

Fallout **EQUESTRIA**

By Kkat

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Original characters belong to Kkat

Art presented in book provided by:

John Elliott

Olav Midttun

Kayleen Wall

Josh Master

Ken Stone

Brandon Huang

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INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time, in the magical land of Equestria...

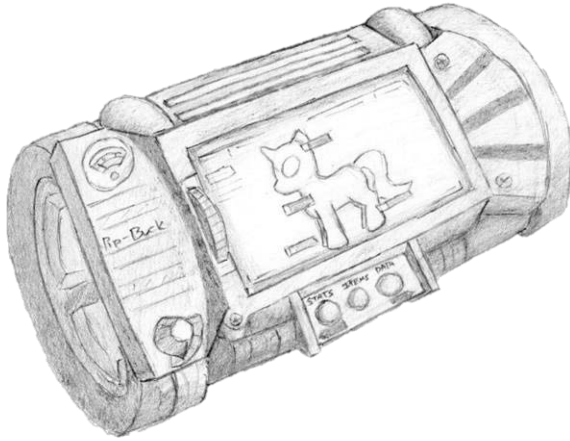
...there came an era when the ideals of friendship gave way to greed, selfishness, paranoia and a jealous reaping of dwindling space and natural resources. Lands took up arms against their neighbors. The end of the world occurred much as we had predicted -- the world was plunged into an abyss of balefire and dark magic. The details are trivial and pointless. The reasons, as always, purely our own. The world was nearly wiped clean of life. A great cleansing; a magical spark struck by pony hooves quickly raged out of control. Megaspells rained from the skies. Entire lands were swallowed in flames and fell beneath the boiling oceans. Ponykind was almost extinguished, their spirits becoming part of the ambient radiation that blanketed the lands. A quiet darkness fell across the world...

...But it was not, as some had predicted, the end of the world. Instead, the apocalypse was simply the prologue for another bloody chapter in pony history. In the early days, thousands were spared the horrors of the holocaust by taking refuge in enormous underground shelters known as Stables. But when they emerged, they had only the hell of the wastes to greet them. All except those in Stable Two. For on that fateful day when spellfire rained from the sky, the giant steel door of Stable Two swung closed, and never re-opened.



VOLUME ONE:
EQUESTRIAN WASTELAND

PROLOGUE



OF PIPBUCKS AND CUTIE MARKS

If I'm going to tell you about the adventure of my life -- explain how I got to this place with these people, and why I did what I'm going to do next -- I should probably start by explaining a little bit about PipBucks.

What is a PipBuck? A PipBuck is a device, worn on a foreleg just above the hoof, issued to every pony in a Stable when they become old enough to start work. A blending of unicorn pony magic and science, your PipBuck will keep a constant measure of your health and even help administer healing poultices and other medicine, track and organize everything in your saddlepacks, assist in repairs, and keep all manner of notes and maps available at a hooftap. Plus, it allows you to listen to the Stable broadcast whenever you would like as it can tune into and decrypt just about any radio frequency. And that's not all. A pony's PipBuck generates an E.F.S. (Eyes-Forward Sparkle) that will indicate direction and help gauge whether the ponies or creatures around you are hostile. And, perhaps most impressively, a PipBuck can magically aid you in a fight for brief periods of time through use of the S.A.T.S. (Stable-Tec Arcane Targeting Spell). Oh, and a feature not to be forgotten: it can keep track of the location of tagged objects or

people, including the wearers of other PipBucks. So if a pony somehow got lost -- don't ask me how you could get lost in a Stable, but it does happen on occasion -- then anypony who knew the lost pony's tag could find them instantly.

It can even be made to glow like a lamp.

So yes, PipBucks really are a testament to unicorn pony arcane science. And yes, having a PipBuck is a big advantage. So with how wonderful and miraculous all that just sounded, it's hard to impress upon ponies who never lived in a Stable just how ordinary, how *pedestrian*, a PipBuck was in the eyes of the ponies living in Stable Two. And why I was disappointed to have one as my cutie mark.

Every pony in Stable Two had a PipBuck. All that stuff I mentioned? Most ponies don't use even half of that. They just used it to tune into the Stable broadcast -- listened to the sweet, sweet voice of Velvet Remedy in the evenings or the latest school singing competitions during the day. The Stable had two soccer leagues, one which allowed S.A.T.S. and one which prohibited it. Otherwise, most ponies paid their PipBucks almost no attention at all. The Overmare issues each pony their own PipBuck on the day of their Cutie Mark Party -- usually a day or two after you get the mark on your flanks that tells everypony what makes you special, what you're destined to be good at. Once it shows, the Overmare knows what work to assign you; you know your place in the Stable. So no, I was not thrilled that what made me special was something that everypony had, which was a lot like being told I wasn't special at all. Sure, getting a PipBuck as my cutie mark could have meant I was destined to become an awesome PipBuck repair filly or something, but in reality it was like getting a cutie mark of a cutie mark.

Didn't help that I was the last pony to get her cutie mark. Not surprising in retrospect. Kinda tough to find what you're supposed to be good at when what you're supposed to be good at is something you don't get until you've found what you're supposed to be good at. So I tried everything. I even tried to invent new things. As a unicorn pony myself, my innate magics allow me a level of fine manipulation that

earth ponies don't enjoy. Any pony can hold a key in their teeth and open a lock, but using multiple tools in a very delicate operation? That requires precision levitation. So I decided to learn to pick locks with a bobby pin and screwdriver. And I was even getting pretty good at it. Unfortunately, it didn't get me my cutie mark. It just got me into trouble.

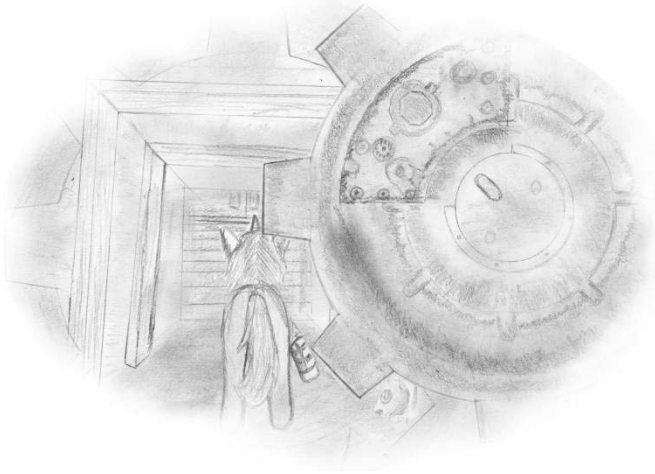
I even, to my humiliation, went through the C.A.T. (Cutie-mark Aptitude Test) in the hopes it would guide me to what made me special. But no. My C.A.T. was utterly average, with only marginally higher scores in a couple areas, indicating that I might be suited for work as a PipBuck Technician or a Stable Loyalty Inspector. Two options, I should note, that were even less impressive when you considered that it was generally expected that unicorn ponies would go into either technical or administrative work. That is, except the unicorn ponies who are natural artists, like Velvet Remedy. As I said before, our inherent magic allows us the sort of fine manipulation that technical work demands. Likewise, the Overmare and her government were always unicorn ponies. It is the Overmare's unicorn magic, after all, that creates the false sunlight used to grow our underground apple orchard. And while our apples might not look like those beautiful red things in the old books, they are what keep us alive.

It was only because they let me try my hooves at both positions that I gained access to a PipBuck before receiving my own, otherwise I might *never* have gotten my cutie mark.

Oh, my name is LittlePip. Go figure. I was given the name because I was the youngest and the smallest, and even my mother had the good sense not to call me "Pipsqueak." (Not that I don't love her, but when a filly's cutie mark is a glass of hard apple cider...) Anyway, funny how names like that turn out sometimes.

Pleased to meet you. Here is my story...

CHAPTER ONE



OUT OF THE STABLE

"Because in Stable Two, no pony ever enters and no pony ever leaves."

Grey.

The walls of the maintenance stalls were all a very monotonous, dull grey. The particular wall I was staring at had the merit of being a very clean grey. PipBucks were notoriously hardy and reliable, so being the Stable's PipBuck Technician meant that there were long periods of nothing to do. Being the PipBuck Technician's apprentice meant that I was assigned all the mundane daily chores while my trainer took extended naps in the back room. Chores like cleaning the walls.

"This wall needs a mural."

I let myself fantasize, picturing the Overmare agreeing and ordering Palette herself to turn our entire stall into one of her brightly colorful masterpieces. Palette was the greatest painter in Stable Two, and like every skilled artist, that made her a stable treasure. Life in Stable Two inevitably began to eat at your spirit -- you were born in the Stable, you lived your whole life in the Stable, you were going to die there, and the course of your life was largely laid out for you to see by your Cutie

Mark Party. So the Overmare insisted that a new song be added to the Stable broadcast's repertoire each week, that public areas were brightly painted and adored with uplifting and motivational murals, that regular parties were planned in the atrium... all in an effort to distract and stave off depression.

Reality came crashing back as I stared at the eternally blank grey. Beautifying maintenance areas was tragically low priority already, and the PipBuck Technician stall was one of the least trafficked parts of maintenance. I felt my ears droop as I started to realize that I'd be staring at this same grey wall nearly every day for the rest of my life.

"Oh dear. Is it really *that* bad."

And there she was. Velvet Remedy, the gorgeous charcoal-coated unicorn with streaks of color in her white mane and with a voice as smooth as silk and rich as finest chocolate, was standing in the doorway of my stall. I felt immediately grateful that I had finished the cleaning and simultaneously ashamed that the room was so beneath her.

I couldn't believe she was standing there. I'd seen her on the stage above us at late parties; I'd listened to her songs incessantly, recording every new one on my PipBuck so that I didn't have to wait to hear it again. I'll admit it now, I'd had a crush on Velvet Remedy for years. Me and at least three hundred other ponies. My mother used to laugh at that. "LittlePip," she would say, chortling with her friends, "Velvet Remedy's barn door doesn't swing that way." It took me a couple years to understand what my mother had meant by that. And took me several seconds to process that Velvet Remedy had just asked me something.

"W-wha-huh?"

Wonderful response, LittlePip. So elegant. I wanted to dig my way through the concrete floor and pull the chunks over the top of me.

She smiled sweetly. She smiled at me! And in that amazing voice, "You looked so heartbroken when I came in. Is there anything I can do?"

Velvet Remedy offered. To help. Me.

I was shocked back to my senses. Velvet Remedy must have some reason to be down here. Some PipBuck reason. It wasn't like she would just go wandering around maintenance, after all. Looking around, I realized that I was the only pony on duty. My teacher was, as usual, asleep in his office.

"Oh... no, it was n-nothing." I tried to regain composure. "How may I be of assistance?"

Velvet Remedy's expression was both compassionate and unconvinced, but she lifted a forehoof, raising her PipBuck up to my gaze. A more elegant model than mine, with her initials and cutie mark (a beautiful bird with wings outstretched and beak opened in song) embellishing it tastefully. "I hate to be a bother, but it's begun to chafe. Could you replace the padding?"

"Oh, absolutely!" I was already levitating the special keys used to unlock a PipBuck from a pony's foreleg (as an apprentice PipBuck Technician, I had all manner of special precision tools in the pockets of my utility barding). "I'll have it done in right quick!" The PipBuck came off with a click.

Velvet Remedy chuckled hesitantly, lowering her hoof. "Oh no, that's all right. Take your time. I'm going to put some salve on this leg back in my room and rest up for the afternoon."

That's right! Velvet Remedy was performing at the Stable Two Saloon tomorrow night! I would have to polish it up, make it worthy of being worn above her hoof. If I spent all night on it, I could give it a full tune-up, have it running as smoothly as the day she got it, and still have it back to her before the show.

"All right! I'll have it back to you by this time tomorrow. You won't be disappointed. I promise!"

She smiled at me again, and all the grey in the world couldn't darken my day. "Thank you." And then she turned to go. I watched as her cutie mark disappeared around the doorway. Then she was gone.



The next day, I was whistling one of Velvet Remedy's songs as I walked down the halls towards her room. Her PipBuck was hovering along beside me in a field of magical levitation, freshly padded with the best lining I could find, looking shiny and new. I was tired from a long night of work, but in high spirits. Velvet Remedy was going to be so happy with my work!

Turning the corner, I was startled out of my reverie by the mass of ponies gathered outside Velvet Remedy's room. Damn, I was going to have to battle my way through hoof-print seekers and paparazzi. Levitating the PipBuck higher, I started to shove my way into the crowd.

"She's gone!" "How could she leave?" The hushed voices and panicked whinnies around me grew alarming. "Why would she abandon us?"

Gone? Velvet Remedy was... gone?

And then the words that stopped me cold. "I didn't think the Stable door even could open!"

She was gone *outside*!?

"Don't worry, everypony!" boomed the voice of the Overmare from somewhere in the crowd. "I have the tag of each and every pony in the Stable. I will personally send out a rescue party. We'll have our Velvet back by the end of the day. Worry not."

I felt I was drowning in cold, wet cement. My gaze slowly moved up towards the PipBuck floating above me.

I lowered my head, slowly trying to back out of the crowd, curling the floating PipBuck close. When the Overmare brought up Velvet Remedy's tag, it would lead everypony not to Velvet but to her PipBuck sitting in the maintenance...

With a thump, I backed into somepony, startling me enough that the levitation field evaporated in a poof and the clean and shiny PipBuck clattered to the floor.

Turning, I found myself eye-to-eye with the Overmare.

She didn't speak, her gaze turning to the PipBuck on the ground. Velvet Remedy's initials and cutie mark clearly visible.

"What. Is. This?" The Overmare spoke slowly, dangerously.

All eyes turned to me. I could feel every pair of eyes. Nobody spoke. The silence bore down like a lead blanket. My mouth went dry. I couldn't find my voice.

I didn't need to. I could feel the wave of loathing. Dozens of Velvet Remedy fanponies, and I was the pony holding the reason why their idol was lost to them.

The Overmare's voice was low and surprisingly gentle. "Take it and go to your room. Swiftly."

She didn't need to tell me twice.



I lay on my bed that evening, poking at Velvet Remedy's PipBuck as the radio in my own played yet another re-iteration of the tragedy of the day.

I couldn't believe it. Velvet Remedy was gone. I couldn't understand. How could she leave? Why would she go?

The door out of Stable Two was closed and sealed. Only the Overmare knew the secrets to opening it, assuming it even could open. Which, obviously, it could.

But why? Nobody really knew what was outside, if there was anything out there at all. Historical books suggested the world outside was blasted, lifeless and poisonous. That was, at least, the common and logical assumption. But a ghost story somepony told at my first (and only) slumber party had given me horrible nightmares and still lurked in the shadows of my head: a tale of a pony who somehow got the Stable door open and stepped outside... only to find out that there *was*

no outside! Just a great nothingness that whisked the pony away, devouring her soul so that she was nothingness too.

Empirically, I knew that wasn't the case, but the mental image still haunted me.

The two things I did understand was that Velvet Remedy had gotten me to remove her PipBuck so the Overmare couldn't track her with it, and that I was screwed.

Being the smallest pony my age, and the last to get my cutie mark, did not facilitate building friendships with my peer ponies. Mother honestly didn't help either. Nor did waking up screaming at my first slumber party. So I was used to being alone. But I'd never had enemies before. I'd been beneath the notice of other ponies, but I'd never had one hate me.

I really couldn't blame them either, even though it totally wasn't fair. They were upset and hurt and needed a scapegoat. The news hadn't mentioned me by name, just "Velvet Remedy's custom-decorated PipBuck was found in the possession of a PipBuck Technician pony", but with a whole *two* of us, it wasn't hard for everypony to figure out, even without the scene outside her room earlier.

The Overmare was speaking on the radio. "We are all feeling this loss. But I want to remind everypony that Velvet Remedy chose to do this. She chose to leave her home. To abandon us, her family. She betrayed my trust and she betrayed yours, just as she betrayed the trust of the pony who she tricked into removing her PipBuck, ensuring we could not find her. I know many of you are angry or hurt. I urge you to direct that anger where it truly belongs..."

As thankful as I was for her words, it wasn't going to change the resentment that I would face every day, even if every pony kept it to themselves. It hung in the air like old smoke.

I distracted myself with the errant PipBuck, taking note of an encrypted file. I had spotted it yesterday, figuring it was probably an unfinished new song. I didn't want to open it then, both out of respect for Velvet

Remedy's privacy and a dislike of spoilers, but I guessed it didn't matter anymore. The song would never be played.

Opening a pouch on my utility barding, I withdrew an access tool that would allow me to remove the encryption safely and easily. It was a sound file. I played it.

"The override code for opening the door to Stable Two is... CMC3BFF."

I shot up in surprise at what I had heard. Swiftly, I turned off the radio and played it again.

I didn't recognize the voice. It was female, kinda sweet, and had a strange accent that didn't sound like anyone in the Stable. But now I knew how Velvet Remedy left.

I must have sat there for hours, contemplating what I should do. But finally, I made my choice.

I was going to go outside after her. I was going to bring her back.



I stood there, staring at the huge steel door that sealed Stable Two away from the horrors (or nothingness!) outside. And at the two guard ponies who blocked my way. I had my saddlebags packed with apples and necessities. Even a Big Book of Arcane Sciences for something to read. I had two canteens around my neck. I was ready to go. But the Overmare was making sure there were no follow-up acts.

Insistence and glowering looks weren't getting me anywhere. My horn was glowing, but they stood their ground, unimpressed. They weren't going to let me anywhere near the control panel.

"Hey, aren't you the filly who let our Velvet get lost outside anyway?" one of the guards inquired daringly, taking a bullying step forward. The other guard looked away in disgust. I'm not sure if he was disgusted at me, or if he felt like the Overmare seemed to about ponies wanting to take it out on me. I was kinda hoping it was the former, considering what I was about to do to them.

THUD!

The metal footlocker above them dropped onto their heads, knocking both out cold. Earth ponies -- they never see that levitating-something-up-behind-you trick coming.

I was at the controls, entering the passcode from Velvet Remedy's PipBuck when the Overmare's voice boomed through nearby speakers.

"Stop! I order you to stop this instant!"

Yeah, that wasn't going to happen.

"Guards! I want every guard pony at Stable Two door! Stop that filly!"

Oh crap!

My hooves flew up to the main switch for the door, and I prayed to Celestia that the code worked. Then, with all my strength, I threw the switch.

A loud clanging filled the air, followed by a hissing of steam and a great rumble that shook the room. As I watched, the massive bolt that held the door from Stable Two shut slid back. A huge hinge-arm swung down, attaching itself to the door, and with a teeth-hurting squeal, pulled the massive steel door out and away.

Randomly, I found myself thinking in my mother's voice "Stable Two's barn door doesn't swing that way." The door to Stable Two wasn't supposed to swing at all. Even though I threw the switch, I was stunned to see it actually open.

"You don't have to do this... LittlePip, isn't it?" The Overmare's voice kicked me out of my stupor. I could hear the hooves of galloping guards drawing near.

I took a step towards the door. "Don't worry. I'll bring her back."

"No you won't! If you leave here, you'll never be let back in!"

For a moment, the unfairness stung. The Overmare was willing to send out a search party to bring Velvet Remedy back. But then, Velvet was special, and I was... not.

Part of me wanted to turn back right there, crawl back to my room and my dreary but safe life.

Drawing myself up, I stepped out the door.



With a final hiss and clang, the steel door of Stable Two closed irrevocably behind me.

I don't know what I expected to find just beyond the door, but it certainly wasn't this long, dark hallway that smelled of rotting timbers and sepulcher air. I was no longer in the Stable. But I wasn't outside yet either. I was in limbo.

I turned on my PipBuck's light, and recoiled with a gasp at the skeletons of long-dead ponies which littered the hall. The outside of the Stable door was marred from where ponies had slammed on it until their hooves cracked and shattered, trying to get in.

Moving forward quickly, I discovered that the hallway opened into an old room with stairs leading up to a horizontal door with a shattered lock. The entrance from the outside world into Stable Two had been cleverly disguised as the door to a humble apple cellar. And by disguised, I meant that the person who built it had been building an apple cellar.

Taking a deep breath, I trotted up the stairs, swung open the cellar door, and stepped outside.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Cherchez La Filly - +10% damage to the same sex and unique dialogue options with certain ponies.

CHAPTER TWO



EQUESTRIAN WASTELAND

“What world do you live in? Out here in the real world, blood flows, little pony. Blood flows...”

Nothingness!

My first several seconds outside were a heart-bursting eternity of hoof-pounding terror! The story had been right! All that was outside was a great black nothingness! It surrounded me, suffocating. If I had been able to draw breath, I would have screamed.

And then my eyes started to adjust to the darkness. I began to calm, gasping, feeling weak (and not just a little foolish). In my defense, I had never experienced *night* before. Not really. Sure, I’d always turned off the lights before curling into bed, but that darkness was small, confined to my little room. And there was always the glow from under the door. The hall lights of Stable Two were eternal.

This was different. A cool air, quite unlike anything within the Stable, tickled my coat and chilled my skin beneath. It bore smells that were dank and rotting, dusty and alien. I could hear the sounds of night insects, creaking of wood and a far-off sloshing... but I was struck more by what I *couldn’t* hear -- the constant low hum of the Stable’s generators and the ever-present high whine of the lights were gone -- so

powerful in their absence that I first mistook the outside as silent. I could feel dirt and broken stone beneath my hooves, so unlike the smooth and sterile floors I had trotted all my life. And though I could not see much or far, I could see further than I had ever seen before, and there were no walls to mark the end of the room. I was staring into a horizontal abyss that stretched out from me in every direction.

An entirely new panic began to form within me. My hind legs went out from under me and I sat, stunned. I turned my gaze to the ground, breathing deeply, thanking it not only for holding me up, but being a visual endpoint. Then I made the mistake of looking up into the sky, and the absolute endless up-ness of it sent my head spinning and my stomach lurching. Great masses of clouds rolled over most of the sky; but there were gaps through which soft light poured and through those I could see the up went on forever. Insanely, I thought of the clouds as a great net, made to catch me if I fell from the earth into the yawning gulf above; but if I slipped through the holes, I would just fall up forever.

I clenched my eyes shut and tried to keep from vomiting.

The fear and queasiness was intense but passing. Once my faculties returned, I began to notice those things that had escaped me in my initial panic. The surrounding terrain was becoming evident. The world around me did not stretch out evenly; the ground heaved and rolled -- hills creeping towards mountains. The earth was punctured by the upthrusting black fingers of long-dead trees. Along distant hilltops, I could see the swaying, leaf-shrouded branches of healthier woods, but the living trees near Stable Two were few, scattered and sickly.

Second, I noticed that my PipBuck was flashing with a host of alerts. The map-maker was already beginning to do its work on my new and unfamiliar surroundings, and to my surprise had already pulled a label from the ether: Sweet Apple Acres.

Turning around to get my bearings, my eyes were drawn to the large, hollowed husk of what I assumed had once been a magnificent

house. Now, it creaked and swayed in the breeze as if threatening to collapse.

Looking to my PipBuck again, I noticed that it was picking up several radio transmissions. The radio broadcast from Stable Two was dark, but new stations had taken its place. My heart leapt, for it was the first indication that there might be pony life out here after all. I nudge my PipBuck to start playing the first station on the list.

"...still sealed up. There is no way inside. My son, he ate one of the apples from those damned apple trees up near the Stable, and now he's terribly sick. Too sick to move. We've holed up in the cistern near the old memorial. We're running out of food and medical supplies. Please, if anypony hears this, help us... Message repeats. Hello? Is there anypony out there? Please, we need help! I was bringing my family to the Stable up near Sweet Apple Acres when we were attacked by raiders. Only my son and I survived. We made it to the Stable, but it's still sealed up. There is no way inside. My son, he ate one of the apples from those damned apple trees up near the Stable, and now he's terribly sick. Too sick to move. We've holed up in the cistern near the old memorial. We're running out of food and medical supplies. Please, if anypony hears this, help us... Message repeats. Hello?..."

A voice was filled with a terrible resignation, as if the pony had already given up hope and was just going through the motions. Shaken, I turned it off. I didn't think I could bear to hear it again. That is when I noticed the soft ticking from my PipBuck. Checking it over, I discovered that its radiation detector -- a feature I had never known to be used, had self-activated. The cute little rainbow dial had always been planted firmly in the green. It was still there, but edging discreetly towards the yellow.

I couldn't just stand here beside what had long, long ago been the door to a simple apple cellar for the rest of my life. Well, I could, but it would be a relatively short and miserable life. A realization was dawning on me: with so many directions to go, what was the likelihood that I would chose the path that Velvet Remedy had followed? Even

though she only had a few hours head start, the prospect of finding her was bleak.

But I had to start somewhere. And the best chance I had was to get up high and have a look around. The ruins near me rose higher than any of the nearby trees, and the sheered-off roof of its upper tower was probably the best vantage point I could hope for. I closed my eyes, steadied myself, and went inside.



What was left of the Sweet Apple Acres building proved sturdier than it looked (or sounded). It was also almost barren, anything of value that had survived had been looted, leaving only scraps that nobody wanted but that time itself seemed unable to erase. Rusted shoes, boxes of soaps for cleaning dresses that no longer existed, a pitchfork with a shattered handle, a rake.

I began up the stairs. My eyes were alerted to a feeble glow, the soft green color of a poisoned apple, bathing the room above. The glow came from the screen of an old terminal, a device of arcane science identical to the ones used throughout Stable Two. It seemed miraculous that it still worked after centuries on the outside. When Stable-Tec built something, they built it to *last*.

Curiosity lured me to it, and my wonder was quickly replaced with understanding. It was no coincidence that this particular terminal was live, for on it was a fresh message:

To any pony who has left Stable Two in search of me:

Please, go home. I am doing what I have to do. The Overmare understands, even if she can never agree, and I hope one day you will to. I will not be back. Do not look for me. Do not endanger yourself further for my sake. Please forgive me.

Velvet Remedy

I searched the terminal for more, but all the other messages were ancient and corrupted save for one. And that one had a rather unique

encryption, something I had heard of but never seen before -- a binary encryption such that in order to decrypt it, I would first have to download the message into my PipBuck from both the terminal which had been used to send it and the one upon which it was received.

Having nothing better to do with the vast amounts of storage my PipBuck was capable of, I downloaded it. In reality, I knew that the chances that I would ever come across the companion terminal, much less that it would be functional, were overwhelmingly against me. Nor did I have any reason to believe a message centuries old would be of any significance.

More importantly, I now had to face that outside was my new home. Even if I found Velvet Remedy, it was unlikely that she would accompany me back. I'll admit, I had been subtly entertaining a fantasy where the Overmare would be so delighted with Velvet's return that she would embrace us both back into the herd. Maybe even throw me a party. Now, I was forced to admit how foolish that vision was.

Thinking upon this made my head fill with black clouds. But as I reached the top of the ruins and looked out over the wasteland, a bright light, feeble as it was, flickered in that darkness... just as the light from the campfire, not half an hour's trot distant, poked an orange hole in the night.



As I approached the circle of firelight, I knew something was off. Something about the way the dusty beige unicorn was laying on his mat of straw, legs curled up under him. Some tenseness in his body language. But it wasn't until I stepped hoof into the light and got a good look -- a warm "Hello" dying on my lips -- that I saw he was gagged, and caught the glint of the flames against a few exposed links in the chains binding his hooves.

"Well lookie here! Walked up all nice and pleasant, didn't she?" A large earth pony emerged from the shadows of a nearby rock. His hooves clacked metallically against the rocky ground, shod in cruelly

spiked ponyshoes. Two more ponies slid out of hiding on opposite sides -- one another earth pony holding a shovel whose blade had been lethally sharpened, the other a unicorn whose glowing horn levitated towards me a short instrument of wood and metal with two barrels. Each pony wore barding made from thick hide. Much like night, I had never seen a firearm before, save for pictures in books. But those books were more than explicit enough for me to recognize the mortal threat.

The bound unicorn on the mat shook his head with a sad yet derisive look and began trying the scrape the gag away with a forehoof, no longer making effort to keep the chains secret. The three ponies menacing me spared him only the occasional glance.

"Might as well have trussed herself up for us," the gun-wielding unicorn snickered. Then, addressing me, "You wouldn't mind, would you?"

Laughter. "And another unicorn too. She'll fetch a pretty price, this one."

Fetch a price for what? And from whom?

The one holding the shovel-spear in his mouth mumbled something incomprehensible. Then, apparently deciding the gun was sufficient deterrent, spat out his weapon and re-iterated, "By the Go... I mean, look at her! I think she's taken a *bath!*"

I was suddenly and bizarrely aware of how filthy all four of the ponies were, and how foul they smelled. I managed to cover a gag with a sneeze.

"What's going on?" I asked. Of the emotions battling for supremacy in my head, confusion had clawed its way to victory.

The captive unicorn finally succeeded in pulling the filthy gag free. "They're slavers, you idiot."



