed on, fueled by the victory we had won and the ever-growing closeness of our goal. Our progress was inexorable. The outcome was inevitable. As night fell, our long march came to a halt, just six miles from Serenity. There was nothing they could do to stop us.

Which is why they decided to change the game.



I was enjoying a late dinner of stale broccoli when a voice came on the radio that sent a chill down my spine. There was no mistaking the resonant tones and commanding authority of a changeling queen. Chrysalis.

"Attention!" she said, her voice crystal clear in my left ear. "This situation has gone far enough. This hostile army stands on our doorstep. Already, ponies have caused untold death and destruction. Now they seek to wipe out our very existence. They must be stopped, whatever the cost."

"To that end, I will be deploying specialists from the hive. At precisely three A.M., they will turn the ponies' own clouds against them. They will initiate a massive downpour to blind these ponies."

"Commander Notum. You will pull your forces back to three miles distance from any enemy encampments. Prepare for operations in heavy weather."

"Brachinus. You will move to Point Firefly. At exactly three-thirty, you will set out, using the cover of the storm to close on your target. Your target will be the center of the enemy army. You must not let anything stop you. This is our last, best chance to stop this enemy before they destroy our very way of life. I understand that the weather will be treacherous, and the opposition fierce, but the weapon must be delivered. For the good of the hive, I trust you will do what is necessary to see this task through."

"That is all."

I set down my food and levitated my PipBuck to look at the map. A new marker had come in on the Serenity channel, labeled simply "Target". It was a mere thirty yards from where I sat.

"Dusty? We've got a problem."

I repeated the information to him. A minute later, he called Hail Burst,

asking her to join us. She arrived soon after.

She came gliding in, backwinging to land neatly before me. Even with her eyes hidden beneath those lenses, the questioning look was clear. While I was still wearing the power armor, I had removed the helmet, and she could see my grim expression. “Okay,” she said, turning to Dusty. “So what’s so important we couldn’t talk about it on the radio?”

He just raised a hoof, gesturing my way.

She looked to me again.

I drew in a breath and exhaled. “We need your help.” Her head tilted as I levitated my PipBuck once more, presenting it to her. It was displaying the map, dotted with markers. One was highlighted. Point Firefly.

“I need to organize a raid.”

## Chapter Forty-Six

# From the Shadows

No matter how clever you are, how deceptive your schemes, how well you manipulate the course of events toward the outcome you desire, there will inevitably be times you have to intervene directly.

Hail Burst returned ten minutes after our meeting, with a pair of pegasi accompanying her. We had set tents by then, giving our second meeting more privacy. Five minutes after she stepped into my tent, she left, hauling the equipment I had supplied. Much of it I had gotten from her or the wreckage of the *Cumulonimbus*: PipBucks, radio equipment, and cables. A few cases were strapped to the bundle, packing additional equipment. She left, returning to the Loyalist camp.

We both knew secrecy was important. As such, we ensured nobody could know what we had discussed in that tent. Aside from her presence and the equipment I had returned to her, the most any outside observer would have seen was my power-armor-clad head peeking out of the tent as she left, before securing the flap shut.

Hail Burst made good time back to her camp and roused her soldiers. Perhaps ten minutes later, those soldiers filed into the large tent Dusty had ordered erected for them, where Hail Burst and the returned equipment was waiting. Some of the soldiers were grumbling. One arriving pegasus called out, “So what’s going on, anyway?”

“This is a mission briefing,” Hail Burst replied. “Operational security rules are now in full effect. No communications with anyone outside this tent until we finish our sortie. Understood?”

Replies of “Yes ma’am” rippled through the tent.

“Good. Now, this mission is both sensitive and critical, so we’re bringing a specialist on-board.”

The latches of one of the cases snapped open, she lifted the lid, and a cat hopped out to stand before the gathered pegasi.

I allowed them a moment of staring before transforming, returning to my regal disguise. A few flinched from the sudden burst of magical flames, but mostly the reaction was murmurs and looks of discontent.

Hail Burst gave me a nod. “I’ll allow Queen Whisper to explain the initial situation.”

“Thank you,” I said, with a tip of my horn, before looking over the gathered ponies. Without their armor, they looked like any brightly colored group of ponies, if more on the physically fit side of the spectrum. “The situation is this: we have uncovered a critical opportunity, and we are taking every measure to ensure that Serenity has no warning of our discovery. The matrix disruption grenades Hail Burst subjected you to were modified by me to disrupt changeling magic. While both she and I felt it extremely unlikely that a Serenity Infiltrator would have been able to replace and impersonate any one of you, we both agreed that we had to be absolutely certain. While Serenity has lost some of those assets in recent days, it would be foolish to ignore the threat they pose. We are operating under the assumption that they still have a strong and effective espionage force, and that it remains a significant threat.”

“Fortunately,” I said, with a sly grin, “they are not the only ones skilled in espionage.”

I held the grin just a moment for dramatic effect before returning to a serious expression. “In just over four hours, changelings from the Serenity hive will hit the overloaded clouds above, kicking off a massive storm.” A few ponies blinked in surprise. Some murmurs rippled through the group. “Thirty minutes after this, the team carrying their balefire bomb will use the cover of the storm to deliver their weapon here. Their orders made it clear that they were expected to do this no matter what circumstances stand in their way, even if it costs them their lives.”

More murmurs, louder. One pony called out, “How the hell do you know this?”

“I’m afraid the specifics of how I got this information will have to remain secret,” I said. “Right now, only a few of my companions, and Hail Burst, know.”

“It’s a damn good source,” Hail Burst said. She was even smiling, small and predatory.

“There’s also one more crucial piece of information I uncovered,” I said, allowing my own grin to return. “We know exactly where the megaspell is.”

Hail Burst stepped forward, her smile even sharper than before. “And

we're going to take it."



Sunbeam, a cute yellow pegasus that looked deceptively pretty for a soldier, gave a firm tug on my back. "Okay. Chest is secure." The power armor fit snugly around me, an exact fit.

I smiled, replying in a perfect mirror of her voice. "Thanks," I said, shaking my head to flick the copied golden-blonde mane from my face. "Sorry you have to sit this one out."

"Eh, I never was good at night flying. Bad-weather night flying? Hah." She made a cute scrunched-nose expression before returning to a more serious look. "Here, you'll want to tuck the mane in loosely at the edge of the neck armor. It's kind of a pain in the flank otherwise."

She guided me through the procedure, weaving it back and forth until it was loosely secured and I could slide the helmet into place. "No pinching or pulling?" she asked.

I rolled my head to check. "It's good. Comfy"

"Good. That's the helmet secure," she said, giving a gentle tug on the helmet to make sure. "Okay! Let's get your mission equipment loaded up, then we can step through system checks."

She helped lift the package of equipment that Starlight had hastily modified. One of the heavy pieces of radio equipment salvaged from the *Cumulonimbus* formed the base, with four of my salvaged PipBucks strapped on and plugged in, effectively turning it into the largest broadcaster attachment in history. A set of heavy cargo straps were looped around my body, cinching the equipment snugly against my underside. It was awkward to stand with, especially with the cluster of three antennas protruding from the back, scraping against the ground.

A few minutes were spent stepping me through a quick check of the armor's systems and making sure the interface between the PipBucks and the armor was working. By the time we were done, I felt like I understood the armor a little better. I even finally figured out how to display the time.

"Okay, that's it. You're good for flight."

I thanked her one last time before waddling over to Hail Burst. The pose was awkward, but I couldn't help but note how much better the armor

fitted me. I'm not sure how much of it was because of being in pony form instead of my hard chitin, or because it was already adjusted to Sunbeam's body, but it was much nicer than my previous experience. I was tempted to just walk around, enjoying the feeling of the well-fitted armor around the lean and athletic body, but the equipment strapped between my legs made that awkward. Besides, we had more serious matters at hoof.

I was, naturally, the last to be ready. Hail Burst gave me a quick last-minute rundown on what we were doing. We'd gone over it before, but I could appreciate the double-checking to ensure we were on the same page and not forgetting something. We were setting out on a difficult task, and I had never flown with them before; best not to take chances.

She called everyone into position, giving a final layout of formations. We shuffled around, arraying ourselves as we would fly. With a final look over our group, Hail Burst nodded. "Okay. Let's do this."

She turned, and we followed, exiting the tent. Her wings spread as she exited, taking to the air as she broadcast. "Command, this is Loyal Lead. Departing."

"Copy, Loyal Lead. Good journeys."

She was already ascending, keeping a relaxed pace as more pegasi took to the sky, quickly falling into formation. I followed directions, just as she had briefed me. Downdraft trailed off her left wing, with Soaring Heart off her right. I positioned myself to trail similarly off their wings, directly behind Hail Burst, so we formed a simple diamond formation. My eyes glanced regularly to the E.F.S., making note of everyone's position. In the darkness of the night, under those dark and roiling clouds, the black armor was already difficult to make out.

The Loyalists quickly fell into formation behind us, trailing off on either side like a giant, inverted V. Once the last team reported as in-position, Hail Burst radioed to us. "Kicking it up."

She accelerated, and we followed, climbing towards the clouds. Our course was taking us east. Away from Serenity. Away from Point Firefly.

We were only a minute out when the Serenity scout channel came to life. "Lead, this is Ghost Five. Eyes on enemy fliers, about twenty strong, tracking east from point Target, ascending."

"Copy, Ghost Five. Shadow enemy fliers. Update when situation

changes.”

“Ghost Five copies, wilco.”

I reached down to the relevant PipBuck, casting quick glances to check on what I was doing while maintaining my position in the formation. It took several seconds before I confirmed I was on the right channel. Hail Burst and I had chosen an unclaimed channel for direct, private communications. “Hail Burst, an enemy scout has eyes on us and is trying to follow.”

Her head swung around, searching the sky below us, then around us. It was several seconds before she replied. “Any idea where?”

“Negative,” I replied, perhaps unconsciously mimicking some of the professional radio habits I’d been listening in on. “I can’t really operate all this stuff while trying to maintain formation at speed. She’ll probably end up on our tail, or close to it.”

“Understood. Keep me updated.” Then it was back to silence, with only the sound of the wind passing under wing.

Minutes later, we were approaching the underside of the cloud cover. It loomed ominously, ever closer. Miles away, the clouds flickered as lightning lit them from within. It was like a dark, hungry thing, waiting to devour us.

The world rapidly dimmed as we slipped into the edge of the clouds. The temperature dropped. Moisture gathered on my lenses and the underside of my wings. Visibility, already poor, plummeted. The erratic changes of air pressure made flying feel like running in sand, unpredictable and slippery, while sudden and unexpected gusts of wind tried to throw me around.

This wasn’t the first time I’d flown through clouds, though it wasn’t something I had a lot of experience in. In daytime, thin clouds might limit you to a few hundred feet of visibility, like a light fog. Thick clouds might limit that to a few dozen feet, which was really too close for flying at anything but a creeping pace.

In these churning storm clouds, in the dead of night, I was essentially blind, yet we kept flying at a swift and steady pace. Even after reverting to my natural eyes and their improved low-light sensitivity, I could barely make out the rare glimpse of the ponies just five feet ahead of me. I kept my eyes locked on the E.F.S. markers, making rough adjustments as I tried to keep them all aligned in their proper place, while hoping I was ascending at a steady rate.

The radio came alive with Hail Burst's voice. "Leveling out, seven-three-hundred."

I glanced over to the altimeter readout, seeing that I was just shy of the prescribed number. I hit the toggle Sunbeam had indicated, and an illusionary line appeared across my vision. It was supposed to act as an artificial horizon, giving me some semblance of up and down in the near pitch-black environment. I did my best to remain level, my altitude slowly weaving back and forth around the correct number, all while trying to keep the E.F.S. contacts in the right place.

I might have grumbled about how even the pegasi's armor had the woefully short-sighted 2D design mentality behind their E.F.S., but I had too much on my hooves to spare even that much thought.

Hail Burst radioed again. "Turning right, two-six-two. Snooze."

And that was it. We were alone. That last word was one of the codewords she had briefed me on. It meant we were to maintain radio silence until told otherwise.

The E.F.S. contacts started to swing right, and I banked to follow. In the darkness, I caught little glimpses of shadow and light. Every now and then, some thinning of the clouds gave me a glimpse of a silhouette. A flicker of distant lighting filtered through the clouds, giving me a strobe-like image of the pegasi in front of me before plunging us into darkness once more.

The numbers on the compass steadily drifted upwards, and I finally leveled out on the given bearing. My altitude wavered, but I caught the motion and steadied myself.

A minute later, Serenity's scout broadcast again. "Lead, Ghost Five. No eyes on enemy fliers. They disappeared in the clouds."

"Understood. Sweep the area quickly. If you can't re-establish contact, then return to station."

A minute later, the army commander broadcast on the command net, alerting all her forces that the entirety of the Enclave forces had departed from the army, heading east, and that their current position was unknown.

It was inevitable that they would know we were making a move. I just hoped they couldn't imagine what that move really was.

We flew on.



I don't think I've ever been on a flight that was so mentally draining.

Every single moment was spent fighting the tumultuous environment in an attempt to maintain formation with ponies who, most of the time, I could only perceive through colorful E.F.S. indicators.

It was with immense relief that Hail Burst spoke, without assistance of the radio. "Popdown and rally." The voice was quiet in the dense clouds, but both Downdraft and Soaring Heart echoed the command, and it made its way back along the formation, quickly passing out of earshot.

I nosed down, entering a gentle dive as I maintained position. The occasional flicker of light showed I had drifted above Hail Burst's level, and I corrected.

We leveled out at the very edge of the clouds, slowing to a halt, and I breathed a sigh of relief. It was still quite dark, but now I could see much more of the formation. Better yet, I could see the ground spreading out below me. A quick glance at the map revealed we were directly above Point Firefly.

I wiped away some of the accumulated moisture from my helmet's lenses, and looked down. Far below, nestled into a tiny valley in the rough terrain, I could see a half-dozen ghostly rectangular shapes, ever so slightly paler than the terrain around them.

Hail Burst gestured in a circle with her hoof, and the formation condensed. As they did so, Hail Burst drifted closer to hover right before me. "Any activity?"

"None," I said, with a shake of my head.

"Good." She looked around to her fellow pegasi. "Let's make this quick and clean. Spread."

The Loyalists quickly spread out, individual groups separating from the others. A few seconds later, Hail Burst made a sharp gesture with a forehoof, tucked her wings, and plummeted downward.

A second later, every single pegasus was diving, plunging toward the ground in silence.

Only I remained there, hovering at the edge of the clouds, watching the receding forms descending in the darkness.

I turned to my equipment, double-checking every PipBuck screen. Everything was ready. Serenity was, for the moment, silent.

The radio in my right ear squawked softly, followed by Hail Burst's voice. "Alarm."

There was a little spike of adrenaline, despite the simple meaning behind the codeword. It wasn't a call to alert, like you might think. It was simply the opposite of "Snooze". It meant we were no longer on radio silence.

Of course, we were no longer on radio silence because that was a matter of stealth, and stealth was about to no longer matter. My hoof moved to a button, hovering.

The left earbud came to life. "Hey! We've got fliers coming—"

My hoof jabbed down, and the transmission turned to garbled digital nonsense. The heavy communications equipment strapped to my underside hummed with arcane energy as it flooded the Serenity frequency with random noise, overpowering the weaker transmitter.

There's a certain satisfaction in turning a foe's own trick upon them.

I immediately moved my hoof to the broadcast button. "You've been spotted! Jammer is on."

Far below, a storm of fuchsia lights erupted, illuminating the ground with flashes of impacts. A few shots sailed up into the air, return fire that had missed. Friendly channels were lighting up as individual team leaders directed their soldiers.

I switched over to another private channel to carry out my next responsibility. "Dusty, the raid has made contact with the enemy."

His voice came back with only faint artifacts. "Copy."

A few bursts of warbling nonsense sounded in my left ear. A couple channels had lit up, transmitting something that got through the jamming enough to not be discarded by the decryption program as random noise, but not clear enough to be understood. I turned in place, aiming the trio of antennas as I examined another PipBuck screen. Indicators popped up, pointing south.

I really wish I could have had more time, so I could whip up a program to filter out the noise I was flooding Serenity with to pick out their signal, but that was probably a multi-day project to get right. This close to the jammer, there was no way I was going to make out anything on the Serenity

net. Still, if I couldn't make out what they were saying, at least I could do direction finding.

There was just the small concerning fact that I didn't know of any Serenity forces to our south.

I looked out to the south, scouring the dark folds of the earth below. I had a bearing, but no distance. I didn't even know if the signal was important. Maybe they hadn't even been related to our attack. Maybe this was a completely unrelated bout of communication, and they were still unaware.

Several bolts of magic arced through the sky, shots that had missed the attacking Loyalists and sailed onward.

No, it was safe to say that anyone within several miles knew something was going down.

Hail Burst sounded in my ear. "Three, break north. The skywagon lifted and is trying to make a run for it."

A quick glance found the distant, dim outline of the skywagon leaving the camp, heading roughly north. They must have had someone in the harness, ready to fly. They were already leaving the heavy fighting behind. From what I could tell from my vantage point, the fighting was intense, and extremely one sided.

"These bugs are fucking suicidal!" someone shouted over the radio.

"They're protecting the wagon," Hail Burst replied. "Two, extend. Get distance, don't get drawn into a close fight."

"Trying!"

"One has casualties, will need medic once we're secure."

"Same for two!"

The skywagon was arcing around in a turn. I could barely make out the black dots of soldiers escorting it, and a short distance away, the pursuing Loyalists. Streamers of magical fire reached out, and the escort turned to engage, flying straight at the attacking ponies.

"Three has merged with enemy escort. No longer in pursuit. Target now tracking south."

The skywagon had leveled out, sweeping past the dying fight at the camp. Several Loyalists broke away. "Four is breaking south, in pursuit."

I quickly scanned ahead of the skywagon. If they turned to fly by the

force attacking them, there must be a reason for it.

It was a good ten seconds before I caught a glimpse of movement, and a few more before I picked out exactly what I had seen. I quickly keyed in. "Enemy forces inbound from the south, about twenty or thirty of them, maybe three miles out."

"Copy. Four, change of orders. Bring that wagon down."

As much as we might want to capture that megaspell, depriving Serenity of it was even more important. Capturing it had always been a long-shot; no doubt they'd be prepared to detonate it, rather than allow its capture and potential use against them. The Loyalists flew into this fight with full knowledge of this.

Magical bolts sailed out in long streams. Even the distant fire drew a few flashes of hits from the skywagon. The pursuing Loyalists were already faster, and as the skywagon weaved evasively to avoid the incoming fire, that edge grew.

I glanced out south again. "Enemy forces at two miles now."

The fighting at the camp had ended. Soaring Heart swooped down to tend to the injured while the rest regrouped and sped south. I pushed forward, flying along above them as I skimmed the underside of the clouds. Several more flashes lit up the side of the skywagon, and it banked away again. The pursuing Loyalists were only a couple of hundred yards behind it, and as it banked into a turn, one scored an accurate burst. Fuchsia bolts smashed into the side of the wagon, producing several flashes and bursts of magical flame all around the cockpit.

The wagon continued its roll, inverted, and plunged downward.

"Splash! Target going down!"

"Bugout!" Hail Burst called, repeating it twice more. Every Loyalist banked hard, flying away from the stricken wagon at top speed.

The skywagon fell to the waiting ground, and at the last moment, I saw a flicker of sickly green at its rear, darting away.

"Someling is carrying the bomb!" I called out. "They bailed out. It's continuing south!"

"Re-engage!" Hail Burst, and the Loyalists wheeled around again.

My radio direction finding gear was indicating more signals, almost all strong and from the south. The fleeing changeling was likely calling for

help. It would have been impossible to pick her out in the darkness, but the faint glow from the megaspell was like a beacon.

Hail Burst was on the radio, rapidly giving orders to different groups and coordinating their approach. It was perfectly clear that they couldn't catch the fleeing megaspell before it reached the approaching changelings. She was getting ready to smash through them.

As soon as the firing started, the difference in experience became clear. The majority of the Serenity force aimed straight at the center-most teams of the Loyalists, who were already turning away to pull their enemy in one direction. The other Loyalist teams, which had flown off to the other side, now banked around, lining up right on the Serenity soldiers' flanks. Their opening exchange of fire was devastating.

Within moments the fight had devolved into a chaotic storm of swirling black forms and flashing magic. Changelings and pegasi were completely indistinguishable at such a distance.

For a terrifying moment, I lost track of the megaspell. Then the faint glow caught my eye again, speeding away in a new direction.

While the individual team channels were swamped with radio traffic, there was little on the Loyalist command channel. I keyed in. "The megaspell is escaping, heading east."

"Understood," Hail Burst replied with remarkable calmness. "Pursue. Maintain visual. We will engage when able."

"On it," I said, and beat my wings hard, picking up speed.

The fleeing changeling was still trying to transmit. Only garbled nonsense reached my ear. I glanced to my map, hoping to see who she was trying to contact. Her course was leading her right toward the general area of the enemy army opposing us.

That also meant she was heading right toward our army with the megaspell.

I switched back to our private channel. "Dusty, things are messy out here. We're pursuing a changeling carrying their megaspell, but they're heading toward the army. I'm not sure if we'll stop them in time or not."

There was a telling pause before he replied. "Understood."

The furious furball of fighting had already died down to more sporadic fire. The number of black dots had dwindled.

"Three," Hail Burst called out. "Are you able to break off and pursue the megaspell?"

"Three, affirm. Breaking off east. No joy on target."

"Whisper, guide them in."

I pressed the button. "They're almost directly to your east," I said, pausing a moment as I looked back to the pursuing Loyalists, read the bearing, and did some quick math. "Eight five degrees from your position. About one mile out."

"Zero-eight-five, one mile, copy. Target altitude?"

"Low," I said. "She's pretty much skimming the ground."

I could see the cluster of forms breaking off from the rest of the fight, speeding east in pursuit. They made good speed, but there was a lot of distance to make up. I pushed myself harder, wings beating furiously against the weight hanging from my underside; I didn't want to fall behind.

Miles ticked by with disturbing speed.

Hail Burst reported that the enemy was driven off or defeated and that they were joining the pursuit. Then she called for me. "Whisper, relay to Dusty that the bugs have changed tactics. They're fighting like they don't care if they live or not as long as they take us down with them."

"I'll tell him," I said. Then, after a moment of thought, added, "Are you all right down there?"

"Casualties are light. Relay the message."

I did so, repeating the information to Dusty before giving my own additions. "Any changeling would give their life to protect the hive. We might see suicide tactics or other desperate measures."

There was another long pause before he replied, the background now filled with noise. "Noted."

I turned my attention back to the pursuit. The fleeing changeling had made good progress, but the Loyalists had made more. "Three has tally on megaspell. Committed."

They'd closed to about three quarters of a mile. It was too far for accurate shots, but they lobbed a few bolts. The megaspell-laden changeling veered as one passed nearby, then straightened out again, flying as hard as she could.

I double checked the map. She was ten miles from our army. With their army having pulled back three miles, that gave us... five or six miles until she

reached the rearmost elements, and a *lot* of support.

"This is Whisper. She's going to reach enemy lines before Three can catch her." I pushed my magic out, pouring it into my chest and wings. Muscles toned and thickened, bones growing in density, the armor growing tight around my chest. "I am engaging."

"Understood," Hail Burst said, with just a touch of skepticism.

I pitched down and plummeted, wings beating furiously. Within moments I was plunging downward at a tremendous speed, diving toward the rapidly-growing green dot. I quickly ran through the checks Sunbeam had described. Weapons showed a full charge. A toggle changed the display of SAFE to ARM. A targeting reticle appeared before my eyes. Fire mode was set to automatic.

The speed was almost too much, the wind whistling loudly around the equipment strapped to my chest. Maneuvering was growing difficult, with even gentle attempts at corrections threatening to send me out of control. I stopped beating my wings, holding them loosely at my sides, riding out the dive in a full stoop.

I could see the fleeing changeling in detail now, low to the ground and flying fast. She was clad only in light armor, the glowing megaspell clutched against her chest. A tiny shift of my wings and the angle of my tail adjusted my dive, the aiming reticle slowly drifting up until it was in front of her.

Fifteen seconds. I spread my wings slightly, pitching up a little more to track my target.

Ten seconds.

At five seconds, I bit down on the bit, loosing a stream of blindingly bright magic. I spread my wings more, pulling up to keep pouring shots into where I hoped she would fly. The reticle swung up over the horizon as my wings spread all the way, swooping up from my attack. I'm not sure how low I had gotten in the dive, but I'm certain the altimeter had dropped to two digits.

I banked, swinging back around and looked over my shoulder. My speed had brought me up a good ways, and I could see the lingering glowing remnants of my shots. A bright flash of green drew my attention back to the fleeing changeling, only to find feathered wings beating furiously away from me. She'd turned into a griffin!

I swung around, wings pumping hard to keep my speed up. I needed every ounce of it; she was flying even faster than before, likely having made the same kinds of alterations to herself that I had. If not for the advantage of altitude, she probably would have been out of my reach. I dove again.

At least she wasn't heading toward the rest of her army. That happy thought lasted only a moment until I realized what lay just north of us. A quick check of the map confirmed it: we were just two miles from Serenity.