Monterey Jack, the dirty beige unicorn with dour expression and a cutie mark that looked like cheese, followed behind me as we trudged

alongside our captors, walking a broken path that once was a road. My legs were in chains, making walking difficult and anything more speedy than a trot impossible. My PipBuck had stymied the slavers efforts to bind my forelegs, eventually forcing them to chain me above the knees. Had the one with the shovel-spear not been holding its point dangerously against my throat, the other two would have gotten a few hooves to tender places for their efforts. As it was, they made short work of me.

I was not gagged, but Monterey had convinced me early that unnecessary chatter from the slaves-to-be would likely result in the loss of my tongue. Not that I had much to say to these brutes anyway aside from my repertoire of colorful metaphors. I didn't expect they would answer my questions, even if my tongue should survive the asking, and they were being chatty enough with each other to suffice.

"Hate thef fart," grumbled the earth pony through the spear clenched in his teeth.

"Well then, if you would just learn to swim, we could take the long way, couldn't we?" suggested the unicorn with poisoned sweetness.

"Hate fuffen sweffey." By his smell, decidedly more pungent than the others, I guessed he just hated water in general.

"How about you stop complaining and I'll let you sample one of the slaves before we get to the forest." Their leader, the earth pony named Cracker with the spiked shoes and a cutie mark that looked suspiciously like a whip (or maybe a snake?), turned back towards Monterey and I with a filthy smile.

I looked away. They laughed.

Through their disgusting dialogue, I could hear a liquid sound ahead. Not like a burbling water fountain but closer to a sloughing muck. And... something else. A distant sound, getting closer. Music? Yes, music. Slightly tinny yet... triumphant? Regal? I couldn't put my hoof on exactly what feeling the music was trying to inspire, but it was brightly out-of-place.

Cracker took note of my expression and smirked. “You look like you’ve never heard that before. What, did you live your life in a Stable? If you’re hoping for the cavalry, that ain’t it filly. That’s just one of those sprite-bots.”

The music cut out with a sharp twang.

The unicorn slaver, Sawed-Off, trotted ahead a bit, peering down the path ahead. Turning back to the rest of us, he smirked. “Think one of the radigators got it?”

Cracker suggested it flew into somepony’s booby trap. The other earth pony suggested a mouthful of spear-mangled mumbling. The unicorn turned forward again and the glow from his horn illuminated the machine -- a metal ball about the size of a foal’s head floating on four silently flapping wings – hovering silently right in front of his face. No arcane science this, I could tell; it was pure earth pony engineering.

“FUCK!” Sawed-Off leapt back a full pony’s length in surprise. Then swung his shotgun to bear and fired it at the sprite-bot. The sound was like a metal plate falling from the ceiling, and it echoed through the night-darkened hills. Sparks specked the metal ball as it was peppered with scattershot. It let out an electric whine and darted into the darkness.

The unicorn almost took off after it, but Cracker’s voice cut the distance between them, “That’s enough, Sawed-Off. Save your ammo.”

“Dammit, I hate when they pull that stealthy shit. It’s a flying fucking radio; it’s not supposed to sneak up on ponies.”

My ears were burning from the free flow of crude profanity, but I didn’t mind. I was mulling over what I had just seen.

“Idiot,” muttered Monterey Jack under his breath. “They heard that all the way in Ponyville...”

Unlike my fellow slave, I was pleased to have witnessed the unicorn firing off his weapon. Because now I knew how it worked.

“...What kind of damned fool,” Monterey grumbled, “announces his presence this close to raider territory.”



A river slithered across our path, its waters slipping and oozing along its banks, half-stagnant. The water lapped and sucked at the supports of a bridge, making the wet sounds I had been hearing. Beyond the bridge lurked the shattered remains of a pre-war town.

The bridge was a maze of barricades. Dark shadows of ponies moved about it. Briefly I may have made the mistake of hoping for rescue; but my eyes were drawn to the spiked poles that lined the bridge, and the still rotting heads of decapitated ponies that adorned two of them.

I tasted bile. The sight was horrific.

“Cager, stay here,” Cracker said, finally putting a name to the spear-wielding slaver pony. “Sawed-Off, let’s go hear what the toll is this time.”

Monterey Jack lowered his head and looked balefully towards the bridge. I moved closer to him, following his example, and hoping that I had positioned myself so Cager couldn’t see the faint glow from my horn as I slipped my screwdriver and a bobby pin from my stable utility barding. Like all of the slavers’ equipment, the manacles on my legs were crude and of low quality. As Cracker and Sawed-Off argued with the bridge ponies, I focused on picking the first lock. I was rewarded with a soft click as it sprung open, releasing my PipBuck foreleg. The manacle fell to the ground with a little thump.

“Hhu!” Cagey’s ears had shot up, and now he moved around to see me. Swiftly, I cut the magic, dropping the screwdriver and bobby pin into the dirt, and hoped that in the darkness the slaver couldn’t see the change in my chains.

“Wuf hoo uf foo?” Cagey growled dangerously. The nasty sharp edge of the shovel hovered inches from my eyes.

BLAM!

Cagey turned abruptly, the spear-shovel slashing close enough to my face that I shrieked. The gunshot was from the bridge. It didn't sound like Sawed-Off's shotgun. But the second shot did.

It took Cagey a breath to recognize that crossing the bridge had become a bloody affair. Glowering back at us, his posture threatening, he started to say... something. I suspect he was warning us to stay put, but I'll never know. His head exploded, showering me with gore.

I stood there, eyes wide, shaking with shock. Blood, warm and sticky, ran down my forehead and into my left eye, oozed into my coat and mane.

In the growing list of things I'd not seen before this night, the death of another pony ranked at the top. I blinked, feeling the blood on my eyelid. Cagey was dead! And I had Cagey all over me!!

The urge to throw myself into the river was overwhelming. But I wouldn't get to it like this. Pushed by something more than determination now, my horn once again glowed and I began to unlock the rest of my manacles.

I spared a glance towards the bridge, seeing Sawed-Off hunkering down beside one of the barricades as he magically pulled his shotgun open, stuffing in more ammo. Two shots, I realized. One at the sprite-bot, one just now. Two shots, and then reload. Closing the weapon, he levitated it up above the barricade and shot blindly into the violent milieu, spraying an already wounded raider pony with scattershot. The pony staggered and fell.

Unfortunately for Sawed-Off, the raider behind him had a different kind of shotgun, one that was faster and not limited to two shots, that fired slugs which tore great holes in the unicorn slaver's body the moment he looked up to see the results of his effort.

I turned away, cringing from the nightmare playing out before me. I focused on the locks.



I had freed myself and was beginning to free Monterey when two raider ponies trotted off the bridge towards us, stepping over the battle-mutilated corpses of Cracker, Sawed-Off and the raiders they had taken down with them. One of those approaching was the unicorn raider wielding the devastating combat shotgun. The other, an earth pony with a sledgehammer in its teeth. The unicorn was laughing. Not the mean laugh of Cracker, but a crazed laugh that sent chills down the back of my neck.

“Looks like we got ourselves some prizes!”

The earth pony chortled behind the sledgehammer as the unicorn looked us over appraisingly. The two were somehow even filthier than the slavers. The unicorn bore jagged scars across her face and flanks, one of them tearing through her cutie mark, several freshly bleeding. The earth pony was hairless and painfully burned over much of her left side. Both wore barding that looked ragged and cobbled together.

“help us?” I suggested weakly.

“Oh, I’ll help myself to you, all right!” The unicorn reared up and gave me a kick, her hoof striking hard into my side. Pain exploded and I dropped, gasping. Rearing up again, she brought her full weight down on me. I howled.

Near me, Monterey let out a wet grunt of pain as the earth pony gave him a taste of her sledgehammer. Leaving me in a crying huddle, the unicorn also turned her attention to the still-chained Monterey. In moments it became clear they intended to beat and bludgeon him until he was another lifeless corpse. And probably not stop then.

“Hold his leg out. I’m gonna shoot his hooves off!” The unicorn raider floated the combat shotgun a foot from Monterey’s splayed left hindleg, the only one I had freed from its manacle.

Ignoring the pain, I leapt up, closing the distance and spinning as I gave a fierce back-kick. My hooves connected with the shotgun, sending it flying. It clattered onto the bridge beyond. A moment later, I was levitating the shovel-spear at the two raider ponies who stood facing me

with gleeful expressions. Two against one, and both of them were experienced fighters. The one with the sledgehammer stepped closer, as if eager to see if hammer beat knife.

Monterey was on her in an instant, throwing his forelegs over her head, pulling the chain between them across her neck. The sledgehammer fell from her mouth as the raider pony choked.

The unicorn turned, surprised by the sudden change in odds. I could have attacked her then, but threatening a pony is much different than actually attacking one. I wasn't sure I had it in me to slash at another pony, to draw her blood. To maim, or possibly kill.

The unicorn kicked up the fallen sledgehammer and turned to face me with it, murder in her eyes. And suddenly, I found it easy to thrust the shovel-spear forward. I was no longer struggling with following through on a threat; this was survival. Self-preservation is instinctual; it clears away the moral hesitations. And while I did not have the fighting skills of my opponent, I did have an advantage all my own. S.A.T.S.

Aided by the targeting spell of my PipBuck, I sent the spear slashing across her knees, hobbling her. A second slash, this time across her face, relieved her of her weapon. The third would be a killing blow...

...except I wasn't ready to do that. Not yet. Instead, I swung the spear around, cracking her across the head with its handle, hard enough to splinter the wood. The unicorn raider fell at my feet, unconscious.

I looked up. Monterey was standing, chest heaving, over the body of the earth pony raider, the life choked out of her. He was staring at me quietly. Then finally raised a forehoof, only for the chain to clank tight before he had it more than a few inches off the ground.

"Oh!" Dropping the shovel-spear, I turned on the light of my PipBuck and searched about for my screwdriver. I had lost the bobby pin; there was no chance of finding it in the dirt at night. But I had more.

Once we were both free, Monterey limped slowly over to the bridge. A moment later, he returned, his horn glowing a gentle beige. Sawed-

Off's shotgun followed him. Before I could react, he aimed it at the head of the unconscious unicorn raider and fired.

Her blood began to seep across the ground towards my hooves. I watched in stunned silence as he turned and began prodding at the bodies, tugging items from them.

Finally, I found my voice. "What are you doing?"

He looked at me as if I was stupid. "Checking to see if they have anything valuable on them. With luck, food." I nodded, watching him move to the bodies at this end of the bridge. Looting the bodies of the dead felt wrong; but a cold, rational part of me murmured that it was a qualm I would have to get over in order to survive. And imagine how embarrassed I'd be if I starved to death out here because I'd been too shy to check a dead pony's bag for a pouch of oats or a can of old applesauce? I moved a bit further down the bridge.

I looked over the body of a dead raider pony, his face bloody and torn from Cracker's ponyshoes. I started to go through the pockets of his barding, but my stomach rebelled, and I flung myself to the railing, heaving my lunch into the foul river below. A large break in the clouds brought a soft and silvery light to everything, and I could see my reflection in the water, still covered with Cagey's drying blood.

Then I saw Sawed-Off's shotgun hovering in the air behind my head.

"I'll be taking what you have too," Monterey Jack informed me with a bored drawl.

"w-What?" I turned slowly to see him standing on the bridge, bathed in moonlight, his horn glowing a soft beige light. The shotgun floated between us, pointed at me.

"b-But I just saved you!"

"Yeah. And for that, I'm not going to kill you." His eyes narrowed. "Unless, of course, you do something stupid right now."

"But I just saved you!"

"Aren't you top of your class," he said snidely.

“We should work together! Travel together!”

Monterey snorted. “And split our limited provisions? Go to sleep with one eye open each night, hoping to catch you when you try to stab me in the back. No thanks.”

My righteous disbelief stopped short of denial. Suddenly, I was so very weary. Nodding, I lowered my head and let my two canteens slip free. I then backed up so he could approach them. I turned my head to start unclasping my saddle bags.

I saw it on the bridge just beyond my tail.

Turning back to Monterey, my own horn was glowing. And the combat shotgun whipped into the air. For a long moment, we stood there, two unicorn ponies on a bridge, surrounded by bodies, shotguns floating between us, aimed at each other. Moonlight shone down on us from the break in the clouds.

Monterey Jack broke the silence, “You’re not going to use that. I saw you spare that raider. If you couldn’t kill a pony like that, you don’t have it in you to kill me.”

I narrowed my eyes. “I’m a quick study.”

He huffed, but didn’t move. “Do you even know how to use that thing?”

I forced a smile across my face. “Do you know that you only have one shot left? And judging by the sprite-bot, that gun is in such poor repair I’ll survive being shot with it. Will you survive being shot with this as many times as I can move the trigger while you try to reload?”

Monterey Jack took a step back. And with that falter, my smile was no longer forced. “And I’ll be taking my canteens back.”



Ponyville. I wondered just how my PipBuck knew the names of places before I did. It even named the wreckage of a building that I had just

slipped into. Ponyville was raider territory. I just hoped this place, this “Carousel Boutique”, was not crawling with them.

Monterey Jack and I had barely parted ways when the railing of the bridge exploded next to me. A sniper! The same pony, I presumed, who had turned Cagey’s head to applesauce. I fled into the town, keeping to what cover there was. Few of the buildings were intact enough to hide in. This was the closest.

Fortunately, I was alone. I waited for nearly an hour, curled up in a shadow near the door; but the sniper pony seemed uninspired to follow me. No, she or he could just wait until I came out.

Fatigue washed over me. I had stayed up all the night before, and this night’s events were a strain on both body and spirit. My muscles were weak and achy. My body hurt from the kicks I had taken. I felt emotionally played-out. I needed to sleep. Sleeping here was probably a horrible idea. If I woke up at all, it could be in the hooves of slavers, raiders or possibly worse. But going back outside, finding someplace better, it just wasn’t on the table. I was in no shape to test my wits against the sniper pony again.

Carousel Boutique was quite similar in condition to the building up at Sweet Apple Acres, only the looting was more destructive. The walls had been painted with crude images of violence and cruder swear words. A pile of torn-up cloth rotted in a corner, smelling foul, like ponies had urinated on it repeatedly. There were two beds, one of which was stained deeply with blood (and probably more vile things). The other was smaller, a foal’s bed, nothing but a mattress on a crushed frame. In my state, I felt it would do wonderfully.

The Carousel Boutique offered two more treasures, a locked chest and another terminal, identical to the one at Sweet Apple Acres. This one too was still functional, again to my surprise. It was locked; slipping out my access tool, I went to work. These terminals were crafted by some of the same ponies who later made the PipBucks, and the encryptions and locks were similar enough that my tools allowed me to get partway through the security. What remained was a puzzle, finding

the password within strands of code that my access tool laid bare. In my fried mental state, it was probably a small miracle that I was able to parse the code and find the password.

Or possibly not. The password was “apple”.

I laughed aloud, catching myself when I heard the volume of my own voice in the stillness of the decrepit boutique, as I realized that, beyond all realistic chance, this was the computer that the message had been sent to. With an unwarranted feeling of accomplishment, I downloaded it, and let my PipBuck do the rest.

Age had damaged the recording, but there was enough audible for me to recognize that same female voice, kinda sweet and with an odd accent, that had many hours before revealed to me the code that lead me out of my old life and into this new and horrible one.

“...special instructions for Stable Two... ...that’s muh family down there! Until the poison is gone from up here, that door doesn’t open for anypony!”

The voice faded in and out of static.

“...know you hate this, Sweetie Belle, but you’re an Overmare now. The Overmare of the most important Stable in all of Equestria. I need you to do this for me... ...to keep them safe... ...best friends forever, remember?...”

The sound file died with a whimper. I had been right -- there was really no value in a two-century old message. I left the chest for the morning, curled up, and went to sleep.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Horse Sense - You are a swift learner. You gain an additional +10% whenever experience points are earned.

CHAPTER THREE



GUIDANCE

“Books! I’ve read several on the subject.”

Daylight.

I had never seen the sun before, and it was fair to say I still hadn’t. But the power of its light filtered down through the thick angry, cloud cover, turning a sickly color yet still brighter and warmer than the humming lights of Stable Two. The air itself looked somehow wrong in the light, off-color. But everything was illuminated. I could see motes of dust and ash floating about the room (I wondered how healthy it was to be breathing it), and for the first time I really grasped the expanse of the outside.

It made me want to hide under the window.

While working up the nerve to step into the (very, very *big*) outdoors, I preoccupied myself with opening the locked chest I had discovered the night before. It took two of my bobby pins, but it was worth it! Inside was the most beautiful dress I had ever seen! Such lines, such folds of fabric, and the *colors* -- elegant and regal -- yet the fabric was light,

breezy and did not sag! It was a dream! Sadly, a dream for another, taller pony.

Joy and disappointment mixed in equal measure. But even if I could not wear it (at least not without some major tailoring), it was the prettiest and most cheerful thing I had seen since leaving the Stable. Carefully folding it up, I slipped it into my saddlebags.

Mindful of the sniper pony from the night before, I stood back, behind the cover of an overturned table, and used my magic to open the door. A tarnished bell hanging above tinkled cheerfully. Muted sunlight poured in. The sounds of outside flowed into the room. The twitter of birds, the far away sloshing of the river. Fresher air pushed back the stale.

Cautiously, I moved into the doorway and looked about. Post-apocalyptic Ponyville was a rotting skeleton of a once homey little town. Between collapsed buildings and burned homes, the streets were littered with rubble and refuse. And everywhere, garish paints of depravity and grotesquery. The graffiti was not limited to outside; the raiders had defaced the Carousel Boutique with an almost ecstatic fervor. I turned from the doorway, my gaze following the lines of profanity that curled up the walls towards the rafters. And shrank back, choking in revulsion at what the sunlight revealed above me -- dozens of dead and desiccated cats had been hung from the ceiling like decorations. I had slept directly beneath three of them.

I took an involuntary step back, one hindhoof out the door.

BEEP.

What was that?

BEEP.

I turned and spied the half-buried orange disk in the ground just outside the door. A little red light was pulsing on it. BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

“CLOSE THE DOOR!” The voice came out of nowhere, tinny and mechanical but somehow full of urgency. My heart lurched and I jumped back inside, slamming the door hard.

The explosion just outside tore the door off its frame, hurling it and me back into the room! I crashed through a tattered vanity divider, the smoking door landing over me. “Ugh!!”

I was more shocked than hurt as I slowly dragged myself out from under the door. My ears were ringing. A trap. No wonder the raider ponies hadn’t invaded while I slept. They had left a present instead.

“Hurry. There are more on the way.” I could barely make out the voice; my ears felt like they were stuffed with cotton candy.

“Who are you?” I queried, but moved to throw my canteens over my neck while magically drawing out the combat shotgun. I had been dismayed to learn that it had only had one shot left; but if a raider pony stepped through the door, I intended to make it count.

An entirely different voice replied. “Come out, come out, whoever you are!” The head of a raider pony slid into the doorway, grinning maniacally with something in her teeth. It looked like a metal apple. She tossed her head, it flew into the room at me, but the stem stayed behind in her teeth.

A memory flashed through my mind: I as a younger pony, trotting to the Stable schoolroom when an older pony stepped out of a doorway and heaved a water balloon at me. It had burst against my horn, soaking me and my homework. “Hey, don’t look so sad, blankflanks! I was just tryin’ ta help you. Y’know, in case your cutie mark is supposed to be a target!” The older pony had laughed and hurried off to class, leaving me dripping and miserable in the hall.

Lesson learned: when somepony throws something at you, don’t let it hit you. Don’t even let it hit near you, because it might splash. The combat shotgun clattered to the floor as I focused my magic on the metal apple, catching it and hurling it back out the door. The grenade barely cleared the doorframe when it exploded. Dust and splinters of wood flew at me, getting in my eyes. A tinkling erupted at my

feet. Looking down, blinking the debris from my eyes, I saw the little bell from over the door had landed, mangled, at my hooves.

My eyes hurt, and I kept blinking to clear them. Cautiously, lifting the combat shotgun again, I edged towards the door. I could barely see the foreleg of the raider pony around the edge of the door frame, completely still. With a second thought, I levitated the table so that it formed a barricade over the lower half of the doorway, and crawled up behind it. Quickly popping my head up, I looked to see if the raider pony was still conscious.

The leg wasn't attached to the rest of the pony.

It took me a moment to spot the rest of her torn body, mercifully dead. I dropped back under cover, feeling a strangeness pass over me. I had just *killed* somepony!



Sneaking out of Ponyville had been harrowing.

I realized early that I had been neglecting my Eyes-Forward Sparkle. Once I had brought up my E.F.S., it was far easier to determine where the raider ponies were, and to avoid them. Despite actively looking for me, the raider ponies proved less than adept hunters. Using my magic to bang a mailbox lid down the street or break an empty bottle against a freestanding chimney several yards away provided sufficient distraction to get past them. I had almost made past the last house when the sniper pony started taking shots at me again. The closest shot grazed my flank -- a slash of burning pain and a flowing blood. Fortunately, the wound looked far worse than it was, and even my meager medical skills were enough to stop the bleeding and bandage it.

I crouched in a little gully, sheltered by trees, and fought to catch my breath. Somewhere in the distance, I heard music playing again. The rumble from my stomach was much louder, reminding me that I hadn't eaten in almost a day. I floated out one of the apples from my saddlebags while I un-corked one of my canteens. Of course, I had no

more than taken a sip when my PipBuck threw a dancing red light into my E.F.S. compass. Not coming from the raider town, but from up ahead, deeper into the hilly wood. Of course. Something else was coming to get me. Because the wasteland clearly hated me.

I re-corked the canteen and stood up, wincing at the flair of heat in my wounded flank. I lifted the combat shotgun, still with its single shot, and perked my ears to listen.

My surroundings were quiet. Even the music was gone. Then I started to make out a faint buzzing. I lifted the gun to eye-level and focused down the top of the barrel, lining it up with warning mark of red on my E.F.S. At first, I saw nothing. Then I spotted it, an ugly little flying creature, bloated and grotesque, hovering between the trees. It spotted me too, and shot a spiny dart through the air at me. It missed me (mostly, getting tangled in my mane).

I aimed, but hesitated. The damn thing was so small, and could jerk about so erratically, that I had almost no chance of hitting it. I didn't dare waste my only shot. So I did the next best thing. I dodged behind a tree and prepared to gallop.

Another mark appeared on my E.F.S. followed by a zortching, crackling sound quite unlike anything I'd heard before. The red light winked out, leaving only the new one, which my PipBuck had divined as "friendly".

"I'm really sorry about what happened back in Ponyville. But that raider didn't give you any choice. She would have killed you." It was that same mechanical, tinny voice that had shouted out the warning that surely saved my life earlier.

With a mixture of relief and bewilderment, I watched the sprite-bot fly up to my hiding place.

"Who are you?" ("What are you?" was the question that wanted to escape my muzzle, but I suspected it would be rude.)

“A friend.” I raised an eyebrow. “Okay, a passing acquaintance. But one that doesn’t mean you any harm.” After a pregnant pause, “Call me Watcher.”

I regarded the sprite-bot critically. “Watcher. Okay...” I slipped out from behind the tree and started looking for where my apple had rolled to when I dropped it. Not far away, near where the flying creature had been, I spotted a glowing pile of pink ash. “You do that?”

“Bloatsprites. That’s what you get when you mix parasprites with Taint. Can’t stand ‘em, myself. Glad to help.”

Finding my apple, I levitated it up. “Thank you. And thank you for the warning about that... thing in the ground.”

“Mine.”

I blinked. “Y-you want my apple?”

The sprite-bot laughed, which was very weird to hear since the artificial voice didn’t have any inflection. “No. That’s what it was called. The explosive in the ground. It’s called a mine. It triggers when you step close.”

“Oh.” I took a bite of the apple. “That’s a very stupid name for a weapon.”

The sprite-bot laughed again. It was a little unnerving. Then, strangely, I found myself chuckling as well. “I really thought you meant my apple was yours. I’d share it if you wanted, although I don’t know what you’d do with it since you can’t eat.”

“Huh?” For having no emotion in its voice, the sprite-bot did a good job at conveying confusion.

“You don’t eat. Food. Because you are a robot, and you don’t have a mouth.”

A third time with the laughter, although this was more of a slight chuckle. “Oh! You mean the sprite-bot.” Well, at least I wasn’t the only one this conversation had managed to confuse, although I was more confused now than ever. “The sprite-bot isn’t actually me. I’m

somewhere else; I just learned how to hack into these things to communicate. And look around.”

I was beginning to get the picture. “Then that music...”

“Oh gosh no. I turn that crap off the moment I hack into one of these. You have no idea how *old* that music gets.” As an afterthought, the hacker-in-the-sprite-bot added, “Yet.”

I finished my apple. My stomach felt much better now. As did my spirits, thanks to finally having a civilized (if utterly bizarre) conversation.

“Oh, time’s almost up. Look, there are a few things you’re going to need if you want to survive out here. A weapon (or at least a lot more ammo for the one you have), armored barding, a bit of guidance... and most importantly, you need to make some friends.”

Armor, at least, shouldn’t be too hard, although I shuddered hard at the thought of putting on a dead pony’s barding. Still, that grazing shot... I’d been outside less than a full day and already I’d come terrifyingly close to death. I could probably slip back around to the bridge and strip it off the corpses there.

A weapon? If the idea of stripping armor from the dead made me cringe, the idea of possibly killing again stopped my heart. And friends? I’d had no luck with that as a foal in the Stable. What chance did I have in a world where saving a pony from raiders and slavery didn’t get you a friendship welcome mat? If this was what I needed to do to survive, I wasn’t sure I was up to the task.

“What do you mean by guidance?”

The bobbing sprite-bot was silent a moment. “I’m going to take a shot in the dark here and guess you like books. Am I right?”

“Well, yes. I...”

“There’s a great book for people traveling through the Equestrian Wasteland. I’m pretty sure there’s a copy in the Ponyville

Library. Give me just a second... Okay, I've sent the tag for it to your PipBuck."

My eyes widened in alarm. "The *Ponyville* Library. You mean, that place I just barely escaped from? The town full of sick, psycho ponies? Are you trying to get me killed?"

"Look, you've got to trust somebody."

The memory of Monterey Jack surfaced in my mind. "Why should I trust you? I've never even met you. You're hiding behind a robot radio."

"Oh, I dunno. How about the me-saving-your-life part? If I was trying to kill you, why would I have done that?"

The voice, Watcher, had a point. Before I could say anything to that effect however, the sprite-bot burped static and began playing music again. (The music featured multiple harmonicas and trombones.) It flew lazily away, as if it didn't care I was there.



The Ponyville Library was in a tree. Not a treehouse, but literally *inside a tree*. A massive, gnarled tree bigger than most buildings had been grown in the middle of the town, clearly the project of magic, and hollowed out to be the public library. The south side of the tree was scorched black and dead. But there were still a few leaves clinging to life on the opposite branches. The tree was surrounded by a wide open space with absolutely no cover.

Any hope my luck at the Carousel Boutique would hold out here was dashed when I looked up to the highest balcony and finally spotted the sniper pony – an earth pony armed with a powerful-looking rifle. The rifle was attached to the balcony railing with a gliding swivel mount, allowing the raider to aim it wherever she could see. The only safe approach was from directly behind her, where the door to the balcony and the narrow top of the tree beyond blocked her line of sight. There were surely more raider ponies inside.

Sneaking up carefully from the only direction that wouldn't mean instant death, I was trembling with nerves by the time I reached the door. As swiftly and silently as I could, I slipped out of Ponyville... and straight into pony hell!

Pony corpses everywhere! Not like the bridge where ponies had fallen in battle; these ponies had been mutilated, desecrated and put on display! Some poor pony's body hung from the ceiling, head and hooves severed and flesh sliced open and pulled back to reveal the meat and bones beneath. Heads and limbs hung from chains like sick party decorations. The rotting body of a pink pony with a violent mane was mounted, spread-eagled over a bookcase with railroad spikes. Two had been driven into her eyes. On another wall, a torso had been skinned and sliced open, the pony's entrails pulled out to decorate the shelves like streamers.

Blood and gore were everywhere, dripping from the ceiling and painting the walls in equal parts with the graffiti that had somehow gotten even more mocking and cruel. Between the bookcases, pre-war posters were mounted in shattered frames. Some raider pony had painted over one of them ("Reading is Magic") with a crude but effective depiction of a megaspell detonation. Another ("The most beautiful ponies have beautiful minds!") was covered over by a painting that was simply pornographic. The books had been burned in piles. The floor was layered in ash and filth. The stench was *unbearable*.

The room was dominated by three cages, two large square ones, and a smaller one hanging from the ceiling which was barely big enough for a pony. Captives -- filthy, beaten and misused -- were curled up inside, their hooves tied together with stained ropes. The two in the nearest cage looked at me pitifully and my heart wrenched painfully.