She couldn't make it to the army before being intercepted, so she was trying for the closest bastion of safety, where hundreds of changelings could back her up.

"Three, this is Whisper. She's making a run for their hive, due north. We're two miles out."

"Copy."

Except now she was banking right again. I banked as well, quickly lining up and firing another burst, but I was practically perpendicular to her path. I misjudged the lead, with my shots passing harmlessly behind her, and then I was rolling level and climbing once more. Once I'd gotten a bit of height again, I started to turn, looking back to find her once more.

My radio blared. "Whisper! Break left!"

The urgency brought me into action before I'd really processed what had been said; I heard left, so I banked hard to the left, moments before a stream of magical bolts whipped through the air. She'd turned to engage me!

I tightened the turn, rolling almost inverted to dive, trading altitude for speed. A quick glance at the compass gave me a direction, and I pulled out of the dive low to the ground, speeding southwest and, hopefully, toward friendly Loyalists.

A quick glance over my shoulder immediately found her, but she hadn't pursued me. She had instead turned north again, and now she was the one with the advantage of altitude.

With a whistle of wind, several Loyalists swept past me, flying faster than I could manage. It was up to them now.

I called up my magic again, the armor loosening as I undid my modifications. "This is Whisper, disengaging."

"Copy, Whisper," Hail Burst replied. "Gain altitude, pursue, and observe."

"Will do," I said, already banking around and climbing, the world opening up once more as my viewpoint ascended.

The pursuing Loyalists had taken advantage of the brief dogfight to close in, and they opened up from a little more than a quarter mile. It was still a difficult shot, but any attempt to evade brought the Loyalists a little bit closer to catching the fleeing changeling-griffin.

I'd finally gained enough altitude to see, past a distant ridge, the partially constructed office building. "She's one mile out from Serenity."

The Serenity soldier was speeding across the valley. Only a low ridge separated her from the safety of her hive. Her evasive maneuvers were tiny, little bobs and weaves, but it was enough. Shots passed all around her, a few coming so close they might have singed her feathers.

She shot over the ridge and dove toward safety.

The pursuing Loyalists lobbed a few more shots, but as they reached the ridge, they turned sharply away. "Three is aborting pursuit. Entering orbit."

"Understood," Hail Burst said. "Whisper, where is it going?"

While the Loyalists circled the site at range, the lone Serenity soldier sped toward the half-constructed office building, stripping away her disguise in a flash of magic. She dove past a rusted bulldozer, right where we had escaped in our stolen motorwagon. "She entered the site itself," I said. "She's out of sight. Probably underground."

"Okay," Hail Burst said. "This could work. All flights, establish one-half-mile orbit around Serenity. We'll be holding and keeping the weapon penned in until ground forces get here. Whisper, call Dusty and get me an E.T.A. And tell him to hurry!"

I looked east as I switched channels. There, just a mile, maybe a mile and a half away, I could see lights. I allowed a small smile. I knew the plan; soldiers were told to keep their gear packed and ready to move out at first light. The moment I'd passed Dusty the word that we had engaged, he called the commanders he had previously briefed. He said he could have a hundred soldiers loaded and rolling out in motorwagons within five minutes of my call, maybe less.

After all, why make one sneaky move when you can make two with twice the distraction?

"Dusty, Hail Burst wants to know your E.T.A."

"About three minutes. What's up?"

"The megaspell is at Serenity now. Hail Burst is trying to trap it there, but I'm guessing she wants reinforcements before the whole hive comes pouring out."

"At Serenity where?" Dusty asked. "On site, or in the Stable?"

"Unknown," I replied. "It's not visible from the sky. It's indoors or underground."

"Understood. We'll figure it out when I get there."

I passed on the message to Hail Burst, who replied with a simple acknowledgement and nothing more.

Seconds steadily ticked away. I could see faint forms stirring in the partially constructed building. At least a dozen soldiers emerged onto the top floor, and it looked like all of them had power armor.

The guiding light of the lead motorwagon was finally climbing the slope of the nearest hill. As they reached the top, they disgorged ponies, along with several of the magical energy cannons. Within seconds, they were pouring out fire at the ancient buildings. Serenity soldiers, hidden in the buildings, returned fire, but they lacked a proper response to the heavier weapons. The group that had gathered on the top floor disappeared into the building once more.

I could see Dusty dismount from our wagon, while Sickle hauled out the antenna, which had apparently been reeled in for travel. Once they were clear, the wagon was moving again, gathering with the other unloaded wagons.

As the convoy rocketed off down the slope on their return trip, Dusty radioed. "Whisper, how close would that megaspell have to be to Serenity to take it out?"

"I'm not sure," I said. "Stable-Tec claimed that a Stable should be able to survive a direct hit, but they seem to have been overly optimistic about a lot of things, and others were less convinced. I never saw any detailed studies, but from what little I heard, a detonation within several hundred yards, maybe a quarter mile, would probably lead to the failure of the Stable. Keep in mind that's all speculation."

"So if they try to break out and we shoot them down, they might blow up their own hive. I suppose that might be some consolation." He didn't

sound entirely convinced of that.

"You're far too close to survive that," I noted.

"Then let's hope they don't want to die more than they want to kill us."

I sighed, but didn't reply.

The ponies on the ground were pushing up under the supporting fire of the heavy weapons. Dusty was being aggressive. Fortunately, it seemed to work. Any Serenity soldier who opened fire faced a storm of return fire.

A cluster of six changelings burst from one of the buildings, shooting up into the sky. Hail Burst immediately directed two flights to pursue. "Don't let them get to the clouds. If they can kick off that storm, they can sneak that megaspell right past us."

I felt my heart hammer at that, and I radioed Dusty to make sure he knew.

"That's what I was thinking," he replied. "We're trying to take the entrance to pin them down. I'm concerned about the other underground tunnels. We know they cover a lot of this place. We need to secure any possible exit."

Mareford soldiers had reached the edge of the site, taking position behind ruined cargo skywagons and the temporary construction shacks. The fighting was intensifying, close-range and hard, but Serenity's defenders had been pushed back. Our side had the momentum.

The last of the changelings racing for the clouds fell back to earth, shot down by the Loyalists. It bought us some more time, but only a little. I may not have any experience with weather manipulation, but even I could feel the growing humidity.

A faint, rhythmic thumping caught my ear. Looking east, I could just pick out the pair of whirligigs coming in, quick and low, with the Loyalist skywagon leading them. The trio landed on the back edge of the ridge, behind the heavy weapons. They disgorged their cargo of ponies, some thirty or so, and then took to the air again, rushing back for their next load.

There wasn't much for me to do but watch as the attack continued. Pushing the Serenity defenses back from the windows and doors was easy enough, but there the attack stalled. Ponies gathered at entrances, trying to force their way in, but it was slow going. The reinforcing ponies had taken up some of the side buildings, including the old C.L.T. offices we had previously investigated. Some of the initial assault force managed to take

the ramp we had driven the motorwagon out of. Otherwise, it seemed we were at a stalemate.

I continued to circle above, keeping an eye on a situation that had essentially turned static. Minutes ticked by. I glanced down to one of the PipBuck screens, eying a readout and doing some quick math. "Dusty, I've got about eight minutes left on this spark battery. I'll need to come down for a replacement."

"Make it quick," he replied, and I banked around into a dive, descending towards his position.

I came in a bit too quick and back-winged too late, my hooves skidding across the dirt for a couple of yards before coming to a halt. Dusty was keeping his eye on the situation, but as I turned and trotted up to him, he opened the case set beside him. Two more heavy spark batteries lay inside. I reared up, using my wings for balance as he pulled the almost-drained spark battery from the communications equipment, and plugged the new battery in its place.

"You're set."

The jammer whined back to life, and I gave a sharp nod before spreading my wings and taking off. It would have much better coverage at altitude.

That was about my grand total contribution to the fight for the surface of Serenity.

The whirligigs and skywagon returned several minutes later, unloading another thirty ponies that Dusty rushed to reinforce the uneasy hoof-hold. Serenity made counter-attacks, but Dusty was quite willing to give a bit of ground so that the heavy weapons could come back into play. We couldn't push into the ruins or the tunnels beneath, but they couldn't dislodge us. The rest of their army, weakened as it was, was either blind and deaf, or too caught up in a fight with the rest of our army to come aid the defense.

Not that they were a non-factor, mind you. It was ten minutes later when the flying vehicles returned again, flying close to the convoy of motorwagons for mutual protection. One of the whirligigs was smoking, with signs of magical energy weapon strikes along its side. When they landed, several of the ponies who exited were rushed to the makeshift hospital. None of them took off again; now that the rest of Serenity's army was aware of what we were doing, the whirligigs were far too vulnerable to fly alone.

Once all the wagons were unloaded and returning for another batch of ponies, Dusty started giving directions, and that's when the fight really kicked off. Another hundred ponies descended on the ruins. A cluster remained behind: Rangers, Mareford Militia using salvaged pegasus power armors, and the hulking form of Sickle. They loaded into the whirligigs and skywagon.

As Dusty directed the heavy weapons to lay down a storm of fire along the upper levels of the partial office building, the flying vehicles took off, rushing across the gap. One whirligig, Pidgeon, was small enough to land on the top floor. Even then, it was a narrow fit, slipping in between the open weave of girders that would have been higher floors, and which would have ripped off the vehicle's blades for the slightest error in judgment. The other vehicles came to a hover beside the building, with ponies hopping across the gap.

It wasn't a subtle move, and no doubt Serenity was already repositioning forces to deal with the new threat, but it opened up a new front. More importantly, it was yet another thing Serenity had to deal with, complicated by their impaired communications. Dusty was putting them on the back hoof, forcing them to react and keeping them off-balance, while the odds swung steadily in our favor.

On the ground level, ponies had pushed into the buildings. The ramp into the lower levels was firmly in our control, with more ponies heading in, pushing Serenity back. We were making progress, but I could see many casualties being pulled back from the fighting.

It was long and brutal, and all I could do was circle overhead, watching. The use of gas in the tunnels had been expected, and ponies quickly pulled back when it was used, giving back hard-fought territory. It prolonged the fighting, but every minute delayed was another minute closer to the next batch of pony reinforcements.

Less expected was the variety of booby traps. We first learned of these when a powerful explosion went off under one of the outer buildings, blowing it apart and collapsing an entire section of the tunnels. At least a dozen ponies were killed in the blast. Smaller charges showed up more frequently, hidden behind pipes or pillars. Casualties mounted.

Finally, a relieving report came back. "Command, Ranger Lead. We

have secured the outer Stable entrance. The door is sealed.”

Serenity’s Stable was cut off from the outside world. We’d forced them to seal themselves up.

That also meant the rest of the changelings fighting in the tunnels were cut off, not that it slowed them down any. They fought fiercely, bringing us to a standstill. It wasn’t until another wave of ponies arrived that they could finally push into the remaining sections of tunnel by sheer weight of numbers.

Serenity’s soldiers didn’t give up. They never wavered. They fought with ferocity and skill, making those ponies fight for every inch, even long after the fight was lost.

In the end, they all fell, but they took a good number of ponies with them.

Dusty gave the word. “All tunnels secure. Ranger Lead, keep at least a platoon watching the Stable door. We’ll get a plasma cannon there to help. Every other unit needs to reposition for external defense. They’ve still got the remains of an army out there. Once defenses are established, start getting your ponies some rest. They’ve earned it.”

Even circling overhead, I could hear the many cheers going up. Serenity was trapped. We were entering a siege, but that was just a matter of time.

We had won.



All around the surface buildings of the Serenity site, ponies practically collapsed in exhaustion. Some had only a couple of hours of sleep before being woken up and stuffed in a wagon. A few didn’t even have that much.

Heavy weapons were arranged in the upper floor of the office building and in other sheltered locations. Sentries were posted. The rest of the force, hundreds strong, found places to sleep. They demonstrated some remarkable creativity in the endeavour. I saw ponies tucked into concrete pipe sections, nestled in the nook of a partially collapsed wall, or laid out across conduits running along a tunnel wall.

The Loyalists were taking a well-earned rest. By the time we had all landed, many were looking just about dead on their hooves. They might not have captured or destroyed Serenity’s megaspell, but unless it had somehow,

inexplicably, slipped by us all, it was trapped somewhere in the hive. It was beyond our reach, but there was no way they could use it against us without destroying themselves.

Even Sunbeam looked exhausted when I returned her armor. She might not have participated in the raid, but she'd been flying rapid sprints with the skywagon to bring enough ponies into the fight.

When I looked at the weary Loyalists, I couldn't help but notice that their numbers were thinner. I knew some were injured, off at the medical section with Soaring Heart, but that didn't account for all of them. Five of the pegasi had not returned from the excursion.

The last convoy of motorwagons arrived almost an hour after the fight had ended. Exhausted ponies clung to battle-scarred wagons. They had been harried by Serenity forces on every trip, and the last had been the worst. Serenity had pummeled the last group of ponies defending the old camp, trying to crush them while they were out of contact. More than half of the defenders had been injured before the convoy had reached them, and Serenity hadn't let up. Two of the motorwagons had been damaged and abandoned on the way back, leaving some ponies hanging precariously off the sides of those that were still mobile; leaving them out there with the disabled wagons would have been a death sentence.

The motorwagons descended the ramp, pulling into the underground storage chambers for shelter. The ponies who dismounted looked tired and battered, and none more so than the crews who had just made a half-dozen trips through hostile territory. Even the most obstinate and confrontational of the Trotsen ponies paid me no attention, despite the return to my queenly form. They were too exhausted for it.

Of course, I wasn't there for them. I passed the first few wagons, until I reached our own.

Starlight slid out of the window, her usual nimble movements grown slow and slightly clumsy with fatigue. She dropped heavily to her hooves before looking up to me, and slowly smiling. She was still wearing the power armor Echo had repaired, though she had removed the helmet. "Heeeeey. How'd it go?"

"Well enough," I said, and sat down to draw a little more even with her. "And you?"

"I think I'm going to go sleep forever."

I chuckled, raising a foreleg, and she stepped in, wrapping her forelegs wearily around my chest. I dipped my head, nuzzling gently as I hugged her back.

We were both asleep when, just an hour before dawn, the rain started to fall.

## Chapter Forty-Seven

# In from the Cold

I stared out the second-story window as the rain poured down with a tremendous roar. Somewhere, far above, the sun must be shining down, but you could be forgiven for thinking otherwise. I couldn't see even a hundred feet in the dim, gray gloom. Every few minutes, a flash of lightning would cast sharp silhouettes through the pounding rain, accompanied by the powerful, rattling boom of thunder.

It had been raining for more than twelve hours, and showed no sign of relenting.

The world outside was mud. A small river flowed along what had been a ditch along the edge of the construction site. Several of the smaller tunnels, despite their working pumps, were partially flooded by the massive inundation. Even here, in the upper levels of the incomplete office building, everything was soaking wet. The wind was completely wild, whipping the rain around in random directions and getting water everywhere. The air was icy. Despite the pair of blankets draped over me, and Starlight tucked in close at my side, it was still unpleasantly cold.

We'd won, and now we sat there, bunkered down against the storm, with no idea of what to do next. So far, the consensus was that we would wait out the storm, then see what the situation was.

That left us with little to do. I did some more recordings, but even with the glut of activity in the previous two days, I soon found myself with little to occupy myself with.

The earbud in my left ear chirped and warbled, the volume turned down low. Serenity's communications were all nonsense. I'm not sure what the final straw had been, but they'd finally chosen to change encryption keys. I'd say that it was too little, too late, but they still had probably two hundred soldiers out there. Our soldiers had to remain alert and ready. Even E.F.S. offered no comfort; this close to Serenity, the top levels were within detection range, filling the compass with hostile markers in all directions. If Serenity decided to attack, there would be no warning.

What actually happened was... something else.

It was Axe, of all ponies, who radioed me. His voice was hushed. "Hey, Whisper? Get your buggy ass to the north side of the main building, ground floor. Bring that big bitch with you. And not a fucking word to anypony that I talked to you!"

I blinked in confusion at the strange message.

"The hell?" Starlight said, stirring at my side and looking just as confused as me.

Echo lay nearby, frowning down at her own PipBuck. "I do not trust that stallion. It is clear he has no good wishes for you. And is he asking for Sickle, or is he referring to me in such crude terms?"

Sickle grunted and snorted, her head jerking from the floor as she woke. "Urgh, wha?" She raised a hoof, wiping at her armor-clad face. "Somepony say my name? What's up?"

I groaned softly as I stood, leaving behind the tenuous warmth of my blankets. "I'm not sure."

She slowly stretched, giving a deep yawn before asking, "There going to be a fight?"

I hesitated, not entirely sure. "I don't think so. Probably not."

She wearily pushed herself up, armor rattling. "Well fuck, probably not is maybe yes. I'm in."

I couldn't help a wry smile. "You have such an amusingly strange sense of optimism."

"Yeah, I'm just a ray of fucking sunshine," Sickle replied, teeth bared in a grin.

I headed out, with Starlight, Sickle, and Echo all following me. Dusty remained behind, electing to go over his gear once more.

In the depths of the building, the pounding rain turned into a more distant, deep roar, echoing down the hallways. The stairs down were slippery, with the bare concrete coated in water and mud, but we managed without incident.

On the ground floor, as we made our way toward the north face of the building, a new sound reached my ears: yelling.

I walked faster. The yelling was a jumble of anger and eagerness, like a crowd cheering for blood. As I entered the last hallway, I could see a trio of Mareford ponies, weapons in teeth, eyes narrowed. They gave some shouts

as well, buried under the rest, but theirs were firm and authoritative to the crowd's emotion. One cast a glance down the hallway, seeing me, and lowered her weapon, her glare returning to the ponies they were shouting at.

I was almost to the corner when I heard a new voice behind the others. A cry of pain. A shout, pleading in tone, full of pain and fear. A voice that was clearly not a pony.

I prefer to act with a clear and rational mind, but emotion can be a useful tool. So, as the adrenaline flowed, it was with a clear and rational mind that I put on a mask of rage, eyes narrowed and teeth bared as I rounded the corner.

Several Trotsen ponies had confronted the Mareford ponies, their jeers and anger shriveling as they saw me. Eyes went wide, and several staggered back as I advanced. Past them, the rest of the large room was filled with at least fifty Trotsen ponies. Some, at the edges, looked displeased or concerned, with a few trying to calm down the more agitated ponies. It was those angrier ponies, at the center of the room, who drew my attention.

There was shouting. Jeering. Calls for blood and pain and worse. At their center was a lone, muddy changeling. A pony was pulling on her foreleg, and her pleading was cut off by a cry of pain as he twisted on it. I saw blood running from her mouth. Another pony was staggering back, having just delivered a kick to her abdomen.

The dim room abruptly turned green as I lit up my horn, eyes snapping to me as I gave a shout that could have made Sickle proud. "Enough!"

The nearest ponies staggered back as I stalked into the room, my head high and posture imposing. The ponies at the center of the room hesitated for just a moment at the sudden intrusion. I used that pause to speak first, voice cold and hard.

"What are you doing?" I demanded, fixing the ponies with my best glare.

The mare who had delivered the kick looked up to me, perhaps emboldened by her anger. "Fuck off. She's ours. We caught this cockroach trying to sneak in."

The changeling gasped and croaked out, "P-please, I—"

The stallion holding her swung a hoof at her head. "Shut your fucking —"

He didn't get the chance to land the blow. My magic grabbed around

his chest and foreleg and tore him away, throwing him against the nearby wall. It took a tremendous amount of magic, but I had plenty to spare and little reason to hold back. Heck, there's no way I could have even managed such a display of magical might in my natural form. Having a queen's horn had advantages.

The stallion collapsed to the bare concrete floor, groaning as he tried to get his hooves under himself again. I continued to advance into the center of the room, with several ponies stepping back. "Do not mistake my general civility for timidity," I said, teeth still bared as I looked around the room. "Let me make this perfectly clear to you: I am here to protect *people* from cruelty, whether they are pony or changeling. Anyone who insists on *behaving* like a raider will be *treated* like a raider."

The mare in front of me had apparently regained her confidence, puffing up her chest as she squared off with me. "Hey, fuck you! Trotsen ain't going to be pushed around by you fucking bugs. You don't scare us."

Sickle gave a loud, snorting laugh. "That's because you're a fucking moron."

The mare shot Sickle a glare. "Oh, fuck off. I'm talking to queen bitch."

"You're about to get torn in half by that queen bitch if you don't watch your fucking mouth," Sickle said, advancing a step. "I mean, shit. I've seen her walk through a fucking mountain of corpses to get here. She's wiped out raiders, mercs, monsters, big fucking robots, and all sorts of other shit. She's probably the most dangerous cunt I've ever met. Fuck, why else do you think I'd tag along with her?"

"But you know what?" Her muzzle split into a savage, almost manic grin. "All those fights, all that killing, and I ain't ever seen her even *half* as pissed as you dumb motherfuckers got her right now."

The mare glanced my way. I met the look with a cold, hard glare.

"And she's the *nice* one," Sickle growled, drawing the mare's attention back to her. "She's the one always trying to help ponies and shit. Me, I'm just here for a fucking fight. So how about it, little bitch?" Her hoof suddenly raised, thumping into the mare's chest and shoving her back several steps. "You talk a big fucking game for a cunt who can't even fight a scrawny little bug without somepony else holding them down. Come on. Try a pony that ain't held back, you little chicken-shit. See how that ends for you."

The mare regained her balance, glaring back, but smartly chose to not take Sickle's invitation.

Sickle advanced another step, and while the mare held her ground, she still didn't retort. Sickle followed with a sneer. "Pussy. Ass. *Bitch*." She turned away with a dry laugh. "This is fucking pathetic."

The gathered ponies grumbled, some glaring back at Sickle, but none challenged her. It seemed the appropriate moment to step in. "Enough," I said, looking to Echo. "Take and bubble the changeling."

The changeling, who had remained still during the confrontation, floated from the bare concrete floor, a purple shield snapping into being around her. As she floated over to us, I looked around at the gathered ponies. "This fight isn't about ponies versus changelings. It's about right versus wrong. There are still hundreds of Serenity's soldiers out there. Fight them. But if they are captured, or surrender, then they will be treated fairly. Period."

I turned to walk away, leaving on a note of finality. I heard some murmurs behind me, some clearly angry, but ignored them. Echo watched over her shoulder, likely waiting for an attack.

Several more Mareford soldiers had arrived, and all were relaxing now that the situation was resolved. The soldier who had first caught sight of me even gave a nod as I passed, which I silently returned.

The moment we were in the hall and walking away, my hard expression crumbled. My ears fell, my head sinking.

I don't like using threats and strong-hoof tactics. Generally, I see them as a failure of reason, but I also knew that they were tools to be used in the right situation. However mixed my feelings might be, I felt this was one of those situations. Trotzen ponies seemed to recognize and respect strength, and I wanted to make it perfectly clear that this behavior would not be tolerated. I think I had delivered that point.

The walk back was in silence, aside from Sickle, who walked along with a happy strut. "You know, I think I'm starting to enjoy this whole 'talking' shit." At least she was in a good mood.

Dusty was on the radio when we returned, engaged in a hasty exchange with Two Bits. By now, word had filtered up to him. Dusty looked up from his PipBuck, first at me, then at the changeling. "Is everything okay?"

"It's been resolved," I said, a bit of the earlier firmness lingering in my tone. "I may have to abuse my apparent position of power."

"Oh?"

"I declared that anyone acting like a raider would be treated like a raider, regardless of whether their victim is a pony or a changeling. I'd appreciate it if you could make that an official stance of the army."

Dusty gave a snort. "I'd have thought that was perfectly damn clear, but yeah, we'll do that."

"Thank you," I said, looking back to Echo and gesturing for her to follow.

Sickle flopped down to rest again, while Echo and Starlight followed me into the next room.

I sat with a long, deep sigh. Starlight sat beside me, her movements slow and cautious. Her side brushed gently against my carapace. Her eyes were full of worry.

"Are you okay?" she asked, voice quiet.

I gave a slow, tired nod. I felt like I could fall asleep right then and there, as if it would let everything pass me by, but there was more to do. "Could you get out your medical supplies?"

As she quickly dug through her bags, I looked back to Echo. "You can release her."

Echo frowned. "I do not think that is a good idea."

"She couldn't possibly kill me before either of us could stop her. It will be fine."

"I still feel that you are excessively optimistic in your evaluation of potential risks," she said, but she lowered the changeling to the ground, the bubble of purple energy vanishing.

The changeling was in pretty poor shape. She lay on the bare floor, her breathing rough and ragged as she watched me with wide, frightened eyes. Mud still clung thickly to her legs, with smears and spatters in many places. The side of her muzzle was smeared with blood, which ran down to trickle from a fang. Her carapace was discolored in a few places where she had been struck hard enough to bruise through the exoskeleton. Surface cracks crossed her cheek, back, and flank, with a full-depth crack running for several inches along the side of her chest. She held her leg—with a PipBuck still buckled to it—tight to her chest, protecting and cushioning the injury.

I sighed, then reached out with my magic, gently cradling her. Her mouth opened, wavering for a moment before shutting and remaining silent. She trembled as she continued to stare at me, terrified. I couldn't even blame her. A changeling queen holds a special place of reverence and awe. It is a remarkably short step from awe to terror.

"Here," I said, floating over a healing potion. She flinched, eying it carefully. "I want to apologize for how you were treated. We may find ourselves as enemies, but that doesn't excuse what they did."

She was still trembling, eyes turned back to me. She ignored the potion. Her mouth opened, wavered, and shut again. Her eyes were watering.

"What's your name?" I asked, my voice quiet and gentle, prompting her.

She hesitated, but finally managed to croak out a word. "Calypter."

"Calypter. I like the name." I floated the potion a little closer. "Here, drink up." She finally relented, taking a slow and careful swig. While she was busy with that, I floated up a washcloth from the supplies, gently removing some of the mud.

There was something surreal about it. She was so tiny and fragile beside me, and I had to remind myself that she was about the same size as I was in my natural form. I think she might have even been taller than me. Supporting her in my magic, gently wiping away the mud from her carapace, it felt like an almost motherly tenderness, like she was a hurt child I was comforting. Yet the truth was that she was probably a well-trained soldier, a survivor of the previous days' of fighting. Or, possibly, an Infiltrator trying to pull a trick.

She hissed softly as the crack along her side sealed itself, leaving only a thin line. I gently gripped her PipBuck, turning the screen upwards as I switched it to the medical screen and read the information there. "Well, it's not perfect," I said, "but at least it's an improvement. Now, I apologize, but I'm going to have to take this, at least for the time being."

Her mouth opened to object, but shut again, merely staring at the device as I unbuckled it and set it aside.

I returned to cleaning away the mud. "So, those ponies say they caught you trying to sneak in. What really happened?"

She slowly twisted, trying to pull free of my magic, and I released her. She pushed herself up, winching, but finally got herself into a sitting posture. She took several slow, deep breaths, her expression steadily setting. When

she finally spoke, her eyes were firm and focused, though she couldn't quite look me in the face. Only the faintest of tremble showed behind the determination. "I came to... talk. To you."

Now that was interesting, I thought. I carefully maintained my expression of soft neutrality, casting a quick glance to the confiscated PipBuck. "You approached them... undisguised?"

She nodded. "Yes."

I frowned, a hint of anger stirring in the background. Attacking a just-discovered spy at least had a bit more of an excuse than abusing someone who had surrendered openly, not that I considered either action justified. I pushed that emotion back. "And what did you want to talk to me about?"

Another deep breath. The tremble grew slightly, and her eyes wavered. There was a clear struggle to force herself to speak. "I... I wanted to plead with you." Her eyes drifted up to mine, then snapped back down to my chest, unable to hold eye contact. "I-I beg you. Please spare my hive."

My ears drooped once more. The metaphorical weight was heavy on my shoulders. I sighed, and saw Calypter shiver at the sound, assuming the worst. My voice was even quieter when I spoke again. "We are in an awkward situation, aren't we? I've seen enough changelings die for a lifetime, and I have no desire to see more. At the same time... I think it's clear the current situation can't be allowed to persist. It's a problem that's been hounding me ever since we started this venture, and I still don't see a good solution."

"Please," she said, again trying and not quite meeting my eyes. "You beat us. What more do you want?"

"Myself?" I pondered that for several long seconds before replying. "I was sincere when I was talking to those other ponies. This isn't about ponies versus changelings. There doesn't have to be that adversity. If anything, I think this alliance has shown that changelings and ponies can work together, and be stronger for it."

She looked down.

"I don't want to see your population exterminated. I would prefer a peaceful resolution. At the same time... your hive has repeatedly hurt ponies through lies and deception. We can't trust you. I can't even trust that you're actually a soldier, and not yet another Infiltrator trying to find some weakness to exploit."

Her ears drooped, tears gathering. Whether it was a calculated move or true despair, it was still a painfully emotional display.

"Don't despair," I said, voice soft and comforting. "I wasn't trusted when I first revealed myself, either. I earned trust through my actions. The changelings of your hive can do that, too, by showing that they can coexist with others. You have the opportunity to lead the way to a better future, by helping us to bring an end to this conflict."

Her jaw tightened, ears folding back. A tremble ran through her, though her eyes remained fixed on my hooves. "I-I came to ask for mercy," she said, her voice tight. "But I will never betray my hive."

"And I wouldn't ask you to," I said. "You clearly have a strong conviction. Whether you're a soldier or an Infiltrator, you risked your own life to approach an attacking army, intending to speak with a foreign and possibly hostile queen, all with the hope that you might save others in your hive. I'm not going to ask you to betray that. I *admire* that."

I raised a hoof, reaching out to her chin and gently but firmly nudging upwards until she was looking at my soft smile. "I want the same thing as you. I don't want to see more changelings die. So I would ask you, please, help me find a solution to this conflict. Help me show these ponies that we can coexist, and save as many of your hivemates as we can."

She had gone still. Her expression slowly softened as I spoke, her eyes widening.

The hint of surrealism had returned. The scene had a certain familiarity to it, with a scared and desperate changeling looking up to a tender and confident queen, but it was all wrong. I could see myself all too clearly in her. I'd been there before. I could clearly remember the feeling of fear or despair, and the comforting touch of Queen Ephema's hoof. I remembered feeling so small, yet buoyed up by her presence, her compassion, her confidence. It was almost like looking in a mirror.

Only it was more than just a change in perspective. Now, I was the confident and compassionate queen, calmly and tenderly reassuring a scared changeling. It was all backwards, and should have felt all wrong, but it didn't. It wasn't even an act. Everything I had said was what I felt was right. Seeing the fear fading to hope brought a feeling of pride and happiness, a sense that I was doing the right thing. I could save some of these changelings, even if

it was just her. I knew already that good changelings could come from her hive, and I hoped that she might be one. From what little I knew of her, I kind of liked her.

At that thought, her reaction made sense. We might be on opposing sides, and I might not be able to trust her, but I did like her. She could sense that. The emotion I was giving off wasn't of a heartless queen bent on the destruction of her hive and the deaths of her kin.

Of course, she couldn't trust me, either. A skilled Infiltrator can stir up feelings in themselves, and can retain the clarity of mind to act according to their goals rather than their feelings. While I presented all the signs of being genuinely compassionate, it was perfectly possible that I could be trying to play her. Despite that, my response had apparently been more gentle than she had expected, and must have suggested that her hopes might not have been in vain.

To be absolutely fair, even though I was starting to like her, I wouldn't have hesitated to blast her if it should become necessary. I'd be disappointed, of course, but I was too well-trained to let emotion get in the way of doing what was necessary and right. They'd tried to assassinate me three times already.

I slowly slid my hoof away, returning it to the floor. "So that brings us to the big question. How do we resolve all of this?"

She blinked, gaze fixed on my smiling face for a moment before she looked away again. "Um... I... I don't know..."

I hummed thoughtfully. "Well, I suppose we can start by establishing the absolute conditions that must be met, and then working from there. Does that sound good?"

She looked to me again. "Conditions? What conditions?"

"Well, to start with, the people being held in your hive will have to go free."

"What?" Her wings gave a couple of beats, her head drawing back. "But we'd starve!"

"You would have to make friends with ponies, yes," I said with a nod. "I've already shown that it's possible to do so openly. I get more than enough love from my friends."

I finished by inclining my head toward Starlight, who, finding herself

suddenly at the center of attention, gave an awkward smile. “Uh, heh, yeah.”

Calypter looked to her, then back to me, her expression hardening. “Friends? Like those ponies who beat me?”

I sighed. “I know, it will be complicated by recent events, but not all ponies are like that. Some of the other Trotsen ponies were trying to stop it. It may not be easy, but there are ponies who would try to help. Gemstone preaches Kindness and Generosity, and I’m sure they’d do what they could. Seroon seems like a very compassionate and wise individual, and I’m sure there are many in Mareford who would follow his lead. And of course, I would be helping. We won’t let you starve.”

Her gaze wavered, finally looking away once more. “Doubt it matters. The hive isn’t going to give them up and trust in pony *generosity* for survival. You just have to look around the world to see how *that* went.”

“Then we have two options. Either we, you and I, figure out how to convince at least some of your hivemates to free those prisoners, or we’ll have to figure out a way for the army to rescue them.”

Her ears folded flat. “I won’t help you attack my hive.”

“I understand,” I said, “but they will have to be freed, one way or another. I’d prefer to negotiate their release, and avoid violence. Will you help me with that?”

She hesitated before silently nodding.

“Good. The next condition would be the disarming of the hive. We can’t trust all of your hive to have peaceful intentions, so we’ll have to remove the industrial and military power that let you become such a threat.”

She grimaced. “So we’d be entirely at the mercy of these ponies.”

“You’re already at the mercy of these ponies. At least this way, the ponies will be supporting and protecting you. You’ll have to work alongside them anyway, to develop the friendships you’ll need to survive. We can at least start things off on the right hoof, by making this as peaceful as possible.”

Calypter was silent for several seconds. “...What else?”

I paused, considering that for a moment. “I think that might be it for absolutely necessary conditions. You’d have to surrender to pony authority, of course, but what happens after that is likely to be up for negotiation. I’m sure we can come up with something that’s mutually beneficial.”

“I doubt it,” she mumbled, slowly shaking her head. “You want my hive

to give up everything. I don't think they'll listen."

"Then we'll need to find a way to get them to listen," I said. "So we need leverage. Something to simultaneously show them that they can not win this, and that these ponies will treat them fairly if they surrender." I gestured to the vacant window and the pouring rain beyond. "How about the rest of the army? I'm under the impression they're in bad condition. Battered, low on supplies, exposed to a harsh storm, and with a much larger army between them and the safety of home. I'm guessing that contributed to your willingness to come before me?"

She hesitated, then nodded.

"And are there others who are open to the possibility of negotiation?"

Again, she nodded.

"Then perhaps we should appeal to them. We have supplies and shelter to care for any who surrender. You can serve as an example of the sincerity of the offer. If we can convince them to surrender, they can serve as a similar example to the hive as a whole, and hopefully convince those still in the Stable to surrender peacefully."

Another pause. "...Okay. I'll try. I'm just... I'm not sure how many will listen."

"I know, but we have to try. I think what you're doing is the best course for the survival of your hive, but I know not everyone will see it that way. I may not know your hive personally, but I know well how strong the devotion can be. There will likely be some who will fight to the death rather than surrender. There may even be some who would prefer to see their hive destroyed rather than compromise. We may face difficulty on both sides, but we will do what we can to save as many lives as possible."

I saw the tremble run through her, and I lifted my hoof again, this time placing it on her shoulder, reassuring. "I've faced the fear of my own hive's possible destruction, Calypter. I have no desire to see any changeling ever have to go through that again. I hope we can save most of your hive, but even if we're only able to convince a few other changelings from the army to surrender, at least your hive will have a future."

She still trembled, eyes watering, but nodded, looking up to me. "Okay."



Two hours later, I sat by a wide upper-floor window, looking out into the storm. The icy mist spattered against my carapace, forcing me to squint into the gloom. The various work lights around the site had been arranged outside the building and turned on. They struggled to pierce the torrential downpour, while leaving the interior only dimly lit, concealing our positions.

Calypter sat nearby, still and silent. She'd already done her part. Before she had set out to see me, she had confided in a few close friends. They'd arranged a frequency and key to communicate privately if some emergency came up. She'd contacted them, detailing what had happened. A few minutes later, she broadcast a wider message to the army, explaining the situation and pleading with her fellow soldiers to follow her lead.

It wasn't clear yet how well-received the message was, and Serenity had already gone through the process of changing out encryption keys again, leaving us cut out of their communications once more. Her friends had agreed to surrender, and had said they would persuade any who would listen to come as well.

Three minutes ago, her friends had radioed again on their private network. They were heading towards us, with a good number of other soldiers. They were coming in from the southwest, as we had instructed them. Dusty had arranged the most disciplined of the Mareford soldiers there. Two Bits was some ten yards away from me at another window, to watch over events and give directions. Several Mareford Rangers stood guard around us, weapons ready.

We waited, wary and hopeful.

The rain pounded the wet earth in a dull roar, but I caught another sound. There was something faint and distant, almost hidden behind the rain. It repeated several times, without any apparent pattern. It was several seconds before I recognized them as the discharge of magical energy weapons. I peered out into the rain. I saw nothing but darkness.

Seconds later, one of the Rangers at the next window raised her PipBuck, reporting the shots.

Calypter stood—drawing an alarmed twitch from Echo—and moved

to the window. Her ears were perked alertly, though she squinted against the blowing rain. “What’s going on?

My own ears drooped. “I think they’re fighting each other.”

Calypter cast an alarmed look my way.

I turned to my own PipBuck. “Dusty? There might be a complication. It sounds like part of the army is trying to stop the changelings who are surrendering. The surrendering soldiers may be coming in under fire.”

“It can never be simple,” Dusty replied with a grumble. Then, more professionally, “I’ll make sure everypony is ready for it.”

“Thank you.”

Calypter was at the window, her hooves on the sill as she watched and waited. I sat, still able to see over the edge just fine. The darkness continued to yield nothing.

The sounds grew steadily louder, and almost a minute later, we could see flickers of red and purple light. They steadily grew, until we could pick out individual bolts of light. A few even sailed out of the darkness; some hit the ground before us, a few sailed overhead, and a couple struck the face of the building.

Multiple calls went out over the radio, ending with a long burst of fire from one of the nearby Rangers. Both Calypter and I flinched at the sound, a string of tracers lashing out at the source of the distant fire.

“Two Bits!” I called out, looking down the wall. “What are you doing?”

“Relax,” he said. “We’re just suppressing that shooter.” The stallion beside him had a belt-fed weapon, and every few seconds put out another second-long burst.

“Just be careful of who you’re shooting.”

“Yeah, we know our job,” he replied, his tone neutral and matter-of-fact rather than offended.

The volume of magical weapon fire rapidly decreased, but didn’t cease entirely. Flashes and flickers of light filtered through the rain. A few flashes lit up silhouettes, fuzzy and indistinct in the rain. Soon those silhouettes started to resolve into hastily moving forms, moving quickly our way.

“Eyes on!” one soldier called out, with reports quickly spreading down the line.

I leaned close to the edge, half-shielded by the wall. A flash of lightning

lit the area in a strobe, highlighting dozens of forms before plunging back into darkness. The after-image lingered for a few seconds before clearing enough to find them again. I could make out the pony-like silhouettes of the closest three, moving with obvious difficulty in the thick mud. They staggered and struggled, working hard just to make a slow walking pace.

Several more bolts sailed out from some distant assailant, immediately answered by another long burst of return fire. The incoming forms all staggered and ducked, but were quickly moving again. I could already pick out the silhouette of curved horns, and the occasional glint of blue eyes reflecting the lights.

They were only about twenty or thirty yards out when the lights finally illuminated them. The closest pair trudged through thick mud, sinking nearly to their knees with each step. They carried almost nothing with them, just light armor and mud-caked PipBucks. Light glistened from wet armor and carapace.

I could hear ponies shouting instructions to the incoming changelings, though I couldn't understand the words past the rain. More changelings were coming into sight. One had a sodden blanket draped across her back and head, reminding me of my early days in the Wasteland. Another still carried her weapon, pulling the sling over her head as she stepped into the light and letting it fall into the mud. Others still had their rifles strapped across their back, seemingly dazed as they trudged forward almost mindlessly toward the waiting shelter. Another changeling was helping to support a companion with an injured foreleg, and from the lack of bandaging or splinting, it appeared to be a very recent injury.

There were even a couple of power armors, including one soldier in Steel Ranger armor with a pair of changelings laid across her back. There were many shouts, and they halted some ten yards out, turning away. The ponies below were taking no chances, making them get out of their armor, then sending out a half dozen ponies to help carry the wounded in.

The firing in the background finally stopped as the final few changelings trudged into sight. The last was a pair, with one changeling weakly struggling to drag another. She floundered, collapsing in the mud, seeming unable to rise again. A squad of ponies made their way out, fighting against the thick mud, and dragged both of them back.

Nothing else moved out in the gloom.

I stood, turning to Calypter. “I’m going to go check on them, to make sure everything is going well. You should stay here for the moment. When I get back, we can see about talking with the rest of your hive.”

She nodded. Even past the spray of mist from the broad window, I could see her eyes were watering again. She was watching the defeat of her hive, and knew she had a hoof in it.

I placed a hoof gently on her shoulder, offering a momentary gesture of compassion before turning and walking away. Starlight and Echo followed; the Mareford soldiers at the entrance could watch Calypter for us.

The ground floor was a busy place. A large room, likely intended as an open office space for a large team, was now filled with ponies and changelings. While there were a few Mareford soldiers standing guard, most were still at the outer walls and windows, ready to defend against any attack. Instead, most of the ponies in the room were from Gemstone, alongside Seroon and a couple of other zebras.

A pair of fire-pits had been arranged on the bare concrete floor, and most of the changelings were huddled around these. It was a pitiful sight. Most were huddled up and shivering, their armor having been traded for dry blankets. I could see one changeling soldier, shaking uncontrollably, and seemingly too worn out to even help as a pair of ponies unbuckled her armor and wiped away the worst of the mud. Her expression was distant, almost haunted.

It was an expression shared by many of the exhausted changelings in the room. As I made my way through the room, few even acknowledged my existence. None spoke. The looks I did receive varied. A few looked to me with hatred. Others, with fear. Several watched with a mix of curiosity and concern, as if waiting to see what this foreign queen did next. But mostly, the ones who looked at me did so almost entirely devoid of emotion, as if too exhausted by their ordeal, both mentally and physically. It was as if they had lost all capacity to care.

Some ponies were starting to pass around small bowls and cups of soup. It looked like a thin vegetable soup, mostly broth. The Gemstone ponies had quickly cooked it up, and while it was probably not very filling, it was something hot, and that likely mattered far more. Changelings cradled the

steaming cups and bowls as they were passed out, taking careful sips. Only a few managed glares at the ponies passing it out. Most were too focused on the source of warmth, assuming they were able to summon the emotion to focus on anything at all. Some were clearly just going through the motions, as if lost to a trance. A few were in such poor shape that they had to be helped, with a pony carefully feeding them.

I slowly made my way across the room, to where the heaps of armor, PipBucks, and a few weapons were gathered. It was also where Soaring Heart and a couple of other Loyalists were gathered, tending the injured changelings. The one I had seen with an injured leg now had a simple splint, and Soaring Heart was wrapping some magic-infused bandages around the side of another changeling, who hissed weakly in pain with every movement. I could see the discoloration of burns across her carapace, peeking out from behind the bandage.

I halted a few feet back, giving them room to work. “How are they doing?”

Soaring Heart glanced my way before returning to his work. “No critical injuries. These four are the only serious injuries, and they’re all stable. The only real concern I have now is hypothermia, and Dazzle’s taking care of that. From what little I got out of them, they had almost nothing in the way of shelter or supplies. Most of it went up with their logistics.”

Two Bits had arrived as well, and I spent a short time talking with him, getting more information, before returning upstairs.

Calypter huddled by the wall, and quickly wiped at her cheeks as I entered. I walked up and sat by her side, while she tried to hide her awkwardness.

“Fifty three made it here,” I said, my voice quiet and gentle. “Four were injured, but they’re stable. As for the rest... well, they’re recovering. I know the storm is a strong one, but I hadn’t expected them to be in such poor shape.”

Calypter’s reply was quiet. “You blew up most of our supplies.”

“I suppose we did,” I said, giving a soft sigh. “Well, they’re warming up now, and we’ll see that they get proper food and shelter. How much of the army is still out there?”

“I don’t know,” Calypter murmured. “Maybe a hundred.”

I nodded, mentally correcting my assumptions of their army's strength. "I hope the rest will surrender before their situation gets even worse."

She remained silent.

"Well, as much as I'd like to let you rest, I think we may have to move to the next stage." My horn lit up as I floated over a PipBuck, one of the new ones we had confiscated. "If we want to get a message to the rest of the hive, we'll need to do it before they change encryption keys again. Do you think you're up to it?"

She hesitated, but eventually nodded, reaching out to gingerly grasp the PipBuck.

"Do you need any help?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No. I... I already thought out what I should say..." She brought the PipBuck close to her chest, switching over to the radio screen. She switched channels, then reached to the broadcast button. She hesitated, hoof wavering for a moment, and pressed down.

"...H-hello."

Her voice almost cracked, and she released the button and swallowed. A different voice came across the radio. "Unidentified speaker, Comms reads you. Identify."

She took a deep breath, exhaled, and pressed the button again. "Hello," she said again. "M-my name is Calypter, soldier basic grade, currently assigned to second platoon, Alpha company. The army is... is defeated. We can not continue to fight. Most of us have surrendered. They're allowing me to use this broadcaster to contact you."

"We... we can't beat them. If we keep fighting, it's not going to end until we're all dead." Her voice choked up, but she pressed on. "We can't win this, but... but the ponies are willing to negotiate a surrender. They've given us food, shelter, and medical aid. We're being treated well. They're willing to extend this to anyling who surrenders. If we—"

"Enough!"

Calypter jerked. Even my own heart skipped a beat at the angry voice of Queen Chrysalis.

Calypter fumbled at the broadcaster. "M-my queen! I—"

"Be silent!" Chrysalis snapped. "We have heard enough of your mewling. To imagine that such cowards could have wormed their way into the ranks

of our army. These ponies have already destroyed the world. We will not be baited by their lies, and we will not throw ourselves at their hooves, just to be stomped out! They know they will never take our hive, so they try to lure us out to our destruction. And you... you're working with that treacherous foreign queen, helping them against your own queen and hive."

"N-no! I'm trying to help us, to save—"

Chrysalis cut her off, practically growling into the radio. "You have betrayed your hive, betrayed me, all for the empty promises of a queen that's already taken advantage of our hospitality and murdered your sisters. Now you recite her poisonous words, helping her to tear down everything we've accomplished. You have turned your back on your hive and your duty. A strong changeling would have been willing to give her life for the good of her hive, but you'd rather be a slave to a new queen, trading the lives of your entire hive for whatever meager comforts she promises you.

"You, and all the other traitors, have turned your backs on your hive, so I turn my back on you. You no longer have a place among us. Better to have died for the good of the hive than to live as a traitor and slave."

Tears were gathering in Calypter's eyes, her hooves trembling. "Please, my queen—"

"You do not get to call me that any more," Chrysalis said, her voice icy. "I do not want to hear another traitorous word from you. Only actions can speak for you, now. You want to earn your place back? Then you turn to that vile and treacherous queen, and sink your horn into her black, shriveled heart!"

Calypter trembled, growing so strong that I could see her horn wobbling back and forth. Tears ran down her cheeks as she struggled to control her breathing.

Her head turned my way, eyes glancing, but she froze again, clutching the PipBuck like a lifeline. Past the pain, I could see struggle, emotions warring against reason. Somewhere in there, I suspect she was evaluating her position, my defenses, Echo's reaction time, the amount of force it would take to actually penetrate my carapace, all the factors that might go into her queen's last demand. The odds of success were practically nonexistent, but emotion was unlikely to care.

I raised a hoof again, gently slipping it across her back to rest on her

shoulder. She tensed, the tremble growing... and then gave a weak sob, her head slowly sinking. I gave a gentle squeeze, hoping I could give some small degree of comfort, despite being the source of the conflict causing her such anguish. She remained tense, but didn't fight it. She simply let the PipBuck slide from her hooves as she broke down into tears over all she had lost.

I remained silent, letting her crying run its course. She twitched or jerked every now and then, changing position, starting to push back against my gentle embrace or leaning against my side. A couple times, her horn ended up resting against me. I wasn't worried, even if I was very aware of it. She didn't have the room to give a proper stab, and she'd never be able to build up magic quickly enough to strike. Echo was watching her like a hawk.

Eventually, her trembling started to subside, her sobs growing quieter, and I spoke up. "I know my words can't offer much comfort right now, and I hope you won't take offense to this, as I don't intend any insult, but... she's wrong. We both know you're not doing this for some personal reward." I slid my hoof up, gently touching the side of her head, and her eyes cracked open to look at me past all the tears. My own expression was somber, ears low. I could perfectly imagine how much pain she was going through. "Whatever else happens, you have guaranteed that your hive has a future. Remember that."

Her head slowly sunk down again, eyes closing, but she gave a weak nod.

I gave her a gentle pat on the back. "Take your time. When you're ready, we can take you to join the others."

It was a good ten minutes later when she finally wiped away the last of the tears and rose to her hooves. She looked so tired and fragile, even ignoring the lingering injuries, but she forced herself to stand upright. Her hooves were shaky, but she pushed herself on.

I gathered up my bags, and we made our way down. We passed the ground level to reach the warehouse-like tunnels outside the Stable. Unlike the smaller side tunnels, the drains and pumps were keeping the main chambers dry. The sound of rain was distant, echoing faintly from above.

A section of the storage level had been set aside for the surrendered changelings. A group of six Mareford soldiers stood guard at the entrance to that section, and from the looks of their position, Dusty had posted them

there as much to keep ponies out as changelings in.

Calypter came to an abrupt halt some ten yards away. I stopped as well, waiting as her mouth moved in a silent attempt to force out the words, until she finally managed to speak. "What do I tell them?"