My eyes kept going wider until I had to clench them shut and bite my own hoof to keep from screaming. I backed against the door, heaving, unable to breathe properly, not wanting to breathe this air at all! The horror of the room flooded over me, drowning me. I pulled my hoof away barely fast enough to avoid vomiting my apple all over

myself. The stench of it mixed with the reek of the room, assaulting me further.

“please,” a whisper from one of the ponies, terrified to raise her voice, “help us.”

This was beyond horror! I pressed my eyes tighter and tighter... then opened them as a wave of brutal determination cut through the sickness.

“please... help!”

That was no voice, disembodied and trapped in an eternal loop, coming from some radio signal floating through the ether. These were living ponies; they were right here in front of me, and they needed help. And I was as damned as these rotten raiders if I was going to make them beg again.

The screwdriver and bobby pin slipped out and immediately began working on the nearest lock. With a click, the metal cage door swung open. Inside, two ponies, bound and laying in their own filth. I realized uncomfortably that I had nothing to cut the ropes with. I tried to untie them with my magic, the first pony’s ropes were so wet with blood that I could pull them apart, but second pony’s were bound too tightly.

“Are... are you for real?” The first pony stood shakily. “I-I’m free?”

I nodded, then glanced to the other ponies. I had no idea how I’d reach the one in the hanging cage. “If you could help me with...”

The pony blanched and shook her mane. “Oh no, I can’t stay here any longer. But, here, take these supplies. I managed to squirrel them away...” The pony dug into the floor muck with her hoof, revealing the utterly pathetic pile of scraps laying on a dirty rag that amounted to her entire worldly possessions. A can of diced carrots, a box of pre-war single-serve cake, a handful of bottle caps. It broke my heart.

“No, you keep it. You’ll need it more...” I paused, my eye catching a single shotgun shell in the pile. “Actually, I’ll take this

shell. Thanks!” I magically opened the shotgun and slid it into place. Now I had two.

The pony had already folded up the rag, picked it up in her teeth and slinked rapidly out the door before I could say anything else. I sent up a prayer to Celestia for her and focused on saving the others. I looked over the second pony, who hadn’t said a word, and recoiled as I saw the blood caking the inside of her flanks. What had these raiders *done!?!*

Looking around, I took in the shape of the room, trying to blot out the horrors everywhere I turned. (Above the front door was an aged fresco of a beautiful white winged unicorn -- Celestia? -- unusually large and graceful, a book floating in front of her, her wings outstretched over a rainbow of foals as they smiled up and listened to storytime. Not only had the ponies been painted over with images of blood and knives and violence, the fresco had been used for target practice, everything from bullets to flung excrement, and was now shattered and stained unspeakably.) The room was oddly shaped, with balconies and rooms branching (literally) off in all directions. I could hear the voices of raider ponies in the other rooms. And, judging from the décor, knives wouldn’t be far behind.

“I’ll be right back,” I promised with a whisper. Then, levitating the combat shotgun, I moved towards the nearest interior door.

I jumped back as the door swung open at me. A raider pony stepped through and stopped, staring at me blankly. His coat was dark black under his makeshift armor, his mane wild. Holsters were strapped to his flanks, one with a small gun, the other holding a blade whose edge was jagged like a saw, ensuring the most grievous of wounds. In stark, horrified disbelief, I saw that his cutie mark was actually a splayed torso.

The raider pony recovered quickly, swinging his head around and drawing out the small gun in his teeth (what, was he going to pull the trigger with his tongue?) just before S.A.T.S. helped me pump my two shotgun rounds into his face. I felt no remorse as his head turned into spaghetti sauce that splattered over his instantly lifeless body. I hadn’t just killed a pony -- these raiders had given up any right to the

title! These were not ponies, they were sick monsters that needed to be put down! And Celestia help me if I wasn't going to do just that. I didn't realize it until that moment, but I was *mad!* The pure evil of this place had shaken me to the core... and my core was *furious!*

Collecting knife and gun, I dropped the empty combat shotgun to the side. The smaller weapon was not going to be as powerful, but was fully loaded -- six shots in a revolving barrel. And that was good, because there was no way the noise wasn't going to bring every raider pony running.

The first three raider ponies galloped into the main library almost immediately, one of them crying out thrilled insults. S.A.T.S. helped me fire three shots at her head. The first two missed, but the third found a home in one of her ugly red eyes and down she went. A second started firing another small firearm at me (what do you know, they *do* shoot with their tongues!), bullets impacting the door frame. One shot punctured one of my saddlebags, but didn't pierce flesh.

I crouched and poked my head around, levitating the revolver in the open doorway. I fired two shots at the second pony, but my PipBuck's targeting spell was refreshing, and without it I might as well have been aiming at the ceiling. Still, the gunslinger raider skittered away, using one of the captive ponies for cover. The dishonorableness poured gasoline on the fire of my anger. I stepped fully into the doorway, looking for the third, spotting him on the far end of the main room.

The third raider pony lowered his head, a pool cue clenched in his teeth, and charged at me.

I blinked. "Really?" I took a single step back. The pony rushed at me full-tilt, and was nearly on me when the ends of the pool cue struck the doorway, snapping him to a stop. I fired the revolver's last shot point-blank into his neck. Even I didn't need S.A.T.S. at that range.

"Shouldn't you ponies be smarter than that? You live in a library!"

As the body slumped to the floor, bleeding from the gaping wound through its neck, I saw the gun-wielding raider standing in the open, aiming through the door. I dived to the side as shots rang out, and

screamed as I felt a bullet sink into my side. It hurt! More than I had thought it would.

I fell against the wall, leaving a bloody smear as I collapsed next to the doorway. Pain seared my side, flaring with each breath. I could hear the clop of the raider's hooves as he approached cautiously. I tried to focus my magic to close the door, but the body of pool-cue pony was in the way.

I cast about the room. It was a kitchen. On a table, surrounded by knives, was the body of a fearsome creature of scales and teeth. The raider pony with the splayed torso cutie mark had been carving it up to cook. A refrigerator. And oven. There were scattered books, but all ancient, destroyed and unreadable. (I was beginning to doubt the Watcher's assertion that there was a book here like he described.) Then my eyes fell on what I was hoping for. In one corner, mounted on the wall over several metal boxes of ammunition, was a faded yellow box with a pink butterfly symbol on it: a medical box! Double luck: the box looked to be locked. There were knife-scrapes all over it where the raiders had attempted to get it open. It should still have a few medical poultices, and maybe even a healing potion!

But I had to survive the raider pony first, and I was wounded and out of bullets. Crossing to the ammo boxes would mean moving across the open doorway. Scooting back, I looked around again. And focused my magic through the pain.

When the raider pony stepped in, he was met by a swarm of knives flying at his face. "Gah!!" He turned and fled back out. The knives all either missed or struck uselessly against his armor. I was even more pathetic with melee weapons than I was with guns. But it got him out of the way long enough to make for the ammo boxes. Luck was with me again. While one box had ammo in large clips for a type of gun I had yet to see, the other had bullets designed for the revolver.

The raider poked his head around again, calling out "You're all out of knives, missy! Why don't you just come on out. I promise I'll let you die, eventually."

His head turned in my direction his eyes went wide. I don't know if it was the look in my eyes or the revolver. S.A.T.S. was with me again, and this bastard wasn't going to get another chance to use raped and beaten captive as a shield.



One more dead raider, a picked medical box and a healing potion later, I trotted quietly back into the main room, serrated knife floating by my side. I moved to the open cage and sawed away the ropes binding the poor pony. "Go. You're free. Get somewhere safe." With a blink, I remembered the sniper pony, and quickly told her which direction to sneak away in. She nodded mutely and began to slink out. I moved to the next cage.

What I saw sickened me. A pony had been locked inside along with a decaying corpse. The pony was whimpering in her sleep, and had her tail wrapped around the ghastly body like a teddy ura.

Unlike the other bodies, I couldn't tell how this one had died, for it wasn't carved apart. The body had lost all its coat, it's skin was a sickening blotch-work of red and grey, flaking away. Its eyes were open, dry and staring in wrong directions. Its teeth were horribly yellowed, matching the few strands of hair left in its mane and tail. Odd, fleshy growths hung from its sides. At first, I mistook them for mutations, but then I realized I was looking at the pony's wings! This was the body of a pegasus pony. Stripped of feathers and hair, the wings looked strange, even repulsive.

I screamed, a full-throated cry of terror, when the corpse shifted position and sat up, it's eyes sliding around until they both focused on me. It was a zombiepony!

The zombiepony blinked at me, then tried to get up, only to fall over onto one winged side as it's hooves were bound in ropes like the others. It... she stared at me plaintively.

My mind was reeling. Of the scattered half-thoughts that flitted through my brain, “untie the nice zombie so she doesn’t get mad at me” managed to be the most coherent, if not the most sane.

Swallowing, I moved the knife down to her ropes. “Hold still.” I looked at her eyes and was quickly forced to look away. One of them was sliding again. Her breath was fetid. “Now if I let you go, and you try to eat my brains, we’re going to have harsh words.”



I had freed the second two captives, including the zombie-pony, both of whom slipped away without an offer to help (although the zombie at least smiled at me, which was... deeply unpleasant), and was trying to figure out how to get to the hanging cage when two more raider ponies appeared on a balcony above. One of them was a unicorn pony with a very scary-looking firearm. I dove into the shelter of a stairwell as the raider opened fire. The gun let out a terrifying cacophony of rapid-fire cracks as it sprayed the main room with bullets.

At least I knew what type of gun the large clips were for now.

I waited until I heard him reloading, then dashed into the room and spun to face him, focusing all my magic... not on my own weapon nor on him, but on the bookshelf behind him. The glow of my horn stood out brighter and brighter as he lifted the reloaded assault rifle and took aim for my head.

CRASH!

The bookshelf came down on top of him, knocking him unconscious. The assault rifle fell to the floor in a rain of dead books. Something else showered down as well, thrown from the falling bookshelf. Knocking away a book that had fallen over it, I saw that it was an ancient, dusty pair of pre-war binoculars. At first, it struck me as extremely odd that someone would need binoculars in a library -- that would require some *really* bad eyesight -- but the silly thought passed.

I couldn't see where the other raider pony had gotten to. Swiftly, I added the assault rifle to my growing collection, and the binoculars for good measure. Then I looked back to the balcony, considering it as a way to get to the cage pony hanging from the ceiling. If I could get up there, I thought, I could leap from it to the cage. That would get me close enough that I could see what I was doing while I picked the lock.

The second raider pony appeared back at the railing, a wicked grin on his face. With a hoof, he shoved forward an ammo box, then tilted it over. The lid sprung open and half a dozen orange disks poured out into the library below.

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP!

Oh fuck!

I dashed as fast as my little legs could take me, leaping over the body of pool-cue pony and under the kitchen table, using my magic to toss it over as a shield. The carved-up radigator slid to the floor with a meaty thump.

Behind my shield, the world became blinding light and fire!



When I emerged, the main room was a wreck. Fresh blood dripped down into my mane. Looking up, I saw the blast-torn remains of the pony in its twisted metal cage. Oh, Celestia damn them to hell!

More determined than ever, I stripped the raider bodies (what little was left of them now) of their armors. The armors were in shredded tatters, but with some effort I was able to use the best parts of each to patch

together something that would give me better protection than my stable-issued utility barding. The resulting outfit had almost no pockets, so I would have to dig the utility suit out of my saddlebags to get at most of my tools, but it was a fair trade.

Putting it on was gruesome. My hooves were darkened with blood just from working on it; every inch was covered in the flash-fried gore of dead ponies. I almost lost my nerve and abandoned the awful thing. I slipped it on; my stomach rebelled, but I didn't have any more to throw up.

A last look around while I figured I still had time. The raider above obviously assumed I was dead. (I would have assumed I was dead too.) Looting the bodies garnered me a little more ammo. The gun from the earlier raider had been in bad shape to begin with, and was damaged beyond repair by the explosion. Several ponies apparently collected bottle caps, which struck me as an absurdly odd thing to hoard. I left those alone. The kitchen's refrigerator had a small stockpile of food: cooked radigator meat, a few skewers of barbecued fruits and what the PipBuck identified as bloatsprite meat, a box of pre-war cake (because nothing says healthy eating like two-hundred-year-old food) and some water that looked like it was bottled straight out of sludge river. I took everything but the cake and water; apparently, splayed-torso cutie raider was a rather decent cook. With a second thought, I looked over the ingredients on the cake box (filled with enough preservatives that your stomach will still be intact long after the rest of you rotted away to dust!) and took it too.

The raider pony was in the main room, looking over his handiwork, when I returned from the kitchen. One look at me (and my growing pile of weaponry) and he fled up the stairs. I galloped after him, revolver zipping through the air in a cloud of levitation magic that matched the light around my horn.

He went through a door on the level above. It took me only a moment to reach it, but caution made me skid to a stop before barreling through. If that had been me on the other side, I'd be waiting just to the side of the door, ready to take the head off of the raider who rushed

through. With positions reversed, I was not going to make the same mistake.

A filly's cry from inside, "aaah! Help!" changed the scenario.

Standing to the side, I threw open the door. When there was no attack, I darted in. And stopped short.

The room was lined with more destroyed books on either side, and ended in a large window that opened onto a balcony. This room was decorated as disgustingly as the last, but filled with stained sleeping mattresses. Near the open window, a filly too young to even have her cutie mark lay on a mattress stained with so much blood it was nearly black. She had been brutalized and raped repeatedly, and her flank was covered in small burns where her cutie mark would have eventually appeared.

Her ropes were on the floor nearby, looking chewed through. And between myself and her, the raider pony stood with a shocking hostage: the zombie-pony! It took me a moment to realize she must have flown in from the balcony; and (if I was allowed to believe there was any decency left in the world) it would have been her who gnawed the filly's ropes free. Now, she was against a wall, with the blade of an axe to her throat.

A small part of my brain insisted on distracting me by wondering how the zombie-pony could have flown when her wings didn't have any feathers. As if that was a more significant mystery than how she could be alive (by some definition) in her decayed physical condition.

My distraction was distracted by a nearby table. An ashtray with a smoking cigar told me just how the filly had gotten those burns. Rage welled up in me until I felt it would burst through my eyeballs. Next to the ashtray, two familiar metal apples rested on top of an (only lightly stained) book with a stylized pony skull on the cover. A second book, this one showing a revolver almost identical to the one floating next to me, had slipped to the floor where it rested against one leg of the table, along with several pencils and a filly's lunch box. A smiling, gentle white unicorn with a beautiful lavender and pink mane stared back

beneath the Stable-Tec logo. It felt wrong that something so innocent-looking should be in this place.

My eyes turned to the earth pony raider with the axe in his teeth. For a moment I just hated at him, the room quiet except for the filly's occasional whimpers.

When my voice returned, my words surprised me. "By Celestia, you're stupid. Hard to tell a pony to back off, or surrender, when your mouth is full of axe, isn't it? Maybe if you spent some more time reading these books rather than destroying them, you'd be smart enough to come up with a plan that actually allowed you to negotiate a way out of this." The grenades levitated off the table; I dangled them between us. "One that doesn't end with me shoving one of these up your tailhole!"

The raider pressed the axe blade tighter against the zombie-pony's throat, enough to cut flesh, which split and pulled back as if it had been strained taut. Ichor that might have once been blood oozed from the wound. The zombie-pony didn't flinch or whimper, but the filly did both.

"Right. Kill her." The revolver floated forward next to the grenades. "That way, there won't be anything to block my shot."

I could see the raider considering his options and not liking what he was finding. Dropping the axe from his mouth, he whinnied pathetically "I don't wanna die!" and dashed for the open balcony, leaping over the cringing filly.

S.A.T.S. send four shots right into his ass. It was a pathetic way to die.

Looking to the filly and the zombie-pony, I smiled grimly. "There's one left. I'll be right back."

I turned and continued up the stairs toward the upper balcony and the sniper pony.



Better equipped and a lot more confident, my heart still flickering with righteous fire, I made my way carefully out of Ponyville.

Up ahead, I spotted a huge gazebo surrounding a marble statue of a rearing pony girded with combat barding, a sword in his mouth. The gazebo was relatively free of graffiti... and peeking through the binoculars, I could see why. The field of weeds around it were teeming with radigators. My E.F.S. was filling with red marks as I drew closer.

Slipping out my newly acquired sniper rifle, I picked off a few. Their meat, I knew now, was safe when cooked (at least, relative to other food source in the Equestrian Wasteland). Slipping the sniper rifle back into its harness (another "gift" from the sniper pony), I slid out the serrated knife and crouched up towards my kill.

An alert flashed on my PipBuck. Checking it, I discovered that it had labeled the gazebo in front of me: The Macintosh War Memorial.

Curiosity pulled me closer. Careful of radigators, I neared enough to read the inscription beneath the statue through my binoculars.

"In honor of Big Macintosh, hero of the Battle of Shattered Hoof Ridge, and his noble sacrifice for all of Equestria."

As I lowered the binoculars, I caught sight of something else. A concrete circle sticking up from the ground, roughly halfway between myself and the gazebo, with a ponyhole cover. Remembering the night before, I turned my PipBuck back to the first radio broadcast on the list.

"...from those damned apple trees up near the Stable, and now he's terribly sick. Too sick to move. We've holed up in the cistern near the old memorial. We're running out of food and medical supplies. Please, if anypony hears this, help us... Message repeats..."

Pulling out the revolver, wary of radigators, I crept towards the cistern opening. I was almost there before one of the beasts charged at me, its huge maw opening to reveal rows on rows of razor-sharp teeth. I fired twice into its mouth. Horrifyingly, that wasn't enough to kill it. But it did make the beast think twice. The sound, however, brought more of

them down on me. Abandoning the revolver in fright, I used my magic to pull open the ponyhole and dived in, sliding the cover over behind me.



In the wake of my anger, I was exhausted. In the aftermath of the library battle, my whole body ached from exertion. My nerves felt frayed from the content adrenaline. Eating a bloatsprite skewer, I looked over the small underground chamber once more before curling up on the upper bunk of the pair of bunk beds built into the wall. I tried not to think of the colt skeleton on the bed below me. The skeleton of his father was by the door. A sip from my canteen took the edge off my thirst. It was almost empty; I had to conserve.

I reflected how, when I had come back downstairs after dealing with the sniper pony, the zombie-pony was already gone, and had taken the poor filly with her. I hoped it was to someplace safe. I found it strange that the most decent pony I had found in the wasteland was already sort of dead. I also noticed that the assault rifle pony was also gone; he had woken up and freed himself from the crushing bookshelf. That meant there was at least one more raider still in the wastes, but I wasn't the sort of pony to kill somepony while they slept. Not even a raider.

I figured that if I slept here tonight, that would give the radigators time to wander away from the exit. If I was lucky, I would even spot where I dropped the revolver.

Until then, I would preoccupy myself with my two new books. Slipping them out of my saddlebags, I looked the first one over, the one with my lost revolver on the cover. *Guns and Bullets*. Very straightforward. I set it aside for now.

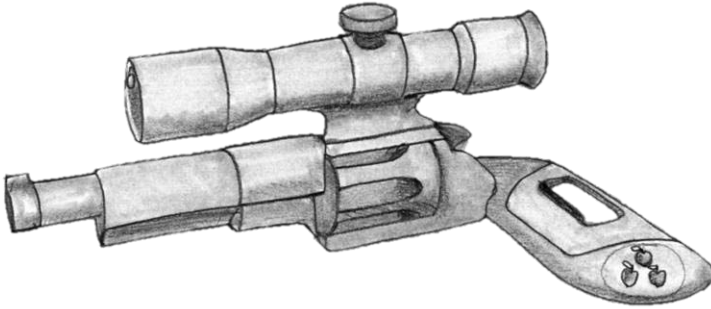
The second book, a grey tome with a black pony skull on the cover, was the real prize. Opening it to the first page, I began to read:

"The Wasteland Survival Guide. By Ditzzy Doo..."

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Bookworm - You pay much closer attention to the smaller details when reading. You gain 50% more skill points when reading books.

CHAPTER FOUR



PERSPECTIVE

"I don't know why it took an interest in you, but I'd be careful. It's never helped anyone before."

Stupid!

A blast of lightning fired past me, shattering an old clock at the back of the overview office I was cowering in. The Wasteland Survival Guide was full of all sorts of helpful tips. Scavenging guides. A whole chapter on mines. And more! And then there were the not-so-helpful ones. After having read the chapter on "Making Pre-War Earth Pony Technology Work For You", my first thought when I came across the ruins of Ironshod Firearms was to take a peek inside and see if there was any technology I could make work for me.

Instead, I got myself trapped in a maze full of ponicidal robots and automated turrets, fleeing until I managed to back myself into a corner here in an office box high above the factory floor. Almost out of ammo. If I hadn't found that medical box in the employee bathroom, I would have died trying to get across the second floor.

How could I possibly have been so very stupid?

Below, three of those robots were rolling about, looking for me. They were tracked things, built to somewhat resemble ponies, with clear domed heads that housed real brains. I refused to think that the ponies who built them might have used other ponies' brains in the construction. The thought was just too horrible. Even doing that to an animal's brain was awful. And clearly, two-hundred years of continuous operation had done nothing for their sanity.

"Come on out. We only want to kill you for trespassing!"

Case in point.

The fact that the voice sounded like a young filly, despite being clearly artificial, just made them that much freakier. Fortunately, the railing on the catwalks leading up to this office were too narrow for the brain-bots to get up here.

A much deeper, authoritative voice boomed across the room. *"Surrender in the name of the Ministry of Technology, zebra scum!"*

I cringed behind a line of metal filing cabinets as the room filled with a rush of flame!

Unfortunately, the same could not be said for the other type of guard robot I'd crossed paths with in here. The multi-limbed things looked like giant metal spiders, many of its arms seemed to end in weapons, including a buzzsaw and a flamethrower. And worse, the damn things could fly!

I slipped both of my grenades out of my saddlebags and waited until the flames died away. The metal cabinets were beginning to get unpleasantly warm against my back, and the heat in the air seared my lungs. The second the flamethrower cut off, I turned my head around the corner and levitated them both right up to the metal monster, pulling out the stems on the way. The moment it saw me, the robot raised a pulsing green weapon that looked like a unicorn's horn. Eldritch fire erupted from it, shooting past me close enough to singe my cheek. The blast struck an old fan sitting on the desk behind me; it glowed green for a moment, then melted! I ducked back as I dropped the grenades.

The explosion rocked the office. I heard a fearsome twang as part of the catwalk outside gave. Looking back, the robot was in a non-functional heap. The walkway outside was still mostly intact, but sagging badly. I wasn't sure it could hold my weight.

Stripping what I could from the fallen spider-bot, I considered my options. I couldn't stay up here forever. If I moved very fast, I could run the walkway without the brain-bots below getting me. Their weaponry did not seem very accurate. But the first few yards of the catwalk had partially torn free, and sagged alarmingly. The more I looked at it, the less I wanted to put a hoof on it.

I'd never tried levitating *myself* before. In theory, it should work, but I'd never seen a pony do it. Focusing, I tried. I could feel the glow from my horn stretch out to envelop my entire body. Brighter it glowed as I tried to lift myself. I was shining like a dozen lanterns when I felt my body lift, just slightly, from the ground. I was sweating. This was as far as I could go, but I was doing it. Now one step forward... and another... and another...

I was halfway across when the brain-bots started firing lightning in my general direction. One of the bolts struck the catwalk, arcing along it. I felt very lucky I wasn't actually touching it. But I was also almost spent. Ahead of me, the catwalk stopped right before the huge windows that let twice-filtered sunlight (once by the clouds and once by the dirty glass itself) onto the factory floor, supplementing the light from heavy fixtures hanging above. The catwalk shot off in both directions, running parallel to the wall. One was the direction I had come from. The other lead to a door which had been locked. Only that door didn't have a lock to pick. Instead, it could only be opened by command from a terminal.

Another shot of lightning missed cleanly, shooting through one of the shattered windows of the observation office and frying the terminal I had just used, not five minutes ago, to unlock said door.

It was a lot of metal catwalk. And the damn bots beneath me shot lightning. I grunted with the effort that kept me aloft, feeling my

vision darken at the edges. I had to stop, or I'd pass out. And that would be the end of me.

Releasing the magic, I dropped onto the catwalk. It wavered, but held. I let go of a breath I didn't realize I was holding, and started to gallop.

"Don't run! We want to be your friend!"

More blasts. I tensed, expecting to feel paralyzing electricity rip up my body, starting at my hooves. Instead, I heard a crash a loud pop and a twang from somewhere above. Looking up as I ran, I saw that one of the bolts had hit the hanging lamp above, causing its softly buzzing light to explode. And that, freakishly, was the last straw: it snapped loose from the badly aged, cracked ceiling above and swung down, crashing into the catwalk behind me. The whole walkway shook. And then the section behind me tore away with a rending scream of abused metal.

Oh fuck me with Celestia's forehooves!

I'll admit, my repertoire of colorful descriptions had grown more profane from my experience with the raiders; but as I galloped down the walkways at heart-tearing speed, trying to keep ahead as the sections of catwalk began to fall down onto the factory floor like a thunderous, lethal game of dominos, I felt the sentiment entirely appropriate.

I was almost to the door when the metal walkway dropped out from under me. I threw myself forward, carried only on momentum, and caught the final section with only my forelegs. I hung there, my hindhooves dangling several stories over an ancient rifle assembly line that had been crushed by the fallen catwalk. I struggled, trying to inch myself up. I used my magic to try to tug on my saddlebags and drag myself forward. My heart was pounding. I fought to keep visions of falling from dominating my imagination -- tried not to think of my back breaking as I landed on the conveyor belt below. At least the damned brain-bots weren't shooting at me anymore, having scurried for cover.

It seemed to take forever, but inch-by-inch I pulled myself onto that final section of catwalk. It wobbled threateningly beneath me, sticking out from the wall like a diving board, held in place by bolts that wiggled in wear-widened holes. Cautiously, I got my hooves under me and stepped lightly towards the door.

A blast of lightning hit the catwalk, shooting up my legs and sending me into painful convulsions. I collapsed, shaking, on the walkway, my mane and tailhairs standing on end. The walkway responded with a metallic cry and tilted several inches, threatening to dump me into the gulf below.

I struggled shakily to my feet. Another blast shot up from almost directly beneath me, missing the walkway by less than a foot and striking the ceiling above. Bits of singed plaster rained down. I gave the door a push, and was vastly relieved when it swung open. Then the catwalk gave further. I lurched, wrapping my forelegs around the door frame to keep from sliding down the now quite steep metal platform. A third electrical blast ripped through the air, striking another strip of industrial lighting whose light also exploded, making it swing perilously.

Grunting, I pulled myself into the room. I turned and sat in the doorway, looking down at the brain-bot rolling in circles directly below, trying to figure out how to get me. Then, with a strong kick of my forehooves, I knocked the last of the catwalk loose. It fell, scraping down the wall, until it smashed through the robot's brain-case, pulping the organ inside and continuing down, ripping the machine roughly in half. I must admit that I found the crunch immensely satisfying.



I realize that if the room I had successfully accessed at such great personal risk had not offered another way out, I would have been in deep trouble.

Closing the door behind me, I felt immediately more comfortable. The room had been painted in what had once been a bright orange, and the

paint had not lost all its warmth over time. The wood paneling probably brought a pleasant, homey feel to what I believed was clearly the factory overmare's office. Now that wood was rotted and crumbling. On the back wall above the desk was an oversized logo in deeply tarnished bronze:

IRONSHOD FIREARMS

How do you like *them* apples?

I didn't get it.

Ignoring it, I looked around. Large, fancy desk. Chair. Filing cabinets. A poster in a backlit frame -- the same poster I had seen several other times in the factory, but this one in better condition, showing graceful pegasus ponies soaring through the sky, rainbows exploding behind them as they shot down on dark, demonic striped figures with evil, glowing eyes. (Better Wiped than Striped! Join the Equestrian Forces Today!) A wardrobe.

My eyes barely touched these, moving to the important things first. The office held a terminal I could hack, a wall safe I could pick, and a personal elevator that, if it worked, would get me safely to the first floor and out of this deathtrap. There was an ammo box under the desk. Then my eyes fell on something unique. Mounted on the opposite wall was a glass case. And in the case was a beautiful and perfectly preserved revolver. A similar model to mine, but crafted with what must have approached love. It had a scope, and an ivory bit molded for extra-comfortable fit in the mouth and ease of trigger. On the handle was an emblem, three apples.

I tried my hoof (so to speak) at the safe first. It was tough, taking a few attempts, but after breaking one bobby pin I learned better how to prevent further losses. The safe opened with a generous click. The impressive amount of objects made me wonder if my excursion into Ironshod Firearms hadn't been worthwhile after all. I started sorting the treasure from the rubbish. Inside was sack full of pre-war coins, a copy of Equestrian Army Today, a whole bunch of finance papers that ceased to mean anything hundreds of years ago, a box of what looked

like bubble gum (I couldn't decipher the writing on it), a Spark o' Magic battery and finally an odd hoof-strapped arcano-tech device that looked like it was meant to interface with my PipBuck. Curious, I slid it on and let my PipBuck analyze it.