The small flicker of happiness that she would ask my advice was buried under the weight of what she asked me. "About your queen?"

She nodded, and I sighed. "I'm afraid I can't offer an easy way out. They'll find out eventually. It's unpleasant, but deceiving them is only likely to make things worse."

She sighed, weakly nodding.

"But Calypter?" She looked up at me, with my ears low and eyes full of concern. "Please, try to be gentle about it, and... and try to keep them from doing anything drastic out of grief. There's been enough death and suffering already. More won't help anyling."

She swallowed, nodded again, and resumed walking.

I let her lead the way past the makeshift walls that separated the changeling area from the rest of the storage lot.

The area we had given them was one of the more pleasant available. Between the two fires and the walls keeping in the heat, it was actually somewhat pleasantly warm, or at least not as frigid as our place upstairs. There was plenty of room for the changelings, and Gemstone ponies were moving around the room, setting out whatever they could arrange for bedding. Dazzle was among them, smiling and talking with a changeling who looked rather more wary about the whole exchange. There were a few more Mareford soldiers, as well, keeping an eye on things. They looked professionally attentive, but relaxed. There hadn't been any trouble, then.

Blankets had already been distributed to those who had none, and empty crates had been arranged to form makeshift tables and chairs. The fires were both made out of empty barrels, with metal grates set on top to serve as a grill. One already had a large pot bubbling atop it. It wasn't luxury by any means, but it was at least as much comfort as our own side was enjoying, and apparently far better than what these changelings had out in the storm.

The changelings looked much improved, as well. The dazed and numb looks had faded, even if they hadn't entirely vanished. Most seemed to be treating their new situation in an admirably matter-of-fact fashion, with

neither fear nor hostility. Even the injured changelings were doing well. While two of the injured were resting in their makeshift beds, having been given the best of what was available, the other two were upright alongside their uninjured kin.

The changelings' reaction to my entrance was less neutral. Most of them looked my way. Expressions hardened, eyes watching me carefully. There was still little in the way of outright fear or anger, but they clearly didn't trust me.

I stood tall, speaking in a calm but clear voice. "Excuse me."

All eyes were on me, including Calypter's. She stood by the nearest group of changelings, her tail tucked down between her legs. I assume she had expected some unpleasant reaction from her fellow soldiers, but they were too focused on me to spare her any attention.

I stepped forward, so I was perfectly visible to all in the room. "I wanted to express my gratitude for your peaceful surrender, and to affirm the promises we have made to you and your hive. I hope to continue working towards a resolution that doesn't require any more bloodshed. While we continue our work toward that end, I will also be working with Dusty Trails, the commander of this army, to ensure all surrendered members of your hive are properly cared for."

My horn lit up, the flaps of my saddlebags opening. Six love crystals floated out on my magic, full and glowing. I set them on the nearby table, the closest changelings eying them with surprise and suspicion.

"If there's anything that you need, or if you feel you are being mistreated, please bring up your concerns with any of the ponies here, particularly Dazzle or the other Gemstone ponies." I gestured to Dazzle, who smiled and waved to the gathered changelings. I had to smile as well, seeing her happily helping these changelings. She was a perfect embodiment of Gemstone's ideals, and I had no doubt there were some changelings very confused by the emotions she must be radiating.

I continued. "If they're not able to resolve the problem, then they'll bring it to my attention, and I will personally see to it that the situation is taken care of. I know you have little reason to trust me or any of these ponies at this time, but we will do our best to earn that trust through our actions. I just ask that you give us that opportunity."

With that said, I dipped my head, just enough to show a small degree of respect. Then I turned and made my way back out.

I was just reaching the exit when the first changeling cautiously took up one of the love crystals I had left them. I had a momentary pang of regret. Those were the same crystals Queen Ephema had left behind for my sisters and me. They were one of the few things I had of her.

I shook the feeling off. There was something fitting about this. A new queen, using those very same crystals to feed some lost and scared changelings. The smile returned, and I continued on.



Dusty had broken out the food by the time we got back. We shared a meal of old oats with a side of vegetables, then sat back with a dessert of canned fruit. I got a can of peaches in heavy syrup.

I was just starting on it when Starlight scooted up beside me, a can of mixed fruit cocktail held in her magic. “You know, you make a pretty good queen.”

I blinked, almost dropping the slice of peach I was about to eat. I looked over, seeing her warm smile. It took me a moment to formulate a reply, as simple as it was. “Thanks. Though to be honest, I was just doing what felt right.”

Her smile grew, and I could swear there was a glint of mischievousness behind it. “So being the whole super-nice and regal queen is what feels right, huh?”

I snorted out a soft laugh. “Well that’s an incredibly generous way of phrasing it. No, I just had a good role model. Still...” I paused, trying to sort out my thoughts. I finally just shook my head, quietly saying, “I wonder if this was what it was like for Queen Ephema?”

Starlight’s head cocked to the side. “Hmm?”

I floated a slice of peach up, savoring the taste before swallowing. “Queen Ephema wasn’t always a queen,” I said, looking to Starlight again.

She blinked. “Really?”

“Mmmhmm,” I said, nodding. “She was hatched as a regular changeling, just like my sisters and me. When our hive was founded, she was changed into a queen. All it takes is enough love.”

"Really?" she repeated, almost dropping her can. "You mean, you can actually *become* a queen? Like, for real?"

"That would take a *lot* of love," I said. "Normally, an egg would be infused with the love. It takes much less to do so early in development, but there's nothing preventing it from being done with an adult. It just takes a lot more."

She was staring at me, wide-eyed.

I responded with a shrug. "We're changelings. Change is in our nature. Quick shapeshifting isn't the extent of that magic. It's like how I heal so fast from injuries. An injured changeling's natural magic burns through love faster, altering their body to shift away the damage. It's great, so long as you have enough love."

"Huh," Starlight said, setting her can down as she stared off into space. "So... Ephema did that, then?"

I nodded. "Remember, the first Chrysalis was the only queen in her hive. When she died and the survivors scattered, there wasn't a single queen among them. Our new hive had the option of waiting to raise a new queen from an egg, or elevate an already grown and educated changeling to the role. Given the hive's precarious position, they couldn't really wait."

Starlight nodded. "...So how about you, then? You could be a queen for real, right?"

"I... I could. I don't know. Maybe."

"Hmm." She picked up her can once more, leaning lightly against my side. "Well, I think you'd make a great queen."

I gave a soft chuckle, smiling down at her. "Thanks. And I guess I'm going to be stuck with the role for at least the next decade or two." I looked off into space, quietly musing. "It's kind of nice having the future being clear enough to think that far ahead. Dealing with Serenity is just a matter of 'when', not 'if', now. After that... I can bring back my hive."

She grinned. "I'll bet you do great at it," she said, then nudged me in the side. "So, think you might have any use for a scavenger, hunter, and guard?"

"I certainly wouldn't turn down the help, or the company." I looped a foreleg around her shoulder, giving a soft squeeze. "You sure about that, though? That's a long time I'm going to be stuck in once place. It's not exactly great adventuring opportunities."

"Hey, you remember how we met, right?" She chuckled, tilting her head to point her horn to her Lancer. "Me playing at being a guard. Hunting around in ruins for cool tech is fun and all, but what I really want to do is help protect ponies. Uh, people. And you've got like a hundred-something little 'lings that could use protection. I think I could be happy with that." She shrugged. "Plus I've got the wagon, so I can take off every now and then to scavenge some ruins, just for a change of pace. Pretty much everywhere is 'nearby' with that thing."

Across the room, Sickle started snickering. "Just say you want to fuck her, dumbass."

"I can have other reasons for sticking around!" Starlight shot back, and stuck her tongue out at Sickle. Then she asked, "What about you? What are you doing after all this?"

Sickle snorted, tipping back her own can to get the last of the pear chunks before tossing the can away. "Fuck if I know. I guess purple-bitch already killed off any raiders in the region—and I'm still tempted to kick your scrawny flank for that—so I don't have much else to do. Guess I could do whatever I want. I mean, I'm all famous and shit, now. Got to be some opportunity there."

Starlight sat abruptly upright. "Wait, famous?"

"Well, yeah!" Sickle said, chuckling. "While you dumb cunts were hanging back, I got right into the fighting. First into the bunker, first into this building, and plenty of stomping heads. Plus, you know, I kinda stand out. Gave 'em a good show, too. One of those Serenity cunts shot me in the side with those big magic guns, gave me a nice new scar, and I just turned and caved her fucking head in, power armor and all. Those Mareford shits looked like they couldn't believe I was still standing. Kept trying to drag me off for healing."

I looked to her side and that missing armor plate. She hadn't removed her armor, but I could still see the knotted, burnt flesh beneath it.

"So yeah, I can pretty much go wherever I want. I dunno. Got to be some group out there that knows how to fuck." She fished around, eventually pulling out a beer. "Think I might start at your little hive, though. You've got ice cream."

"Ice cream," Starlight echoed, her voice skeptical.

"Fuck yes, ice cream! Chems I can find anywhere. You know how hard it is to find fucking ice cream?" A grin spread across her muzzle. "Hmm, you got a bunch of freezers and shit there. Maybe I can figure out how my mom made that stuff."

Starlight's face went taut. "Your *mom*?"

"Forget you heard that," Sickle said, absentmindedly tapping her beer bottle against the bars of her muzzle. "Shouldn't be too hard. Hmm. Finding milk might be a problem."

I swallowed the last slice of peach, floating my can over to the collection of empties. "Sickle, you've made how many thousands of caps in the last couple of months? You could *buy* a brahmin for milk."

Sickle stared silently, blinking. "...Holy shit, I could buy a brahmin. Fuck yes. All the ice cream I can eat." She leveled a hoof my way. "Okay, I'm crashing with you for a while. Need to do something about the whole 'fucks' situation, but we'll figure something out."

Starlight managed a strangled chuckle, lost somewhere between hilarity and disbelief. "Seriously? Terrifying raider to raider-hunter to war-hero to *ice cream mare*?"

"Hey, I can still kick more ass and get more sex than the whole lot of you." She grinned. "I just get to do all that *and* have ice cream. Or do you not want any?"

Starlight gaped for a few moments before sitting back. "...Okay, ice cream does sound kinda good."

"Damn straight it does," Sickle said, finally turning her attention to her beer.

Starlight softly chuckled, then looked over to Dusty. "So, what about you?"

Dusty looked up from his PipBuck. "Hmm? What about me?"

"What are you going to do after all this?"

He paused, giving it a good long thought before shrugging. "Hell if I know. I think I'm about done with all this army stuff, though."

"You've got to have some idea," Starlight said.

"Ehh." He shrugged. "I'm pretty sure Two Bits and some of the other Mareford folk want me to come and help them. Two Bits hinted something about being mayor, but screw that. Then there's all these changelings that

need handling, and nopony knows how they're going to do that. Hell." He sighed, sitting back. "At this point, I'm starting to think it might be time to retire. Maybe some light duty, like watching the wall at Gemstone or something."

I smiled. "Well, if you're looking to settle down, you're always welcome at my hive. You probably did more to make this possible than I did. Plus, I'm pretty sure there's plenty of coffee and cigarettes you didn't already loot."

He snorted out a laugh. "I'll think on it."

"Guess that just leaves you," Starlight said, now looking at Echo. "What are your plans?"

"That should be obvious," Echo replied, setting down her own can. "Once this nonsense is done, I will finally have the time to properly analyze Whisper's magic and research how it could aid my mother's cause. Once that's done, I will finally be able to free ponies from the hazards of the wasteland, by helping them rise above it."

"Poetic," Starlight dryly noted, before continuing on more cheerfully. "Personally, I'm thinking saving the world deserves a good vacation. I am going to kick back, relax, and just have fun for a while. Seriously, Echo, try relaxing and having a little fun for a week or two. It'll help."

Echo frowned. "Research is fun, especially when it's magic. Or advanced arcane technology."

Starlight chuckled, rolling her eyes. "Well, as long as it keeps you happy."

The conversation meandered on for a good half an hour before fatigue started taking over. I had a smile on my face as I settled down for bed, Starlight cuddling up against my side. There was something nice about being able to just kick back and chat like this, almost unconcerned. It was something we'd been missing the last few days, like a returning piece of normality. A ray of sunshine breaking through the clouds, showing the brighter times lying ahead of us.

There was only a little more to do. We had to finish dealing with Serenity, wrap up the last of the conflict, and we'd be on to new and better things. Already, thoughts were coming together, pieces of a broader scheme falling into place.

But that could wait for morning. There would be plenty of time to think on that. Right then, I just focused on cuddling up with Starlight

under those blankets, and drifted off to sleep.

## Chapter Forty-Eight

# The Infiltrator Queen

To start off, I'd just like to apologize if this particular recording isn't up to my usual standards. It's remarkably difficult to form a larynx that has sufficient audio fidelity with my natural voice while still fitting into such a small form, and the acoustics of the standard Stable-Tec ventilation duct leave a great deal to be desired.

Suffice to say, it's been an interesting day.



Everything kicked off almost exactly twenty four hours ago, when all the leaders of our army came together to form a plan. We met in the center room of the incomplete office building, where a crude table had been made from sheet metal and old sawhorses. I led with a simple observation.

“Right now, Serenity can simply bunker down and wait. We can’t siege them into surrender. They’re in a Stable. It was designed with the purpose of sustaining their population without any need for outside resources. Unless we want to have soldiers parked at their door for decades to come, we need to take some sort of action to force a surrender, or if necessary, destroy them.”

Hail Burst hummed softly. “What about sealing them in? Weld the door shut, collapse the whole site on them, all that? How long would that hold them?”

“Not long. They’ve got plenty of equipment, and seem to have a decent industry. There’s an entire level of the Stable dedicated to workshops. If I had to guess, they’d be able to dig themselves out in less than a month. They might even be working on an escape tunnel right now.”

Dusty leaned forward. “I’m guessing you have some idea of how to deal with this?”

I smiled. He was right, naturally. “I do, and better yet, it’s one that focuses on saving lives. Serenity is entirely dependent on the dozens of ponies they’re holding captive. Without the love they provide, they’ll be forced to either come out or starve. It would give us the leverage to force a surrender.”

"That would be nice," Dusty said, "but I'm not sure how we do that. We're not breaking through that entrance without massive casualties." He glanced to Echo. "Not even with her able to teleport in explosives."

"I'm thinking something a bit more complicated, less head-on. I'm talking about another raid. We've already seen how dangerous a group of ponies can be when brought in behind enemy defenses, especially when done by surprise."

Echo snorted softly. "While I appreciate your high appraisal of my abilities, I think you underestimate the difficulty of what you ask. You're talking about blindly teleporting into a location I have never seen, over a distance that we can only estimate. I can assure safety for the act of teleportation itself, but I could not guarantee where we would arrive, at least not on the first trip. A small misjudgment could place us in the completely wrong room, or even the wrong level. Worse, any assault team could be split up, and I might not be able to quickly locate and evacuate them if that were to happen. This would be extremely dangerous."

I nodded, still smiling. "I know, but what if it wasn't blind?"

She cocked her head to the side. "Explain."

Instead, I turned to Hail Burst. "The *Cumulonimbus* had video cameras, correct? Do you still have any?"

"Several, including one in each turret," she said. "I'm sure we have at least one that still works."

"Good. Because if we take one of those, couple it with a broadcaster, and attach one of those little lift-cloud things, we can use it to 'test the waters'. Echo teleports it in, we use the cameras to figure out where it arrived, and we adjust from there."

"Could work," Dusty mused. "They must know the danger Echo poses to them by now, so they've probably got internal defense already in place, but if we're able to organize a hard, fast raid..."

Hail Burst was nodding. "Bust in, get those ponies out, and force Serenity to act instead of hiding. I like it."

Dusty had frowned. "I'm not so sure that Serenity 'acting' is a good thing for us. Whisper, what's your impression of their queen? Will she surrender, or do you think she'd do something desperate?"

"I've had only brief encounters with Queen Chrysalis the Sixth, but

the impression I've gotten was of a very driven and determined individual, absolutely sure of the correctness of her actions. I tried getting more insight from Calypter, and while she is a bit... distressed by recent events, she was of the opinion that Chrysalis would never surrender to ponies.

"That said, I think I can still use the leverage the raid will gain us against the rest of her hive. I have no expectation of persuading all of them to surrender, but if we've removed their source of love and are offering the opportunity to surrender instead of just keeping them trapped until they starve to death, we might get some taking us up on the offer."

Axle grimaced. "And then the ones who don't surrender get trapped until they starve to death." He shot me a look.

"I'm not sure what to do about those who won't surrender," I said. "The fact is, a changeling queen holds a special place of reverence among changelings, much like Princess Luna and Princess Celestia did among ponies. There are some who will never surrender so long as their queen refuses to, and I don't see Queen Chrysalis surrendering. Honestly, despite the harsh conditions and the inevitability of their defeat, I'm still a little surprised that we've convinced as many to surrender as we have. We're up to..." I stopped, glancing to Two Bits. "How many are we up to, now?"

"I believe we're up to eighty two," he said, double-checking on his Pip-Buck. While there hadn't been another massive influx like the first group, surrendering changelings had slowly trickled in overnight and throughout the day. The lighter rainfall might have been a relief for them, but the rapidly dwindling supplies and numbers had convinced a few more to follow.

"Thank you," I said, nodding, before continuing on. "That's already more than I had expected we would manage when setting out on this expedition, and I'm feeling more optimistic for it. We know some of the hive is willing to surrender even without Queen Chrysalis. If we can put more pressure on Serenity, make them desperate, and then give them a way out, we might convince even more to surrender. Even if we don't, we still rescue a good number of ponies."

"Oh, yeah," Axle grunted. "Let's make them desperate while they're sitting on a balefire bomb."

Hail Burst's eyes widened. "Holy shit. The megaspell. We just need to use that camera setup, figure out where that is, and then we can have Echo

teleport in a bunch of explosives. Burn out the whole damn stable!"

"Let's focus on getting the captives out," I said. "We can look into our options, including the possible use of the megaspell, once we've gotten that sorted out. For now, I'd like to come to a consensus on this rescue attempt. Are there any objections, or shall we do this?"

"Seems like a good idea," Hail Burst said. "Only question I have is who we're sending in."

"You can work that out while we're preparing the camera system," I said. "Personally, I would imagine we want to sent our hardest hitters. Loyalists, Mareford Rangers, as many captured power armors as possible, all of that. Maybe some heavy weapons. I think I should go, as well. I've operated the suspended animation pods before, even if only briefly. I'll also want to get inside so I can see about splicing into their public intercom. If we're going to convince more of the hive to surrender, we need to communicate with them, and they're not listening to the radio."

Echo was frowning again, but didn't say anything.

"Works for me," Hail Burst said. "The assault force goes first, though."

I nodded. "Of course. There isn't any point in me being there until we have secured the control room, after all."

She nodded. "Okay. I'll see about getting you the equipment you need. Anything else?"

"I think that's it," I said, before looking around. "Are we agreed, then?"

Voices of agreement came from all around the table, and the group rose, heading off to their own tasks. I caught Dusty's attention, asking to speak with him privately. Echo's frown deepened, but she allowed us our privacy.

We stepped into a neighboring room, alone for the moment. Dusty stopped and turned, looking at me critically. "Putting off planning ahead doesn't seem like you," he noted. "What's up?"

I smiled. I do really love his insight at times. "I am planning ahead. I just didn't want to discuss it in public."

He sighed. "Okay, *that* seems more like you. Are you going to leave me guessing, or would you like to fill me in?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about." I walked over to the window, sitting by the window. With the rain reduced to a light drizzle, we actually had a view, even if it was fairly bland. "This raid is important, and we need

to get those ponies out, but I think we can do more with it. I want to use it as a distraction.”

“A distraction for what?”

“I’m an Infiltrator,” I said, shrugging. “Part of that includes scouting out or infiltrating facilities to gather vital information. We already know I can use their ventilation system to move around with some degree of secrecy, though I won’t say it’s entirely safe. That’s why I want to use a distraction. While they’re preoccupied with our raid, I want to use the opportunity to scout out the hive, and see what further action I might be able to take to end all of this.”

He was frowning, quiet and thoughtful. “...Depends. What ‘further action’ are you thinking of?”

“Two come to mind,” I said. “The first is simple: locate the balefire megaspell, so that we can either take it or detonate it. We can’t leave it in their possession. I am concerned that, if they are driven too far into desperation, they may decide to use it to wipe us out, even if it destroys themselves in the process. They may see that as preferable to being subjugated by ponies.

“The second is dealing with the greatest obstacle we face: Queen Chrysalis the Sixth. I don’t think she will ever surrender, and I expect the great majority of the hive will refuse to leave her side. I want to investigate the plausibility of removing her.”

“You mean assassination,” Dusty said. It wasn’t a question so much as a clarification of what I said.

“Yes. It’s a messy situation. Killing her may even harden some of the more devoted changelings, but without her presence, at least some might be willing to surrender. I think it’s worth investigating, to see if it’s plausible.”

He grunted. “I don’t know. You keep talking about how much changelings revere their queens. Killing her might make ‘em use the megaspell.”

“Which is why the megaspell comes first,” I said.

He was silent for a few more seconds before sighing. “Okay, yeah. Scouting things out might be good. Hail Burst was right; if we know where the megaspell is being stored, we can end this any time we want. We’ll just need enough time to get everypony away, but it only takes a few dozen to hold the door. We’ve got transport to get them away quick.” He

paused a moment before adding, “Good luck convincing Echo to go along with this.”

“I think I can handle that.”

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To start with, I visited Calypter again. Naturally, Echo wasn’t going to leave me alone and defenseless in the midst of all those changelings, so she walked with me, her critical eyes turning to any changeling who so much as looked at me.

My first stop was the center table, where the six love crystals sat, empty. For the second time, I pushed out my magic, the glow rekindling within them. I’d burned through a lot of magic in the past day. I was finding this regal disguise easier to hold, but it still drained a fair amount of magic. Add in feeding all these changelings, and it was starting to put some stress on me. Or more accurately, it was putting some stress on the people I was feeding on. Starlight had mentioned feeling more tired than usual. I’d have to start rationing a bit more.

With that done, I turned to find Calypter. She was sitting with a group of three other changelings, who all looked on uneasily as I approached them. Calypter looked particularly awkward, especially as I addressed her.

“Hello again, Calypter. Can we talk?”

She glanced around before looking back to me, her ears drooping. “I can’t really say no, can I?”

“You could,” I said. “You may all technically be our prisoners, but I’m not going to put that sort of demand on you. That said, I’d like to ask you something that might help your hivemates.”

She sighed and nodded. “Okay.”

I sat there, beside her and her fellow changelings. Echo remained standing watchfully behind me, while the other changelings watched, distrust and unease evident in their expressions.

“I’ve been talking with Dazzle and Two Bits,” I said. “We’ve been working out how to get you all situated and fed, once this is all over. I’ve only got the basic outline settled so far, but I’d like to get feedback from you, or any of the other changelings here.”

Her head tilted ever so slightly. “Uh... okay? What is it?”

"The short version is, they think there are places where they could use more hooves to help out. I think we'll be able to arrange food and housing in exchange for work. We all agree it would be better to at least offer the opportunity rather than just dumping you out in the Wasteland to fend for yourselves. I don't think that would be good for anyone."

Calypter frowned. "So we get to be slave labor or starve. Wonderful."

"Absolutely not," I said. "You'll be treated the same as any pony in the same job. I was prepared to insist on it, but they had already decided to do so without my intervention. It might be a good while before you'll be trusted with more sensitive work, like guard duty, and you'll probably be watched carefully at first, but you'll be treated fairly. And while I doubt it will be necessary, I *will* be double-checking to make sure that promise is upheld."

I could see their suspicion rising in their expressions. Perhaps I was playing the whole Generosity thing up too much.

I smiled and rolled my eyes. "If you're looking for any self-interest, my hive will have to live alongside ponies as well, once it's established again. It's in my interest to promote the acceptance of changelings as friends and equals. I think we'll all be better off working together."

They continued to stare at me, until Calypter grunted quietly. "Guess we'll see."

"There's a lot to be gained from such a cooperation," I said, still smiling. "We are far more versatile than ponies, able to adapt better to our roles. Then there's the advantage of flight. You might have noticed there's a severe lack of pegasi here below the clouds, which opens up a great many opportunities for us. We have a lot to offer. At the same time, ponies are also better than us at some things. Earth ponies have their innate magic, from strength to enhanced crafting to magical agriculture, and unicorns can perform magic that's beyond all but the most talented of changeling queens."

Calypter looked to the other changelings sitting nearby, who all looked equally unsure of what to think of all this.

"What I'm saying is, you're not going to be forced into dangerous or demeaning work, and there will be plenty of opportunities for better employment. Jobs like craftsmares, or couriers, or the like." I paused, then gave a little chuckle as I glanced at Echo. "Or magical research."

Echo eyed me warily.

I looked back to Calypter. "Actually, that might be a good example of cooperation. Echo here is conducting research into changeling magic. She believes she can make the world better for both ponies and changelings by crossing over the behavior of one species's magic to the other. She's been watching me shapeshift, though I have to admit, I've been a bit preoccupied lately. She might offer a job as research assistant. Love, food, and shelter, in exchange for shapeshifting every now and then. How does something like that sound?"