StealthBuck. Invisiblity Spell. One charge.

Hot damn!

Next was the terminal. Pulling out my utility suit, I slid out my access tool and started to work. This terminal was tougher to crack than the previous ones. Even with my tools, I had to abort several times to avoid getting locked out. I pulled another apple from my bag and bit into it, intent on the screen, only to hit something painfully hard. Levitating the apple up to eye level, I saw a bullet embedded in it. Looking down at my saddlebags, there was indeed a small hole, although it took me a few minutes to remember when that had happened.

Once in, I discovered a whole mess of old notes and messages. In addition, the terminal had a shutdown key for all the robotic security. And it could remotely open both the safe and the display case. I rolled my eyes, thanking the universe ever so much for giving me this potentially life-saving option only now that I'd already fought my way to the finish and no longer needed it. I also realized that I could have saved myself a bobby pin if I had worked on the computer first.

I told the terminal to open the display case. Doing so triggered a message.

"Cousin Braeburn, Ah know we ain't talked in some time, but the war effort's takin' a twist for the scary, and Ah might not have a chance t' see ya again. Ah want t' mend fences. Now, Ah ain't gonna muck this up with words. We all know how well that went last time. Instead, Ah'm sendin' ya Lil' Macintosh as a gift and as an apology. T'show you I'm sincere. Keep 'im safe for me, will ya?"

The accent was very much like that of the voice I found on Velvet Remedy's PipBuck, although this time it was clearly not from the same pony. But it was the earnest tone of the recording that made me pause. Two hundred years ago, some pony had given this gun as a token of apology and as an effort to reconnect with family. And that some pony's cousin had done just as she asked, preserving the weapon for generations after his own death.

I wasn't going to leave it there, untouched by anypony until the building collapsed on it. But when I took it, I removed it respectfully.

All that was left was going through the rest of the office. The ammo box held bullets for *Little Macintosh*, and not a shy amount. In the wardrobe, I found some old maintenance suit that I could use to repair the holes in my own utility barding, and other garments that I left behind.

Eventually, I turned to the elevator and pushed the button. Nothing.

Of course it didn't work. The wasteland just couldn't give me a break. Pulling out my tools, I opened up the side panel and tried to figure out what was wrong and if I could fix it from here.

To my great relief, I could. The elevator proved to be in impressive condition, particularly considering the rest of the building. But the battery for the interface was dead. As Celestia's mercy would have it, there had been a replacement in the safe. One swapping of batteries later, I was on my way. As the doors slid shut, the thought crossed my mind, "Macintosh? Wasn't that..."



I trotted between the collapsed buildings that littered the area around Ironshod Firearms, not having any particular direction to go. Aimless. I hadn't found any signs of civilization... *civilized* civilization, mind you. I had kinda given up on finding Velvet Remedy. For now, I was satisfying myself with random exploration, although that had just proven exceptionally dangerous.

In Stable Two, I knew exactly what my future would be (as unbearably dull as it would have been). Out here, in the huge open outside, I was struggling with just the opposite. I never considered that having an assigned place might be as much a relief as it was a burden.

My ears perked at the sound of overwrought, triumphant music. I watched as a sprite-bot fluttered down a cross street. Running up to it, I drew myself around in front of it. "Watcher?"

It just floated by.

I dashed in front of it again. "Hello?" The music just kept playing. I waved a hoof right in front of its lack of face. It danced around me and kept going.

Well, that was helpful.

I picked a random direction and started trotting again. I thought of Watcher's advice. Armor, check. Weapon, double-check. Guidance? I looked back at the Ironshod building. A bit iffy, but check. Friends?

"It's kinda hard to make friends where there doesn't seem to be anypony around!" My exasperated voice echoed off crumbling walls of concrete. If this was a quest, it was a lame one. I seriously needed to find something to do. Preferably other than "dodge" and "duck". In Stable Two, I felt painfully ordinary. I yearned to be special; now I yearned to be anything.

My downcast eyes chanced upon a Red Rider scooter amidst the ruins. Reaching out a hoof, I flipped it back onto its wheels and prodded it back and forth a few times. Three of the wheels were locked with rust; but to my surprise, one still turned.

Looking up, I found myself at the edge of a playground. The swings and slide jutted into the oddly-colored air, blackened by ancient spellfire, like bones of a great dead beast. The merry-go-round was warped and canted. The skeleton of a baby pony was still curled at one end.

Sadness and immense shame flooded me. I had been feeling sorry for myself in the midst of all this!? Another tiny skeleton lay against the

burnt husk of a tree, three roller skates in the dirt near its hooves. The fourth? I doubted anyone would ever know.

I plodded on, moving through the silent impromptu graveyard.

At the far end, sheltered by walls that were mostly still intact, I found an old vending machine. "Sparkle-Cola" the machine still advertised through the years of grime. It featured a backlit emblem of stylized carrots. Surprisingly, the machine still looked functional. Fishing out a few pre-war coins, I fed them into the machine. I didn't actually expect that it would still have soda after all these years. I was astonished when a bottle rolled out dutifully. I suddenly realized how awfully thirsty I was!

The Sparkle-Cola was luke-warm, but actually rather delicious, with a delightfully carrotty aftertaste. The clicking of my PipBuck warned me that I was ingesting trace amounts of radiation with each swallow, but not enough to be harmful. I'd taken more harm standing around at Sweet Apple Acres. And besides, if it reached a point where my radiation intake began making me sick, I had a couple RadAway potions -- the only supplies from the Ironshod medical box that I hadn't needed to use just to survive the building.

I spotted a bench just around the side of the building and decided to take a load off my legs, possibly read some of the Equestrian Army Today book I had picked up. As I turned the corner, my gaze fell upon an old, torn poster affixed to the wall. The image was the face of an elderly pony of almost obtrusively pink coloration. Her mane was streaked with grey. (On some ponies, grey hair makes them look distinguished; on most, it just makes them look old. Hers made her look like a candy cane.) Her eyes were huge, staring. I could swear, poster or not, that she was looking right into me. Some pony had ripped the poster right through the middle; I had no idea what her expression was supposed to be, but I couldn't help but feel like I was doing something wrong. Bold words above and below the image, now deeply faded, announced: PINKIE PIE IS WATCHING YOU FOREVER! There were additional words, very tiny, beneath, so small and faded that I had to lean close and strain to read them.

“...a happy reminder from the Ministry of Morale.” I stepped back, tilting my head as I looked at the poster again. “What’s the Ministry of Morale?”

Watcher’s voice erupted from over my shoulder, making me jump high enough my horn whacked the ceiling. “Another well-meaning idea that was so much better on scroll.”

I gasped, willing my heart to beat regularly again, and felt a fleeting empathy with Sawed-Off. The sprite-bot was hovering right next to me. Celestia, those things were silent when they weren’t playing music! “Are you *trying* to give me a heart attack?!”

“Oh. Sorry.” I gave the flying orb a glare.

I forgot about the bench and started walking, trying to enjoy the rest of my Sparkle-Cola. The sprite-bot followed.

“I see you’ve got some armor...” The mechanical voice seemed hesitant. I didn’t ask why. Watcher either didn’t care enough to explain or thought better of it. Maybe the fact that I was walking through the Equestrian Wasteland in an outfit coated inside and out with drying blood gave it pause.

I could probably go up to any Stable pony and go “I am evil, bad, nightmare pony. Arrrr!” and, even despite my size, they would take one look and flee.

I sipped my cola and wished desperately for someplace decent to bathe. Problem was, any water clean and radiation-free enough to take a bath in would be too precious to pollute. One of my canteens was empty and the second nearly so.

“Maybe the reason you’re having trouble finding your place is that you haven’t discovered your virtue yet,” Watcher offered out of thin air.

I stopped. “What? How did you know... oh, nevermind.” Then, “What do you mean, my virtue?”

“Well,” the flying ball began, “The greatest heroes of Equestria, ponies with lifelong bonds of unbreakable friendship and strength, were each

known for exemplifying one of the great virtues of ponykind. Kindness, honesty, laughter...”

“Laughter is a virtue?” I asked dubiously.

“Roll with me on this,” the sprite-bot continued without breaking stride. “Generosity, loyalty and magic. They really didn’t know themselves, or each other, until one pony came to realize that her friends represented these virtues, and together they grew to live by them. Now, I’m not saying those are the *only* virtues, they are just a...” Now the bot paused as if searching for words. “...particularly important set. I’m just saying that perhaps if you learn to recognize the dominant virtue in your own heart, you will find yourself. And you won’t need anyone or anything else to tell you your place in the” Watcher’s voice cut out with an abrupt pop and music once again poured from the bot.

“Brilliant.” I watched as the sprite-bot slowly sailed away.

Well, if that wasn’t a load of ponypies, I didn’t know what was. Finishing my soda, I tossed the empty bottle amidst a pile of others. Empty bottles littered the Equestrian Wasteland like weeds.

A new thought was occurring to me. About Watcher. The Wasteland Survival Guide had to be written after the megaspells rained down. Long after, considering its sound advice on scavenging. So that book wouldn’t have been in the Ponyville Library as part of the original, pre-war library. It found its way in there later; from the lack of being burned, defaced or covered in blood, I was guessing recently. Which made me wonder: did Watcher know about those poor ponies the raiders held captive? And if so, is that why I was talked into going there? Was I manipulated into walking into that horror because Watcher hoped I would free them? I couldn’t be sure. And considering that Watcher saved me, I should give the benefit of the doubt. But I couldn’t help the niggling sense that Watcher had played me, and I don’t like being tricked.

My ears perked as the music stopped again, replaced by a voice. But this wasn’t Watcher’s voice. This was somepony else. This voice

wasn't metallic. It was the voice of a smooth male pony with a greasy charisma.

"Friends, ponies, rejoice! Although the world about you is bleak, scarred and poisoned by the war of honorless, thoughtless, inferior ponies of the past, we do not have to live in the shadow of their greed and wickedness. Together, we can raise Equestria back to its former beauty! Together, we can build a new kingdom where all live together in perfect unity! It's already happening, my good ponies. Already, the foundation for a new and wonderful age is being built. Yes, it's hard work, but don't we owe it to ourselves, and to future generations of ponies, to be better? No, to be the best we can possibly be? I'm telling you now, as your friend, as your leader, that we can. We must. And we WILL!"

What in a fever dream was that??

The music had resumed -- not popping back in the middle of a song like when Watcher seized control of a sprite-bot, but at the beginning of a new song, like this was how the bot was supposed to work.

Wait, ponies have a leader now? That was serious news to me. As far as I could see, we didn't even have a country. Hell, I'd settle for a town! Even just a few shacks built within vague proximity of each other, so long as they had ponies living there in peace. Or as close to peace as the wasteland allowed.

If we had a leader, we had to have at least one town, right?

Trotting faster now, I found a ruin with enough intact stairs for me to get up to what was left of a second floor. I brought out the binoculars and looked about. Sure enough, in the distance, I saw smoke. Enough plumes, close enough together, to suggest some sort of settlement. I prayed to Celestia that the smoke was from cooking fires, not raiders burning it to the ground.

There was a path leading out towards the settlement. That would keep me from losing my way. And there was movement on that path. My horn glowed as I focused the binoculars, bringing a small group of ponies into view. Two of them were pulling a heavily laden wagon. A young pony rode on its back, apparently talking with two others who

were guiding equally-burdened two-headed beasts. The group was headed towards me, away from the theoretical town. But they didn't look like they were fleeing, and none of them were wounded, all of which I took for a good sign. A very good sign indeed.

I looked up into the thick, broiling clouds, up to where the disk of the sun made a brighter spot in the cloudy ceiling, and sent a prayer of thanks to Celestia.



The path wasn't a road, exactly. Rather, it was a long, arcing swath cutting through the Equestrian Wasteland. Two parallel metal lines reinforced with badly-aged cross-planks of wood. Half-an-hour back, it had crossed over a gully on a rickety bridge. After my fun with catwalks, I chose to brave the gully rather than put my hooves on something else that was surely holding off its inevitable collapse until it could take me with it.

It turned out to be a good decision, despite the wounds. The gully had been home to a bunch of large, bloated pig-things with extremely nasty front teeth. One of them got ahold of my left hindleg, biting clean through my armor and cutting a deep gash.

Little Macintosh is neither quiet nor subtle. A single shot from that sweet little gun tore the head clean off the pig-thing attacking me! And it fires quickly enough that I was able to slay the three others before my targeting spell ran out.

Beneath the bridge was somepony's camp. It had a long-abandoned feel to it, but there were scattered supplies, including a few cases of shotgun ammo, a single can of food amidst a litter of tin cans ("Magical Fruit" the label boasted, but it turned out just to be beans), and a locked medical box. I picked the lock easily, finding a healing potion which I swiftly drank, breathing a sigh of relief as the nasty gash mended gently, the pain ebbing away. There were magical bandages, nowhere as powerful as a potion but good for flesh wounds, and a box of... mints? ("Mint-als! Refresh your mind and your breath!" I had

been surprised to see a smiling zebra on the front of the box, the first depiction of a zebra I'd seen that didn't look like a storybook villain.)

Now I figured I was over halfway to the settlement, maybe two-thirds. I tried to keep myself from imagining what I would find. (A whole city of civilized and happy ponies, maybe.) I didn't want to set myself up for a letdown. "Even a few shacks" I told myself. I picked up the pace of my trot.

I heard a gunshot shot in the same instant that I felt a bullet tear clean through my right hindleg and another clang off the metal casing of the sniper rifle strapped to my back. I screamed in agony, collapsing to a skidding halt on the rocky ground, clutching at my hindleg. I was bleeding profusely through the hole torn through it. The bullet missed the bone, and I could tell that sickeningly because I could see it! I tossed my head back and screamed again.

Desperately, I dragged myself around a large mound of rocks, trying to take shelter from a shooter I never saw. Focusing as much as I could through the terrible pain, I pulled the magic-laced medical bandages from my pack. I tried wrapping my bleeding hindleg, but the bandages were meant for cuts and gashes, not gaping holes. It was soaked with blood and sliding off almost before I had finished wrapping it. I tossed the bandage and tried again, this time pulling the bandage much tighter. It too soaked bright red, but at least it stayed.

Shaking with fear and pain, knowing from the sudden chills that my body was going into shock, I looked up and tried to spy the pony who attacked me. I looked all around, but no one was there! And there wasn't a whole lot of cover to be hiding in; these hills of dirt and rock were mostly barren. I felt like my heart swallowed an ice cube when the image hit me that there was a pony out there with a StealthBuck! She could be right next to me, pointing her gun at my head, and I wouldn't even know!

But then I looked upward, and there in the sky was a rust-coated pegasus pony with an orange mane under a black desperado hat, and

what looked like two rifles, one strapped beneath each wing. The pony had just finished circling back around and was aiming right at me!

With panicked instinct, I levitated a large rock in front of my face as a shield. A crack rang in the air, two rifles fired simultaneously! The first bullet struck the rock, sending chips of stone flying, and ricocheted, lodging in my canteen. The last of my water bubbled out at my hooves. The second punched through my armor and embedded itself in my left shoulder, sending me reeling. Again, I collapsed, the pain peaking and then beginning to bleed off, which I knew wasn't a good sign. This time, I didn't think I would be getting back up again.

So, this is what it was like to die? So overrated.

My eyes felt heavy. I closed them, I don't think for long. But when I opened them again, I spotted the ponies drawing their wagon, coming over the hill. Behind them would be more ponies, guiding pack... two-headed cattle-things. I remembered the young pony in the back of the wagon.

I doubted any of them would be looking up.

Forcing myself to my hooves, I began dragging myself into the open. If I was going to die, it wasn't going to be laying down, watching these people get slaughtered! My body screamed agony into my head, but I kept going, marching myself on lame legs until I was standing in the path right in front of the approaching group. Turning, and focusing through the hammering in my head, I lifted Little Macintosh into the air and pointed it at the rust-colored pegasus who had whipped back around and was again flying right at me.

I stood directly between him and the travelers. My vision was blurry from tears and trauma. I wasn't sure, even with S.A.T.S., that I could hit him. And I stood no chance against his aim. He was an amazing shot; technically, he hadn't missed me yet.

Putting every ounce of me into it, I growled as menacingly as I could. And hoped that a pony who had survived four shots would be mistaken for a pony to be reckoned with. "Shoot at me all you want, but if you attack that family, *I will! End! You!*"

To my surprise, the pegasus's eyes widened, and instead of firing, he backflapped his wings, coming to a halt in front of me. "Whoa nelly!"

Levitating Little Macintosh was getting really hard. I'd lost all feeling in my shot leg, and fell onto my haunches without realizing.

"Ah ain't the one attackin' that caravan! You are!"

What!? Black was seeping into my vision from all sides. My head was swimming. The conversation wasn't making any sense. But at least he was conversing rather than killing me. Weakly, "...not attacking. *You* shot *me*."

"Well of course ah shot you! Ah see a raider headin' at a caravan, ah'm gonna perforate her till she ain't movin' no more!" The rust-colored pony glared at me. Then, with a strangely proud look, "It's muh policy."

I felt my forelegs beginning to give. I was near collapse. But the words of the pony caused a fire to flash in my head. Little Macintosh had begun to sink towards the ground, but now it swung back up, pointed right between my attacker's eyes. "I'm *not* a *raider*!"

The pony pointed at me argumentatively. "Y'sure *look* like a raider!"

Seemingly from out of nowhere, the colt from the wagon galloped into view. I tried to raise my voice in warning, but nothing came out. The blackness fighting to overtake my vision finally won, and I collapsed, sinking into what felt like a deep sleep.

The last thing I heard was the colt whinnying, "Calamity, what have you done?!"

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Egghead - You will add +2 skill points each time you gain a new experience level.

CHAPTER FIVE



CALAMITY

“Friendship. Friendship never changes.”

Alive!

I was still alive!

As consciousness came back to me, I found myself laying on a mattress, with blankets tucked about me, feeling warm and rested and more comfortable than I had since before I left Stable Two three days ago. At least, I thought it was three days; I had no idea how long I had been unconscious. By habit, I lifted up my forehoof to check the date and time on my PipBuck. Doing so unsettled the blanket, which proceeded to slide to the floor.

“Oh! Look who’s awake!” The pretty voice of a mare awfully close to me shocked me into full alertness. Looking up and about, I found myself surrounded by several ponies, only one of which I recognized -- and that was the pegasus who shot me up in the first place! I wondered if I was his prisoner.

The voice had come from an equally pretty white-coated earth pony whose cotton-candy pink mane matched the pink and yellow-stripped

nurse's dress she was wearing. Scanning what I could see of the walls through the small crowd of ponies, I saw a line of three medical boxes (all the little pink butterflies perfectly in a row) and a faded pre-war poster apparently advertising jobs in health care services ("You don't need to be a Steel Ranger to be a Hero! Join the Ministry of Peace today!" announced the mare on the poster, barely more than a filly, who wore the exact same dress that I saw brought to life before me). Between the décor and the lack of ropes or chains, I concluded this was a clinic, and I was not a captive.

Besides, I was actually feeling quite good. Tired, almost like I needed a good nap... except I wasn't sleepy. Just tired, and kinda warm. I sat up and the room spun.

"Take it easy there, partner," the pegasus whose name I recalled was Calamity -- although I was a bit fuzzy on how I had learned that -- said, stepping towards me. I scooted back on the mattress. Oh sure, he looked polite and gentle now, with all these ponies around; but I'd seen him when he was all murder-from-above guns-blazing death-pegasus.

"Candi?" one of the other ponies, a grey-coated earth pony with black mane and tail, asked as he looked to my nurse (although to me it sounded like he was calling her candy, and I felt an oddly cheerful urge to agree).

"Oh, she'll be perfectly fine. Ah mixed up the last healing potion she needed and gave it t' her less than an hour ago."

"Mixed?" The grey earth pony raised an eyebrow dubiously.

Candi smiled. "Why with apple schnapps, of course! Ah find the medicine always goes down better that way." I couldn't understand why the grey pony facehoofed. I felt perfectly fine now. Better than fine. And pleasantly warm.

The grey stallion started shooing all my guests away. That made me feel slightly sad, although I really didn't know any of them. I had felt so lonely the last few days, so eager to find civilization, and here it was, but he wasn't letting me keep it. A thought which I realized didn't quite make sense, although I wasn't sure why.

“Come on out when you’re feeling up to it. I know there’s some ponies who would like to see you.” The grey stallion smiled at me. Then looked at the rust-colored straggler. “You two, Calamity. Out you go.” Calamity took one look back at me before scooting out.

Candi pranced up to me, whispering dreamily, “Such a handsome stallion, isn’t he?”

“Who?”

“Why Calamity, of course!” She giggled.

I was at a loss for words. No, no I wasn’t. “He shot me.”

She waved that off with a hoofwiggle. “Ah’m sure t’was just a misunderstanding’.”

It was, I recalled, but... why was I having this conversation? If anything, I wanted to talk about how pretty Candi was (candy Candi!), not to talk about Calamity. Least of all whether or not he was handsome. None of which seemed to find a suitable way to be spoken aloud. Sulkingly, I fell back on reiterating, “He shot me...” Then added, “...a lot.”



More rested, and with a much clearer head, I was eager to meet the ponies of New Appleloosa. By my PipBuck, I’d been out of it for nearly two days.

I gazed over the railing at the walled village. Multiple lines of what I had realised were railroad tracks converged into a town made up largely of dozens upon dozens of virtually identical homes built from old passenger cars, many of them stacked two or three high. Most still had their wheels. Heavy metal boxcars formed a ring around the town, with a massive gate on either side. Armed pony guards walked around the tops of the boxcars, keeping their eyes on the wastes outside. Inside, scores of earth and unicorn ponies trotted about their daily lives. The place was dirty, rusty... and altogether wonderful!

“How did you get them stacked like that?” I asked, looking up at the stacked train cars, the tallest group being four high. Railing and catwalks spanned out from it, connecting to other towers. On the highest roof, brilliantly glowing letters announced Turnpike Tavern.

Railright, the grey and black stallion who turned out to be sheriff/mayor/general-hold-togetherer of the town, deadpanned, “Had one o’ the unicorn ponies do it.”

I turned with a gasp, staring at him. I’d never heard of a pony levitating anything that big or heavy before!

Railright held that serious expression just a moment longer before chortling. “Ah’m just playin’ with ya.” My astonishment faded to a sheepish grin as he smiled and pointed towards the sky behind us. “That’s what the crane is for.” Looking back and up, I could see the huge orange tower of metal jutting above the town, a massive hook dangling from it’s long arm.

“Although,” he continued, “If yer lookin’ for a heavy lifter, ya can’t do better than Crane. Ya should talk t’ him.”

“Talk to the crane?” I said slowly, trying to gauge if this was another joke. But it wasn’t.

Crane, he told me, was the name of a unicorn pony who worked in the trainyard. “Won’t find a stronger telekinetic this side o’ the Canterlot Ruins.” With that, Railright offered to give me the grand tour.



New Appleloosa’s general supplies store was called Absolutely Everything. It was the fourth stop on the tour. Railright smiled knowingly as he coaxed me towards the odd-looking building. Three train cars, each a different type, had been fused together to create the store; one of them was a barrel-shaped car of black metal dominated by a smokestack. This was one of the sources of smoke I had seen from a distance. Pausing in front of the door, I read the signs beneath the playful block letters of the store name:

Yes, I do deliveries!

No hooves, nasty stingers? No service.

**Ask me about special orders! I won't answer, but I'll get
right on it!**

**Wasteland Survival Guide! Available now! First copy for
every family is free!**

I pushed the door open and stepped inside. And stopped with a gasp as I saw the zombie-pony from the raider library. I could tell she was the same one by the way one of her eyes rolled up. The fact that she recognized me with an immediate, bright smile and dashed over to give me (an uncomfortably squishy) hug, were admittedly also clues.

She backtrotted and waved a forepaw about in what was a surprisingly effective combination of welcome and showing off of the store. (Something I hated to admit I was thankful for; the stench of her as she hugged me forced me to hold my breath. I had been sure gagging would have been impolite.)

“uh... Hello again,” I said, feeling a little awkward. Last time this pegasus zombie-pony saw me, I was trotting off to put a bullet in a raider’s brainpan.

“Howdy” said a familiar voice from off to my left. I’d been so focused on the zombie-pony that I’d totally missed that there were other people in the store. Turning, I found Calamity looking back at me with a bashful smile. “Look, ‘fore ya scamper, ah just want t’ say how sorry ah am!”

I didn’t scamper, although I did take a cautious step back.

“Ah’ve been gettin’ the story from Ditzzy Doo here, see...”

Ditzzy Doo? I turned to the pegasus zombie. “*You* wrote the Wasteland Survival Guide?” Both Ditzzy Doo’s eyes managed to focus on me and she absolutely beamed with joy, nodding fervently.

Yes, I do deliveries. Suddenly, I had a very good idea how that book ended up in the Ponyville Library. Which, in turn, fortified my suspicions about Watcher.

While I was thinking, Ditzzy Doo had rushed up, another copy of the book in her mouth, and was stuffing it into my saddlebags. The zombie pony was amazingly kind and generous and had a severe problem with personal space.

I opened my mouth to say something, maybe that I already had a copy (although considering there had been several pages torn out of the copy on the raider's table, having another could still be quite helpful). However, whatever I was about to say got derailed by a strange realization. "You... don't talk much, do you?" Could zombie-ponies talk?

Ditzzy Doo stepped back and opened her muzzle wide, giving me more a look at the inside of her mouth than I ever wanted. Calamity focused my attention, "Ditzzy Doo's tongue was cut out by slavers a few decades ago. She gets by without it real well though." So then Monterey Jack's warning had been cringingly accurate.

Ditzzy Doo trotted to the sales counter, where she picked up a pencil in her teeth and scribbled something on the first sheet of large pad of note paper. She dropped the pencil and held up the notepad, her eye going weird again.

Looking strictly at the paper so my gaze didn't rudely follow her eye, I read aloud, "Because I couldn't talk, I took up writing. If it hadn't been for that, I would never have gotten so good at it." I looked up at her with a blink.

Ditzzy Doo put down the pad, picking up the pencil again, and added a line before lifting it again for me to read.

"Now, how about we get you some better armor?"



Bottle caps? That's what ponies use for money out here?

As absurd as it was, and it was ludicrous, I should have seen that coming. No wonder raiders were hoarding the things. No wonder there were empty bottles littered everywhere, but not a bottle cap to be

found. (Except, of course, for the one I tossed casually away somewhere outside Ironshod Firearms.)

My stable utility barding was back at Absolutely Everything. Ditzzy Doo didn't have any armor in my size, but swore she could modify my barding so it was better than the best armor any raider could scrounge together. She offered to do it for free, but I insisted on paying for her work. And that's when I discovered the absolutely cockeyed (no offense to Ditzzy) barter system used throughout the Equestrian Wasteland.

"Bottle caps. Seriously."

Fortunately, pre-war money was still worth something, if only in bulk. If for no other reason than that they could get sodas out of the few machines that hadn't simply been pried open and raided already.

Ditzzy Doo took all but a few of my coins; I had no idea if what I had given her was a fair price, but I suspect I was getting a generous discount. She also insisted on giving me a sheet of paper detailing an entirely different use for bottle caps -- a way to turn them into homemade mines. Apparently, it was going to be an insert for the Wasteland Survival Guide's chapter on mines that somepony discouraged her (probably wisely) from including.

When I had left Absolutely Everything, Railright commented, "Ditzzy Doo's our resident pegasus. As well as our resident ghoul."

Right, because ghoul-pony sounds so much better than zombie-pony.

"Although," he had continued, poking a hoof towards Calamity, "Ah keep telling this one he's always welcome t' settle down here in my town. He's been keepin' the caravans safe for goin' on four years now."

Now, as I was on my way to meet Crane, with Calamity trotting along beside me, I finally ventured conversation with the rust-colored stallion. "So, you don't live here?"

"Nope. Got my own place 'bout a half-hour's flight distant."

I thought over what I knew of pegasus ponies. "A place up in the clouds?"

I could swear Calamity's eyes widened just bit. "Oh no. Just a shack. Something somepony threw together a few generations ago, only t' get eaten by the wild animals in these here parts."

I'd already encountered some of the wild animals in these parts.

As we walked down the catwalk, my gaze fell to the strange weapon that Calamity wore, my eyes following from the gun barrels to the odd metal protrusion that stuck out in front of him -- a control mechanism, I suspected. I opened my mouth to ask him about it, only to find myself looking at air. I stopped and looked back; he had halted abruptly to let by a mare in a straw sunhat and her colt. The mare was apparently having trouble keeping the colt from dashing off at top speed. She looked like she wanted a leash.

"But ma! I wanna go see Derpy!"

Calamity leaned close and whispered, "That's what some folks call Ditzzy Doo. Cuz of the eye." Yeah, because that's what they'd focus on; the bullies back in Stable Two would totally have ignored the whole putrefying flesh thing for that. "She doesn't seem t'mind. Ah actually think she finds it endearing."

I did not point out that Ditzzy Doo didn't seem to mind having her tongue cut out either. Didn't make it right.

"Trolley, you get back here," the mother called out as the colt started to trot a little too fast. "And you stay away from that store. I don't want you bothering that thing."

Thing? Okay, I'll admit I'd thought of her as an "it" a few times, but that was back when I thought she was dead. I stopped.

"Excuse me, miss. I'm new here. Is there something wrong about zo... ghou ponies?"

The mare looked abashed, staring more at Calamity than me. I didn't need to look; I could feel his scowl.

"Well... nothin' against good ol' Derpy. Ah mean, miss Ditzzy Doo. But... well, y'know..."

“Know what?” I persisted, trying not to hint at the shame I was feeling for having balked at her smell or the grossly squishy way her hug felt.

“Well...” The mare looked about furtively, then lowered her head, whispering, “Y’know they’re all like tickin’ time bombs, right? Ah mean, you can see what bein’ a ghoul is doin’ t’ their outsides. Imagine what it’s doing t’ their brains. They all go mad sooner or later. Dear Ditzzy, she’s lasted a good long time an’ she’s only a li’l crazy for it. But someday... Ah just don’t want my boy t’ hurry that along none. Or be there when she does finally turn on us all.”

With that, the mare drew herself up, pulled Trolley close, and hurried off. Away, notably, from Absolutely Everything.

I stood there a long time, stunned. Finally, I asked Calamity, “Is that true?”

Calamity sighed deeply, which was not a good sign. “Ayep... for most of ‘em anyway. Ya get into the wrong places, y’ll find yerself hunted by whole packs of cannibal ghoul-ponies gone zombie. But, an’ I mean this, that’s only most of ‘em, and even they’re good pony folk, if a little smelly and strange-lookin’, until that day. Some, like Ditzzy Doo, break the odds an’ *never* lose their noodle.”

I understood the spirit of his words, but the news didn’t make me scared of the hairless pegasus writer. It made me ache for her.



Crane was a yellow unicorn pony with an orange-and-beige striped mane and tail. He wore a bright orange construction hat with a hole in it for his horn. When we found him, he was loading barrels onto the flatbed of a train car -- this one actually still on the tracks that ran through town and connected to several others.

“Howdy! Pleased t’ meet the little mare with the PipBuck who saved Sweet Apple and Ditzzy Doo! Not t’ mention Desert Rose, Barrel Cactus an’ Turquoise!” He stopped to shake my hoof vigorously.

"Please to meet you too," I smiled, feeling a touch wobbly after the hoofshake. "Railright told me you're the pony to talk to if I wanted to see some heavy lifting."

Crane smiled, then causally lifted three barrels at once, putting them in their places on the flatbed. "Reckon Ah am." Then, to my shock, he asked, "What kinda spells ya got?"

"Spells?" I replied hesitantly.

"Ya know," he continued talking while three more barrels levitated by, glowing with the same light as shown from his horn. "Unicorn ponies generally have a small collection of magical spells, usually related t' what he or she is destined t' be best at. ('Cept for the ones who are destined t' be good at spells, o' course, cuz then they get a whole heap of 'em.) Me fer instance, Ah can make all manner of repairs t' the rails an' trains just by focusin' at 'em."

Crap. Kicking a hoof at the ground, I sighed deeply. "Nope. Just telekinesis. No spells." I knew it was pathetic. Levitation was basic filly stuff. By the time I got my cutie mark, every *other* unicorn in Stable Two had a nice collection of spells. Thank you, Crane, for reminding me that I was probably the most un-magical unicorn ever.

Crane's eyes widened in surprise. And he quickly changed the subject. "Now Ah've got lots o' work t' do, but ah tell y' what. If y'all would do me a small favor, Ah'll return it by teachin' ya everything Ah know 'bout heavy liftin'."

Sounded great to me. "What's the favor?" Fetch him a soda? Maybe some lunch? Help tie down the barrels on the flatbed?

"We been havin' a small bit o' trouble with the things that've been crawling up outta that ol' Stable west o' here. From what Ah hear, y'all are might brave an' no slouch w' slingin' a firearm. Jus' get down t' the Stable an' close the door. I reckon we can clear out the varmints up here if somepony locks off their breedin' grounds."

Okay, not a soda run.



“So why are you with me again?” The sky had darkened prematurely. I would soon have to turn on the lamp spell of my PipBuck.

“Ah figured Ah owe ya one,” Calamity said earnestly as he followed beside me. “Maybe a whole mess o’ ones, considerin’ all y’ did for the good ponies of New Appleloosa.”

With a sigh, I tried to console him. “You couldn’t have known. I was wearing blood-caked raider armor.” And carrying an arsenal that would make the average raider radioactive in envy.

“Caked in raider blood. Armor ya only had cuz ya needed protection while saving the lives of five good townspories!”

“Only four, really. Ditzzy Doo saved Sweet Apple.”

“An’ you saved Ditzzy Doo so she could save Sweet Apple. In muh book, that makes five.” He took a deep breath. “Besides, ah can’t consent t’ ya goin’ down there alone. Ah’ve heard dark stories about those Stables. Bad, bad things happened down in too many of ‘em.”

“I came from a Stable. Hell, everypony came from somepony who came from a Stable, right? I can see why an empty one would be an inviting nesting ground, but it’s not like the Stables are cursed or sinister.”

Calamity mulled that over. “Ah suppose yer right ‘bout that. All ‘cept the few like Ditzzy Doo who somehow survived the apocalypse on the surface, or are descended from folk who did.”

I halted my trot so abruptly I nearly fell over. My surviving canteen, refilled, swung out and back, smacking me in the chest. “Ditzzy Doo survived the war? She’s *that* old?”

“Ayep. Ghoul-ponies don’t age like normal pony-folk do.”

The idea of a pony who had actually been around way back then, who knew what actually happened, blew my mind away. “What’s her story?”

Calamity snorted a laugh. “So long ah couldn’t even guess at most of it. Ah do know she was flyin’ outside Cloudsdayle when that first megaspell hit it. She was caught at the very edge of the magical energies that wiped the entire city out of existence. Been a ghoul ever since.”

I nodded, continuing on in solemn silence, the image of entire city in the clouds filled with pegasus ponies playing out in my head. There one minute, and then just nothing.

The clouds above started to leak.



It was like being in a shower back in Stable Two. Only the shower was *everywhere!* And it didn’t stop. If I hadn’t been cleaned by Candi the day before, I would have welcomed it, despite the cold of the water. Now, soaked to the bone, I just found it miserable.

The sky had turned so dark I had to turn on my PipBuck’s lamp spell to see ahead of me. In theory, it was still daylight, but that was hard to believe. A ferocious wind had picked up out of nowhere and was whipping the rain at us like a weapon. “What’s going on?!” I cried out to Calamity above the storm.

“It’s a thunderstorm. An’ a mighty big one. We best be findin’ some shelter, cuz it’s just gettin’ started!”

“Thunderstorm?” I hollered back as a patch of clouds lit up briefly but brilliantly. “What’s thunder?”

KA-BOOOOOOOM!!!

The sky exploded! It was like the sound of a gunshot, if the gun was wielded by Celestia Herself and was made out of pure awesome. I actually tried hiding under Calamity.

“Get ahold o’ yerself there! “

Timidly and a little bashfully, I backed up and got to my hooves. Another flash illuminated the whole countryside in stark white and shadow, gone before I realized it had happened. Another mighty

boom tore at the sky following close behind the flash. Calamity had to put his forehooves on me to stop me from trying again.

“If y’all are that scared o’ the thunder, wait ‘till ya actually see the lightnin’!” He chuckled. “Now let’s get ta movin’ so’s we can find some shelter.”

Each flash of light in the clouds was followed by a terrifying crack or a mighty boom. A little later, I did indeed see the lightning. I’d been envisioning lightning bolts like those blasts of electricity the brain-bots had been shooting at me. This was *nothing* like that. This was a white tear through the sky, like the universe itself had been slashed open. It lasted an eyblink, but I still saw its afterimage floating in front of my face for several minutes later.

I also saw somepony, or I thought I did, in the far distance on a hilltop briefly illuminated by the lightning. I couldn’t tell if it was a unicorn or a pegasus... at first, I thought it was both. But the vision was gone before I could be sure I had seen anything at all.

We galloped, the ground beneath us increasingly muddy and treacherous, until we were forced to stop by a raging, frothy river. The muddy, rushing water was tearing away at the banks on each side. I could see the black shapes of uprooted dead trees as they were carried away.

Just beyond the other side rose a cliff-face. Water was pouring down the cracks of the cliff in a hundred rivulets, each feeding into the river at the bottom. Across from us, just a little way up the cliff, was the dark mouth of a cave, the path up to it already washed away.

I stood there staring helplessly, trying to figure out how we were going to get across. Then I felt myself being lifted into the air as Calamity flew us over the river and set me down in the mouth of the cave feeling stupid.

I stepped further in, shining the lamp of my PipBuck into the cave. The path continued up about a yard, then took a steep decline with frightfully old metal stairs, rusted nearly black, leading to a concrete landing. Once at the landing, the rough walls were replaced

by stonework. At the end, a very familiar-looking steel door hung open on its hinge-arm. The number 24 was emblazoned on the center of the door. Beyond lay a rusted, ruined doppelganger of the place I had once believed would forever be my home.

Calamity rushed past me. “Don’t just stand there gawkin’. Help me get this door shut before that darned river spills its banks completely and floods this hole!” He was trying to push the door physically. I looked down, noticing for the first time that the floor of the cave was already a puddle, two inches deep and growing.

Moved to action, I rushed to the controls. I paused long enough to check the bolting mechanism (which was actually entirely missing), and making sure I’d be able to open it again. Satisfied I could, I tried to push up the lever. It didn’t want to go. Focusing, my horn glowing brightly, I added my telekinetic strength to that of my hooves. With a loud grinding sound, the lever moved. With a wheeze, the lever arm moved, and the door to Stable 24 slammed shut, groaning in protest.



“You realize we just shut ourselves into the Evil Scary Stable of Spookiness, right?” I teased my self-invited companion as he stared about the place in wonder.

“ah-Ah’m trustin’ yer right ‘bout what ya said earlier. Reckon if anypony knows better, t’would be you.” He shot me a nervous smile. “Besides,” he added, flapping his wings, “not like these are gonna do me any good down here, one way or t’other.”

My eyes caught the harness Calamity wore. The pegasus had twin long-range rifles, one strapped to each side of his body right under his wings, built into a saddle mechanism. Thin metal “reins” reached out in front of him, ending in a bit that hovered a few inches below his mouth. By biting on it, the sibling barrels would fire at once. The saddle was designed to reload on command -- possibly triggered by pulling on the bit, or biting differently. I couldn’t tell.

“Hey, Calamity, I’ve been meanin’ t’ ask you, what is that?” I pointed a hoof at the contraption.

“What?” He turned looking around, spinning in place. I couldn’t suppress a laugh. He stopped, looking at me, then back behind him again once more before, “What, you mean my battle saddle?”

I nodded.

“Fine piece of work, ain’t it? I designed it myself!” He reared up, showing it off proudly. Then, at my expression, asked, “Ya mean t’ tell me ya ain’t never seen a battle saddle before?”

I shook my head.

“Well, ain’t that a thing!” He strutted about. “There’s basically two types o’ firearms, loosely speakin’. There’s the small ones that a pony can stick in ‘is mouth or levitate ‘round if he’s a unicorn. Then there’s the battle saddles, for all the firearms that are just too big an’ heavy an’ have too much kick t’ be wielded without support. Ah’ve seen all kinds of weapons built into battle saddles. Machine guns, rocket launchers...”

“Rocket launchers!” My tail drooped and ears fell back at the thought.

“Ayep! Even magical energy weapons.” He paused. “...though those are damned scarce, so yer not likely t’ ever see one of ‘em yerself.”

I filed that away for future reference. After checking my PipBuck for radiation or similar dangers, and E.F.S. for any glows of hostility, I took a long gulp from my canteen and began plotting our course. I was confident from my lifetime in a Stable that I could navigate this one with no problems. If the layout was the same, the door to the right in the next room should lead to stairs headed downward. That would be the cafeteria, living quarters, school and clinic. To the left, a corridor leading deeper into Maintenance, including the ever familiar PipBuck Technician maintenance stall. Without a second thought, I decided we would go right first.

Calamity, meanwhile, had scouted all the immediately adjacent rooms. He came back with a mildly surprised look. "They got a box o' dynamite in the storage room over yonder."

Okay, that was a bit surprising. I felt my ears stick up. You weren't going to find that in Stable Two. "What was in it."

"Dynamite, ah reckon," Calamity said mock-scholarly. "In truth, Ah don't know for sure. It was locked. And Ah wasn't 'bout t' go shakin' it like a birthday present t' try'n figure it out. On the chance it might be fulla, y'know, dynamite."

I followed the rust-colored pegasus back to the storage room to check it out. But after three tries, and the loss of two more bobby pins (which I was beginning to run alarmingly low on), I had to admit the lock was beyond even my self-proclaimed expertise. Instead, I suggested we move on along the path I originally planned.

The door to the living quarters slid open with a reassuring hiss. The lights gave off a familiar whine... those that still worked. Already, Stable Twenty-Four was making me horribly homesick. Worse, the dull ache in my heart mixed with disconcerting sense of wrongness. Seeing this place in rust and ruins was unpleasant in a way that I couldn't describe. It was like walking through my own, personalized version of the post-apocalypse. I was finding doors that wouldn't open. The floor was strewn with tin cans and litter. The generators, uncared for, were making an odd, rhythmic churring. And from deeper within came chugging, banging and hissing sounds that had no place in a Stable at all. This was a demoralizing, eerie, spook-house version of Stable Two.

I turned to look back at Calamity and caught him picking bottle caps up off the floor. I bit my lip, bracing against a wave of emotion that shrieked he was desecrating the place. Looting and scavenging was survival out in the Equestrian Wasteland. And, logically, that applied to in here too. But, even more than stripping goods off fresh corpses, this felt like grave robbing. Unholy.

My feelings scattered as, overhead, a burst of thunder hit so close to the cave that we could hear it inside the Stable. My heart thumped in my chest. “What the hell...?” I stammered, waving my forehooves to indicate the sky outside.

“Ah told ya. Thunderstorm.”

“That isn’t like any storm I’ve read about in my textbooks,” I countered.

Calamity looked at me with a softly mocking expression. “Weather ain’t like it used ‘t be. The sun an’ moon ain’t guided through the sky by ponies anymore. We pegasus...”

“The Goddesses Celestia and Luna move the sun and the moon through the sky each and every day!” I shot back, scandalized. How could he even say that! That was like... blasphemy!

“Oh yeah.” He rolled his eyes at me. *Rolled his eyes!* “From their place in pony heaven. Right.”

I bristled. He stared quietly until I gave in, motioning for him to continue. “As Ah was sayin’, we pegasus ain’t around schedulin’ the weather, neither. Equestria’s weather has gone wild.”

I felt a chill down my mane. Through the metal walls and the mountain, we felt the percussion of the storm.



I had begun to wonder how over-engineered Stable Two must have been for me never to have heard storms like these. Obviously, it was designed to stay closed longer, which I was figuring probably accounted for other architectural differences I had started to notice.

“Huh,” I thought aloud. “There’s only one section of bathrooms.” At least, only one in the living quarters section of the Stable. Back in Stable Two, there were two. One for mares, one for stallions. The floor outside was wet and I could hear a roar gurgling, splashing sounds from behind the bathroom door. Also unlike Stable Two, Stable Twenty-Four was connected to the aquifer, its water supply merely purified with

anti-toxin and anti-radiation spells. With the downpour outside, every sink and toilet was backing up.

The same went for the water fountains. The one between the school and the living quarters was spraying brown water. The horrible noises were coming from the pipes and plumbing rather than unnatural monsters.

I stopped dead as a red spot flashed up on the compass of my E.F.S. Somewhere, just ahead of us, was surely one of the creatures Crane had talked about. Not, I realized, that either of us had bothered to get a description.

"So... any idea exactly what sort of 'varmint' we're supposed to be looking for down here?" I whispered as we both crouched down, moving as stealthily as possible.

While bathrooms weren't segregated, sleeping areas were -- the main floor for stallions and a lower one for mares. That too was different than Stable Two, where the quarters were geared towards families. My E.F.S. felt annoyingly limited, unable to tell me which level the creature was on, just that it was almost dead ahead now. I levitated out Little Macintosh, ready as I could be.

"Actually no," Calamity whispered back. "And as Ah recall, we ain't supposed t' be lookin' for 'em. We're supposed t' just close the door."

"As I recall," I retorted, maybe a slight bit less quietly than I should have, "*I'm* supposed to be closing the door. You aren't supposed to be anywhere." I couldn't deny that he had a point. In fact, if trapped inside a creature's lair, poking around was probably the dumbest thing a pony could possibly do. On the other hoof, this was another Stable. My curiosity and sense of connection wouldn't allow me to leave it unexplored. And if I was trapped in here for a few hours, well, no time like the present.

Calamity shook his head, but followed all the same.

We moved a few steps closer, and the red spot winked out. I turned quickly, trying to see if it had somehow gotten behind us, but there was

nothing. Either the creature had evaporated, or we were right on top of it, one floor up. We crouched there, keeping still and quiet. After a moment, the red spot appeared again, once more right in front of us. And a few seconds later it vanished once more. This time, apparently, for good.



Aside from age and deterioration, the school in Stable Twenty-Four looked exactly like the one back home. Students tables, all in nice little rows. A sharing area with toys. The teacher's desk, with a terminal, pencils and even a long-rotted apple. The only real difference was a large glass tank which could have once been an aquarium. Even with rusted walls, this felt like home.

It should have been comforting. Instead, it was unpleasantly weird. And it was putting me on edge. The constant banging and screaming of the pipes was adding to my discomfort and giving me a mild headache for good measure. Worst of all, we had encountered three more "ghosts" -- hostile entities that appeared on my Eye-Forward Sparkle, but nowhere else -- a matter not at all helped by the fact Calamity had no PipBuck of his own so he couldn't tell what I was reacting to.

I was beginning to worry that my Eye-Forward Sparkle, or even my PipBuck itself, had been damaged or warped by exposure to the Equestrian Wasteland. Unlikely, I reassured myself, remembering that they were made to withstand much worse than this. What was more likely, and less comforting, was that the creatures down here had magic of their own.

"Ya ever heard of anypony named Prince Celest?"

"What?" I trotted over, brow furrowing. "Lemme see that," I said, snatching the book from the desk in front of him with a glow of telekinesis. I read a few sentences, then slammed the book shut to look at the cover. It was a children's storybook. "The Stallion in the Moon?!"

Calamity chuckled. “Y’know, Ah think ah member my ma readin’ me a story like that... only, it was a mare in the moon, if I recollect.”

“That’s because it’s supposed to be The *Mare* in the Moon!” Quickly, I began looking through the other books on the desks and school shelves. When I was done, I had reached to important-feeling observations. “One: every significant pony in every book had been changed into a stallion...”

“Well, ah suspect some of ‘em were stallions t’ begin with...”

“Two!” I continued undaunted, even though my voice sounded strained even to my own ears. “Not one story or textbook has anything but the vaguest references to the history or governance of Equestria.” Not that Stable Two’s library was stellar in that regard -- the most recent history in any of our textbooks was over a generation old. But this here wasn’t a lack of material. This was a deliberate alteration of facts and context! In the portion of the Stable dedicated to education! This was... it was...

“Y’know, yer gonna burst somethin’ if ya don’t calm down a touch.”

I tossed the book I was holding into the corner with malice. I was about to trot out, indignation wrapped about me like a cloak, when I remember the terminal sitting on the teacher’s desk. The screen was giving off a soft glow. I trotted over and prepared to hack into it, only to be slightly disappointed when it offered up its secrets readily. Such as they were. There entries were mainly filled with notes on attendance and grades. Two stuck out though. First:

Had a real surprise when we tested the young unicorns on their magic today. I had all my little ponies bring in their pets and show me how they could make them levitate. Simple enough, although a squirming animal can add a level of difficulty for foals at this age. I had to let both Butter and Peridance each borrow the class mascot, since neither have a pet of their own. Peridance was thrilled, but I think Butter is terrified of the snake, even though she’s been told it’s defanged and harmless. Needless to say, Butter didn’t do very well.

The real surprise was little Quanta, who has been struggling with even minor levitation all year. Now I know these things have never been recorded in girls, but I can't imagine any other explanation: we had a full magical epiphany occur right in our classroom. Quanta not only levitated herself, but she let out a flash of energy that affected all of the pets in the room. Most just panicked and had to be recovered, but some (including our mascot) seem to have vanished completely. And strangest of all, the arcane flash seems to have transformed Carrot Tail's ugly old cat into... well, an even uglier old cat.

It only lasted a moment. Quanta seems fine. Didn't even realize what she'd done. Of course, parents had to be called, and Carrot Tail is traumatized. It will be a miracle if I can teach these foals anything for the rest of the week. Meanwhile, I'm going to write up a proposal to have another unicorn stallion watch over these tests from now on. Just as a precaution.

The second entry that stuck out was four days later, and it was the last entry on the terminal:

I expected a few parents to keep their colts and fillies home after the excitement at the beginning of the week, but by now they should be letting them back. Instead, attendance is at its lowest yet. Over half my students have skipped their classes today. If things haven't turned around after the weekend, I'm going to have to start calling parents. And if that doesn't work, maybe even the Overstallion.

I stared at that last entry for a while.

"Wait... the Overstallion?"

Calamity looked at me curiously. "What's wrong?"

"This *Overmare* of this Stable was an *Overstallion*?"

He blinked, and then his eyes narrowed just a little. "What's wrong with that?"

"The Overmare is supposed to be an Overmare. That's what's wrong." It was like explaining to a child. But instead of understanding, his eyes narrowed even more.

"Are ya sayin' a feller can't do what a gal c'n do?"

Taken aback suddenly, I tried to find the best way to explain. "N-no. It's not that at all!" I waved my hooves in negation. "It's just... It's just the way it's supposed to be. It's tradition."

He didn't move. His voice was very even. "Ya sayin' that even if there was a feller who was better at leadin' a Stable than any other pony, stallion or mare, and had the cutie mark t' show for it an' everything, that he wouldn't be allowed t' on account he was a buck?"

I gulped, taking a step back. Dammit, but I was *right*. Yet there was nothing I could say to explain that I was right without digging myself deeper. So instead, I just clammed up and said nothing.

Calamity turned and walked out of the classroom. This time, I followed him.



"Okay, now Ah do feel a bit embarrassed."

In front of us was another door to Maintenance. To our right, the cafeteria. To our left, a maintenance store room. In the store room: a glowing terminal, several shelves of supplies, and a poster on the wall of a mighty stallion standing brave and tall, facing danger head-on, ready and able, while three mares crouched down at his hind hooves, frightened but looking up to him for salvation, adoration evident in their eyes.

Calamity felt embarrassed. I felt something creeping more towards anger.

It wasn't that this turn should have taken us towards the atrium. I could forgive a severe divergence in Stable design (although it did irk me). It wasn't the heroic stallion or the simpering mares. There's a desire to be special and to be admired for your accomplishments that

the poster played to which I fully understood. It wasn't even that this was the fifth poster we'd come across and all of them catered to the same gender bias. It was that the stallion in the picture was valiantly holding a wrench in his teeth, and the unspeakable horror that had the girl ponies all cringing like frightened bunnies was apparently a leaky sink.

Carefully, so as not to step on another social mine, "Do you see... why I'm upset? This isn't like, give it to the best pony, who cares about tradition. This is..."

"Ayep. This is manipulation. Alla these posters been here since before ponies trotted up into this Stable to avoid the apocalypse." He turned and fixed me with a look. "It's like sayin tha' a job's only fit fer either a mare or a stallion."

I got the point.

"An' that's only true fer cookin'."

I stopped. My ears shot up and for a moment I bet they could have been steaming. "What?! What's that supposed to..." And then I caught his sly look. "Oh. Ha ha. I guess I deserved that."

"Ayep."

We were quiet a moment. I turned to hack the storeroom terminal and read over the logs of a pony who appeared to be the maintenance supervisor while Calamity hoof-picked some supplies worth scavenging. The clanging and banging of the pipes continued relentlessly. But for a moment, I felt a little less stressed. I felt that I had just made it out of the social minefield, singed but intact. So, naturally, that was the moment everything went to hell.

I had just finished the fourth entry and was partway through the final entry when my E.F.S. flared up with not one "ghost" but five!

Entry One:

I cannot believe my luck. Persimmonie is one fine mare. The date last night went incredibly well. She even let me kiss her! And her little filly, Carrot Tail, seems
--

to like me too. Even better, I kinda like her. I don't have to pretend like I thought I would just to spend some more time with her mother. In fact, we have a second date planned tomorrow night.

Oh, and Greyhorn finally fixed the lighting on level 2-B. That flickering was driving everypony bonkers.

Entry Two:

Dammit, of all the luck. First, the whole lighting strip on guess-which-level blows out, plunging the damned atrium into blackness in the middle of rush. Even worse, Persimmonie postponed our date. Some unicorn filly did something wonky to Carrot Tail's pet, and Persimmonie's been with her all day trying to keep the little cunt from drowning in her own tears. I take it back. I hate children.

Entry Three:

Got called to the Overstallion's office today. Big emergency that required my special talents. Any guesses? He locked himself out again. Again! This is the third time this week. Fortunately, any pony with half a lick of sense could get that thing open. Weakest damn lock I've ever seen. Still, just in case Greyhorn ever has to do it, I've left a handful of bobby pins and a copy of Today's Locksmith in the Maintenance locker room safe. I've even highlighted the most useful bits for him. So as long as he doesn't forget the password, even he shouldn't have a problem. And I made the password his name, so... oh hell, he'll still probably forget it.

Meanwhile, my love life's taken a turn for the worse. Persimmonie's filly is apparently in the clinic. I hear the cat attacked her. They'll probably have to put it down.

Entry Four:

Where the hell is Greyhorn? Idiot missed his whole damn shift today. Called up to his room, but no answer. Goddammit, I've got to do everything around here myself.

Oh, I replaced the entire lighting assembly up on level 2-B and guess what? We're still having problems. I swear to God the ponies who built this whole place must have been cutting corners. Probably cheated Stable-Tec out of fat loads of money. I hope their asses melted when the megaspells hit.

Entry Five:

Still no Greyhorn. Talked with some others, and they haven't seen him either. Suggested I check medical. Would be just like him to find some way to fall and impale himself on his own horn.

Dammit, there's that scratching sound again. Something's managed to get into the ventilation system. I've removed several of the covers on this floor. Hopefully, whatever it is will fall out and I won't have to send some colt crawling in after it. Did I mention how much I hate children?

Double-dammit. I just spotted the thing staring down at me. If I didn't know better, I'd say it was Carrot Tail's damn cat. But they caught it and put it down yesterday. Tripple-dammit! The damn thing just bit me! I swear, I'm going to send a colt up there after it with a flamethrower!

Looking up, I saw the dark opening where the covering grate should have been. And several pairs of alien eyes gleaming at me.

"Calamity, get back, they're in the ventilation!"

Calamity backed away at my shout even as the first creature leapt out, landing on the shelving, spilling a bucket of fuses crashing to the floor. It looked only vaguely feline, but with scales rather than fur, oversized fangs and cat-like eyes save that the slits ran horizontally. Somehow, that last part freaked me out the most.

I had made the mistake of putting Little Macintosh away. When it leapt at me, I didn't have time to draw the gun out, or even think. I reacted instinctually, grabbing the creature telekinetically and hurling it away from me, just like with the grenade. Only this time, we were in a small room and there was no place for it to go, so just thumped back against the wall, pinned and hissing.

A second jumped out, hitting the terminal, and fell to the floor. I raised a hindhoof and brought it down as hard as I could on the creature's head. Rearing up, I treated the one I was pinning to a fatal blow from one of my forehooves.

The third jumped right down onto me, claws catching in my mane.

I screamed like a little filly. "Get it off! Get it off! Get it off!" I bucked, panicking, sending a hindhoof through the terminal with a crunching of glass and a popping explosion. I could feel the hairs around my hoof singeing.

I turned towards the doorway and saw Calamity taking aim.

BLAM!

My mind conjured up a flashback of being wounded and dying, shot multiple times by this very same pony who was swooping down the tracks, aiming at me again. Without thinking, I threw myself to the floor, trying to dodge the shot... a second after Calamity had already fired, ripping the cat-snake-thing apart and leaving me unscathed.