Echo's wary glare was now fixed firmly upon me, the other changelings forgotten. Meanwhile, Calypter cast a quick glance to her companions before turning a suspicious eye to me. "That certainly *sounds* generous..."

"We're trying," I said, smiling and giving a little shrug. "Though it wouldn't surprise me if Dazzle already talked your ear off about Generosity."

The change in Calypter's expression was subtle. Her ears twitched forward, head rising a hair, the hardness of her expression relaxing ever so slightly. "She has," she said, and as she spoke, I caught a momentary flicker of emotion. It was hard to make out, some low-level but sincere appreciation, perhaps. Dazzle was making an impression on these changelings.

Both sides were following in the hoofsteps of Emerald, in their own way, and my smile grew at the thought.

"Yeah, she's good at that," I said. "Anyway, I mostly just wanted to ask about that, to get a reaction to any plans for the future. There isn't anything firm in place just yet. Probably won't be, until this is all resolved. And..." I had steadily shifted to a frown as I talked, ending with my ears drooping slightly. "Well, there was another thing I wanted to ask you, and it's not quite as cheerful."

Concern had returned to Calypter's face. "What's that?"

I gave a sigh before continuing. "The situation is coming to a head. Right now, it looks like Queen Chrysalis intends to fight to the death, and she'll take the rest of your hive down with her. I... I know the previous attempt wasn't successful, but I was hoping you might have some insight on how we might convince your queen to surrender, instead."

Calypter's expression fell, ears drooping. She looked down, her voice quiet. "She's... not my queen. She disowned me."

"And I think we both know that doesn't make you any less devoted to her or your hive," I said, my voice soft. "Or that it makes any of this less painful."

She winced, turning away slightly. "...No." She huffed in a deep breath before continuing. "I... I can't think of anything."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said. "I'll still give it my best try, but at this point... well, I wanted to make sure you were forewarned."

Calypter's breathing had deepened, and I saw her blink several times. She didn't answer.

"I'm sorry," I said, rising to my hooves. "I hope I'll have good news when I talk to you again."

Still no answer. She sniffled once as I started to walk away.

I steadily made my way out, weaving through the small crowd of changelings. Every single one of them watched me.

We had just exited when Echo stepped up closer to me, her eyes narrowed. "What are you up to?"

"Echo, I—"

"You're going to do something foolhardy and reckless, aren't you?" she said, moving in close. With her hair flowing aggressively and wings spread, she did a great deal to make up the head's difference in height between us. "That's what that was all about? Right?"

I sighed, and motioned further down the tunnel. "We need some privacy."

"Fine." She stalked past me, and I followed, avoiding her strangely ethereal tail.

Once we had gotten a safe distance down the spacious tunnel, she turned to glare at me again. "Well?"

"To start with," I said, coming to a halt before her, "I do not intend to be reckless. I plan on taking a carefully calculated risk, and—"

"And you know quite well that your appraisal of risk and mine do not in any way match up. You risk not only your own life! You risk delaying the salvation of all ponykind!"

I habitually raised a hoof to correct her. "All people, not—"

"Ugh!" she groaned, throwing her head back in an exaggerated show of frustration.

"And in any case, I knew you would object, and that's why I wanted to bring you to speak with Calypter."

"Yes, I understand exactly what you are trying to do," she said, fixing me with a glare again. "You're being deceptive and manipulative to get what you want, *again*."

"I'm not being deceptive in the slightest," I said, frowning. "Misleading or hiding information would be counterproductive. The entire intent was to establish another source for your research if something were to happen to me, so I could then use that to ease your concerns, and none of that would work if I didn't present it upfront and clearly to you."

She frowned as well. "...Yes, well, it was still very manipulative."

"Ponies might not like to say it, but any conversation where one party wants to convince someone to do something they don't want to do is essentially manipulative in some degree. Coercion, rationalization, appeals to emotion, bartering, they're all ways of getting someone to do something they're not otherwise inclined to do. I'm bartering. You want a cooperative changeling to assist in your research, so I ensured you will have one, regardless of what might happen to me."

I gave her a moment to contemplate that before adding, "And I could also note that I've already arranged that assistance for you, regardless of whether you choose to accept my proposal in return."

Her thoughtful look vanished under a flat glare. "*That* is manipulative."

I smiled. "Maybe a little."

She held the glare for a couple of seconds before looking away. "You are so incredibly frustrating. Part of me wants to be angry with you, while another part of me admires the way you construct arguments in such a rigorous fashion. It's so... conflicting." She sighed and shook her head, fixing me with a fresh glare. "Fine. What are you planning?"



Echo's irritation was at least mollified once she started tinkering with the equipment I had requested.

The pair of cameras Hail Burst supplied us with were rugged devices, each about the size of a loaf of bread. While Echo and Starlight worked on getting one mated to a small lift-cloud generator salvaged from a cargo-

lift, I hooked up a spare PipBuck and broadcaster to the other for testing purposes.

A few quick tests with my diagnostics equipment mapped the outputs, and a bit of spell-matrix wrangling adapted the existing data-channel functionality of Serenity's encryption spell to work with the video output. More difficult was the awkward bridging of another PipBuck's receiver to a banged-up video monitor. Convincing the PipBuck's spell matrix to pass on the data stream was an awkward affair. I'm a little embarrassed to admit it, but in the interest of saving time, I kludged a solution by copying much of the functionality of the audio playback and rewiring the audio jack. I didn't even have a soldering iron, so it was all twisted wires and a few bits of stripped insulation tied around it to prevent shorts, with a few circuit connections simply wonderglued in place.

I didn't manage to get that all working until the next morning. As soon as we were done with breakfast, it was time to try it all out.

Both PipBucks were set to the new frequency. The monitor was turned on, showing static. Finally, I turned the camera to look out from the sheet-metal desk to where Echo and Starlight sat, and turned it on.

The static remained unchanged. I frowned.

A second later, a flicker darted across the very top of the screen. It repeated, just a hair lower. Then again, and again, and again. As it worked its way down, shapes and forms started to show, starting with the tip of Echo's horn and making its way down.

It was at least twenty seconds before the off-center image was complete, a single frozen snapshot of time.

The top of the image then started to fill with the next frame, identical to the first. This was a problem. Contrary to what the screen was showing, Echo now had an expression of confusion and dissatisfaction, while Starlight wasn't even there any more, having moved to look at the monitor.

"Well," she said, cocking her head to the side. "It kinda works."

I'd finally adjusted the display to center the image, and another little tweak adjusted the horizontal and vertical size to more-or-less fill the display. The second frame was complete, slowly being replaced by a third. "Not well enough to be useful," I grumbled. "I'll have to check a few things. Maybe there's something in the spell matrix that's holding up the process."

So it was time for one of the most time-consuming and difficult parts of any complex project: troubleshooting and debugging.

The first step was simple enough: remove all of the intermediary parts and ensure that the camera and monitor were functioning correctly. I disconnected the PipBucks and broadcasters, and plugged the two devices directly into each other. The result was a perfect image with good framerate. This meant there was a problem somewhere in my solution, but this was a good thing; it meant this was something I could work on fixing.

Having established that the hardware on both ends was functioning correctly, I reassembled the chain of devices to investigate all that lay between. The next likely suspect was the encryption process, so I hooked up my own PipBuck and all my nice debugging tools, watching the spell matrix as it processed the video feed. Sure enough, it was using almost all of its processing ability on this data stream. This led to a short diversion before a second look revealed that it was processing the data as fast as the camera could provide it. It wasn't the bottleneck.

A little more digging turned up something unusual. The encryption program fed into a buffer that was then sent to the broadcaster for transmission, but that buffer grew at an incredible rate. Even with an entire frequency to itself, the broadcaster's radio simply didn't have enough bandwidth to transmit the data in real-time. I was trying to pour a waterfall through a garden hose.

I turned to tweaking the video feed. Stripping the color channels from the luminance channel turned the image black-and-white, but also gave a small improvement in the time-per-frame. Next was the much more complicated effort of messing with the camera's output. Its simplistic spell matrix was, ironically, much harder to work with, as it left me with fewer options to tweak. Many things I expect would normally be programmable were handled by dedicated crystal arrays, and altering them would have required rebuilding the whole thing. I eventually gave up and started replicating some of their behavior in a new spell on the broadcasting PipBuck.

This took up the bulk of the time, at least two hours. What I ended up with was a crude and likely far-from-optimal piece of spell-work, but it accomplished my goals. It stripped down the data and let me recompile it, with simple variables to control the resolution and the range of output

values. By reducing those, I was finally able to bring the size of the data stream below the bandwidth limitations of the broadcaster.

The resulting image was tiny and rapidly scrolling end-over-end. I had to tweak the monitor's settings all the way to their limits to get the display working properly. In the end, the video was grainy and washed-out, but I had cut the time-per-frame to about a tenth of a second. The entire chain of multiple encodings and decodings, plus transmission time, had also led to a good quarter-second of latency, but I was willing to overlook that. If I had more time, I might have worked on improving it, but it was sufficient for our purposes.

The time this took gave Echo and Starlight plenty of time to finish their part. By the time we sat down to lunch, they had gotten the camera-cloud floating, with a pair of desk fans wired up to a receiver. A simple tone broadcast on the right channel would activate each fan, allowing it to pitch and yaw.

Echo waved a hoof dismissively when I praised the ingenuity. "Compared to advanced arcano-tech engineering, this was trivial." She managed to hold out a whole three seconds before adding, "But it was fun."

After we presented our work to Dusty, it was time to get things rolling. While I prepared the equipment I would need for my own mission, he contacted Two Bits and Hail Burst, calling them over to brief them face-to-face.

By the time I had returned, a small bag in tow, they were down to discussing plans and tactics. Dusty brought me in to brief them on what we would be facing.

"This entire level appears dedicated to their suspended animation technology," I said as I presented my PipBuck and the relevant map. We all huddled around the tiny display. "That presumably includes both the simulated Serenity where they keep their prisoners, and the combat simulations they used to train their soldiers. We were held in Simulation Chamber One, here."

I tapped the map. It was one of three chambers, separated by long halls that split the level into thirds. The chambers themselves took up most of the level.

"I only had the two brief experiences with the place, so I can't say what most of their standard operating procedures were, but I can tell you what

the situation was when I was there. The chamber appeared to have an operating staff of eight. The one policy I do know is that there is a hard minimum of two staff in the control room at the back of the chamber, here. Two more were roaming the section, checking systems and the like. And finally, there were four changelings in pods, managing the prisoners inside the simulation. I don't know what percentage of their time they actually spend in the pod, and it's possible there were extra that day because of the new prisoners. That said, they're oblivious to the world outside, but the control room has a way to communicate with them, and they appear able to revive themselves if they don't get a response.

"So we can expect a minimum of four to eight changelings. Given that they're certainly aware of Echo's teleportation and will take steps to mitigate its threat, there may be soldiers stationed throughout the Stable. The staff might have also been armed."

"That's a lot of territory to spread out guards," Hail Burst noted. "And we cut off most of their army. Even if they prioritize a few key locations, they'll be spread thin until they can reinforce. If we catch them by surprise and move quickly, we might be able to take a few defensive choke points and hold them. What are we looking at for access points?"

"That depends on how much we plan to take and hold," I said. "I have no idea what's in the other two simulation chambers. Given the size of the simulated combats Serenity conducted, it's possible that the entirety of those chambers was used for that purpose, but I can't be sure. We'd have to actually go in to find out."

"Couldn't you send in the camera?"

"They're likely to be occupied, and the teleportation isn't very subtle. If we do it before kicking off our attack, they'll know something is about to happen, and have a good idea of where it will be. During the attack itself, teleporting the camera means not teleporting soldiers, and let's not forget that even Echo's magic is finite."

Two Bits leaned in to peer closer at the map. "...Okay, the first chamber will be the primary objective. If we use that back hallway as a choke point, then it's just that and the two doors into the main chamber. We'll probably want to push out a little, and if we hold each end of the hallway outside those doors, and the intersection between them, that's four, with good fallback

positions. We can lock that down with a few squads, while the rest push out to check the other chambers.

"If we do need to hold them... hmm. It looks like there's only four stairways and three lifts, and there are two pairs that open into the same room. That's just five access points for the whole level. That's easily doable. We'll need more ponies to sweep the rest of the level, but once that's done, they'll have a hell of a time uprooting us."

"It may not be that simple," I said. "Remember, these are changelings. We can be very tricky. Shapeshifting into a smaller form can turn any vent into an access point. They may not be able to make an assault out of the vents, but if there's an unobserved room, they could easily arrange the same sort of surprise attack we're planning."

"That... puts a damper on things. Hmm." He looked over the map some more. "How long do you think it will take you to get ponies out of the pods?"

"Assuming I remember the procedure correctly, it's about thirty seconds or so for the pod to cycle open, and less than a minute before the subject recovers consciousness. They'll probably be disoriented and erratic, so waking a large number at once might cause problems."

"Echo can teleport them out as soon as they're out," Hail Burst said. "Let the ponies out here deal with that mess."

"Not a bad idea," I said, nodding. "Saves us time, too. Assuming you're up to that much teleportation?"

Echo was frowning, her gaze shifting slightly before fixing on me again. "It should be well within my ability... so long as there aren't too many."

"Even after teleporting everyone in?" Two Bits asked. "Because looking at this, I'm putting a hard minimum of two platoons to do this, if we have to push out to secure those other chambers, and that's assuming we fall back quickly. I'd prefer three."

Echo tilted her head. "How many is that?"

"Eighty to ninety ponies, minimum. Preferably more."

Echo's frown deepened. "...Yes, I believe I should be able to do that... but I am not certain I'll be able to get everyone out again without a rest to recover. I shall try my best."

"How long a rest?"

She contemplated that for a moment, her eyes darting across the ceiling as she made calculations. “Approximately an hour, if I am able to rest. Less, if we could find a source of radiation. Maybe as much as two, if there are a lot of ponies to be rescued.”

“Two hours is fine,” Two Bits said. “If we can get two platoons down there, we should be able to hold that chamber indefinitely.”

“Just be ready for any tricks,” I said. “They had gas defenses outside the Stable. They may have more they could use inside. They might also do like they did on the *Cumulonimbus* and breach a wall or ceiling to make a new access point.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I’ll be planning internal security, too. My plan is to move quick to secure the secondary objectives, then fall back to the primary. Teleport out any ponies in the secondaries that we can, haul the rest back, and hold until Echo is able to get everyone out. That minimizes the risk of breaching. As for gas, the rangers have masks. I assume those power armors of yours do, too?”

Hail Burst nodded. “Our face-masks have filters. I’ll make sure everyone buttons up for the op.”

“Good, because I definitely want you in on this. You, the Rangers, and all the captured power armors. Round out with experienced Militia units. Sound good?”

“Yeah.”

They turned to Dusty, who nodded. “Good. Bitsy, you’re lead on this. You can have your pick of the army. Make this happen.”

Two Bits grinned. “Yes sir.”



Half an hour later, the army was in motion. Under Sandalwood’s command, the bulk of the Mareford Militia was setting out into the light rain, taking up scattered defensive positions all around the site.

I had frequently lamented the two-dimensional thinking behind the E.F.S. design, so it was with some satisfaction that we were now taking advantage of it. Any Serenity defender would see hostile contacts in all directions, obscuring our movements. We had no idea how much of the Stable was in E.F.S. range of the surface, but at least the upper levels were.

Hopefully it would reach down to the level we were going to.

In the center room of the building's ground floor, our assault force had gathered. Almost a hundred ponies, many in power armor, stood ready to begin the rescue.

Dusty stepped into our room, where we waited with Two Bits. "Okay. We're all set up here. Bitsy, kick it off."

"Yes, sir," he said, and turned to Echo. "Find me a way in."

She nodded. "We should be directly above the target room," she said as she stepped up to the floating camera-rig. I watched the delayed image of her movements in the monitor. "The only question is estimating the correct distance down."

With a flash, the floating camera disappeared. The screen flashed with a single frame of nonsense, then turned dark. For a moment, I thought it had stopped transmitting, but then I saw the shadow of shapes. The room it was in was dark.

"Rotate right," I said, and Starlight twisted the corresponding dial. Somewhere below us, the camera slowly turned, and a quarter second later, so did the image it was sending us. As it turned, I could see shelves, loaded with boxes and other containers. "Bring it back."

The camera returned with a flash as I turned to my PipBuck, consulting the map. "...Yeah, that matches up with the storage room here, two levels up from the target. Near the ceiling, too."

"I see," Echo said. "I will try again."

Another flash. The screen flickered, then started showing blackness.

"Light," I said.

Starlight pressed a button, and the screen of the camera's attached PipBuck came to life, turned up to maximum brightness. It was near the floor, and as the camera panned around, we could see the room was plain, vacant, and sterile, with only a pair of benches within it. It was the same room I had been held in after waking up from Serenity's simulation. The same room where I had rescued Sickle. A reasonably sized room, just off the main chamber, but used infrequently at best.

"And you got it," I said, grinning. "You're low to the floor, but otherwise good."

Echo nodded. "One last check."

With a flash, she was gone.

A moment later, the video flashed, and Echo appeared, staggering as she dropped a foot to the ground. She straightened, and nodded, and teleported again. The flash of her arrival beat the flash of her departure in the video.

Echo gave a thin, proud smile. "We are ready."

Two Bits turned to Hail Burst. "Okay. You're up."

Hail Burst nodded and stepped forward. Five more loyalists followed as they gathered around Echo. Then, with a flash, they were gone.

Two Bits called out. "Next team, move up!"

I watched Hail Burst's team move to cover the door, while the next six Loyalists marched up to Echo. She looked at the monitor, and as soon as the first team had cleared a spot, she teleported the second group in.

Teleport after teleport, the number of ponies in the distant room grew. By the time the last Loyalist was teleported in, they were clearly running out of room.

The radio squawked and came to life with Hail Burst's voice. "Taking initial positions. Be ready on the music."

I cast a quick glance to the bulky communications equipment set beside the desk. The indicators were lit, and the spark generator it was plugged into was running. I keyed in. "Music is ready."

The Loyalists were already heading out the door. They would be taking up initial positions in the access hall, which would give plenty of room and easy defenses, but the chances of a random passing changeling spotting them went up significantly.

The moment they were clear, Echo teleported Two Bits and the first Ranger team. Following teleports took the other Ranger team, then two groups of Mareford Militia in captured power armor, including the massive Steel Ranger suit. Sickle was with them, and gave me a toothy grin, eager to get to work.

Echo's general air of calm pride steadily decayed, replaced with a look of grim determination. I assumed she was feeling the strain of tearing a few tons of people and equipment out of reality and popping them back into existence a hundred yards away.

As the next group of soldiers were teleported, Two Bits called on the radio. "Beginning assault. Start the music."

The salvaged communications equipment whined as it came to life. The video feed flickered faintly as the jammer flooded the nearby Serenity frequency. "Music is on."

My awareness of the events below was restricted to the rare communication on the command net and a tiny slice of video from the room below. I could only imagine what was going on.

Apparently, my imagination was lacking. I was guessing that the fighting must be kicking off when Two Bits radioed out. "Primary secure. Queen is cleared to enter."

Echo grunted. "As soon as I get the last of these soldiers down there," she said, horn flashing as another batch disappeared.

I called up my magic, stripping away my disguise. My armor reappeared, fitting snugly around my body. I checked the fit of my holster, and slung my pack across my back. Then it was down to waiting for my turn.

The last group vanished, and Echo turned to look at me.

As I stepped forward, Starlight's hoof caught my leg. "Hey," she said, giving a nervous smile. "Good luck."

I smiled back. "See you soon."

She smiled a little more, and lowered her hoof. I continued on to stand beside Echo.

The world twisted around me as Echo's magic deposited us both in the distant chamber below the ground. A pair of Rangers were waiting for us, already wearing their gas masks. The closest gestured with a hoof, her voice muffled behind her mask. "This way, ma'am."

The pair set out at a trot, and I kept pace with them, even as I pulled out and donned my own respirator mask. A burst of automatic fire echoed from down the hall, followed by the sound of magical energy weapons firing, before silence returned. The fighting was continuing, but it was still low-key. Serenity's reinforcements hadn't arrived yet.

The pair of Rangers led us to the control room. I hesitated before stepping across the thin dusting of pink ash that had been one of the changelings stationed there. Through the windows, I could see the main chamber itself. A few ponies were trotting toward one of the doors, while a half-dozen had taken up positions around the room. I could see the form of a downed changeling near the middle of the room, clad in armor. So they

had some soldiers here, after all.

Two Bits was at the window, and looked back as I entered. "Welcome to the party. Hail Burst is breaching the second chamber right now. Should have word on that soon."

"Thank you," I said, eyes roaming around the room. I quickly found what I was looking for and strode over, snatching up the binder and opening it.

"What's that?" Two Bits asked.

"Operating manual." I continued flipping until I found the relevant section. "No harm in refreshing my memory while I have the chance."

He'd stopped, ear twitching, then focused on his broadcaster. "Understood." He lowered it and looked to me. "Chamber two is vacant. They're moving on the last chamber."

I nodded, looking back and forth between the manual and the various control panels, mentally running through the procedure to open the pods. It was fairly straightforward.

The sound of weapon fire reached my ear again. Two Bits glanced back. "They're running into some light resistance, but they should have the chamber secure in—"

A loud squelch cut him off as the Stable's PA system came to life. "Alert! Alert! Intruders have breached the simulation level. Wireless communications are compromised. All active security not on entrance duty are to converge on the simulation level immediately. All inactive and emergency defense forces are to immediately assemble at your designated rally point and join the defense."

Two Bits frowned at the speaker. "Well, they were going to catch on eventually." He turned back to his broadcaster. "Hail, you heard the lady. It's going to get pretty spicy, pretty quick."

He was silent a moment, ears perked, before speaking again. "Understood. She's on the way." He lowered the broadcaster. "They've got ponies. Chamber Three. Snapshot, get Queen Whisper there. Double-time."

The Ranger mare gave a sharp nod to him, then a wave of a hoof toward me. "Follow us, ma'am."

I snapped the binder shut, floating it along with me as I followed. Snapshot set a brisk pace, setting off at a canter as she led us out through the main chamber and into the connecting hall. The sounds of combat were

already picking up, with rapid fire echoing down the corridors. Rounding a corner, I could see the backs of several Mareford ponies, including a couple of power armors, taking cover a good fifty yards down the hall, ready to repel attackers. The door into the chamber was just behind them.

Snapshot came to a halt by the door, raising her PipBuck. "Friendlies coming in, south door." A momentary pause, then she opened the door, leading us in.

Hail Burst was there to meet us, her armor amplifying her voice. "Whisper. We've got five ponies and a griffin in here. Everything else is vacant." She pointed to the shattered windows overlooking us. "The control room is secure, but not the access hall. Use the window."

"Got it," I said. "Thank you."

While she passed word on ahead, Echo and I took to the air, flying up to the window. We passed Sickle along the way, sitting beside a mangled changeling soldier. She gave a cheerful wave as we passed. She'd managed to get herself all bloody again, and I think most of it wasn't hers.

The control room was trashed, having been subjected to a withering amount of fire, and scorch marks and craters pocked the walls. Almost all of the glass had been blown out of the windows, leaving us plenty of room to slip in. Another pair of pegasi were waiting for us. One gave a curt nod before turning his attention back to the entrance.

I turned and scanned the controls. Fortunately, they were undamaged.

A quick scan of the indicators located the six occupied pods. With the flip of a few switches, buzzers sounded and lights flashed over the pods. Another couple of switches disengaged various systems, and in less than thirty seconds, the pod doors were swinging open.

I looked to Echo. "You're up."

She nodded, spreading her wings to fly down, and I followed. She floated the unconscious ponies and griffin from their pods, gathering them together. A couple of them were just starting to stir when they vanished with a flash.

"Okay," Hail Burst said in her mechanical voice. "Get your royal flank back to Two Bits. Enclave! Thirty seconds and we're falling back!"

"Good luck!" I called out, and then we were cantering alongside Snapshot again, dashing out into the hall. In the minute we'd been inside, the volume of fire had grown tremendously. We slowed to a trot once we got back inside

the main chamber, sufficiently removed from the combat for the moment. Shortly after that, we were climbing the steps to the control room once more.

Two Bits greeted us with a wordless nod, continuing his conversation on the radio. "Queen has arrived safely. Continue falling back. Call if you need support." He listened a moment further before lowering his PipBuck again. "If Hail Burst and company can fall back and don't get pinned down, we're good here. Echo, will you be able to evacuate these captives?"

She grimaced, but quickly hid the expression. She couldn't hide how her strange, ethereal mane appeared to hang lower, as if it were somehow more physical than usual. "How many ponies are there?"

"Fifty-five. Not including the two changelings still in their pods."

Echo grunted. "That's a lot. But... yes, I believe I can. It will leave me quite drained, however."

"That's fine," he replied. "The sooner we can get them out of this place, the sooner Whisper can start her thing."

As she made her way back to the main chamber, I turned to the controls again. After a quick scan over the occupied pods, I started opening them in groups of five.

I had just opened the third set when Two Bits told me the Loyalists had fallen back to our primary defensive line. We were as dug-in and prepared as we could be.