I got wobbly up to my hooves. I tried to smile, although I could feel it was more like a grimace. I could read it in his face: he wanted to tell me I should trust him, to tell me to stop being afraid he was going to shoot me. But he wasn't going to. He couldn't because he knew I had every right and reason to be gun-shy around him. That I should be acting this way.

In that moment, I realized something. He was actually sorry he shot me. Not sorry he shot the new local hero who saved some townsfolk. But sorry he shot me. He wasn't here out of embarrassment. He wasn't trying to fix some loss of reputation or standing, either in his eyes or anybody else's. He really felt regretful that I nearly died.

I didn't even realize I was thinking about him that way. But now I realized I had been. Dammit, now I felt like *I* should apologize to *him*.

He turned away, looking up at the ceiling. "Ah figure the sound of the shot scare't 'em off."

“For now,” I agreed. I had my revelation, but I couldn’t tell him. He’d just deny it, and then there’d be awkwardness. He was a boy, after all...

Dammit! I scolded myself for having such a thought. Not that it was hard to figure out what had me thinking like that. I glared at the stupid poster. “I hate this Stable.”



Little Macintosh whipped around, firing off three more S.A.T.S.-guided shots. Three more of the evil little cat-snake-things were blown into oblivion. They were easy to kill, which hardly made up for being so small, fast and agile. And extremely aggressive!

Several more tried to jump onto Calamity, finding purchase with their claws. He bucked, throwing back his wings, sending them flying, and buck-kicked one of the fallen into a reddish paste. “How many... of these li’l monster... ya reckon we got?”

I fired at one of the creatures Calamity had thrown, missing. And again, hitting this time. The last got by me, leaping for Calamity’s back. I heard him howl as the creature sunk its teeth into the back of his neck.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got it!” I wrenched the creature away telekinetically, my horn glowing fiercely as it brought Little Macintosh up to the mewling thing dripping with Calamity’s blood and pulled the trigger.

“Damn, those things got a bite.”

“Hold still. Let me look.” I was already pulling medical bandages out of my saddlebags. I was nearly out of those. I knew we could get some in either the clinic (which should be ahead) or the living quarters bathroom (which would mean a lot of backtracking).

We had gone through Maintenance, a trip that had been a long, wet but uneventful slog through the lowest part of the Stable which was half-filled with water. We had found the locker room, and with the password we had opened the safe. My bobby pin collection was now

far more comfortable, and Today's Locksmith was tucked neatly in my saddle bags. The only creatures we had found in Maintenance were dead. Drowned. Despite looking like a cross between a serpent and a cat, the little monsters didn't seem able to swim. Thank the wasteland for small favors when you can get them.

We did, however, start finding skeletons. Sporadically at first, and now in groups. The closer we got to the atrium, the heart of the Stable, the more death we found. I couldn't hold back the images of someone walking through Stable Two and finding the bodies of everyone I had known for all but the last few days of my life dead like this.

For a moment, it was too much. I had to rest, to clear my head.

No less than nine of the damn things chose that moment to attack us.

Wrapping Calamity's wound, I grimaced at my lack of medical skill. If I tried to join the "Ministry of Peace" they'd kick me out on my tail. It was bad enough when only I would die if I didn't know the right end of a potion bottle. I really didn't like having anypony else relying on my (lack of) skill.

Still, we were up and moving in the right direction. Except we really weren't, were we? The more I thought about it, the less reasonable my reasons for wandering around down here seemed. Finishing, I turned away and looked back down the way we came. "Okay, that's it. I've been a dumb pony. We turn around, gallop back to the entrance as fast as we can, barricade ourselves and wait the damn storm out. Then we leave and close the door behind us."

"ahm... actually... Ah vote we continue t' the clinic."

I turned, surprised. Seeing Calamity, my surprise turned to shock. Then horror.

"Ah'm guessin' y'all..." he teetered, looking pale beneath his coat. "...would keep somethin' there for... y'know... poison?"

Thump. Down went the pegasus.

"Calamity!"



Chimera

from the personal notes of Doctor Brierberry

Head of Medicine, Stable 24

I've chosen to call this new species "chimera" for what I feel are suitably obvious reasons. The creature is a result of a wild magical burst from a rather exceptionally gifted filly named Quanta. In a flash of uncontrolled magical power, Quanta managed to fuse several creatures within her vicinity into a single being -- a fully functional and completely new life form.

The initially created chimera took several days to molt before revealing its true nature, during which time another filly, Carrot Tail, was attacked by the creature. She was rushed to the clinic, but perished within hours from an unknown magical toxin injected into the child by the creature.

After molting, the chimera subsequently attacked a maintenance worker by the name of Greyhorn. This time, both the chimera and its victim were fully mature. Based on the case of Carrot Tail, we treated Greyhorn with antivenom spells and potions, but to no avail. Greyhorn lasted three times as long as Carrot Tail, and was in extreme agony for most of that period. It was only after Greyhorn's death that we learned the key component of the chimera's make-up.

As you will be able to see from the images I am having attached to this document, the feline and serpentine elements of the fusion are quite obvious. (See images C-1 and C-2) What we initially didn't realize, couldn't have suspected, is that there had been some manner of insect in the classroom when Roe cast her spell, and that too was infused into the creature on a deeply inherent level. You see, the fangs of the chimera aren't so much like the fangs of a rattlesnake, but more akin to an insect's ovipositor.

The behavior of this species is extremely aggressive, attacking any suitable host within which it can inject its eggs. Over the course of a single day, those eggs will mature within the host, after which a litter of new, baby

chimera will dig their way out of the infected pony, ultimately killing the host if the pony is not already dead. In the case of Greyhorn, five new chimera erupted from his body less than an hour after he was pronounced dead. (See image C-3) You can imagine the look on my assistant's face. (But you don't have to. See image C-4)

Fortunately, from the case of Greyhorn, and the baby chimera specimens he provided us with, we have been able to devise and conjure an anti-chimera potion. Unfortunately, some of the herbs required were in tragically short supply, so there is a high probability that we will not have sufficient quantities for everyone. The Overstallion is keeping one bottle locked away in his office, along with the recipe. Meanwhile, I am storing the rest in the medical refrigerator here in the clinic while I wait for the Overstallion's decision on how to implement dispersal.

Oh Celestia have mercy!

By the time I was done reading, horror turned me numb. Slowly, I got up from Doctor Brierberry's terminal and stared about the clinic. There were pony skeletons everywhere. Dozens of them surged towards the open door of the medical fridge. Others were entangled around each other.

A new species, extremely hostile, which renders its victims immobile with a single bite and then tortures them to death from the inside over most of a day... and in doing so can quintuple its number?

I swiftly realized the only thing that had kept the chimera from overrunning the Equestrian Wasteland was that river and the fact that these chimera can't swim. Thank the wasteland for huge favors!

If we survived this, I was going to have a little talk with Crane about his definition of a "small bit o' trouble". Understatement was *not* a virtue in the Equestrian Wasteland.

I looked at the bed Calamity was resting on, looking even weaker than before. Oh Goddess. I couldn't tell him this! Let him think he's poisoned; it's so much better than this.

Pointlessly, I stepped over and swung back the door of the fridge, already knowing I would find nothing inside.

Okay, one last shot. I walked to the clinic window and looked out into the atrium. The room was dark. Every light in it had failed. The only illumination came from the couple still functional lights of the clinic, and the stuttering, flickering light from the circular window in the Overmare's (no, Overstallion's) office above. If there was a single dose of the... "antidote"... left, it would be locked away in a safe up there. The only way to get to it was through the atrium.

The atrium was teeming with chimera.

Swallowing hard, I turned to Calamity. And told him the plan.

After staring at me for a long time, Calamity finally said, "That's insane."

I focused, my horn beginning to glow, and slipped open my saddlepack. "I'll be okay."

"No ya won't! That's suicide. An' ya 'll be killin' both of us!"

I looked at him sternly. "Let me guess. You're thinking you should do it yourself, seeing as you're already... poisoned. Never mind that you can't even stand up without help. And barely with it."

The rust-colored pegasus managed to look cross. "Then get yerself out of here. Least one of us will survive this crazy Stable."

Now I got to play cross. "I'm not leaving my friend behind." I reloaded Little Macintosh.

Calamity caught. He looked at me with genuine astonishment.

"Friend? But... Ah shot ya."

I rolled my eyes at him. And nodded. "Yes, you did. And I'm planning to needle you about that for the rest of your life. And I'm sure not going to get my blood's worth if you die today."

"Don't be a stubborn fool, LilPip. There's no way in tarnation ya can possibly..."

Levitating the StealthBuck up for Calamity to see, I smiled with a whole lot more confidence than I felt. “I do have this.”



It was, without question, the most harrowing two hours of my life. Inching my way through darkness, surrounded by lethal predators. They couldn't see me. But in the darkness, it was only by my E.F.S. and targeting spell that I was able to keep from stepping on or brushing against one of them.

It was a minefield. And as I crossed, I realized just how calling my own stupidity a “social minefield” did flippant injustice to an actual minefield, and anyone who had ever been caught in one. *This* was a minefield. And all the mines were alive and moving. One wrong move, and it wasn't just I who would die for it.

But I did make it. And for once the wasteland was pouring out the favors. The Overstallion's door was as easy to pick as advertised. From the skeleton, I guessed the Overstallion locked himself in, and I feared he had consumed the anti-chimera potion. But within his locked safe, I found both it and the recipe, as well as an old recording. My guess was that it was his last words. If it had been Stable Two, and I had been the Overmare, watching everyone die because of some magical accident? I suspect I might have done the same.

I took all three items. I figured I should, considering what I was going to do next.

Even after drinking the remedy, Calamity was going to take some time to recover. There was no way to know how long. Lifting both the pegasus and Little Macintosh, I followed my path back, all too aware that the damn chimera were using the ventilation and that even cleared areas were not to be trusted.

I made it all the way back to the storage room near the main door. Sitting down with Today's Locksmith, I went through, finding all the tips I could in a short amount of time. The highlighting really helped.

Outside, thunder shook the mountain reassuringly. I looked up and thanked Celestia for the storm.

The tips from the book proved useful. With a bit of effort and only one bobby pin, I was able to get the box marked dynamite. Inside, there was indeed dynamite. I removed each stick gingerly. Then placed a curled up Calamity into the box, closing it. Should a chimera come for him while I was busy, I didn't want it to be able to get at him.

For the next few hours, I ran back through the entirety of Stable Twenty-Four. Everything but the atrium. I opened each door that could be opened. And then blocked it with a trash can or a tipped-over filing cabinet or anything else that would keep the door from closing.

As for the Atrium, after looting the clinic for medical supplies, I left a stick of burning dynamite on the windowsill of the Clinic and ran.

The rest of the dynamite was to blow the cave opening enough to bring the river pouring in. By the time I was ready to set that off, Calamity had gotten up and wondered why he was packaged as high explosive. His eyes got wider and wider as I explained what I was doing.

"Dayumn!" That was all.



We'd been down in Stable Twenty-Four for most of the night. It was dawn by the time we returned to New Appleloosa. At least in theory. The storm had stopped pounding the crap out of the wasteland and was now content to just rain on us.

Candi was kind enough to let me crash on an unused bed in her clinic. More than fair payment for giving her the anti-chimera cure. One copy of it, that is.

It was still raining after I woke up, later in the afternoon. And it was late evening before Calamity had woken up and trotted out to join me. By then, I had finally been making some progress under Crane's

tutelage. I was panting, sweating heavily, as we stopped for a Sparkle-Cola break.

"I say we're even," I told Calamity as Crane floated an ice-cold Sparkle-Cola over for each of us.

"Ah don't understand."

"If we'd just stayed put at the door, you would never have been bitten."

"If we'd stayed at the door, ya never woulda got the antidote."

"If we'd stayed put, you never would have needed it."

"Ah-ha! But somepony else might! Crane said they'd been havin' trouble with the critters, so obviously some of 'em had been gettin' out."

Crap! I'd forgotten all about that. Still, with luck, and with their nest destroyed...

"It wasn't yer Stable, y'know." Calamity's voice had taken a solemn quality.

I looked at my new friend. "What?"

"Ah know ya grew up in a Stable. But it wasn't *that* Stable." Of course it wasn't. I knew that, but I still wasn't sure what Calamity was getting at.

"It's just... ya seemed t' be takin' what we found down there, Ah dunno... personally." He looked at me earnestly. "Ah just wanted t' remind ya, is all."

He was right, of course. I don't know what I was looking for or I had expected to find. But I'd let Stable Twenty-Four become a personal affront. Stable Twenty-Four had never been my home. I had no relation to it at all. The only threads connecting the different Stables were two hundred years old, dead and buried in a history mostly forgotten. Stable-Tec hadn't existed in a long, long time. I had no allegiance to it, and the long dead couldn't bear any responsibility to me.

“Oh!” I pulled out the recording from the Overstallion’s office. “Should we hear what’s on it?”

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Gunslinger - While using a mouth-held or levitated firearm, your chance to hit in S.A.T.S. increases by 25%.

Quest Perk added: Mighty Telekenesis (level one) You triple the mass that you can levitate with your unicorn magic.

CHAPTER SIX



THE TRUTH OF THE MATTER

"Tis better to be alone, than in bad company."

"Hello!

"My name is Scootaloo. You probably know me (since I am pretty famous) for my awesome performances at events like last year's GALLOPS, or maybe just as the founder of Red Racer.

"...

"None of which means a damn anymore, of course. If you're hearing this, that means Omega-Level Threat Protocols have been enacted and you are... are now... aww, dammit!!
"Sorry.

"Okay... right now, I'm talking to you as vice-president of Stable-Tec. You have been appointed as Overmare (or, in the case of Stable Twenty-Four, Overstallion) of a Stable-Tec life-preserving Stable. You have been chosen for your sense of loyalty and duty, both to the ponies around you and to this company. And while the Stable-Tec HQ might be... probably is... nothing but blasted rubble now, our ideals live on.

"Your Stable has been selected to participate in a vital social project. The first goal of your Stable, like all others, is to save the lives of the ponies inside. But you also have a higher purpose beyond saving the lives of

individual ponies. We here at Stable-Tec understand that it doesn't do ponykind any good to save ourselves now only to annihilate each other later. We must figure out where we went wrong. We must find a better way. And we must be ready to implement it as soon as possible once the Stable doors open. ...And survive what our current leaders have managed to do to Equestria...

"...dammit! I-I really hope no pony ever has to h-hear this. Can't this all just be for nothing? They're really going to destroy us all, aren't they?..."

"...I'm sorry. Again, I'm totally off script. Where was I? Oh, yeah. In short, Stable-Tec is working to ensure a more... a more Stable society for future generations.

"Inside the safe in your office, you will find a set of special instructions and objectives, as well as details on how your specific Stable has been fitted to carry out your part. If at any point, you believe that your part in the project is threatening the safety and security of the ponies in your charge... as a whole... you are to cease participation and take any necessary steps to rectify the situation. In any other circumstances, however, it is crucial that you keep to the directives provided, and keep Stable-Tec appraised of all results as per your sealed instructions.

"Thank you. From all of us. From all of Equestria...

"...

"Thank you, and may somepony up there have pity on us all."



Not the message I had been expecting. Now my feelings about the Stables were completely twisted up in my head, and I just wanted to forget about them entirely.

"Away with the old, embrace the new, right?" I clopped my hoof on the counter again. "Apple Whiskey, another of your specials, please!"

Apple Whiskey, the bartending unicorn who owned and ran Turnpike Tavern, poured me another glass. Then, as I watched, he lined up

seven apples on the counter -- beautiful golden apples quite unlike the pale and flavorless ones back not-home -- and waved his horn over them, magically transforming them one-by-one into bottles of the most delicious, pain-numbing, mind-easing fermented apple beverage. Beside me, Calamity clopped his hooves on the floor in applause and several mares in the tavern let up a whoop.

"Dunno why I was surprised," I half-whispered, leaning near Calamity. "Your leader is a stallion, after all."

Calamity's ears perked up and he gave me a look of shocked confusion. "My leader? Ah don't have a leader!" I couldn't tell whether he sounded more offended or worried.

I hoofwaved. "I heard him. Over the sprite-bot. When it wasn't being Watcher."

Calamity looked at me with deeper confusion. And then broke into a too-riotous laugh. "What? Red Eye?" He turned to the rest of the bar. "Hey, everypony. LilPip here thought Red Eye was our leader!"

The whole tavern joined in on the laughter.

"Good Goddess, girl!" cried one of the mares down the counter from us, "Red Eye ain't nothing but a puffed up prancer! Hell, Ah don't even listen to that broadcast! Not when DJ's on the dial!"

"huh?"

"Ayep," agreed a buck from a nearby table as he gathered a pile of bottle caps from his cross-looking companions, many of whom were looking at colorful squares in disgust. "Just let ol' Red Eye try an' come out here and make New Appleloosa part o' his so-called 'new world'! Ah'll personally take all his unity an' brotherhood an' shove it right up his..."

"Just deal!" the pony next to him interrupted grumpily.

"So..." I fought to shove new facts into the puzzle I was building in my head. The drinks were great for forgetting, but not so great for

thinking. "...the not-Watcher voice on the sprite-bot is Red Eye, and he's not your leader..."

"What's this watcher stuff?" the mare closest to me asked. "Those sprite-bot's are just radios. Red Eye can't actually watch ponies through them. They ain't cameras!" She turned to Calamity. "I mean, could you *imagine* if he could...?"

Okay, now *that* I knew wasn't true. But apparently the fact those sprite-bots can be used to spy wasn't common knowledge. Watcher had tipped me off to something.

One of the bucks from down the counter called out, "Hey, Apple Whiskey! Put DJ on!" Apple Whiskey looked up to a brown box on the top of one of the shelves which had wires running to speakers throughout the Turnpike Tavern. With a slight glow of his horn, the radio turned on, and a beautiful mare's voice, possibly the sweetest I'd ever heard (or, at least, a close second to Velvet Remedy's) began to pour out of the speakers.

♪ *"How did this happen? What have I done?"*

I was only trying to help, but I caused so much pain.

I wish I could hide. Wish I could run.

I wish I could find a way to do it all over again..."

The voice, and the song she sang, was so solemn and sad and filled with determination that it made my mind go to unhappy places. I soon felt like crying, and had to force myself not to. I figured more drink would help, so I finished mine and clopped for another.

♪ *"...I lost sight of the war while fighting my battles.*

and now I carry the weight of the world on my saddle..."

Oh, this was unbearable. My heart was breaking, and I wasn't even sure why. I grasped at a distraction, "DJ? Who is DJ?"

The answers came fast, almost too fast to keep up with. It seemed every pony in the tavern had something to say.

“DJ Pon3, of course!”

“There’s always a DJ Pon3!”

“Best music in the Equestrain Wasteland!”

“...yeah, all, what, twelve songs? Twenty?”

“He’s a ghoulish pony. Been around forever.”

“No he’s not. They keep changing. Back when I was a filly, DJ was a mare!”

“Ah hear he’s a pegasus. He’s got station up in the clouds. That’s how he always knows everything what’s goin’ on.”

“That’s stupid. Everypony knows DJ Pon3’s station comes outta Tenpony Tower in the Manehattan Ruins!”

“He is too a ghoulish pony! He’s been around since before the war!”

“Ah heard the original DJ Pon3 was actually a mare named Vinyl Scratch who was killed when the zebra balefire wiped Manehattan. But her nephew was spared, bein’ in Tenpony an’ all, an’ took up the mantle.”

“I heard it was her sister.”

My head was spinning. Calamity was smirking at me. Leaning close, he whinnied “There’s *always* a DJ Pon3.”

And in the background, the voice of seemingly infinite beauty and sadness, cried out, *“How can I fix this? How many times must I try? Please, this time, let me get it right!”*

The music died away. And a voice came over the radio. “This is DJ Pon3, and that was Sweetie Belle, singing about that one great truth of the wasteland: every pony has done something they regret. And now, my little ponies, it’s time for the news! Now you ponies remember when I told you ‘bout those two ponies who crawled themselves out of Stable Two? Well, I’ve been gettin’ reports that one of those little ponies took out the raider nest in the heart of Ponyville, and saved several pony captives -- including the beloved author of *The Wasteland*

Survival Guide, Ditzzy Doo! Hey kid, thanks! From all of us! And now the weather: cloudy everywhere, with a chance of rain, gunfire and bloody dismemberment...

I didn't really hear the rest. I was too stunned. I was on the radio. DJ Pon3 was talking about me. My heart mixed with pride and panic, the latter quickly swallowing the former. I'd been outside less than a week, and I already had a reputation that was spreading across all of the Equestrian Wasteland... a reputation that built me up into somepony far more heroic and capable than I actually was.

"...one last thing, the other Stable Dweller was last seen out near Appleloosa. My prayers go out t' that one. And that's the truth of the matter. Now back to the music. Here's Sapphire Shores singing how the sun can't hide forever. From your lips to Celestia's ears, Sapphire!"

For a moment, everything seemed to stop. What?!? I turned to Calamity, "Near Appleloosa? I thought *this* was Appleloosa."

Calamity snickered, still not done having fun with me over my wasteland ignorance. "No way, LilPip! This here's *New* Appleloosa! Ya can't have a new without havin' an *old*, now can ya?" Then he quickly got serious. "Now, ya don't wanna be goin' anywhere near old Appleloosa, ya hear me? That's a slaver town!"

Apple Whiskey interrupted. "Well, there's no harm goin' up that way t' trade. Ah sell a good bit o' my trademark apple whiskey to those folk."

I was stunned. Surely he was kidding! "You... trade with slaver ponies!?"

"Ayep. In fact, got a train headed out that way on the morrow."

I looked about with disbelief. "You trade with *slavers*!?"

Calamity whispered in my ear, "Why ya think I never took up livin' here." It wasn't a question.



Next morning, I found myself out in the continuing downpour, staring at the train and feeling not a little guilty that I'd spent the last evening helping load the flatcars as part of my training with Crane. That evening would have gone a bit differently had I known where those goods were headed.

"Ah can't talk ya outta this, can Ah?" Calamity stood next to me, checking the loads on his battle saddle.

My head was thudding dully -- the aftermath of too much apple whiskey -- but I was thinking clearly. I knew this was foolish, but where there were slavers, there were slaves in need of rescue. I knew part of me was just trying to live up to my overblown reputation; but I'd also been a captive of slavers, if for only a few hours, and I couldn't just ignore the fact that there were ponies up there who needed somepony to care enough to try and help them. "No."

"Well, then Ah'm comin' with ya. Always wanted t' take a shot at that damn place. Figure, if there's two of us, might actually have a chance."

His words left me feeling immensely relieved.

"Ah'll talk to Ditzzy Doo fer supplies. Don't want neither of us t' run outta ammo up there. Or food. We c'n take the train up the mountains and out over the desert, but chances are, we'll be trottin' back."

I mulled that over, and suddenly realized that even if we had our own supplies, what about any ponies we rescued? And would they be in any state to make that kind of trip? Not that such questions deterred me at all. But I'd have to find a way to talk the ponies pulling the train to wait for us. As we "robbed" the town they were trading with, no less. I voiced my concern to Calamity.

"Yer gonna hafta do some fast talkin' if ya wanna convince them o' anything like that," he replied, then seemed to have an idea. "Ah know somepony in town that jus' might have whatcha need t' pull that off."

Calamity trotted off, leaving me staring at the train once again.

While I waited, I tried to familiarize myself with the train. Flatcars and boxcars held supplies. Passenger cars, of which this train had only one, were for carrying ponies. The fancy red car on the back and the big, bronze one with the smokestack which rode at the front were mysteries. I knew nothing about the former, and the latter I only recognized from a similar train car in the hodgepodge construction of Absolutely Everything.

Curious, I asked one of the puller ponies what those cars were for. He was happy to answer.

“That there back one, it’s called the caboose.” He pointed a hoof towards the red car in the rear. “That has the breaks. Y’see, when we go up the mountain, we have ta keep switchin’ out puller teams cuz that there’s hard work. One team pulls, one team rides and keeps a lookout fer raiders. But when we go down the mountain, every pony rides. And we use t’breaks t’ keep us from goin’ too fast.”

Now he pointed at the one in the front. “That there’s called an engine. It’s fer pullin’ the train. Although mostly we just use it for the whistle. Keeps varmints off the tracks.”

Huh? “For pulling the train? I thought you bucks pulled the train?”

“Ayep. We do.”

“Then...”

“Well, cuz the engine don’t work without coal. Ain’t got no coal, ain’t got no coal car even if we had it. So instead, we use pony power.”

That didn’t make any sense. “So the engine is to pull the train, but the engine can’t pull the train, so you all have to pull the train and the engine?” I had to be missing something.

“Ayep.”

Arrugh. “Okay... then why don’t you have any coal? Where’s the coal?”

The train pony rolled his eyes at me, “Oh, their ain’t any coal in Equestria.” I felt something in my head snapping. “All the coal’s in a far, far away land.”

“Then... how... was the coal... supposed to get here?”

“By train, o’ course!”

Arrugh!! That was it. I needed to stop learning about trains. They hurt my brain. This conversation had made the pounding in my head much worse!

Splashing through puddles, Calamity trotted back. After the train pony had gone back to his work, Calamity reared up and waved his forehooves around, making a mock-spooky face. “Ooooooh! All the coal’s in strange far-away lands... full of zebras! oooOOOooh!”

I stared at him non-plussed. “Done now?”

He dropped back to standing and pulled a tin out of his saddlebag, offering it to me in his teeth. I levitated it close for a look. The tin had a scratched out picture of a zebra on it.

“Those what are in there are called Party-Time Mint-als. Brewed up using Mint-als an’... well, some other stuff. Guarenteed to make ya the life o’ the party. Those things ‘ll clear up yer hangover, clear up yer head, an’ make you the smoothest-talkin’ pony in all the wasteland.”

I looked dubious. But then, I trusted Calamity, and what did I have to lose? Telekinetically opening the tin, I pulled out one of the little squares inside and put it into my mouth, chewing experimentally. I had to admit, they were tasty, although the aftertaste was kinda bitter. But I didn’t feel any different than I...

WHOA!!!

The whole world shot into stark focus. Colors became brighter and more pleasant. Even the rain seemed nicer. And my thoughts! I was thinking more clearly than I ever had. I was figuring things out I never could before. By Celestia, where had this wonderful stuff been all my life!?

I felt confident. Figuring out just what I needed to say was going to be *easy*. I could talk anypony into anything! And I was about to prove it!



Hours later, I stared out the window of the passenger car, watching the landscape roll by. Or, at least, as much of it as I could see considering the sky had darkened and the rainfall had escalated again. Remembering rivulets running down the cliff face near Stable Twenty-Four, I prayed the storm wouldn't cause us trouble when going up the mountain.

Talking the train ponies into waiting for us had been easy, making up for the crash when that Party-Time Mint-al wore off, leaving me feeling half-blind and horribly stupid without its help. It was all I could do not to eat another right away. In fact, I would have done so if Calamity hadn't snatched the tin away. Even now, I cast furtive glances at his saddlebags.

Ugh. Think of something else. I tried tuning in the DJ Pon3 station; it was barely audible through a haze of static. New Appleloosa, I figured, was near the edge of good reception. I tried another station on my PipBuck, and found the music of the sprite-bots. Calamity told me to turn it off.

Staring out the window again, I found my mind drifting until it settled on, of all things, Ditzzy Doo. I was wearing my utility barding, now upgraded to be effective armor thanks to the strange but cheerful pegasus ghoul. That poor pony, I thought. Seeing her home obliterated, and then turned into a rotted mockery of a normal pony and made to live with that memory for centuries. Raiders, slavers... she'd suffered at the hooves of both of them. Actually seen things that horrified me to contemplate. And as if that wasn't enough, as a ghoul pony, it was as if she had a magical sword hanging over her brain, waiting to drop. It was amazing that she wasn't a broken wreck of a pony. I remembered her smile, wondering how she could be happy...

And then I got it.

Calamity asked, "What's got ya smilin' like that alla a sudden?"

A chuckled at myself, shaking my head. "Laughter is a virtue."

"What now?"

I smiled, holding back a laugh of my own. "Maybe not giggle-giggle laughter, and definitely not bwah-ha-ha laughter... but the kind of inside laughter that allows a pony to take everything this world throws at her and not lose... joy." Maybe it was a little stretch to call that laughter. But it was definitely a virtue!

I turned back to the window, my own spirits somehow higher than they had been in days.

Lightning flashed outside. I gasped, jumping back from the window. I could have sworn I saw a the head of a giant pink pony, the size of an ursa major, peering at me over the hilltop, grinning.



"Ya ready?" Calamity shouted through the downpour.

The train was approaching Appleloosa (*old* Appleloosa). Calamity and I were standing on the rain-slick roof of the passenger car, wind whipping rain into our faces and pulling at our manes and tails. I nodded.