Not that it dissuaded Serenity any. The fighting was ferocious, and several blasts shook the floor under my hooves. Two Bits was quiet, listening in on the radio, but barring some crisis, there was little for him to do.

Finally, the last prisoner vanished. I could see Echo give a weary sigh before slumping down to sit against one of the pods, a hoof moving to massage the side of her head.

The captives were safe. Time to make use of that.

Two Bits had supplied one of the PipBucks they had retrieved from slain Serenity changelings, with its precious encryption key. I set it in front of me, then turned to my own broadcaster and our private channel. "Hey, Starlight. We're set down here. Could you kill the jammer?"

"You got it."

I floated the captured PipBuck, retaking my queenly disguise. After all, I wanted to properly sound the part.

Warbling sounds came from the PipBuck's speakers, as transmissions struggled against the interference. Several seconds later, the traffic cleared up, and I hit the button to transmit.

"Attention, Serenity hive. This is Queen Whisper. As you no doubt are aware, pony forces have conducted a raid inside your hive. Your defenses are incapable of protecting you. We have just teleported out the last captive held in suspended animation.

"I understand the significance of what we have done, and the severity of the situation you find yourselves in. Despite this, we have no desire to see you starve. We are willing to offer safe shelter to all who surrender. Already, the majority of your army on the surface has surrendered. They are being cared for as we speak.

"Please, do not throw away your lives. Lay down your arms and surrender to these ponies before it is too late."

I released the key, bringing the transmission to an end, and immediately turned back to my own PipBuck. "Okay, Starlight. Turn it back on."

"Jammer on. Good luck." She sounded so far away.

Two Bits looked to me. "Think it'll work?"

I sighed. "No. But that's why I'm here."

I met up with Echo, and we made our way to the room we had first arrived in. A pair of ponies were there to watch the room's lone vent. Snapshot ushered them out and shut the door behind her, leaving Echo and me in private.

With the door shut, I turned to the vent.

As I worked, the Stable's PA speakers squawked, followed by Two Bit's voice. He gave his own offer of surrender, both reaching those who hadn't been listening to the radio and reaffirming my own words.

The vent popped free. Echo eyed the opening warily. "Are you sure about this?"

"I am." No point in elaborating.

I called up my magic, and the world expanded around me. When I was done, I was in the same changeling-horned raccoon form I had used before. I gathered up my PipBuck, hooking it on a strap of my bag. My holster was strapped on beside it. Finally, I took up the strap in my teeth. The bag only weighed about ten or fifteen pounds, and while that was proportionally

a lot heavier than I was used to, due to my current size, the strap made it easy to drag.

I crawled into the vent, dragging my bag behind me. Once I'd gotten in far enough to shove it aside and backtrack, I snatched the grate that had covered the vent, pulling it back into place.

Echo had crouched down, looking at me through the gaps. "Be careful... and good luck."

I smiled a raccoon smile, clumsily squeaking, "Thank you."

Then I turned, took up the strap once more, and scurried off.



Progress was slow. The bag dragged behind me, and required a little extra attention on the corners. Fortunately, it wasn't too encumbering, but it did slow me down. The ventilation ducts were dark, lit only by thin slices of light where a vent looked in on a lit room, and snaked their way around the level like a maze. Fortunately, my PipBuck was automatically mapping this new space.

I'd been crawling for barely a minute when a clattering sound reached my ears, echoing from the duct ahead of me. The source was immediately apparent to me: I wasn't alone in these vents.

Scurrying back a couple of yards, I hauled the bag down a pitch-black side passage. From the map, I knew it was a dead-end, but I had no choice. I conjured a tiny flicker of light, barely a candle, to guide my way, quickly reaching the vent barely thirty feet from the intersection. The room beyond was dark, and the vent itself created a tiny nook. I pushed the bag back behind me, tucking both it and myself against the grate of the vent. I didn't have the time to open the vent, especially without making enough noise to give myself away.

Instead, I used what little cover there was to minimize my silhouette, hoping they wouldn't see me. I floated my pistol forward, gripping the cumbersome object in my much-too-small paws. When my magic released, the candle-like glow disappeared, plunging me into darkness.

The sounds grew louder. I had to hope that they continued on the other way, and didn't notice the gray lump in the darkness.

Whoever it was navigating the tunnels, they didn't cast any light. The

sound grew louder, and I focused on keeping my breathing slow and steady.

At the end of the passage, I saw a dark form shuffle across the gap, all sharp edges and faint glossy highlights. Some sort of insectoid form, most likely. I couldn't catch any details, but I assumed it was a form much more suited to combat than my own. I'm not sure if that was an entirely justified assumption, but I didn't care to test it. Better to assume the worst.

The sound was fading again, as they continued on down the duct. A lone changeling, then, likely conducting reconnaissance, and I was now behind them. Of course, they would be conducting reconnaissance for a larger group. If she found a good approach, these narrow ducts might become uncomfortably crowded.

I counted out thirty seconds before daring to stir. Turning back to my PipBuck, I held the earbud to my ear before pressing the transmit button. I spoke in a low whisper. "Two Bits, this is Whisper. Serenity has changelings in the vents, looking for a place to make an entrance."

"Copy that, Whisper. We'll keep them all under surveillance."

I waited until I was sure he wasn't going to say more before stowing the earbud again, and another twenty seconds before I dared move. Taking up the strap of my bag again, I crept up to the intersection.

There was only the sound of air slowly blowing through the duct.

I rounded the corner and moved on, ears perked and alert for further hostile changelings, but none presented themselves. Soon I had reached the central utility shaft, where the ducts, pipes, and conduits that served the Stable traveled between levels. It was my key to the rest of Serenity. The soft thrum of far-away fans flowed through the ducts.

I carefully moved forward, worried that I would run into another changeling, but none presented themselves. For the moment, I was alone.

Time to get started.

Step one was establishing a "safehouse" of sorts. A place where I could hide if necessary, where I wouldn't be found. I already knew where to go.

The bag hung from the strap in my mouth as I slid my way down to a duct two levels below, then started making my way out. About half an hour after I entered the vents, I finally reached my temporary safe-haven: the end of one of the ducts over Serenity's zoology department. I remembered my first visit to Serenity, and the cluster of hostile contacts the wildlife there

had shown. I was still within E.F.S. range of the scattered ponies on the surface, but I might as well gather every advantage I could.

So I hid myself in the cluster of hostile contacts and stashed my bag. The only thing I took with me was my pistol, with the holster strapped securely around my chest.

With my safehouse established, I moved on to step two: planning for extraction. As important as my mission was, I wasn't ready to declare it "assets expendable" at the moment, so that meant planning on how to get me out of here.

Fortunately, that ended up being easier than I had dared hope for. On the opposite side of the zoology department was an equipment storage room. It was a large room with a single entrance, and plenty of shelves to hide behind. I retrieved my PipBuck before prying open the vent and dropping in.

I removed my holster and resumed my natural form, armor and all, and started radioing directions to Echo. Not long after, there was a purple flash. I blinked away the spots in my eyes, blinded until Echo's horn lit up again, casting the room in a soft purple glow.

She looked around and nodded. "Yes, this should—"

"Shh!" I hissed, scooting in close to whisper. "Quiet. We can't let them know we were here!"

She frowned, then nodded.

I led her to the back of the room before whispering again. "When I call for extraction, I'll be hiding here, if possible."

She nodded again.

"Okay, good. That's it. Just make sure someone is always awake and monitoring our channel."

She nodded once more.

"That's it, then. Head on back. And... thank you."

She smiled. Then her horn flashed again, leaving me alone in the dark.

I returned to my raccoon disguise and slipped into the duct once more. I let the vent swing down again, resting on its frame but not quite shut. Next, I returned to my safe-point, stashing the PipBuck before heading out again.

Step three was the most involved yet, as it involved the thorough re-

connaissance of multiple levels of the Stable. It was a solid three hours of scurrying through air ducts and peering through vents, but it proved valuable. My understanding of the space rapidly improved, and I got a better impression of the disposition of Serenity's defenses. Regular guard posts had been established near major rooms and intersections, with small clusters of soldiers ready to respond to any threat that might materialize out of thin air. A good number of the other changelings going about their business were armed, though I have no idea if those arms were distributed before or after our attack.

I ran into the first stumbling block when I made my way down to the utility levels. I was making my way down a duct in the central shaft when I heard a clatter and burst of conversation below. With adrenaline burning in my veins, I dove into an offshoot and froze, ears perked. There were two voices, and both were slow and awkward. I was familiar with that sound; these were changelings who had taken on a different form, but either not skilled enough or simply not wasting the effort required to make their voices sound normal.

Between the distance, the soft thrum of machinery, and the echoing of the ducts, I could only barely make out the louder voice. They were complaining.

“...doing maintenance while ponies are running around *in our hive!* I swear, Shale has the most idiotic priorities. The whole hive could be on fire and she’d *still* have us checking the water recyclers for contaminants and—”

A soft, metallic clank cut off her words.

I waited in silence for almost a minute before I heard a distant thump and metallic whine. Lying still as I was, I could feel the subtle change in airflow through my fur, and hear the distant sound of machinery. A couple seconds later, there was another metallic clank, and everything returned to how it was before, save for the quiet sound of someone moving through the duct. I waited, listening. About ten seconds later the same series of events repeated, and afterwards, the sound of movement was gone once more.

I waited another minute, and this time, there was no disturbance. I cautiously resumed my journey, keeping hiding spots in mind.

I had a good idea of what I was going to find. Sure enough, there was

a place where the duct had been cut open, a latching door had been welded into it, and a series of bars had been welded along one side of the duct like a ladder.

That complicated matters, but maybe it could help me. They were using at least part of the duct system for travel between levels. The chance of a random changeling coming across me went up. Heck, they could open the door as I was traveling past it.

On the other hoof, it meant that seeing someone in the ducts wasn't necessarily an unusual event. I wouldn't be able to adequately explain my presence or stand up to scrutiny, but I might escape peripheral detection.

Still, I made every effort to move past the traveled area as quickly as possible, keeping hiding spots at the front of my mind. Fortunately, traffic was low. Perhaps they were more focused on the intrusion several levels up. Either way, I didn't see anyone, and had soon mapped out a route that avoided those entrances.

It was spaces like this that made the Stable a self-enclosed ecosystem, and not just a bunch of quarters with some public spaces. It was a proper hive, much like home, but packed even more tightly. The utility levels, with their spark generators, air and water filtration, and other systems necessary for life, were only part of it. One level held massive artificial farms, with orchards and rows of crops. Another level was dedicated to industry, a whole factory full of priceless industrial machines. One vent looked in on a small room full of bins, holding hundreds of pounds of bottle caps, all freshly stamped and painted.

As I explored further, one of the key details I sought out was the various storage rooms. A Stable was intended to last for decades without resupply, and that meant plenty of room to store everything that could be needed. That included multiple armories, though peering through the vents showed that they were mostly empty. Presumably, most of their weapons had already been distributed. One was particularly well-guarded, with at least a dozen guards around and inside it. My heart-rate leaped as I peered through grates of the vent at the swirling, sickly-green color of the balefire bomb within. I had never wanted to be close to such a terrifyingly destructive device, and I was acutely aware that I was currently stuck in here with it, with my closest exit several minutes away.

My final stop was the one place that might be even more uncomfortable, but was just as vital: the Overmare's office and quarters, where Queen Chrysalis the Sixth ruled her hive. According to the map, that's where I had met her. No surprise that she'd claim that space as her own.

Of course, it wasn't quite so simple to get there. At some point, someone had decided that measures should be taken to preserve the queen's privacy. To do so, they had welded a couple of plates into the vent and bolted a grate with heavy, thick bars in place, blocking off the vent.

This was a complication, obviously. A quick test with my magic proved that the bolts were far too secure for me to remove by magic alone. I eventually had to backtrack to my extract point and coordinate an equipment drop from Echo.

When I returned, it was with a small set of wrenches. They gave me the leverage I needed, though it was still awkward. I had to slip them through the bars and work half-blind, and even then I had to go slowly to keep them from squeaking, a sound that was disturbingly loud in those bare ducts.

I had to be quiet. I could hear voices echoing faintly down the duct.

After several minutes of very careful work, I slid the grate out of place, laid it flat, and slipped past.

The Overmare's office had been converted to something of a throne room. It was where I had first seen Queen Chrysalis the Sixth, when she had been talking about ending the reign of ponies. Now she sat there fuming, eyes narrowed, as she listened to a trio of soldiers discussing how to deal with the rapidly devolving situation. They were avoiding her gaze as they talked among themselves.

"...could be an opportunity, if we can take it," one was saying. "We have them contained, now. Their teleportation is reliant on a single individual. That means low throughput, and a single point of failure. If we can take out that alicorn, then we have them trapped. If we can't, they're still limited in how quickly they can get out. A swift strike might be able to overwhelm their defenses and kill a significant number of them."

"They're too heavily dug in," another said. "The only way to dislodge them is to either use a great amount of explosives to break their defenses, or force a massive assault to overwhelm them. Either would constitute a significant loss of assets. We risk destroying an entire simulation chamber,

and we'll certainly lose an unacceptable number of our soldiers."

Chrysalis spoke, her voice icy. "How many?"

The second soldier hesitated, her unease apparent. "In an assault of that scale, down long halls with no cover? I think we'd be lucky to suffer only a hundred casualties. It'd probably be closer to two, and even if we wiped out the entire raiding force in the process, it'd hurt us more than it hurt them."

"We need to find a way around them," the third soldier said. "We might not have found a good place to stage an attack through the ventilation system, but there are other ways of bypassing their defenses. Our engineers have already identified a few places where we can breach walls and floors to gain entry. With enough breaches, we could overwhelm them in short order."

"And wreck half the level in the process," the second soldier said, shaking her head. "At the very least, we'd be writing off Simulation Chamber One, and given how thorough their internal security is, we'd probably face stiff resistance. They seem to be expecting some sort of trick."

"And their forces are all masked up," the first one said, "so we can't gas them out."

"Enough," Chrysalis said, waving her hoof dismissively. "I'm tired of this. You are the military experts, you're supposed to handle this. Just tell me, is there any chance they will be able to break out and threaten the rest of the hive?"

They were all silent for several long seconds before the second soldier eventually replied. "With their current forces, I would say very likely not, unless they're able to pull something unexpected. The problem is, they can presumably keep teleporting soldiers in and become an even greater threat."

Chrysalis paused, a smile slowly spreading as she tapped a hoof against her chin. "Hmm..." After a few moments, she set her hoof down, fixing the second soldier with a firm stare. "Good. Now stop bothering me with this and resolve the situation. If you can not do so by noon tomorrow, then you will keep the pressure on, encourage them to bring in reinforcements, and then we will take more drastic measures."

"Drastic measures?" the soldier said, ears flattening. "Like what?"

"Like giving the last balefire egg to one of our soldiers, and using it to kill that pesky unicorn. Then, when they're trapped, we can kill them at our

leisure.”

“What? But that would destroy most of the chamber!”

“And that’s why I’m giving you until noon to find a better solution. If you can’t, then I will *gladly* sacrifice that small part of our hive for victory. It doesn’t matter how much damage this hive takes if we can break their army. They are the ponies’ last, dying gasp, and the only thing standing between me and victory. It doesn’t matter if this Stable ends up as a radioactive crater; so long as I survive and they do not, our hive will end up ruling this land.”

She stood up, tall and lean. I was struck again by just how young she looked. Her youth clashed with my own concept of an older, more experienced queen. She must have been several years younger than me. “I don’t want to hear any more about this, unless something significant happens. I expect you to do whatever it takes to secure our victory. Now go, and tell Ocelli to enter on your way out.”

They bowed and hurried out, while Chrysalis returned to her cushions. Soon, another changeling I recognized entered the room: Ocelli.

She bowed deep and respectfully. “My queen?”

Chrysalis fixed her with a cold glare. “Have you reestablished contact with any of our Infiltrators topside?”

“Only briefly,” Ocelli said, rising to stand once more, though she kept her head low. “We’ve had no word from our asset within the enemy army, but we’ve been getting regular updates from another asset currently on external observation of the target. She’s been trying to infiltrate the pony army, but it’s been much too densely packed to do so without being detected, even during the storm. It’s possible our asset within their army hasn’t been able to get the privacy necessary to contact us, and now that the ponies have activated their radio jammer, communications will be iffy.

“Our external asset’s last report was... concerning. She noted the army spreading out, and that an infiltrated agent should have been able to find a moment to send an asset-intact report, especially after missing so many reporting windows. She’s concerned that the asset may be lost.”

Chrysalis wore a deep frown. “Or they’ve joined the other traitors.”

“That seems unlikely, but... possible. Even if they did betray us, we’ve exercised strict information compartmentalization, and any sensitive information they might have somehow acquired would be at least a week out-of-

date. I don't think they've turned, but if they have, they won't be able to cause any damage with their information."

"I don't care about information," Chrysalis said, scowling. "I care about losing another Infiltrator, right when we need them the most! That vile little queen is sitting up there, laughing at us while the ponies she's manipulating are rampaging through our hive! I want her dead."

"We'll certainly try," Ocelli said, still looking at the floor. "There's standing orders to eliminate Queen Whisper if at all possible, but—"

"I'm not talking about 'if it's convenient,'" Chrysalis snapped back. "I want our Infiltrators focusing on killing her at all costs. She's the one behind all of this."

"She is," Ocelli said, with a cautious tone to her voice. Her gaze finally lifted, looking to Chrysalis with concern. "But at this point, I don't think her death would meaningfully affect the army."

Chrysalis's eyes narrowed. "I disagree. You have your orders."

Ocelli ducked her head again. "Yes, my queen. But... even if we were able to get a message out past the ponies' interference, I'm not sure if we have enough assets in place to effect an assassination. She is very well-protected. The alicorn has powerful shields and seemingly refuses to leave her side."

"The alicorn is preoccupied with teleporting ponies into my hive," Chrysalis said, nearly spitting out the words in distaste. "Their queen is vulnerable."

She stood, advancing until she stood right before Ocelli, who kept her head respectfully bowed. Chrysalis didn't allow this. Instead, she reached down, hooking a hoof under the smaller changeling's chin and lifting, forcing her to look up. When she spoke, her voice was surprisingly gentle. "She has slipped through your hooves once before. I am tasking you with this because you are more motivated than anyone else in the hive to see her end. Do not let her slip away again."

Ocelli swallowed, squaring her shoulders. "Yes, my queen."

Chrysalis nodded. "Go."

Ocelli bowed deep, then turned and left.

I lingered a while longer, but there was nothing more of interest. Queen Chrysalis the Sixth was apparently done with business, and I didn't feel the need to watch her eat. I waited a few more minutes to see if anything

interesting turned up, but it seemed she was done with meetings.

I slipped away, scouting out the rest of the area, including what I could see of her quarters, but there was little of interest.

Having completed my reconnaissance, I returned to my hiding place to wait.



And that's where we're at right now. I've been hiding here for the past few hours. I had a brief exchange with Two Bits. I passed on word to not bring in too many reinforcements, no matter the situation. Better to retreat and vacate the hive than bring in too many to evacuate. He passed on that not a single changeling had surrendered. The conversation took only a few minutes, and then I was back to waiting. I had some time to kill, and once I had gotten past some preliminary planning, I had nothing to occupy my mind.

Fortunately, my hiding spot is far enough from any vents that I can speak quietly without any risk of being overheard, so I've been passing the time with my recording. It's a good way to keep myself occupied on something other than worrying. After all, I'm in about the most hostile place I could possibly be, surrounded by hundreds of changelings that would happily kill me, and my only way out relies entirely on the actions of someone else. De-stressing is good.

If I'm being entirely honest, it's not the only reason I'm doing this. I may have started these recordings of my experiences as a way of managing stress and sorting out my own thoughts, but it soon became more than that. It became a way of preserving those experiences in a way others could understand, even if I wasn't there to present it to them. It could be a way of showing ponies what changelings, or at least my hive, are really like.

But more than that, it could tell that tale to those of my hive.

My journey has been rife with danger. My profession is a constant series of hazards. There have been many times where I could have died, and all those experiences would have been lost. I've now insured the continuation of my hive, at least in body. I'm sure that, if the worst were to happen to me, my friends would do their best to raise my hive's children to be good people, but it would still be incomplete. My hive is more than just a lineage.

It's a vast collection of knowledge, and above all of that, tying it all together, an ideal.

So I've made these recordings, weaving in the knowledge and ideals of our hive, and illustrating how they have guided my actions. It's my hope that, if worst comes to worst, I will at least have this one gift to guide those who come after me.

Once I'm done recording this, I'll be encrypting the audio files and sending a copy to Starlight's PipBuck. She already knows the password to decrypt them. I do hope she won't listen to it before we're done here, though. I don't want to worry her with this sort of talk.

If you are listening to this before I get back, don't mistake this for me being fatalistic. I'm just being "depressingly practical" again. You know how I am. And to be perfectly honest, I really doubt anything bad will happen to me. I'm in a good position, with a clear way forward, and fairly easily managed risks. This is just a reasonable precaution before a major, potentially game-changing event.

After all, at this moment, there are two changeling queens in this hive. By noon tomorrow, at least one of us will be dead.

## Chapter Forty-Nine

# Endgame

“Queen Chrysalis, this is Queen Whisper. Please respond.”

I released the button once more, starting another thirty second count. I’d been broadcasting unencrypted for a couple of minutes, now, with the jammer temporarily switched off. Serenity surely had someone handling sigint work, but it might take time for them to come across my broadcast, and even more to get word to their queen. I mentally reviewed the path through the ducts that would lead me back to my exit-point. Then I pressed the button again.

“Queen Chrysalis, this is Queen Whisper. Please respond.”

I had counted to twenty when the radio crackled and came to life in my ear, filled with an icy, contempt-laced voice. “This is Queen Chrysalis. What do you want?”

My heart pounded at hearing such contempt from a changeling queen. I had to remind myself that I was a queen as well, or at least playing at being one.

I took a quick, calming breath before depressing the button and speaking. “I am still hoping to negotiate an end to the bloodshed. Your hive can not win this fight, but it doesn’t have to be wiped out for a hopeless cause. Please—”

“Oh, shut up,” she snapped into the radio. “You will never defeat us, and I am not interested in making deals with a backstabbing traitor like you. I would rather die free than cower at your hooves. There will be no negotiations.”

“Please,” I said again, pouring every ounce of sincerity into my voice. “You have no source of love. Your—”

“And we have you and your scheming to thank for that! You wipe out our love supply, then try to act like you’re here to help. Well I see through you. Do you really want to end this? Then you come and meet me, face to face, and we can end this like *true* queens!”

I wasn’t exactly sure how to reply to that. Obviously, I wasn’t going to openly face her. I had no idea how dangerous she might be, but with the

outcome of this war inevitable, it was a risk I didn't have to take.

She correctly interpreted my silence as a refusal. "I thought not. You're not a queen. You're just a cowardly pretender, skulking in the shadows and sending pawns against us. If you find some courage in that treacherous heart of yours, then come and face me. Until then, I don't want to hear another poisonous word from you."

I sighed, but didn't reply. The truth is, I hadn't expected it to work. Despite that expectation, I still had to make an attempt, even if all it got me was the ability to honestly say that I tried.



Step four of my infiltration involved establishing a safeguard. This, in turn, took me to the depths of the hive, where the most secure armory was located.

Six soldiers were stationed outside, weapons ready. Moving through the ducts to the armory itself, I could see four more stationed within, with two wearing pegasus power armors. All were sitting by a table, chatting just ten feet from the balefire bomb.

I slowly made my way through the ducts, taking my time. I couldn't risk making a single sound. I'd left almost all my equipment behind. All I carried was a single small bundle wrapped in scrap cloth, weighing barely over a pound.

At each grate, I stopped and observed, looking over the shelves and crates filling the room. While most of the weapons had been distributed, the storage equipment gave ample cover.

Eventually I found a vent I liked. It was on the far side of the room, and was hidden from the guards by a cluster of boxes on the top of a shelf.

Being an armory, the vents were more secure, held in place with heavy screws. Having already scouted out the location, I was prepared. I slipped out the head of a screwdriver from my bundle, grasping it in my magic, and slid it through the grate.

Working blind, without the physical feedback of touch, is surprisingly difficult, but I was patient. I had time. It took almost a minute, but I finally got the screwdriver head into the slot of the screw, and started turning. Even this took time, as I had to rotate the screw slowly to quiet the squeaking. Finally, it came free, and I started on the next.

It took a good fifteen minutes to get that vent open. A tiny voice in the back of my head screamed to get on with it, but I knew better than to listen to it. Patience was key. Better to take my time than risk discovery.

With the last screw removed, I slid the grate away, setting it gently atop the shelf. Next I scooted back several feet; I wanted to transform without those guards seeing the flash. Even my hybrid-raccoon form felt too obtrusive for this. Instead, I took on the form of a large rat. Small, sneaky, and easily overlooked. It was also about the most difficult and draining form I had ever taken. Significant changes in mass are like that.

I made my way out the vent and onto the top shelf, dragging my bundle with me. The loose cloth gave me an easy grip with my teeth, and though the bundle was still fairly heavy to me, it let me haul it along without too much difficulty.

Slowly, I picked my way down the shelf, until I was forced to hop down the last couple of feet. I landed hard, but given my size, that didn't mean much. If any of the guards heard me, I didn't notice a reaction.

The shelves hid my movement as I made my way around the armory, until the balefire bomb was directly between me and the guards.

The bomb was set on a heavy flatbed cart, secured with thick straps. It was the closest I had gotten yet to the bomb, and I could see far more details. The center of it glowed with a pulsing, sickly green, and this close, I could see it was covered in intricate shapes. I started tracing the edges...

I had to physically pull my gaze away, nearly falling off my paws. There was something deeply unsettling about the magic surrounding it, as if it was trying to draw me in. I glanced at it, and could practically feel my awareness seeping away. From that point on, I made sure to not look directly at it.

Around the core was a protective metal shroud. There had been letters stenciled on it, but centuries in the desert had left most of them faded and chipped away. I couldn't tell what was originally written on them, but it appeared to be in the Equestrian language. Perhaps the shroud was part of the Equestrian Army's experiments, or maybe just some extra precaution to prevent accidentally detonating it with a careless jostle.

I slowly crept up to the cart, dragging my little bundle with me. Climbing up onto the bed of the cart was easy enough, though hauling my bundle up was a little awkward and took a few tries. I tried to be silent. Every little

slide of my paws on the cart, or faint tap of my bundle bumping against it, made my fur stand on edge.

The guards just kept talking, oblivious to me.

"I just think we should shove this creepy thing out the front, shut the door, and blow it up. Stables are built to take shit like that!"

"Yeah, except those ponies will shoot anything that comes out. Some dumb pony would blow us all up."

"Besides, even if they didn't, I wouldn't count on the Stable door stopping it. Look at everything else those Stable-Tec ponies got wrong!"

I only halfway listened to them, mostly for any sign of noticing my presence. I focused instead on my bundle, heaving it up along the side of the cart as quietly as I could. As soon as I got it up, I slowly slid up to the shroud, and untied the cloth.

Inside was a single explosive charge. I gave it one final check. There were five remote initiators. Four were on the same channel, set to the maximum delay of ten seconds. I wanted full redundancy. No failures could be permitted. The last initiator was set to a separate channel, with no delay. It was an additional backup, in case some unforeseen circumstance came up where ten seconds was too long.

Everything was correct, just like the two times I had checked before setting out. I made my way to the edge of the shroud, peering over the lip to the inside. The bolts and seams inside gave a perfect place to pack the explosives. I hefted the charge up and gingerly slid it into place, then started working at it, trying to pack it into the crevice as securely as possible with my tiny paws.

Having the core of the balefire megaspell right behind my head was one of the most unnerving things I'd experienced. The glow steadily warped and shifted, reflected in the dull metal of the shroud. Even without looking at it, I could feel the world trying to pull away. The rest of the room seemed to recede into darkness, and I put all my effort into focusing on what I was doing. Even the conversation of the guards grew distant, as if heard through a long tunnel. The balefire swirled and twisted behind me, as if trying to suck me in.

I swear I heard whispers coming from the damn thing, just on the edge of my perception.

When I finally stepped away from the megaspell, satisfied that the explosives were properly secured, I found that I was shaking. The guards were still talking, as clear as ever. The walls still stood there, lit and unmoving.

I shuddered, taking a couple of calming breaths before slipping away, leaving that terrifying device behind me. I had much more to do.



Step five finally kicked off at three in the morning, the culmination of more than four hours of investigating, observing, and waiting.

I'd taken my time. Every inch of the space had been carefully mapped out in my mind. Every step of my course was planned. Strategic vents had been loosened in preparation, so they required only the lightest of pressure to open. Every object in the area had been carefully investigated. I had gone over my equipment three times, carefully ensuring that it would all function correctly when I needed it.

I waited, peering out the thin grate of the vent, into the quarters of Queen Chrysalis the Sixth.

She was asleep. She had been asleep for well over an hour. Still I waited, observing.

She was just ten yards away, tucked into her huge plush bed and oblivious of the world around her, but still I waited. I had one shot at this, and no idea how capable she might be if awoken. I needed to get closer, so I waited.

Finally, I saw the faint movement of her eyelid as her eyes moved beneath them. It was what I was waiting for. I rose from my position, silently slinking down the duct.

All sleep is not equal, and when your job might involve sneaking away from or past individuals who are sleeping, those details become part of your training. REM sleep, signaled by its rapid eye movements, is the most easily identifiable and exploitable phase of sleep. Not only is it harder to wake from, it induces a form of paralysis to prevent an individual from acting out their dreams. That paralysis can potentially linger for several seconds after being woken, and being woken from REM sleep can leave a person disoriented for a few minutes.

As I said, I had one shot at this, so I was taking every advantage I could get. REM sleep lasts about ten minutes on average, and my plan should

need no more than two.

I reached the bathroom vent, where I had stashed my bundle of equipment: my pistol, PipBuck, and remote detonator. A quick glance through the slats of the vent confirmed once more that the bathroom was empty, and I gripped the vent in my magic, gently pressing until it slid silently from the frame. I levitated a towel from the nearby rack and laid it on the counter, then carefully placed the vent atop it on the sink counter, soft and silent. Then I clutched my bundle of equipment and hopped down.

My magic wasn't strong enough to levitate myself, but it slowed and guided my fall. I landed on the thick bath-mat, which I knew from earlier investigation had a rubber backing that prevented sliding. It was as perfectly silent as I could hope for.

I set the equipment down, and moved to the other end of the mat where I wouldn't accidentally disturb it. With that, I called up my magic to transform. The form I took was mostly like my natural form, but with blunted fangs and soft cat-like paws instead of hooves. I also kept my armor hidden. As well-fitted as it was, it wasn't perfectly silent, and I was taking no risks.

I buckled the PipBuck to my leg, letting the E.F.S. calibrate as I slipped the detonator's lanyard around my neck. Finally, I took up my pistol in my teeth and stepped up to the door, my paws near silent even on the polished tile. I did a quick final check. The pistol was loaded, a round chambered, the safety off. S.A.T.S. was fully charged.

I pressed the button beside the door, and it opened as quietly as during my earlier tests. Quietly, however, is not the same as silently, so I wasted no time. The moment the door was open, I advanced in a smooth glide, much as I had seen Dusty move. I turned left, my pistol fixed on the form of the sleeping changeling queen as I moved up. I advanced until I was less than two yards away, my sights aligned over the back of her head.

Once again, I was struck by how young she looked. She was barely an adult, and lying there asleep, she seemed so peaceful. She had taken a genocidal course of action, and had spoken directly to me about her plans, yet it was difficult to connect that knowledge with the gentle-looking individual lying before me, asleep and helpless.

More than that, this was a queen. She wasn't my queen, but I couldn't

help but feel a little of the significance of her title. It was a revered position. The highest place of honor among changelings. Even if we disagree with their actions, it was a position that commanded some respect. A changeling queen should be able to face her fate head-on. She deserved better than being slain in her sleep.

Three shell casings clattered on the hard tile floor. Queen Chrysalis the Sixth was dead.

I lowered the pistol as she gave a few twitches, the last firings of a dying nervous system. It was a victory for us, but I didn't feel any elation. I just felt tired and hollow. Weeks of struggle, a full-blown war, the infiltration of a hostile hive, all ending with a whimper in a darkened bedroom. If I'd heard tales of such a thing during my training, the assassination of a changeling queen in the heart of her hive, I would have thought it the most amazing covert action in history. Living it, it felt anticlimactic and dirty. It had been the right call, but I couldn't say I felt happy about it.

My eyes lingered on the ruined back of her head as the blood poured out, soaking into the plush bed. I shuddered, turning away.

It wasn't the blood that made the sight so unsettling. I'd seen enough over the last few months to lose any squeamishness I might have had about the subject. No matter how gruesome a sight it might be, it would always be secondary to the mere fact that this was the corpse of a changeling queen. Despite what Queen Chrysalis had done, it was all too easy to picture Queen Ephema in her place. Worse yet, it was easy to imagine just how much impact her death would have on the changelings of her hive. I was about to devastate them.

But I'd already known that. In fact, I had planned on using that. I turned, sweeping up my spent casings before walking over to the intercom. A quick flip of a switch on the door panel locked it. It would only be a matter of minutes before they could open it, but that was more time than I needed. I just needed perhaps thirty seconds. That was enough time to broadcast a final goodbye from an exhausted and disillusioned Queen Chrysalis, summon up flames to consume the scene, and escape into the ventilation system once more. If anything could convince these changelings that the fight was lost, surely the suicide of their own queen would do so.

I called up my magic, focusing on my queenly disguise, with the minor

alterations to mimic the voice of the young Queen Chrysalis. Then I drew in a deep breath, raised my hoof to the intercom... and after several seconds, rested it on the wall. I stared at the button, almost as if willing it to press on its own. I didn't want to press it myself.

As an Infiltrator, you have to become comfortable with doing things you would rather not do, but this felt different. This didn't feel like a matter of personal taste, some unpleasantness that I would rather avoid. Now that I was there, ready to follow through on the plan, with the queen's corpse behind me, it simply felt wrong.

The plan made sense, of course. Remove the focal point for their fanatical drive against ponies, subtly encourage them to surrender, all while hiding my own involvement so as to avoid becoming a focus for their despair and outrage. It made logical sense, but I was no longer so certain it was the right thing to do.

I stood there, thinking on the subject, and put myself in their hooves. I thought of Queen Ephema's death and my own reaction to it. I had found her dead, and I had set out into a balefire-scoured Wasteland, without regard for my safety and only the slimmest hope of success. If our hive were under siege, and she died, how would I react? Would I surrender to our enemy?

Not as long as there was any chance of forwarding my hive's goals. No, I would probably fight to the death, so long as I could guarantee some part of my hive survived. Serenity still had changelings outside the hive that would survive whatever happened in here. I would want to resist the attackers with everything I had, and inflict as much damage as possible. How would I do it?

A great number of possibilities presented themselves, but none were terribly relevant. Only the end states really mattered, and given the impossibility of fighting off the attackers and the eventuality of a horrible death to love starvation, there was really only one endgame: open the Stable door, throw out the balefire megaspell, and detonate it. If our lives were to be lost anyway, we would spend them destroying the greatest obstacle to our sisters who were still out there.

I shook my head, as if clearing away the scenario, and considered a new one: instead of my queen mysteriously dying or committing suicide, what if she were killed by a foreign queen? I'd be outraged, and would want vengeance for my murdered queen. The final outcome was the same.

It was a wash.

But maybe the scenarios weren't quite as simple as I first supposed. I wasn't some murderous queen looking to destroy them, though it was quite possible that they might see me that way. I had made every attempt to seem sympathetic and compassionate. Even if they didn't believe it, it was out there.

My queen's suicide might convince me that our goals were lost, and that the offer of a seemingly sympathetic queen might be the best way to preserve something of our hive. That was the idea I had originally considered when forming my plan.

But if that seemingly sympathetic queen had instead infiltrated my hive and killed my own queen? There were a surprising amount of warring emotions there. Certainly there was anger and distrust. If she were really so sympathetic to our plight, why would she kill our queen? On the other hoof, there was abject horror. She had killed the most well-protected and important individual in our entire hive. There was absolutely nothing that could stop her from killing any one of us. Yet there was also a degree of uncertainty and confusion. If she could so easily kill any of us, why was she offering seemingly generous terms of surrender?

Certainly, I could be trying to trick them into surrendering just to make things easier on myself. At the same time, perhaps it suggested a degree of restraint and a desire to minimize violence. Which would win out?

Making all of it worse, even the most fanatical of changelings were not of a single, homogenous mind. They would not all react the same, and that was particularly dangerous when a hopeless and suicidal changeling could have access to a megaspell.

It still seemed to be a wash, but one troubling thought occurred to me. Regardless of the outcome here at the hive, this was a decision that could have consequences years down the road. It wasn't just about getting them to surrender. The choice wasn't really between them thinking I had killed their queen versus thinking their queen had killed herself. Truth has a way of coming to the surface. This was a choice between me telling them I had killed their queen, or them finding out some time later that I had killed their queen and lied to them.

I was trying to convince changelings, some of whom had already sur-

rendered, to give ponies some degree of trust. Hinging all of that on a lie would threaten to tear all of that down.

That made a far more convincing argument, and to tell the truth, Honesty gave a sense of doing the right thing. I just hoped that me doing the right thing wasn't about to get a lot of people killed.

My hoof slid away from the intercom. I'd still be sending a message, but I wanted to be well away from here when I did.

With a new plan in mind, I set about implementing it. First was returning to the bed. I looked over the form of Queen Chrysalis one last time before reaching out, unlatching and removing her PipBuck. With that secured, I focused my magic, calling up green fire to consume her remains. As the flames rapidly spread to the bedding, I returned to the bathroom and retook my hybrid-racoon form. Getting back in the vent took a bit more work than getting down, especially with the extra PipBuck, but I didn't have to be quiet this time.

With the vent securely in place, I scurried down the duct, while awkwardly speaking into my broadcaster. "Two Bits? This is Whisper."

His voice was thick with fatigue when he finally replied. "Two Bits here. What's up?"

"I may be wasting my time in telling you this, but make sure your forces are on full alert. I may be about to kick over an ant hill."

There was a long pause before he replied. "I don't even know what to say about that phrase coming from you. And what do you mean? What did you do?"

I was passing the vent overlooking the bedroom again. The fire was rapidly spreading through the room, and smoke was starting to fill the duct. "Queen Chrysalis is dead."

Dead air for a solid five seconds. "Holy shit."

"Yeah. I can't say exactly how they're going to react. They might be willing to surrender, or they might go suicidal on you. I'd say get an initial feel for it, then decide if you're staying or going. I've got my own way out."

"Understood. We'll hold tight for now."

"Good to hear. While you're at it, get ahold of Dusty or whoever's awake topside. Tell them they should start stage one evacuations. He'll know what I mean."

“...I’ll do that. That sounds bad.”

“You’ll be well away from here before it matters. Also, get ahold of Echo, tell her I need her on alert and ready to start evacuation at a moment’s notice. I’ve got to go now.”

I’d left most of the smoke behind, but it was spreading quickly. Once I had gotten to the utility shaft, I couldn’t even smell it any more. On the other hoof, the Serenity changelings had to be noticing it by now, and would very quickly trace it to its source. I scurried down a level, then darted into the vacant hydroponics office I had noted earlier. I locked the door, then transformed into my regal form once more.

This time, there was no hesitation as I reached for the intercom, selecting the public address channel.

“Attention, changelings of Serenity.” My voice echoed strangely through the halls and rooms of the Stable, low and somber. “I’m sorry to inform you that... Queen Chrysalis the Sixth is dead. I regret that it has come to this, and while I’m sure my words carry little weight right now, I know how hard this must be for all of you. I wish there had been some other way.

“I want this bloodshed to be over. Despite everything that has happened, our offer of surrender is still open. Please, let this end. Put down your weapons and surrender, and we can all move on together. There’s been enough death already.”

I hesitated, feeling like I should add more, but no words came. I released the button, the speakers giving a final squeal before going silent. Maybe brevity would help.

With the message complete, I made my way back to where I had stashed the rest of my equipment, retrieving the respirator mask. Then I back-tracked, making my way back to the Overmare’s office turned throne room.

The smoke filled the vents, even as the air system struggled to pump in clear air. I cinched the mask snugly over my head, though my form made it an imperfect fit. I had to hold it in place to keep from getting a lungful of smoke when I breathed, and visibility was down to only a couple of yards.

Despite that, I was able to make it back to the vent overlooking the office, now filled with changelings. They’d managed to open the door to Chrysalis’s quarters, and smoke was still wafting out of the open door, though it looked like they’d put out the fire.

The emotions I saw covered the whole spectrum. One of the heavily equipped guards, clad in black-painted Steel Ranger armor, was now just sitting beside the queen's cushions, staring off into space. Another lay nearby, and from the slow shifting of her head and shoulders, looked to be on the verge of breaking down. A lightly armed soldier paced angrily. Two unarmored changelings were embracing, tears rolling down their cheeks.

Several more changelings emerged from the former queen's room, looking dazed and exhausted. Others were entering the office from outside, including one I recognized: Ocelli.

She fell on the agitated side, and immediately took control of the scene. She demanded to know what had happened, how their queen could have been killed while locked in her own room. Noling had anything beyond speculation. The working theory was that Echo had teleported in an assassin.

In my earbud, Two Bits reported a hoofful of changelings had fearfully surrendered in one sector, while frantic attacks were launched in others. Every now and then, I could hear the distant thump of an explosion.

At least I had the satisfaction that I might have saved a few more lives, assuming I hadn't just gotten a lot of ponies killed.

The discussion of how their queen could have been killed was interrupted minutes later when a messenger arrived, looking scared and confused. "Um, I... I'm not sure who to report to."

There was a moment of confusion before Ocelli stepped forward. "Under the emergency protocols, I am assuming leadership of the hive until a proper chain of command can be established. Report."

The messenger swallowed and nodded, then spoke. "Guard commanders are reporting a breakdown of order on the simulator level. Most forces are pressing the attack on pony positions, but taking heavy casualties. They're not sure if they can sustain the pressure, but their soldiers are refusing to stand down. Additionally, one commander reported that a squad under her command has surrendered, and others are discussing whether they should follow suit."

Ocelli's eyes widened in rage. "What? Their queen was murdered, and they're giving themselves over to the filth that did it? Those traitors!" She grabbed the messenger. "What was this commander's name?"

"C-Coxa, ma'am."

"Well you go back to Coxa, and tell her that *any* changelings promoting surrender will be considered to be giving support to our enemies in a time of crisis, and are to be shot as traitors!"

"Yes ma'am!"

As the messenger hurried off, Ocelli turned to another soldier. "You! Queen Chrysalis had a plan to take out their alicorn. Are you familiar with it?"

"Yes. She wanted to use a balefire egg to—"

"I know the plan," Ocelli said. "I want you to find a volunteer to enact it. How soon can you have a volunteer armed and ready to go?"

"Um... ten, fifteen minutes?"

"Good. Make it happen. I want that alicorn dead!"

She quickly nodded and hurried off as well.

I quickly scurried back from the vent, until I was confident my whispering wouldn't be overheard. I huddled around the PipBuck and hit the button to transmit. The respirator mask muffled my words. "Two Bits, this is Whisper."

"Go."

"I need you to evacuate immediately. They're planning on bringing in heavy explosives through the vents, with the intent of killing Echo and trapping you. You've got ten, maybe fifteen minutes before they start enacting their plan."

"Shit." A moment of silence. "Understood. Echo is already here. It'll be messy if they keep up the pressure like this, but we should be able to evacuate by then."

I switched to my private channel. "Dusty, are you there?"

A few seconds later, I heard his voice. "Yeah, I'm here. What's going on down there?"

"The situation is evolving," I said, a neat non-answer. "Serenity's new command structure is going to extreme measures more rapidly than I'd hoped. I just told Two Bits to make his exit. You'd better start stage two evacuations."

"Already?"

"Yes, already."

"And you're sure about this?" he asked. "If we do that, there may be no

coming back."

"I understand, and yes, I'm sure."

I heard him sigh across the radio. "Understood. Stage one and two should be complete in... about thirty minutes. Once Hail Burst is topside, I'll put the Loyalists on door duty. That should make stage three take... maybe two minutes, tops."

"Sounds good. Thank you."

"Uh-huh. And Whisper? Be careful down there."

I crawled back to the vent. The smoke was already thinning by the time I got there, while even more changelings had gathered in the room below.

Ocelli was discussing strategy with several of the soldiers, discussing plans to crush the remaining ponies once their teleporting alicorn was slain. I cast a glance in their direction. The E.F.S. was full of contact markers, but there was considerably less green there. In fact, there was less green all around. The amount of friendly ponies within range was rapidly dwindling. Before long, I would have little in the way of camouflage.

Several minutes later, the intercom speaker beside the vent came to life with a loud squawk. "All forces! All forces! Commander Coxa has gone rogue! Her unit has engaged friendly forces and is attempting to join the pony intruders!"

"What?!" Ocelli snapped, leaping to her hooves again. She rushed to the intercom, calling out across it, "Stop those traitors at all costs!"

"We'll try," came the reply. "Pony forces are falling back in all sectors. I think they're teleporting out."

"Well, stop them!" Ocelli shouted, then spun to face the soldier she had been talking with. "How long until the alicorn-killer is in place?"

"I don't know," the soldier replied, leaping to her hooves. "I'll go find out."

Minutes ticked by. The smoke thinned. Friendly contacts dwindled.

A powerful thump hammered at my ears, the air in the duct blasting one way, then the other. My ears were left ringing. Something massive had exploded.

I scurried back in the duct once more, returning to my broadcaster. "Echo!" I whispered urgently. "Are you there?"

The reply came thankfully swift. "I am. It seems they blew up part of

the simulation chamber. I have gotten all of the raiding force out, though Two Bits and a few others were injured in the explosion.”

I gave a quick sigh of relief before a fresh concern mounted. “How bad are they hurt?”

“They will likely live, though Sickle will need *several* healing potions. Again.”

“...Okay. Get them taken care of and stand by. I’ll probably need extract in about thirty minutes.”

“I will be ready,” she said.

I returned to the vent. It was two minutes before a messenger arrived.

Ocelli was immediately on her hooves. “Well? Did they get that alicorn?”

The messenger hesitated, swallowed, and spoke. “I’m afraid not. They were in the main chamber, and engaged our agent when she emerged from the vent. It seems their gunfire detonated the egg prematurely, and the alicorn’s shield protected her.”

“Damn it,” Ocelli grumbled. “What about the rest of them? Did we get *anyone*? ”

“I’m afraid all the ponies have escaped,” the messenger said, shifting her weight subtly from hoof to hoof. “Several ponies were wounded or killed while falling back, though they were able to extract their casualties. We did capture three of our rebelling soldiers, including Commander Coxa. The rest of her unit are either dead or escaped with the ponies.”

Ocelli muttered something far too quiet for me to hear before speaking to the messenger again. “Return to whoever is in charge down there. Inform them that the three prisoners are to be shot immediately. Go.”

The messenger gave a hasty salute and hurried off. He almost ran into the next messenger.

“Commander Ocelli! We just established communications with one of the army scouts, Ghost Two. She’s on one of the landlines. The pony army is pulling out. They’re using the motorwagons to ferry their ponies and about a hundred prisoners to a location roughly four miles away. She also reports that the only forces remaining on-site are about twenty Enclave ponies.”

I glanced around. Sure enough, there was only a single small cluster of green contact indicators.

Ocelli had gone very still, staring off in thought. The soldiers she had

been talking with were just starting to speculate when she spun around to face one of them. "Move the megaspell, now. If one of those traitors told that alicorn where it's being held, she could drop a bomb right on it."

The soldier's eyes widened. "Y-yes, right away! Where should we move it?"

"Anywhere else!" Ocelli said, then immediately corrected herself. "No, move it to the entry-level equipment storage. Go, now!"

As that soldier took wing and shot off, Ocelli trotted over to the intercom. "Attention! All active, reserve, and emergency forces are to equip and assemble immediately on the entry level. All unit commanders are to report to the throne room."

One of the other soldiers followed her. "What's the plan?"

"The plan is that we outnumber the ponies guarding the hive entrance tens of times over." She turned to the pony who had brought in word of the scout, who was now at a terminal with a pair of headphones. "Have we re-established contact with the army?"

"Not by radio. Ghost Two can relay messages, but she says the army is less than fifty strong and completely combat ineffective."

Ocelli muttered something.

I looked at my PipBuck. It had been about twenty minutes since Dusty had started the evacuation.

Soldiers started to arrive a couple of minutes later. The room steadily grew more crowded with changelings, all asking what was going on. Ocelli sat on the edge of the queen's cushions, refusing to answer until the last commander had arrived.

Once they had, she stood. "Commanders. We have re-established communications with a topside scout. The pony army has withdrawn from the surface, and is regrouping a few miles away. They've left only twenty ponies guarding the entrance. They seem to think we are trapped. We are going to prove them wrong."

"I want you to prepare your units for a breakout. When that door opens, we will pour out and overwhelm the ponies guarding it. Once we have done so, we will establish a full presence on the surface. We can not be pushed back into the hive again, even if that means abandoning it. Understood?"

There were nods of assent, firm and confident. Faces still downturned

and slack from the loss of their queen were looking up as a glimmer of hope returned.

“How soon can you be prepared to move out?”

“We should be fully prepared within an hour,” one of the commanders said, and several others nodded.

“Good, because once we have secured the entrance of our hive, we must deal with their army,” Ocelli paced before them. “We still have the megaspell. Many of our sisters gave their lives to deliver it to us. Now we must be ready to give our lives to use it. Commander, how many soldiers do each of your units have?”

She had stopped in front of one of the soldiers, who replied, “About forty, ma’am.”

“Good,” she said, nodding as she resumed her pacing. “Their army is gathering together just a few miles from our hive. I need four volunteers, whose units will ensure that the megaspell is delivered to that army, regardless of the cost.”

She stopped, staring at them with a fierce glare. “We have come so close to losing everything, but we have this one opportunity to reclaim our future. If we are able to destroy this army, then we will have won, and all the death we have suffered will have guaranteed a future where we are never put under the hooves of ponies, ever again. We can not fail our sisters. We can not fail our slain queen.” She raised her head, standing proud. “Who is willing to take up this duty?”