Wrapping his forelegs around me, Calamity stretched out his wings and caught the wind. The storm snatched us up off the train, and Calamity began to steer us towards a ridge that overlooked the slaver town.

The wind buffeted us, making me fearful that we would crash, but Calamity's course stayed true.

We landed... and I immediately slipped and fell in the mud.

Calamity barked a laugh. I shook really hard, flinging at least half of the mud onto him, and then laughed too.

But then we stopped. Virtue or not, there was a time and a place for laughter. And this wasn't it. I floated my binoculars over to Calamity

and then pulled out the sniper rifle to peer down its scope at the collection of dilapidated wooden buildings, derailed boxcars, makeshift metal structures and slave cages that made up old Appleloosa. The train was just pulling in.

Between the darkness of the storm and the distraction of the train, there would never be a better time to sneak in. Through the sniper scope, I could make out the silhouettes of guards walking along catwalks that ran between the buildings and above the cages. In the cages, I could see slave ponies laying under the pouring rain, forlorn shapes in the storm.

I felt a familiar pissed-ness taking hold.

“Calamity, you stay up here. I’m heading down in.”

“Ah didn’t come all this way t’ stay back.”

I levitated the sniper rifle to him. “You’re my cover. And my quick exit if things go bad. Unless you think you’d be better at picking those locks and I’d be better at flying you out.”

He clearly wasn’t happy, but conceded my point.

Pulling out Little Macintosh and checking to make sure it was loaded, I started down the slippery ridge. I didn’t want to have to use the gun. Not that I was feeling particularly live-and-let-live about slavers. It was just that for all the things Little Macintosh was, it wasn’t quiet.



I was most of the way to the first set of cages when a flash of lightning illuminated the landscape starkly. If it hadn’t, I would have been dead a moment later. As it was, I was merely screwed.

Mines.

All around the cages, the fucking slavers had scattered mines. The rain had washed away the dirt covering some of them, the orange metal casings reflecting the flash of light. There were surely more, but I had no idea how many. Or where.

After my session with Crane, I was much better at self-levitation. But that only got me to the fence. I was far less confident that I would have the power to levitate all the slaves to safety.

“Hey, who’s there?” A voice out of the darkness, a slaver pony. I wasn’t the only pony to have seen something in that flash of light. Dammit!

I scooted, moving as stealthily as I could. I hated to leave the slave pens, but I needed more time. If I shot, I’d bring the whole place down on me. If I tried to take out a slaver pony with my hooves, I knew he’d be able to call for help before I took him down. So, instead, I decided to hide, slipping into the nearest shack.

I immediately regretted it. The shack was only a few rooms, and from the one upstairs, I could hear what I really hoped was two slaver ponies going at it. I felt both embarrassed and disgusted.

Trying not to make a sound, I looked about for a place to hide. I didn’t want to be standing right inside the door if that guard pony decided to take a peek into the shack. I also started peeking in boxes. I knew this was stealing, not just scavenging, but these ponies stole other ponies, so I didn’t figure they had any standing to complain.

With screwdriver and boobie pin, I didn’t even spare the lockbox I found in the next room. Sitting inside, I found something... unique. A little totem. A statuette of an orange pony with yellow mane and tail, poised in mid-buck. What struck me was the three apple cutie mark, identical to the mark on Little Macintosh. I floated it close to read the inscription on the base (Be Strong!) and felt a surge of magical energy.

I’m not sure what it did but... I actually felt stronger! Not just physically, but in confidence. Slipping the statuette into my saddlebags, I finished my looting and...

The door banged open. “There you are!”

I whipped around, sliding into the comfort of S.A.T.S., and fired two shots into the pony -- one in the head and one in the chest -- before he could reach me to pummel me with his spike-shod hooves.

The sound carried. Immediately, the two ponies above stopped their intercourse and came charging down the stairs. Only one of them had stopped to grab a firearm.

BLAM!! BLAM!! BLAM!!

Little Macintosh roared like thunder. The slaver pony with the gun never even got a shot off. I reloaded as quickly as I could. Luna dammit! Well, I was in it now.



Fire blasted past me as I dove behind a rock.

A flamethrower! This fucker was attacking me with a flamethrower!

“Oh, I smell roasted pony for dinner,” snarled the slaver with a flamethrower battle saddle. “How about a little barbecue!?” I was seriously hoping he was just being awful, that these ponies weren’t so depraved as to actually *eat* other ponies!

Lightning flashed. Thunder boomed above me. I ran for the cover behind a crazily-tilted boxcar. Flame whooshed out behind me, catching my tail! With a yelp, I thrashed at a nearby puddle with it until the flames disappeared. Ow. Ow. Ow.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are!”

Cringing back, I brought out the combat shotgun. Little Macintosh had finally run out of bullets five dead slavers ago. Two of those had been unicorn slavers wielding shotguns, and now I was in no danger of running out of shotgun shells any time soon.

The flamer slaver stepped around the corner and got a faceful. He went down hard.

Swiftly, I took what I wanted from the body, leaving the battle saddle behind. I had neither the natural aptitude nor the professional training

to use a battle saddle and I didn't need that kind of weight slowing me down. I looked around nervously for more attackers.

Including the pony with the flamethrower and the three back in the first shack, I'd put down a total of nine slavers. A lot, but by no means a town's worth. I was surprised that all the gunfire wasn't drawing a lot more attention. The thunderstorm might account for much of that, and these guys seemed to have a level of stupefying ego that prevented them from just running to get more help. But there had to be more at play than dumb luck, dumber slavers and the weather!

Battling the slaver guards was pushing me closer to the huge multi-story barn at the heart of town. There was a lot of light pouring out from the windows, and a lot of noise. As I drew closer, I could hear music. I checked my PipBuck, but old Appleloosa appeared out of the range of every station except one, the sprite-bot station. (How that station covered everyplace, I had no idea. Although I suspected the sprite-bots themselves might actually be acting as relays too.) This music, however, was not that music.

Going in the front door would have surely been death. But creeping up the catwalks to a second-floor entrance proved safe. I tried to slip in quietly, but the moment I had cracked the door open, the wind flung it wide with a crash. I cringed. Then poked my head inside. The room was empty. Of ponies, at least. It was crammed with broken furniture and old filing cabinets. Bottle caps, ammo, and packages of cigarettes were in several of the cabinets; they found a new home in my saddlebags. I didn't smoke, and had no intention of starting. But I could sell the packs to Ditzzy Doo, who would resell them to the surprising number of Appleloosians who did.

A door towards the far end opened onto a balcony. From there I could see the manticore's share of the room was a wide open saloon, packed with ponies who were drinking, gambling and watching the performance on a stage directly below me. The balcony ringed the saloon, and there were guard ponies walking around it in a pattern. They were focusing on the chaos below and hadn't spotted me. Yet.

Wait! I... I recognized that voice! Crouching flat on the balcony floor, I poked my head over the edge to see the singer.

Velvet Remedy!

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Mighty Telekenesis (level two) - You triple the mass that you can levitate with your unicorn magic. Effects are cumulative with Mighty Telekenesis level one, which is required in order to take this perk.

CHAPTER SEVEN



VELVET REMEDY

“They actually consider us gods. But then, who can blame them?”

Her!

She was still as beautiful as the first time I saw her. It had been the birthday party for the Overmare’s daughter. Velvet Remedy had come in to sing her a stunning revision of the Happy Birthday song. I had been painfully jealous of the filly for weeks after.

Actually, she was even more gorgeous than the last time I saw her. I’d followed her out into this wasteland. To see her now, against this backdrop of rusted metal, old hardwood, bloodstains and liquor -- her song so clear and majestic through the din of lowlifes -- made her breathtaking in comparison.

My heart fluttered like a butterfly trapped in a jar. Part of me wanted to run to her. Part of me, small but insistent, wanted to be furious with her, to blame her for getting me involved; it didn’t matter that the only pony who forced me out of that Stable door was me.

My eyes flickered back to the guards making their rounds. Even if they weren’t looking in my direction, in moments they wouldn’t be able to

miss me. Following either cry of my heart was out. Instead, I scooted back silently, and retreated the way I came.

This threw a new wrinkle in the plan. Now, getting Velvet Remedy out of captivity was my highest priority. Not to suggest the other ponies in those cages were any less important to me. But something personal had been added to the situation. In my head, I entertained the thought of her how happy she would be to see me.

The moment I stepped outside, I knew that I was in trouble. Multiple slaver ponies, lantern poles strapped to their backs, were standing about the corpse of that flamethrower bastard I put down. The wake of my activities was not going unnoticed or ignored. Four of the ponies, those most lightly armed, turned and ran towards the huge central barn. I pressed myself against the wall. The alarm was about to go up!

A single gunshot rang out through the storm, and the lead pony dropped from two bullet wounds. Two of the three runners skidded to a muddy stop and dove for cover, trying to spot their attacker. The third kept running. He nearly made it to the barn -- close enough that the barn door was splattered with red when Calamity took him down.

Most of the four more heavily armed slavers spotted Calamity on that last dive and began firing in his direction. But he was fast, the lighting was bad... and I had not been impressed by the aim of slavers yet tonight. I was pleased and utterly unsurprised when the hail of assault rifle ammo thrown in Calamity's general direction missed my companion entirely.

But now, these four were working in a group, moving towards the barn while covering each other. Denying Calamity any safe vector of approach. Moving quickly, I raced down the catwalk and towards one of the old, half-collapsed wooden buildings surrounding the megabarn, combat shotgun reloaded and ready. It was locked.

I spilled several bobby pins and almost fumbled the screwdriver in my haste. The lock was stubborn and tricky, and every failure was making me more jumpy. I desperately wished I had another Mint-al, preferably of the Party Time variety.

The bobby pin broke.

Behind me, the noises from the central barn changed drastically. The singing stopped. And the drunken hollers were replaced by authoritative shouts.

Frantically pulling out another bobby pin, I tried again. I could hear the barn doors swing open, ponicial slavers tearing out into the storm. Cries for blood and rape and death -- and it struck me like a blow to my gut that such vitriol was directed towards me. If these slavers caught me, I'd only *wish* I was a dead pony!

The door's lock finally gave. Without a second to lose, I dove inside.

POW! POW! POW! POW!

Four rapid shots with the combat shotgun, and the slaver guards inside (gambling at a table covered in bottle caps and cigarette butts) went down before they had time to react to my presence. It only hit me a moment later that I had opened fire based solely on what they looked like, what they were wearing, and that they were armed in a place like this. Had I not just done, in essence, what Calamity did when he opened fire on me?

Only I had murdered these two, and even in retrospect had no reason to believe my admittedly fear-fueled instincts had been wrong. One of the dead ponies had a pair of manacles as a cutie mark, and the other had the keys both to the front door and the cage that took up two-thirds of the room.

My eyes widened at what I saw before me. This was not like the cages in the Ponyville Library; there were no prisoners behind these bars. Instead, there were *weapons*. And boxes of ammo, some stacked on top of other boxes of ammo!

I was in the armory!

Two thoughts raced through my mind, each right on the heels of the other: I had just hit the jackpot! And this was probably right where most of the slavers were headed first!

Swiftly, I turned and locked the door. Then began to barricade it. Not too heavily, as trapping myself in here was not going to save anypony, least of all myself. But it would give me time. Time to loot and to consider my next move. A filing cabinet, the table and the metal desk should do. Bottle caps and gaming chits slid to the floor in chaos as I upended the table and place it against the door. I levitated the filing cabinet against it to hold it in place. Then the desk was wrapped with a glow identical to that of my horn as I swung it around. The desk, I noticed, had a glowing terminal. Time allowing, it might be worth it to see what it had to say.

First, however, was improving my armament.



Seven ammo boxes (half of them locked), two gun cabinets and a weapons locker (also locked) later, I was less like a pony and more like a walking arsenal. There were dozens of weapons, but all in such crappy condition that I was only able to salvage three useful ones out of them including a needler pistol, the repair assist spell of my PipBuck allowing me to swiftly tear down the worst of the weapons for the best of their parts. The weapons locker contained two battle saddles, both far too heavy for me to bother with.

I now had ammo for everything *but* Little Macintosh, including weapons I had never seen before, such as spark packs designed for recharging magical energy weapons, and three missiles. It disturbed me greatly that the slavers had a small stockpile of missiles. Particularly since neither of the battle saddles were built for them.

But by far, the biggest prize in the lot had been neither a weapon nor ammo, but a set of schematics for creating a homemade gun that would fire poisoned needles! It would be silent, crippling and I was pretty sure I'd seen most of the parts required back in Absolutely Everything.

The slavers took little time figuring out I had barricaded myself in their armory. If that gave them pause, however, they didn't show it. Relocking the door had been a useless effort; the first pony to the

armory had her own set of keys. The table, cabinet and desk were proving much more worthwhile, and by the time I had finished repairing the weapons I was taking, they had finally ceased bucking their hooves at the door. I had no doubt that they were waiting outside in quiet ambush, but that gave me yet a little more time. I used it to take a look at the terminal. It took almost no time to hack it. The password was “terminal”. I was unimpressed.

The first entry was ancient; dating back several years before the apocalypse. The others were all within the last few months.

Entry One:

Had a surprise inspection from the Ministry of Morale yesterday. We pretty well knew it was coming, and I'd been given instructions on what to do; but I couldn't believe how smoothly it went! We slip them a small percentage of the special product, and they give us clean marks? Even if they were dirty, I couldn't understand why they wouldn't bring the cage down on us and impound all of it for themselves. Seemed too good to be true. So I did a little digging, and a friend of a friend working over at Ironshod who claims to have an inside peek gave me this apple to chew on: according to him, the head mare of MoM herself actually loathes the new contraband laws. And since MoM enforces those laws, that means all sorts of tasty zebra treats are slipping into Equestria right under the Princess's nose. I figure this means as long as she says golden delicious, we're golden delicious. And even if the Princess suspects her (and how dense would she have to be not to?), she really is the one pony the MoM can't bring up on sedition charges!

Entry Two:

Finally wiped the crap from this terminal. Three-hundred plus documents that I have absolutely no use for (and many of which it's probably best there not be a record of). All except that one damn file from forever ago with the weird-ass flag on it that prevents tampering. And trust me, I've tried.

Don't know why we even bother keeping record of where we send the goods, since they're all going to the same damn place anyway. I don't know what the hell Stern needs all these

slaves for, but unless she's building an army, whatever it is has one hellish rate of attrition.

Boss is more worried about the attrition rate in transit. A third of these fuckers don't make the journey, and Stern ain't paying us none for corpses. I'm supposed to figure out a way to keep the damn goods alive at least until after caps exchange hooves. Maybe a cocktail of drugs will help. Found a false floor last week leading into a buried boxcar just full of the stuff!

Entry Three:

I've finally convinced the boss that we need to start a little side business in the foal market. The young ones are easier to corral, control and train. Sure, we have to play up the "investment" angle, since they can't do the work of a normal slave, but there are plenty of ponies out there who see the potential. Unfortunately, Stern ain't one of them. That bitch has no patience.

Turns out, a mixture of Buck and Dash, in small doses, does mighty well in keeping the more worthless slaves from keeling over before they make Fillydephia. What happens to them after Stern gets her hooves on them ain't none of my concern. Still got to talk to Whip Crack about going a bit easier on them though. No drug cocktail is going prevent a pony from being lashed to death. Might suggest swapping out which slaves are pulling the wagons a bit more often too.

Entry Four:

The cells in the old sheriff's station have been perfect for foal holding. The settlers of Appleloosa might have constructed a lot of this place with an eye to speed over lastingness but they sure knew how to make a holding pen. I'd even say that the cells in there are a close second in the list of stuff I'm glad they left behind when they all kicked the bucket, next to that apple pie recipe!

Turns out, gathering foals has made hitting isolated homesteads a much better risk. The parent folk have a tendency to get annoyingly shooty when we come to claim them, but they also take such great pains to keep their little ones out of the fight that even if we have to kill off all the adults, we still make a good profit.

Entry Five:

What a fucking cock-up! A whole shipment, two wagons worth, slaughtered. Best we can figure, they ran into a stray hellhound. Damned taint fucks everything up. Now I hear that Stern is sending a "special representative" to take a look-see at our operation. Sounds more to me like she's planning on taking over. I think she's in for a face-buck surprise. And this "special representative" best watch her tail.

Got a new herd of foals ready for breaking. Raked in the caps with the last batch. Another benefit of dealing in foals: you only have to kill one of them in front of the others to take the fight out of them.

Entry Six:

The last week has been beyond words. Stern was playing it close to her chest with that "special representative" business. I never had any idea! Let's just say I was shaking in my shodding when our new boss heard about some of the stuff I'd been saying back when we didn't know her. But I guess it's easy to be understanding when you're connected to the divine! Besides, we still have what's left of the old boss as a reminder that the new boss's hooves ain't soft.

The new acquisition is going to do wonders for keeping the slaves up. Good thing too, since the new boss don't cotton to the Buck and Dash trick. Fortunately, I was able to convince her that was Apple Core's idea. Poor Apple Core. Never saw it coming.

All hail the living Goddess!

By the time I was done reading, I could have set the town on fire with the heat of my seething. Mentally, I was adding the foal cages to my objectives list where it fought with Velvet Remedy for first place. Emotionally, I was seething. I didn't want to be hidden away in a barricaded room anymore. I wanted to go out there and hurt some fucking evil ponies!

Sometimes, the wasteland listens to what you want and gives it to you with all four hooves. I had barely backed away from the terminal,

stomping around angrily as I tried to gather enough focus to move the desk, when my barricade exploded inwards with fury and shrapnel! Blood and agony burst from my body as I was thrown back against the wall. My head slammed into the armory cage and for a moment, I lost consciousness. The slavers had launched a missile at the door!



Trembling with shock and pain, I greedily gulped down another healing potion. Already, my wounds were closing. Calamity held my left foreleg in place so the gash that nearly severed it could do its work. The wound was beyond ugly. Even with the potions, I would be lame until a real medical pony could treat it. Candi seemed horribly far away, and that was assuming she even had the skills.

Fortunately, Calamity calmed me, a missile-launching battle saddle takes some effort to aim correctly, meaning that any pony short of a true expert with the things would be planting herself for each launch. And that made her an easy target. Almost too easy for a shot like Calamity.

When I could stand again, though still wobbly, I hastily filled Calamity in on what I had discovered. He gave me an appraising look as I danced around saying anything about Velvet that would lay bare my heart, then (thankfully) trotted back to take a quick peak at the battle saddles. Neither, he declared at a glance, were sufficiently similar to his own to even raid for spare parts.

We didn't dare spend any further time in the armory. The slavers would be back any moment. We decided to split up. I would look for Velvet Remedy while he hightailed it to the sheriff's office, where he would scout out the place and hopefully take out any guards. I would meet him there soon to unlock the cages, but until then he could rally the foals. Or, at least, give them hope and the first friendly company since being captured.

Slipping out, we parted ways and slid into the storm. The slavers missed us by seconds.



I quickly slid the boxcar door shut behind me; outside the bright rectangle of light I had opened shrank and vanished back into darkness.

She was here!

"It's about time!" Her tail was to me as she faced a wall with three yellow boxes arranged so their butterflies were in a triangular pattern. "I can't very well do any good sitting in h..."

She had turned a glance towards me and stopped. Now she turned slowly towards me, staring. "Oh... no..."

For the last half-hour, fantasies had played through my head imagining the expression on her face when I found her. The surprise! The joy! This wasn't either.

"Oh, oh dear!" Her eyes traveled from my face to my Stable Two utility barding (still quite recognizable even with Ditzzy Doo's improvements) to the PipBuck on my foreleg. Velvet Remedy looked shocked and... sad?

"What are you doing here?" she asked with a breath.

I stood tall. "I followed you out of the Stable. Came across the Equestrian Wastelands to find you. I'm here to rescue you!" I gave her my best winning smile. Then, worrying at how I might have sounded, I added meekly, "I'm not stalking you."

"Aren't you now." She shook her head and pranced around almost as if distraught. "I tried so hard to keep anypony from following me. This isn't what I wanted at all!" Then she looked at me again, and this time I could tell she was seeing the wounds. And the weapons.

"You're the one out there shooting up everything? You are, aren't you."

Wait... why was I suddenly feeling like I'd done something wrong? "Yes. Like I said, I'm here to rescue you."

“Rescue? Littlepip...” Oh my gosh, she remembered my name! “...I’m not a prisoner. I’m here of my own volition.”

What? *WHAT!?!?*

“You’re... here... with slavers...” I couldn’t tell which was breaking faster, my head or my heart. “*You’re... working with slavers!?!?*”

She stared at me, her voice cool. “And you’re cutting a bloody swath through them. How many ponies are dead tonight because of you, Littlepip?”

“They’re *slavers!?!?*” I was breathing hard, seeing red.

“And how about the people they support? This is a town, Littlepip. There are merchants and tavern owners and workponies here. Have you killed any of them? Are you sure?”

“No, I haven’t. I’m sure!” Well, unless the some of the townsfolk wear slaver armor and carry slaver guns and were shooting at me.

“And the slaves? Do you think you can kill slaver ponies and they won’t retaliate? Do you think they wouldn’t take it out on helpless ponies to make an example?”

Not if we rescue them all first, I thought savagely. But instead of arguing further, I forced myself to be calm. This was Velvet Remedy! I’d give her a chance to explain herself. In as even a tone as I could muster, “Why?”

Velvet Remedy’s voice never raised nor wavered. I was near shouting and she was keeping her poise. It made me want to scream even more. “When I left the Stable... after leaving a message to keep anypony from following me,” she gave me a pointed look, “I came upon a band of ponies who had been set upon by a horrific beast. There was only one survivor, badly wounded, missing a leg. So of course I galloped to his leg.

“Did you know I always wanted to be a medical pony? I bound his wounds and carried him back to his camp. It was a slaver camp, and there were several ponies there who were in severe need of aid,

particularly amongst the captives.” Velvet Remedy looked about the boxcar, which I began to realize was not her cell but her room. “I’ve been with them since.”

I just stared. “But... you’re helping slavers!”

Velvet Remedy turned away from me, staring at her wall of yellow medical boxes with little pink butterflies. Casually, as if talking about the weather (cloudy with a chance of rain, gunfire and bloody dismemberment), she told me, “I read in a book once, back when I was about your age, that when Fluttershy -- the Mare of the Ministry of Peace herself -- stepped onto a battlefield, she insisted that her healer ponies tend to everyone wounded on the battlefield. *Everyone!* Pony, zebra, to her it didn’t matter...”

She turned a level gaze at me and slowly asked, “How could I do any less?”

“It’s different!”

“Oh?” she challenged, “How?”

Because these are slavers who are killing people and selling others into slavery and death, even foals! And the zebras were just... the zebras just wiped out our cities. I stomped at the ground. Okay, maybe I didn’t have any logical reason why this was any different, but it *felt* different.

“Look,” I tried reasonably, “These slaver ponies... when you save one of them, you’re making it possible for them to hurt and kill other ponies. Destroy lives. The slaves you heal? They’re being sold into horrible work that ends up killing them. The slavers are just using you so those poor ponies survive the trip into hell.”

Velvet Remedy looked pained. “You don’t think I know that? But else can I do? I’m just one pony. And I will not do nothing! Would you have me just trot away from suffering ponies because they have the misfortune of being captives of slavers?”

Now, finally, I felt the ground reassert itself beneath my hooves. “You can help me rescue them.”

She chuckled sadly, shaking her head. "Rescue them? The two of us? Against all those slavers?" She looked me over, "Not that I don't doubt your resolve... or your firepower. But we would be horribly outnumbered..."

I could feel myself grinning, "I'm not alone. We have support. And he's a pegasus!"

Her resistance was crumbling, but still she shook her head. "Even if we did, then what? Did you also bring food enough for the slaves? Water? We are many days trot from the nearest friendly settlement, and many of the poor ponies I have been tending are in no condition to make such a trip. Some of them are foals!"

Her gaze traveled to my lame leg, and her eyes widened. "Oh dear!" She pointed a forehoof. "And it doesn't look like you are in any condition to either. If we had a few hours, I could tend to that, but..."

She sat back, her voice full of regret. "Oh I admire your bravery and sacrifice. But Littlepip, did you really think this through?"

"Of course I thought it through," I stammered a little crossly and mostly honestly. "I have a train!"

"Oh!" Her eyes widened with surprise. And for the first time, her voice was hopeful rather than hurting. "That... might work!"



Calamity stood guard atop the sheriff's office as Velvet Remedy and I made our way to the cells inside. Nearly half a dozen colts and fillies, reeking of filth and sorrow, looked up at our approach, their eyes fearful. That fear softened as they saw Velvet Remedy, and she smiled gently at them in return. "I have good news, little ponies!" she said softly, hesitating with a grimace before stepping over the headless bulk of one of the guards -- Calamity had cleared the way. "We're all going on a train ride!"

I was already at work on the lock of the first cage. I glanced over, admiring how she was with the foals, nuzzling them through the

bars. She had been, I could tell, the one good thing in their bleak, awful lives here. My eyes slid down to her flanks, noticing with amusement (not for the first time) that she had two medical boxes strapped to her sides as saddlebags, only now realizing that the scarlet and golden streaks in her hair and tail had suggestive similarity to the pink and yellow that I now associated with the Ministry of Peace. Also: why didn't I think of that? Those metal boxes would provide better protection and added armor for the flanks as well!

The tumblers slid into place, and I pulled open the cage. The little ponies inside looked at me with mixed expressions: joy, hope and a fearful reluctance to let either into their hearts.

"We got incoming!" Calamity's voice broke through the sounds of the rain. "Whoa... Littlepip, we got trouble! Big trouble!"

Velvet Remedy shot me a worried expression, like the hope I had built up in her was shattering. Moving deftly, I snuck up to the nearest window and looked out. Two ponies were striding up toward the sheriff's office, clopping though the small river that the street used to be. A third watched over them from the top of a boxcar, then leapt down to walk between them. The two on either side wore heavy battle saddles, but it was the figure in between that caught my attention.

She was tall, her body exuding a graceful malice and strength I'd not imagined in any pony. In truth, she hardly looked like a pony at all. From her hooves to the long, spiral horn on her head, to her... wings! A winged unicorn!

Awestruck, I drew on the only figures like this in my memory. "c-Celestia? Luna?"

The voice of the mysterious, dark mare carried majestically through the torrent. "We will give you just one chance to come out. Do so. Or We will bring the whole building down on your ears!"

My mind reeled. I felt my hooves stepping forwards, pulling me towards the door. But I stopped as I locked onto one thing my heart insisted to be true: neither Goddess Celestia nor Goddess Luna would

support such horrible ponies! Whoever this... creature was, she did not deserve my reverence!

My atheistic friend on the roof had moment of pause. With a yee and a haw, Calamity dived towards the enemy trio, firing twice. Four bullets struck home and the pony to the left of the not-a-goddess fell with a splash, blood washing over the strange mare's hooves and down the river that was Mane Street.

The strange mare responded with a whinnying laugh that had no gentleness of soul. "Such impudence!" I gasped as the mare's horn glowed a sickly green and a blast of lightning ripped from its tip, slamming into Calamity's chest, throwing him back through the sky.

"Calamity!!" I focused desperately, my own horn glowing. Calamity was spiraling down, unconscious, and I barely caught him in time, holding him hovering over the minefield that surrounded the slave pens. His eyes blinked open, then widened with terror as he saw the mines below him, his hooves thrashing in panic as he tried to backpeddle through the air.

"Oh... now isn't that touching!" The mare turned to the slaver pony still flanking her as I glided Calamity to safety. "Kill her." The slaver pony trotted forward, the many barrels of his battle saddle pointed at the age- and weather-weakened wooden structure.

Behind me, I heard Velvet Remedy telling the foals, "Lay flat, all of you. As low as you can!" I turned to see her waving her horn at their cells. And I marveled as a weak, shielding glow wrapped about the cells. Only belatedly did I realize Velvet Remedy had not thought to place herself within the spell of protection she wove around the children.

The roar of the slaver's battle saddle was nothing like the thunder of other guns, but akin to the fury of a dragon! Bullets tore at the side of the building, a great many punching through, perforating the front of the sheriff's office! I dove to the floor behind a metal desk, feeling bullets slice the air just behind me and then ring against the metal as they tried to murder the desk.

I heard Velvet Remedy cry out. I heard her fall.

The roar paused, as if the battle saddle needed to catch its breath. Jumping up from my position, forehooves on bullet-riddled desk, I stared out the window and focused. The glow of my horn matched the glow around one, two, three, four of the mines. I pulled them from the mud and carried them towards our enemies as the minigunner reloaded. The strange mare saw what I was doing, throwing up a wing and enveloping herself with sickly green field of energy, a much brighter and stronger version of Velvet Remedy's protection spell.

The slaver pony turned towards the floating mines the moment they started beeping. He backed up, eyes wide...