Sure, I saw signs of hesitation, and deep breaths to build up courage, but one by one, all ten stepped forward.

Ocelli smiled, small and proud. “We only need four,” she said, and proceeded to pick four herself. She stopped by the closest, reaching out to pat her on the shoulder. “Today, through your effort, we will reclaim our destiny. You will bear down on their army like the swarms of old, and deliver destruction to our enemies. The hive’s future rides on your shoulders.”

The commander before her held her head high, her eyes bright and eager. “We will not fail. For Queen Chrysalis and the hive!”

The others carried the cheer. And Ocelli stepped back, smiling. “I’m proud of all of you. Now go, prepare your soldiers, and let us repay these ponies for every wrong they have dealt us!”

The commanders cheered again, and turned to leave. Their heads were held high as they marched out, even those who had just been condemned to death. Ocelli remained in the office-turned-throne-room, watching with a proud smile, like a miniature queen.

The door shut. Ocelli's smile slid away, replaced with a grim expression. She turned to the changelings gathered nearby. "We should discuss contingency plans. These ponies have proven far too tricky to count on this attack succeeding. Aphid, how quickly can we enact evacuation protocols?"

The changeling in question shifted awkwardly on her hooves. "With the emergency defense 'lings called up, we're short-staffed. In ideal situations, we would need only half an hour. With current numbers, I think we'd need at least an hour. Maybe two."

Ocelli was silent for several long seconds. "Hypothetical. Assume only one hundred of our combat forces remain, from the emergency forces, along with all remaining non-combat population. Would that be sufficient to take Mareford?"

Another changeling checked her PipBuck. "Given the last reports after the army's departure, they have only armed civilians for defense. I'd give a pessimistic estimate of twenty four hours to pacify the entire settlement, with minimal losses, assuming we want to take all ponies and structures intact."

"We won't be able to hold it," another changeling noted. "Not if their army survives."

"We don't need to hold it," Ocelli said. "We just need to take a few dozen ponies to feed on, and any supplies we might want. We can destroy the rest and move on. Let their army starve."

There were nods of agreement all around. "Good," Ocelli said. "Aphid, begin evacuation protocols. This pony-made shelter has served us for many generations, but its usefulness is at an end. We no longer need to hide."

I had been so focused on her words that I didn't hear the soft clattering until the large radroach rounded the corner of the duct, just five feet from me. It had come from the duct that served only the queen's chambers, and was wearing a PipBuck.

I immediately had my gun out and firing before the radroach could fully recognize the situation she had stumbled into. Four rapid-fire rounds

smashed into her, and with a flash of green flame, the radroach was replaced by the crumpled form of a changeling, jammed into a duct far too small for her.

“The hell?” someone blurted from below. “Were those gunshots?”

I grabbed my equipment, turned, and scurried away as fast as I could. I could already hear shouts, and seconds later, the duct lit up with vivid flashes of green and red as soldiers fired into the vent mere feet behind me.

I rounded a corner, now outside of the room, which put a solid wall between me and them. Still, I didn’t stop. There weren’t enough friendly contacts to hide me. Now that they knew I was there, they would have no trouble tracking the lone hostile contact.

The duct routed through more walls, then hit an intersection. As I continued on, I pulled off my respirator mask, pressing my broadcaster’s button with my magic. “Echo, are you there?”

“I am. Is it time to go?”

“Yes! Tell Dusty to start stage three evacuation right now!”

“I will.” There were several long seconds of silence as I hit the central utility shaft, sliding down the duct for several levels. “He says they will begin evacuating immediately. The Loyalists should be at a safe distance in two minutes.”

I heard the deep, earth-shaking rumble from above. Stage one had been the initial movement of half the army to establish a new camp a safe distance away, as well as all the heavy equipment. Stage two had been the removal of the rest of the army, leaving only a small force to keep the door shut. Now that stage three was enacted, those ponies were now speeding off, but not without leaving one last obstacle for Serenity. The rumble I heard was the sound of fifty pounds of strategically placed explosives collapsing the exit tunnel. The door to Serenity should now be buried behind a few hundred tons of concrete.

Serenity could dig their way out, of course. This move would only delay them, but it was more of a delay than I would need.

“Echo, I’m almost to the extraction point. I need you to disable the jammer and meet me there.”

“A building just fell on the jammer,” she said. “It is as disabled as it is going to get.”

“Good!”

I scrambled down another series of ducts. My trip down the utility shaft obscured what level I was on, but it bought me very little time. They would eventually find me, even if it required searching every level.

I heard sharp cracks from ahead, but I didn’t slow. When I finally got to the vent leading to the storage room I had chosen as my extract point, I burst out of the duct, only to be immediately caught in a field of magic. Echo stood there, grim-faced, with the smoldering corpses of two changelings beside her.

“Ready to go?”

“Wait!” I said, calling up my magic and transforming into my regal form. I dropped out of Echo’s magic, cushioning my fall with a quick flutter of my wings, and hastily latched my PipBuck onto my leg. I called up the time. I still needed another minute.

I floated up Queen Chrysalis’s stolen PipBuck. A quick check confirmed the radio settings, and I hit the button to transmit. “Ocelli, this is Queen Whisper. Please respond.”

My heart hammered. Several seconds later, the radio came to life. “I can’t wait for them to bring me your corpse.”

“This isn’t going to end the way you think it will,” I said. “My offer still stands, but we are out of time. This is your last opportunity. Please. For the good of your hive and the hundreds of changelings that will perish with you, surrender.”

“Save your empty threats,” Ocelli said, her voice practically a growl. “I will never fall for your treacherous words again.”

A bang drew my attention back to reality. Echo’s shield was up, having just taken a shot from a changeling at the door. She responded with a blast of electricity, and followed it up by hurtling a heavily laden shelf at the door, thoroughly blocking it.

I turned back to the broadcaster. “This isn’t a threat, Ocelli. This is an inevitability. I’ve tried everything I could to save lives, but you are forcing my hoof. If you do not surrender, every changeling within this hive will die.”

“You are a coward and a liar,” Ocelli said. “We will never surrender to you.”

The rapid discharge of multiple magical energy weapons filled the air,

blowing away parts of the shelves blocking the door. The angle left us safe, but it wouldn't hold long. Echo threw another shelf onto the heap. "We need to go!" she snarled.

I looked down at the clock. It was time.

I took a deep breath, and sighed it out. Then I pressed the broadcast key one last time. "I'm sorry."

Then I lowered the stolen PipBuck, and took the detonator in my magic. A quick look confirmed it was on the correct channel.

A sharp bang filled the air, muffled by Echo's shield. Some Serenity soldier had tried throwing a grenade in past the shelves, to no avail.

I moved the switch from "Safe" to "Arm". The red light lit.

My heart hammered. Several magical bolts slammed into the toppled shelving as the Serenity soldiers continued to try and clear the door. Echo shoved another pair of metal chests into the pile.

I flipped the safety, unblocking the trigger.

"Echo."

Her head snapped around, eyes narrowed in grim determination. I turned the detonator so she could see it clearly.

I hit the trigger.

"Now."

With a flash of purple, we were gone.

# Epilogue

And so, the destructive power of a megaspell was unleashed on Equestrian soil once more. In an instant, hundreds of lives were scoured away by balefire. Those who looked back saw a quarter-mile-wide swath of ground heave up, hang there for a moment, and come crashing back down.

The mighty Serenity hive was gone. Only a radioactive crater remained, laced with veins of balefire. Their machinations that had threatened the denizens of the Wasteland, pony and non-pony alike, had ended with their own destruction. The same balefire that had ended the Equestria of old had instead served to protect those who had survived.

In the aftermath, the survivors looked to the future.



Not all of Serenity's forces perished with their hive. A few remained free: Infiltrators, scouts, and soldiers, who had been carrying out their duties in the Wasteland. Now, without a home, without a queen, the remnants scattered.

A few, whether driven by duty or desperation, tried to strike back. Some sought assassination and sabotage as their methods. Others, mostly soldiers, formed small raiding groups, taking the food and love they needed by force from travelers and small settlements. Both caused many problems for ponies, but their impact was short lived. Every month, a few more of these holdouts fell. Before long, the last gasp of the Serenity hive fell silent.

Most, however, sought other paths for survival. Some set out into the Wasteland, putting the grave of their hive behind them as they sought a new future elsewhere. Others, faced with the threat of starvation in a hostile and barren land, turned to the ponies they had so recently been aligned against. At tiny settlements across the land, new travelers and scavengers appeared. Some of these mysterious strangers went as swiftly as they came. Others lingered, only to disappear in the middle of the night. Suspicion was high, but every now and then, a wanderer would find a place where they fit in.

And finally, there were those who followed the example of Calypter,

offering their open surrender.



The surrendered changelings returned with the army, fearfully awaiting their fate.

By agreement of the major settlement leaders, and under the guidance of Queen Whisper, the former Serenity changelings were soon situated alongside the very ponies they had so recently been fighting. Homes were built and jobs established. Most were settled at Mareford, being the largest settlement, but a number were welcomed by Gemstone.

Soon came the difficult business of learning how to live together. Tensions were high and interactions awkward at first. Changelings were fearful of the beings they had been taught to see as monsters, while ponies were understandably suspicious of the creatures who had so recently deceived and attacked them. Sometimes, these tensions boiled over into action: a desperate or depressed changeling lashed out at a pony, or a pony sought vengeance for past wrongs. Despite these difficulties, there was still progress. As the weeks rolled by, under the Kind and Generous example of individuals like Seroon and Dazzle, those tensions started to fade away.



Sixty-one individuals had been pulled from the Serenity hive, returned to a world that some no longer recognized. Some were ponies out of time, having lost decades in the simulated world. Others were distraught at finding themselves torn from a world of peace and comfort and plunged into the Wasteland.

Scouts and messengers were sent out to seek friends and family. More than a few tearful reunions were made with loved ones who had thought them long dead. Some more awkward reunions were made with those who had moved on with their lives long ago. Still others found nothing but silence, the ponies they had known either dead or unable to be found. Every accommodation was made for those poor individuals. While nothing could quite compare to the false lives they had lived in the simulation, life in the heart of Mareford and other established settlements still offered some level of comfort. Whether through guilt or compassion, ponies pitched in to

make the transition as painless as possible.

Unfortunately, Serenity hadn't selected their captives for their morals, but for how much love they could extract. Some had been unscrupulous individuals even before their captivity, including several raiders who had been controllable by the pacifying influence of the simulation. They were given a fair chance, but without that influence, some returned to their previous way of life with abandon. Six of the rescued captives, including a particularly violent griffin by the name of Ricochet, killed a pair of soldiers and escaped into the wilderness. They made it less than two hours before being hunted down and slain by a joint team of Loyalists and Mareford Rangers, leaving them as contenders for the most short-lived raider gang in history.



Having cast off the troubles of its recent past, Mareford soon reestablished itself as the heart of the southern Wasteland, a place ponies—and all others—could look to with pride. Serenity's defeat had been the effort of a great many, but all recognized that Mareford had formed the core of their efforts. Its soldiers had given the army the strength it needed, and their professionalism had giving it direction. Now, the settlement was the center of rebuilding and moving forward, with a renewed image of hope.

Many names were suggested for the new mayor of Mareford. Dusty Trails and Seroon were popular suggestions, though both declined. Instead, the office went to a less-known mare, Silverline. She had stepped forward in memory of her fallen husband, a victim of the town's darker history, and dedicated herself to repairing the harm that had been done in Mareford's name. No longer would Mareford be a place of greed, exercising its power over lesser settlements. Instead, it would be a helping sister, ready to shield the weak and aid the vulnerable. A shining beacon in the Wasteland, that even Celestia could be proud of.

Some worried it was too idealistic. Some thought it was impossible. But the majority agreed: impossible or not, it was worth striving for.



Trotsen found itself scarred by the fight against Serenity. They had lost

almost half their motorwagons, nigh-irreplaceable relics of the old world and the symbol of their might. Worse, their former head rider was dead, and with her, her mighty Beast. They had been beaten and battered, and had little to show for it.

Despite these setbacks and the large horseshoes he had to fill, Axle asserted himself as a strong and clever head rider. The riders under his command were soon roaming more aggressively than ever, hunting down the last of the local raiders, and even claiming a few more of their Serenity-supplied motorwagons. He capitalized on the image of Trotsen motorwagons riding to the rescue, using it to secure beneficial trade deals, security arrangements with nearby settlements, and even the occasional and lucrative transport contract.

With the newfound goodwill and rapidly spreading relations, Axle started seeking out valuable ancient technology. His ambition lit a fire in the heart of the Trotsen ponies, who soon discovered a higher goal: the rebuilding of the ancient motorwagon factories. Slowly and steadily, industry would return to the Wasteland.



Gemstone grew rapidly in the years that followed. Word of the town and its ideals had spread far and wide, perhaps even more than Mareford. A small settlement, advocating the seemingly naive ideals of Kindness and Generosity in a world that appeared openly hostile to such, had stood side-by-side with the most powerful forces of the Wasteland. If Mareford had been the core of the army, many saw Gemstone as its heart. Their tale of idealism and heroism drew the imagination of many, and soon ponies were traveling to see this wondrous place.

These newcomers found a welcoming settlement that embraced harmony. A small slice of the Wasteland that called back to a better time, before the war and megaspells. A place where former enemies lived together in peace.

The small portion of the former Serenity changelings who settled in Gemstone were welcomed warmly, much to their surprise. While there was some early caution, they soon found that they were with ponies that genuinely cared. Ponies who were pleased just to see them happy. Ponies

who offered genuine sympathy over the death of their queen and sisters. Ponies who saw beyond the exterior and the circumstances of the past. Ponies who treated them like equals.

Even the most steadfastly suspicious among the changelings soon found their concerns fading away. Friendships started to grow, and even love. Gemstone stood as an example of the strength of Harmony, with Dazzle and Calypter leading the way, together.



Rust was nothing but a ruin, torn apart in Serenity's quest for material, but it would not be the end. Ponies would soon seek out those burnt ruins, drawn by the promise of steel and water.

A band of settlers set out from Mareford, with Singe at their head. Sympathetic ponies from all around had pitched in, contributing what they could to rebuild the lost settlement. Arclight came from Gemstone to help repair the pump. Ponies and changelings from Mareford helped with the construction. In just two weeks, Rust had returned. All cheered when the first water caravan rolled out, with Mareford soldiers marching alongside.



With the war against Serenity concluded and the army returned to Mareford, the Loyalists under Sergeant Hail Burst turned to seeking out their compatriots in the sky. When they finally re-established contact, they found the situation above the clouds had significantly changed. The latest series of skirmishes had been joined by more widespread civilian uprisings. The Council forces were on the back hoof, and while there was still much work to be done, the outcome was growing more certain by the day. With a final offer of thanks to the ponies of Mareford, and a promise to return, they returned to the fight.

When the reunified Enclave returned to the southern Wasteland, it was Commander Hail Burst who led the way. They were welcomed not as the pegasi who had turned their back on Equestria and cut off the sun, but as the pegasi who had so recently fought and died for their ground-bound brethren.



The remote settlements of Stinkpit and Hayseed, though untouched by the war itself, found the winds changing in their favor. Mareford's occupation and dominion over these settlements came to an immediate and unexpected end, with the new mayor personally visiting to make amends. While the former injustices encouraged resentment, they found some sympathy with the mare who had suffered similarly at the hooves of the very same pony.

While they did not return immediately to the same close relationship they had before their occupation, the new leaders did establish a guarantee of Militia protection, and a trade agreement favorable to the small settlements. With more lucrative trade and the freedom to guide their own future, both settlements were soon on the way toward improvement.

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Death had finally come for the Pale Ponies.

For centuries, they had trotted alongside death. Their ancestors roamed without life, but still protecting their land. The mightiest implement of death and destruction, a balefire megaspell like those that had slain millions, stood sentinel over their lands, an ominous threat to any who came near.

In an ironic twist of fate, it was this very threat that brought about their destruction. Serenity, drawn by the power of the megaspell, tore through their home, slaying living and dead alike. They left only ash and bones. Pale Sands fell silent.

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The settlement of World's End remained oblivious to the events to the north. Life remained unchanged for the small but diverse band of outcasts. The only contact came two weeks later, when a pair of timid and starving ponies fearfully approached the settlement, looking for shelter.

Ever true to their standards, the denizens of the settlement never pried into these newcomers' pasts. World's End was a place for second chances, not judgment, no matter who you used to be.



The years that followed saw many great changes. The greatest of these was the activation of a megaspell, more powerful than any seen before, but one that harkened back to the very first megaspell; a spell not of destruction, but of healing. All across Equestria, the poison and radiation from that ancient cataclysm were wiped away, the land cleansed.

Rainbow shockwaves opened the skies, returning Celestia's sun and Luna's moon. Sources of water that had been poisoned by radiation instead ran clean. Land that had been toxic was turned fertile. Even in the relative desert of southern Equestria, plants swiftly returned. Desert shrubs and flowers soon dotted the land, surrounding rapidly spreading farms. The Wasteland steadily receded, reclaimed by life.

Soon, new settlements started taking hold, spreading along fresh rivers and fertile valleys. Trade grew and flourished, even reaching north into the heart of Equestria, where the nascent New Canterlot Republic, a loose alliance of settlements, was taking root.

Across the land, ponies and other creatures looked forward to a future that was looking increasingly bright.

And in an isolated research facility in a patch of remote wilderness, many days' walk west of Mareford, a new hive was steadily taking form...



Long ago, the room had been the quarters of the head of management for the Crystal Life Technologies Experimental Site Beta. Recent years had seen renovations, including knocking down an adjacent wall for more room, and the construction of a much larger bed.

Several mattresses were arranged for convenient sitting. On the largest sat Queen Whisper, a soft smile on her muzzle. "So," she said, her voice gentle and softly resonant. "Now you know the full story. Everything that happened to bring us to where we are."

She looked around at the young changelings gathered around her. There were eight of them, all in that awkward age between children and adults. Each wore a PipBuck, with expressions ranging from curiosity to uncertainty.

One of the young changelings, Silver, raised a hoof. “Um... so is that it?” Whisper’s smile grew as she chuckled. “Was it not long enough already?”

A few of the others chuckled, and Silver flashed an awkward smile. “Well... I guess. But what happened next?”

“Next, I came here, and raised all of you,” Whisper said. “I’m afraid that part doesn’t make quite as exciting of a story, though I have kept a simpler journal over the years. No more exciting adventures, yet.” Her eyes wandered across them, her smile taking on a sly turn as her eyes fell upon one young changeling, Desire. “Despite some of your best efforts to make raising you an adventure.”

There were several giggles, and one very proud smile.

Once the giggling faded, Desire took the opportunity to ask her own question. “What about auntie Sickle? Was she really that... extreme?”

Whisper gave another chuckle. “Oh, yes. She’s mellowed out a lot.” She paused. “Well, a little.” Another pause, and a small frown. “Well, she’s a little less violent at least. And she figured out how showers work, so that’s an improvement for everyone.”

More chuckles.

Sandy was leaning forward on her cushion. “Ooh! I should go up to her and say ‘Hi Strawberry Shake!’ Would she be mad?”

“You know, it took me a month to convince her to let me share that with you,” Whisper said with a smirk. “I don’t know if she’d be angry with you, or amused that you had the guts.” Then she leaned down, stage-whispering. “But she might not give you any more ice cream.”

Sandy’s eyes went wide. “I’ll be good.” The others laughed.

Desire cut in, her tone light and teasy. “Soooo, did she ever get you to do that ‘changeling thing’? And what *is* that, anyway?”

“Not for lack of trying, and I’ll tell you when you’re older.” Whisper paused, then added, “Though she has apparently had *some* luck with the former Serenity changelings. And please don’t ask her for details.”

Silver had raised her hoof again, and with a nod from Whisper, spoke up. “I was wondering about... uh, Serenity.”

“Yes?” Whisper asked. “What about it?”

“Well...” She struggled for a couple seconds, suddenly finding it difficult to ask the question she had in mind. “Did... did you really have to blow it

up? There wasn't any other way?"

Whisper gave a soft sigh, her ears hanging a little lower. Silver started trying to apologize and take back her question, but Whisper shook her head. "No, it's a good question. A very good question. It's a question I've asked myself ever since that day. And... I don't know. It troubles me. If I'd done things differently, maybe we could have saved more. I've second-guessed all my choices, wondering if there's something I could have done differently. As it was... whether the decisions that brought us there were good or bad, when I hit that trigger, I think it was the right call at the time. I just wish we'd found some other way.

There was a long moment of silence before another changeling, Hope, spoke up. "What about the other changelings from there? What happened to them? Do they, you know... have their own hive yet? Their own queen?"

Whisper shook her head, though she gave a small smile. "No. They've been living alongside ponies quite happily for several years. Forming a hive separate of that would mean leaving the homes and friends they've made. There's been some talk about raising a new queen, but nothing yet. Some have said Calypter should take the role. She's probably the closest they've got to a queen, at least for the Gemstone changelings."

Hope was nodding, though she still looked a little troubled. "...But they don't have a hive or queen like we do. Maybe... you could be their queen, too?"

Whisper reached out, gently petting Hope on the head. "When our hive has grown stable, and we finally step out into the light, I intend our doors to be open to all, whether ponies or changelings or anything else. If they wished to be a part of our hive, I will be glad to welcome them, but I suspect most will prefer to remain where they are. They have their own homes, and... for some, I think the bad memories might be too much." She lowered her hoof again. "Still, even if I'm not their queen, I've tried to help out as much as possible."

The young changelings fell into silence, all thinking. Whisper waited patiently until another, Midnight, spoke up. "So... miss Echo never figured out how to make other ponies be like her?"

"More like the reason for her work vanished in an instant," Whisper said. "I think she might be the only person to actually be upset when all the

radiation vanished.”

Several surprised looks met that statement, but Whisper chuckled, waving a hoof. “I don’t mean to say she’s upset about the world becoming a better place. She *is* happy about that, too. She was just disappointed to have put so much work on something, just to have the main reason for it suddenly go away.

“Still, she learned a lot from her studies, and she’s put it to good use. She’s figured out how to replicate our shapeshifting through unicorn magic, though she’s still the only pony to ever cast it successfully. She has remarkable talent. It makes me wonder just how much of Twilight Sparkle is in there, after all.” She gave another chuckle. “She’s even helped me work out some more advanced changeling magic.”

Midnight grinned. “Yeah? Like teleportation?”

“Like teleportation,” Whisper said with a nod. “Or at least a changeling spin on it.”

“Do you think she’d teach us?”

Whisper laughed. “I think she’d be thrilled to! You’d probably make her day just asking her. And if you’re interested in learning more advanced magic, I think that would be an excellent idea.” She put on a more serious, motherly expression. “Just be warned, it’s very difficult, and extremely exhausting. It would take a lot of work and dedication. Echo makes it look far easier than it really is.”

While Midnight and Silver started chattering about the kinds of magic they were going to learn, another of their sisters spoke up. “I, uh... was wondering,” young Emerald said. “When momma Starlight gets back, you were going to go visit Gemstone, right?”

“I am,” Whisper said with a nod.

Aurora cut in. “That’s where uncle Dusty is staying, right?”

Whisper nodded again. “It is.”

Emerald hesitated, then asked, “Would it be okay if... if we came with you?” She swallowed, putting on a nervous smile. “I think I’d like to meet Dazzle and Calypter.”

Queen Whisper looked down to her, so small and fragile. A soft smile spread across her muzzle, and she leaned down. “I think that would be wonderful. I’m sure they’d love to meet you, too.”

The news was met with many bright smiles and excited murmuring. A trip! Seeing the world! Meeting new ponies and changelings and griffins and zebras!

Only one of the young changelings sat aside, with a quiet, troubled expression. Whisper scooted closer, dipping her head. “Is something wrong, Harmony?”

Harmony looked up, looking into her eyes as if she might find the answer to some question there. Eventually, she asked, “Why didn’t you want to be our queen?”

Whisper blinked. There was a second of silence before her smile returned. “I was an Infiltrator my whole life. I still am, I suppose. It’s what I love, and it was the best way I could serve my hive. I thought I’d do best to remain just an Infiltrator, and raise a new queen to lead us.” She reached up, placing a hoof gently on Harmony’s shoulder. “But I think the real reason was because I was scared.”

Harmony’s ears perked up, her head tilting.

“I was,” Whisper said, nodding. “I was scared of taking on that responsibility. I was afraid I would be overstepping my bounds. There is so much reverence and significance to the title, and I was just an Infiltrator.” Her smile grew. “But I realized that I had a duty to my hive, to you and your unhatched sisters. I couldn’t shirk that responsibility, and I couldn’t pawn it off on someone else. I needed to shoulder it myself... and I think it’s become the happiest decision I’ve ever had to make.”

Harmony blinked up at her, eyes starting to water. Then the young changeling moved forward, wrapping her forelegs around Whisper’s shoulders and burying her tiny muzzle against Whisper’s neck. “I’m glad you’re our queen.”

In moments, there were seven more young changelings joining in. Queen Whisper did her best to hug back, nuzzling gently at the back of Harmony’s head.

“So am I.”

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