BEEP BEEP BEEP **BOOOOM!!!**

The strange mare's shield wettened with blood and organs. The spell had barely flickered at the force of the onslaught. But... it *had* flickered.

"That was almost impressive," she drolled. "But now playtime is over."

I wasn't paying attention. My eyes were only for Velvet Remedy, who lay in a widening pool of blood. Three of the bullets had struck her, one only grazing but two sunk deep into her belly. As quickly as I could, I opened one of her medical boxes and pulled out a roll of medical bandages.

The door of the sheriff's office ripped off its hinges and went sailing into the darkness. "Go ahead," she taunted, "throw your best spell." No spell came. I had none to throw at her.

"Oh!" she laughed as if she had somehow read my mind. "No spells? Well, aren't you just a *pathetic* excuse for a unicorn!"

I finished binding Velvet as best I could. She stirred, moaning in pain. My heart jumped.

“And here We were hoping that the great assassin who decided to assault *Our town* would at least provide Us with a challenge. We have been so *utterly* bored!”

I focused. My horn began to glow.

“Telekenesis again? Such a foal’s game.” She was trotting closer, but stopped several yards from the steps. “For the trouble you’ve caused Us... and worse, for wasting Our time with your patheticness, first We will kill your friends. Then have them chopped up into a nice stew. Which We will feed to you.”

My horn glowed brighter. I was beginning to sweat with the effort.

“...No, We think We will instead feed them to the foals, and make you watch!”

The glow of my horn flared, a bright overglow enveloping it. I began to tremble with exertion.

“Still. Not. Impressed.” The strange mare’s voice was glorious and impossibly jaded. The light from my horn was pouring out the doorway and through the bullet holes of the building, and she couldn’t have cared less. “So what’s this? Levitating all the little ponies away? You can’t send them far enough that We won’t catch them. Or maybe you are trying to levitate every gun in the armory? Even if you could, this shield around Us will stop any bullet!”

A second overglow erupted from my horn, enveloping the first. I screamed as the energies burned through me.

The strange mare looked from one side to the other. Turned in place to see if there was anything behind her, but noticed nothing but running water and darkness. Even up, but still saw nothing. “Oh, enough of this!” She turned back to me.

“You’re right,” I said, stepping feebly into the doorway, the effort draining such energy from me that I feared I would pass out at any moment. “I am small. Weak... pathetic.” My crippled leg was wobbling so hard it made my teeth chatter. My eyes teared from the pain. I kept my head low, horn to the ground. Almost looking

worshipful. “I am a sad excuse for a unicorn with no spells but the foal’s cantrip of levitation.” Without raising my horn, I looked into her eyes. This close, my light bathed her. I could see that she was not actually black, but dark forest green in coat, with a mane streaked in green and purple.

“But I’ve gotten really, really good at it.”

Again, the mare looked around casually, trying to guess what I was up to. But I could see just a touch of apprehension in her bored expression. “Well, maybe you are not worthless after all. Give yourself to Us. Join Us in Unity. Become something greater than this wretched thing you are now.”

A third layer of brilliant overglow erupted from my horn. The light was blinding. My lame leg gave out agonizingly, and I dropped to one knee. “No!”

Rearing back with disgust, the mare demanded, “Oh what are you doing?”

I heard Calamity chuckle nearby. “Keeping ya from castin’ a shadow.”

“What?” The mare looked down. Then up a second time, this time seeing the much softer glow coming from above the sheriff’s office. A moment later, the silently gliding boxcar drifted over the roof and stopped above her. Her eyes went wide with comprehension as I let it go.

<<<-----=====!!!WHAM!!!=====----->>>

The massive wave splashing out from the impact bowled me over, getting into my nostrils and lungs. I coughed, gasping. I tried to get back to my hooves, but exhaustion smothered me, and I passed out.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Organizer - You are efficient at arranging your inventory in general. This makes it much easier to carry that little extra you’ve always needed. Items with a weight of two or less are considered to weigh half as much for you.

CHAPTER EIGHT



DERAILED

“Something tells me this isn’t a circus act.”

Blood.

It washed around my hooves, splashed against my legs, carried by the river that was Mane Street.

I was standing in the middle of the river, and it was full of corpses.

“How many ponies have you slaughtered?” asked Velvet Remedy’s voice accusingly. “It sure didn’t take you long to become a mass murderer, did it, Littlepip?”

“v-Velvet?” I looked for her in the storm and blackness. Instead, my eyes found only the bullet-savaged wall of the sheriff’s office. Crude spray paint covered it shouting blasphemies. Raiders had been here. Their sickening hoofwork, sadistic mutilations, on display for every pony to see. I watched as the pony torso that dangled from the ceiling inside, its limbs hacked off and coat shaved to the skin, heave against its chains and fall to the floor with a meaty thud.

I tried to scream as it began to crawl towards me!

With a wet rending, the splayed body on the wall, its flesh flayed back to show off its ribs and rotting organs, ripped itself free and sloughed towards me, splashing in the water.

I tried to back away, only to find my hooves mired in the muddy street! The crimson ichor in the water coated my PipBuck and sunk into my coat around my legs. “Calamity! Velvet? Help me!” I screamed, but my voice carried no sound.

A silent sprite-bot watched, doing nothing, as the lower half of a slaver pony joined the things that crept maliciously towards me, a long rope of intestine dragging out behind it.



I awoke, my heart thudding hard and my body covered in cold sweat, to the sound and shake of the train. I was weak, but warm and less achy than I had any right to be. I was laying in one of the beds on the train's passenger car, a blanket over me. Beside me, Velvet Remedy was waving her horn tenderly over my recently crippled leg. To my amazement, my leg felt mended, if deeply itchy.

I tried to shake the specter of my nightmare. This was not the first sleeping terror that my experiences outside had spawned, but this had been the most deeply unpleasant. The incorporation of my companions, or lack of them, somehow made this dream far, far worse.

Velvet Remedy! The last I had seen her, she was fallen in a pool of her own blood, having saved nearly half a dozen foals...

My ears perked at the sounds around me; looking over my shoulder, I saw the colts and fillies from the sheriff's cells taking up much of the passenger car. They looked weary and beaten; two of them were fast asleep, but one had enough cheer to look at me and grin. “That was awesome!” The colt waved his hoof slowly through the air then stamped it down with a clop.

I gave him a weak smile, my heart finally beginning to calm. Calamity turned from staring out a window to welcome me back to the land of the living.

"We're... okay?" I was hesitant, half-fearing that this was just another dream waiting to become a nightmare. Velvet Remedy nodded reassuringly.

"The slaves?"

"In the caboose," Velvet said softly. Less softly, "This train only has the one passenger car, and I felt the foals needed the space more dearly. So it was either the caboose or strapping them to a flatcar."

Speaking as though I would have suggested something awful was not, I decided, one of her more endearing personality traits.

Suddenly, I remembered my original plan, and the locked pens that the ponies captives had been caged in. "But the locks...?" I knew Calamity could not have picked them, and I couldn't imagine Velvet Remedy, in her own youth, having plied that skill.

She rolled her eyes at me. "Oh come now. I'm not the locksmith you are, and I certainly do not have the level of telekinetic mastery that you showed -- most impressive, I should add -- but I *am* a unicorn! I can do basic levitation. Between your missiles and the mines, I was able to... bypass the need for lockpicks or keys."

The train rumbled around us. Glancing out my window, I saw that we had already traversed the desert and were clearly well on our way up the mountain. The pace of the train ponies was slowing; we were getting close to the peak-point of the mountain track. My conversation with Velvet had lulled, and now Calamity disrupted it completely.

"Our shadow's back."

I pulled myself into a sitting position, testing my mended leg. "Shadow?"

The colt who spoke up earlier declared, "Mister Calamity thinks something is following us." I noticed Calamity was crouched to the window, looking upwards through it... towards the sky?

"Another..." I kept myself from saying 'goddess' in reference to the winged unicorn slaver I had battled. "...one of those... like at the sheriff's?"

'Ah don't think so. But there's a'somethin' up there. Keepin' just out of sight."

"If it's out of sight, how do you know there is anything there?" Velvet countered. But at Calamity's look, she relented. "Another pegasus, perhaps?"

Calamity grimaced. "Ah... really don't think so." He returned his gaze to the window, quieting.

"At least it has stopped raining," Velvet Remedy announced, looking out the window. "That storm lasted for *days*."

I turned and looked out at the thick grey cloud cover. The water had indeed stopped falling from the sky, and the clouds were a much lighter color, turning the sunlight a drab grey.

"Velvet..." I started.

She smiled at me, and my heart soared, her previous grating remark instantly forgotten. "Thank you, Littlepip. Your bandages saved my life."

I looked at her, knowing that there was no way those poor excuses for medical aid, magically treated or not, could have brought her to health. I started to say as much but she lifted a hoof to interrupt. "No, but you managed just well enough that I regained consciousness, and from there I could take care of myself," She cast a sidelong look towards Calamity. "Not to mention you and that interesting friend of yours."

Calamity nickered in her direction.

I stared at my leg, surprised. Grinning, Velvet reminded me, "I did tell you I'd always wanted to be a medical pony. I studied for it and even apprenticed."

I looked at the beautiful mare, many years my elder, curiously. "If that's what you wanted, why didn't you?"

"Because my cutie mark showed up. One day, I sang a song for an ailing gentlepony, and it appeared. A songbird, a nightingale to be precise. And when your cutie mark appears, your place in the Stable is decided." There was a sad matter-of-factness in her voice. It was a truth I knew too well.

"I even begged the Overmare. But clearly it was to be my destiny to be an entertainer, my fate was written on my flanks. My voice was the most beautiful in the Stable, and I could not deny that I could sing. Or that I even enjoyed it a fair bit. The Overmare even showed me my genealogy, proving that I was the many-times-great granddaughter of Stable Two's first Overmare, who herself was also a legendary singer."

I nodded, having heard the heartwrenching music myself while in Turnpike Tavern.

"How could I fight the weight of all of that? The Overmare... she graciously allowed me to indulge my hobby in the small times when it wouldn't interfere with my new duties of uplifting the Stable's flagging morale. But my dreams, I was told, were not for me."

Suspecting the answer, I had to ask the question: "Velvet, why did you leave the Stable?"

Velvet whinnied demurely. "Again because of my cutie mark." She turned, pulling away one of the medical boxes to show me the nightingale on her flank. Wings outstretched, beak open in song.

"Do you see what it is not, Littlepip?"

I saw what it was. What it had always been. A bird of beautiful song.

“It is not a bird in a cage,” Velvet Remedy said, her voice pleased. “And if it is not, then I was not meant to be either. Come horror or ill, I needed to be free.”



“Ah’m gonna talk a walk outside, maybe stretch muh wings.”

I looked up from the book I was reading to pass the time. (Turns out, *Equestrian Army Today* was all about battle saddles.) The train was slowing to nearly a stop. The engine had already crested the peak, and the train ponies were drawing the rest of the train down over the lip and around the next bend before releasing it and jumping aboard themselves. There wasn’t going to be another chance to get some fresh air... or for Calamity to get himself a better look at our shadow.

I nodded, bidding him go. Velvet Remedy was probably on her way back from the caboose; she had been making regular checks on the adult ponies we had rescued, and I was entertaining taking a quick trot myself once she was here to watch the foals.

I waited, time seeming to have slowed to a crawl like the train itself. She was taking her sweet time -- had she possibly gotten lost? No, that was silly; you couldn’t get lost on a train, could you? I chuckled as I realized that, if I ever got lost on the train, my PipBuck’s automap spell would guide me. Poor Velvet, however could she find her way on a train without it?

I had offered Velvet Remedy her PipBuck; but to my shock she had refused it. I stressed how unbelievably useful a tool it was in the Equestrian Wasteland. She said I could keep it as a gift. And as an apology for having given it to me in the first place. She didn’t blame herself for my leaving the Stable, but she regretted having played a hoof (and truthfully a whole pony) in my decision.

I had tried one last time, and she had finally told me flatly, “I escaped that prison, I will not wear its shackle. No matter how gilded a shackle it might be.” At that, she had left to check the ponies in the caboose.

I was brought out of my reverie by the draconic roar of minigun fire. Followed by the death screams of the train ponies.

A mere second later, I heard the switch pulling team (who were currently acting as guards) open fire in return.

The foals began to panic. I was attempting to calm (or at least corral) them when Velvet Remedy returned through the back door, looking worried. At nearly the same moment, one of the train ponies from the switch team burst in, shouting and waving his paws, a lever-action shotgun floating by his side. "Slaver ambush! Protect the children!"

What?! How could they have gotten ahead of us?!

Before I could ask, a grisly pony wearing slaver armor, spiked hooves coated in the blood of train ponies, broke into the passenger car and reared up, intending to end the life of another. I didn't have time to think; I just drew my assault rifle and fired at him. The train pony ducked, his own gun swinging around and unloading into the slaver. I couldn't tell whose shot felled him.

Flashes of my nightmare came back to me. I hesitated, but mercifully only after the attacker had been taken down. Then with a stomp I activated my E.F.S. and watched the flurry of red marks fill my forward compass, milling about the few friendlies that were in front of me.

I turned to Remedy, levitating out the needler gun and fitting it with a marked clip. I had not been able to determine what the markings on the needle clips stood for, but I suspected any one of them would be at least capable of incapacitating. "Take this. Guard the foals with your life. I'm going to help up ahead!" Better to take them down before they got back this far, if I could.

Velvet Remedy stared at the needler pistol as if it was diseased. "I... couldn't."

Oh for Celestia's sake. "You have to! You're not going to survive out here if you aren't willing to fight back." I pointed towards the foals. "And neither will the ones you're protecting."

Velvet gulped. "I mean... I don't know how!"

Oh! “It’s easy. Float it up, pointing this end at the bad guy. To shoot, pull this little lever back; that’s the trigger.”

She nodded. Then looked to me as if hoping I would offer another option. “I’m not a killer. I... I don’t think I can!”

“Learn to.” It was a harsh, even brutal, thing to say. But that was the Equestrian Wasteland.



The train slid down the track, picking up speed but still slow enough for the motley force of unicorn and earth pony slavers to leap aboard. Two earth ponies with minigun battle saddles had torn through the pulling team, shredding the poor ponies into red meat. The barrage of return fire had slaughtered them in return.

I stood my ground on a boxcar several cars forward of the passenger car that held Velvet Remedy and the foals, assault rifle at the ready. My E.F.S. compass was so full of red ahead of me that it was impossible to track individual opponents. Part of me wanted to attempt parley, if only to avoid the growing pain in my conscience. But that was out of the question. No, any pony attacking the train went down. It was with this intention firmly planted that I opened fire on the first slaver to jump her way onto the boxcar ahead of me. My shot went wild and she jumped back down. Dammit!

I heard an explosion above and behind me. Casting my eyes to the sky, I saw Calamity dodging and weaving through the air, a griffin in hot pursuit. The enemy aviator held a brush gun, a much nastier firearm than any I had seen so far, and occasionally slowed his pursuit of Calamity to fire a shot. Calamity, bless him, was not making himself an easy target, and costing the griffon distance with each failure.

As I watched, Calamity suddenly swooped upward, pulling a full loop... and to my dismay the griffon matched his move, looping slightly inside his own to close distance with him yet again!

I heard clopping coming closer, but as I turned my attention back to the boxcars ahead, I saw nothing. Confused, I took a step towards the edge, looking down to see if they were racing up along the ground...

...only to find three slaver ponies racing along the side of my boxcar, passing me! Somewhere, a slaver unicorn was aiding them with spells! A magic glow held their hooves to the side of the moving train. "Luna rape you with her horn!" I growled, feeling incensed at the magical trickery, and swung about the assault rifle, firing into their hindquarters, flanks and necks as they raced down the next boxcar towards the passenger car. Two ponies screamed as they fell from the train, mortally wounded, one breaking his neck in the fall; but the third made it to the gap between cars before I could bring my weapon to bear on him.

The train was moving at a fair clop now. I raced along the roof jumping to the next car and skidding to a stop. I looked down between the cars, and quickly pulled my head back as the slaver spotted me and fired a mouth-held submachine gun into the air where my head had just been.

Focusing, I pulled the wide-eyes slaver up out of his hiding space. Then something hit me from behind, sending a stripe of searing pain up my back! I dropped him, the damnably lucky bastard falling safely onto the roof just across the gap. I was surrounded now; the pony I had missed before had come up behind me while I was focused on this new one, a whip clinched in her mouth that she wielded with hellish accuracy. With a crack of her whip, she knocked my assault rifle out of the air, the weapon sailing out over the cliff face the track was skirting. The SMG slaver had taken my moment of surprise to reload, and now grinned; in his mind, he had already killed me.

Another explosion from above, and two bullets ripped through the slaver, felling him. His body, SMG still clenched in his teeth, slid off the boxcar roof. A moment later, Calamity swooped low over the boxcar and banked sharply, his hooves scraping along the cliff that rose up above us on the other side of the train. The griffon swooped over the train in pursuit. I ducked. The whip-pony wasn't quick enough

and got clipped by one of the griffon's wings, the hit cleanly decapitating the slaver pony. I felt my heart skip a beat as I saw the blades that adorned the forward edge of the griffon's wings.

Scooping up the decapitated pony's whip, I kicked the rocking head off the side of the train. I curled the whip into my saddlebags, brought out my combat shotgun and moved, first to one side of the boxcar then the other. The spell the slavers were using changed the situation dramatically, and I was painfully worried about how many had gotten past me before I wised up to it.

Further up the train, I heard more gunfire as the remaining train ponies fought for their lives. Down the train, I thought I heard Velvet Remedy scream! I turned towards the sound, my hindquarters to the front of the train when something thumped hard somewhere towards the front of the train, and then the train gave a shudder as its wheels crunched through a body that had fallen down onto the tracks.

Calamity landed deftly beside me.

I stared at him in surprise, and he seemed to blush as he hoofed at his mane. "Ah'm 'fraid Razorwing couldn't join us. He refused t' get offa muh tail. Even when Ah swooped between two of the cars." Calamity smiled, looking around as if trying to find a missing friend. "Ah swear, he was right behind me just a moment ago!"

I smirked. Then pointed a hoof towards the passenger car. "Go help Velvet!"

Calamity nodded and took to the air, not even needing to fly as the now galloping train brought the passenger car right to him. I saw him disappear into the gap in front of it, then and galloped to the aid of the train ponies. As I did so, a frightened voice in my head asked me what my life had become, what *I* was becoming, that there were so many ponies who wanted to take my life, and that I was charging *towards* them?



The last survivor of the train ponies and I raced across the rooftops and dived down into the open door of the passenger car as twin beams of pink magical energy zorched the sky, fired from a white unicorn raider's battle saddle. The train pony who had been with us seconds ago was now nothing but sparkling pink ash blowing away in the wind.

The passenger car was empty! Sort of. The body of a black-coated slaver hung from the ceiling, filled with needles. The spell on its hooves was keeping it from falling to the floor, even after death. It gave the earth pony with me quite a start. To be honest, I might have shrieked just a little too.

"Ah tell ya, I prefer slavers who shoot bullets!" the train pony gasped, recovering. "Ya can't wrap a bandage around bein' turned t' dust!"

I quite thoroughly agreed.

Velvet Remedy ran in through the back door, coming off the flatcar behind. Seeing the train pony, she motioned for him to head behind her. "Please, go meet up with Calamity! He's at the caboose!"

"We've got a nasty one on the way," I warned her. "And another four coming behind her. I think these are the last of them, but one is using a battle saddle with magical energy weapons!"

Velvet Remedy nodded warily, then looked up and pointed at the corpse above. "t-This one came in on the roof! L-like an *insect*!" She was clearly shaken, more at having to take a life than the strangeness of the circumstances, but I suspected she couldn't bring herself to focus on that. Not yet. I began to wonder if her occasional unpleasantness wasn't part of some coping mechanism for dealing with the horrors of the Equestrian Wasteland.

The earth pony trotted past her, reloading his weapon and bucking the door closed behind him.

A minute later, Calamity galloped up. "Everypony's in the caboose and Ah've kicked it off! The slavers won't be gettin' t' them from here!" He lowered his head and stomped at the floor. "Here's where we hold the line!"

There was no time for discussion. Calamity had barely spoken his intent when three slavers, led by the unicorn pony, came into the car at us. Not from in front or behind, but through the windows! The passenger car exploded into violence.

S.A.T.S. locked onto the slaver coming through the window on my left. At this range, I could hardly miss. Unfortunately, neither could they! Velvet Remedy's horn glowed as I fired into the chest of my first target, once and again. His armor stopped much of the damage, but it knocked him back, his own shot grazing my cheek. I turned to the second, but not quickly enough to stop him from swinging his magically enhanced sledgehammer right into my ribcage! The pain was blinding! I could hear ribs snapping under my armor!

My squeal of pain did not stop him from bringing down a second blow across my back. Ditzzy Doo's armor dissipated the blow across my body, saving me from a broken back and a very short, paralyzed life.

Calamity had fired off a double-shot from his battle saddle, tearing gaping holes in one of the slaver ponies coming in on his side. Bloody innards splattered across the bed, wall and window.

The last went for Velvet Remedy. Oh Goddess, why wasn't she wearing armor? I watched in horror from the floor as the slaver sank his combat knife deep into her shoulder, barely missing her neck. Blood gushed around the blade and turned her charcoal coat a wet black. Her spell imploded, the magic radiating from her horn fading away in an instant.

I started to get up, crying out again as bright agony slashed through me with fiery fingers. My targeting spell was still refreshing, but my first opponent had already recovered and was bringing his gun to bear. The pony with the sledgehammer swung again, intent on pummeling me into submission: the submission of a corpse.

Calamity fired. The armor that had spared the slaver from my combat shotgun was not equal to my companion's powerful rifles. The slaver who had stabbed Velvet grasped the hilt of the knife in her teeth, intent on pulling the blade out of the wounded singer, but Velvet's horn

glowed once again, a telekinetic light enveloping the knife. It was simple, weak telekinesis, holding the blade. But it kept the pony from sliding out the blade as easily as she expected, and that briefest pause gave Calamity enough time to turn his barrels on her. He fired again, and Velvet was splattered with wet bits of the other pony.

I was in so much pain; my vision blurred heavily. I was having trouble drawing breath. But at least now, it was (I thought hopefully) only three-on-one. But as the slaver raised his sledge hammer over my head, the door burst open. The white unicorn, standing just outside the door, opened fire with pink magical energy.

With a flash from my horn, sledgehammer pony found himself pushed away, becoming an impromptu shield. An eyeblink later, he was glowing pink dust.

Now it really was three-on-one. And while I had to fight through my pain to fire, my targeting spell had finally returned and S.A.T.S. guided my shots. And Calamity needed no aid at all.



Velvet Remedy's horn glowed as she slowly mended my several broken ribs, jumping slightly as the train gave a buck. The pain in my side had reduced to a throbbing, bad enough to wring whimpers from me. "Really, Littlepip, this is becoming a habit." Her own coat was matted with her blood. The last of our healing potions had been consumed and both she and I wore the last of our bandages. Only Calamity had made it through virtually unscathed.

The slavers lay dead about us, save for the one who had pummeled me with a sledgehammer. His body had been vaporized -- turned to glowing ash. I recoiled at the thought that I might have breathed in some of him.

I turned away, staring at the floor. Though we had won, it didn't feel like a victory. Instead, I felt that I had lead half a dozen train ponies to their slaughter. And, in the end, I had failed in the fight as well. If Calamity hadn't been with us...

Reading me far too easily, Velvet Remedy tried to soothe me. “At least you got that one with the horrible sledgehammer. All I managed to do was be a target.

“You are doing more than your share with your healing skills and mending spell,” I pointed out, adding, “Although I’m surprised you didn’t stay with the freed slaves and foals.”

Velvet Remedy whinnied. “That caboose was too crowded as it was. If I’d have tried to force myself in there too, somepony would have suffocated!” She finished tending my wounds, frowning at the increased shaking of the train. Scenery flashed by outside the windows.

“Ayep,” Calamity returned to us, making his way through the rattling train, “Looks like that was the last of them.”

The train groaned dangerously as it tore around a corner, forcing us to catch ourselves. Velvet looked between us with alarm. “Don’t either of you ponies think we’re going awfully fast? How does this train of yours slow down?”

“We use the brakes.”

“And where are they?”

“In the caboose.”

Velvet’s ears dipped back. She stared levelly at Calamity. “The caboose? That would be the big red car at the back, right? The one you just kicked free of us?” I felt a surge of panic.

Calamity grimaced a little. “Ayep.” Pondering, “Y’know, that would explain the look the train pony was givin’ me.”

“I begin to see how you got your name,” Velvet said flatly.

Several minutes of confirming our situation and arguing what should be done followed as the train continued to race down the mountain out of control; soon the three of us were bracing ourselves against every turn. We were still only halfway down, sheer cliffs flying by on either side. In the end, I decided there was only one solution.

“Calamity, fly Velvet Remedy to safety!”

Velvet’s eyes widened, “But what about you?”

Resolutely, I stomped on the ground, trying to ignore the twinge in my recently mended leg and ribs. “I’ll be fine. I’ve figured out another way off.”

The two of them looked dubious. But they trusted me. So with a nod, Calamity and Velvet made their way to the nearest flatcar. “Ah’ll be back for you!” Calamity promised as he spread his wings. The wind tore Calamity and Velvet off into the air.

And then I was alone. On a runaway train!

Okay, I thought to myself. Now it was time to actually think of a way off. The train charged forward towards a mountain curve, hitting it far too fast! The train tilted; I could feel wheels coming off the track!

My horn flared with power, cold sweat breaking across my already too-abused body as I poured telekinetic power into holding the train on the track. The whole train glowed feebly as it ripped around the corner, canted crazily, riding only one side of its wheels!

With a squealing thud, the train righted itself on the track, already headed towards another turn, this one throwing the train’s weight against the rising cliff wall. The rocky wall raked at the train, gouging at boxcars and rending most of the roof off the passenger car with a resounding roar. I clenched my eyes against the storm of splinters.

When I opened them again, wind was buffeting me fiercely through the gaping wound in the train car. I could see another turn ahead, this one even sharper. Trembling with exhaustion, I knew there was no way to prevent the train from leaping the track this time.

I focused again, dreaming I could levitate myself to safety. Groaning with the effort, I felt my hooves leave the ground just at the engine car hit the curve and snapped around it. The massive weight of the train could not follow. With a horrific, screaming shudder, the jackknifing train tore from the track, soaring out over the mountain cliff like a

snake with a broken head, and plunging towards the valley over a thousand feet below!

With all my remaining focus, I pushed myself up and away, lifting out of the open roof... but it was not enough. I was still falling, and fast! My efforts only slowed me enough that I got to see the train fall past me, diving down into the dead forest below with an almighty crash. The destruction below me was like the hoof of Luna against the land beneath. Great clouds bellowed up, obscuring the wreckage that I was about to splatter against.

Calamity caught me!



The three of us -- Calamity, Velvet and I -- trod through the narrow valley under the grey clouds above. I had no idea where we were, save that New Appleloosa was many days travel on my PipBuck's map. Assuming we could travel in anything close to a straight line. Assuming we were headed there at all.

Based on the terminal entries, the slavers of old Appleloosa were selling the bulk of the ponies they captured to somepony named Stern in someplace called Fillydelphia. I had not lost my rage at what I had read, at the wicked and cruel things these ponies were doing. I kept it at a low simmer in the back of my mind. If I had my way, Fillydelphia was next. But I could not ignore our more pressing concerns.

We were in desperate need of medical supplies. Likewise, the water and food Calamity and I had packed was insufficient to support three ponies for several days. We needed safe shelter and resupply.

Once together, we had rested for several hours. The three of us had just been through a harrowing battle, and it would have been insane, if not impossible, to press on without giving ourselves time out. In truth, we needed much more than we took -- I myself was so weakened by my extreme feats of telekinesis that I found myself unable to levitate even something as small and relatively light as Little Macintosh -- but the

unfamiliar and possibly hostile environment did not encourage dallying.

The valley was strewn with black, dead trees and bits of debris. Not from the train, whose crash site was now miles behind us; these told of the devastation of Equestria's apocalypse. Fallen sky chariots and similar vehicles marred the land. According to Calamity, we were below the outskirts of what had once, high above us, been the pegasus city of Cloudsdale. Now, there was nothing up there above the clouds. And on the ground, the only grave marker for the sudden ending of so many pony lives were the scattered wrecks of pegasus vehicles that had been too far from the city to be instantly consumed, but not far enough to save those pulling them.

Inappropriately upbeat music (heavy on the tuba) floated like a siren song through the valley. My ears perked, and I began galloping towards the source, my surprised companions scrambling to follow suit.

"Littlepip!" Velvet gasped, "What is it?" Calamity was no less confused; he knew the sound of a sprite-bot, but could fathom no reason I would be in such a hurry to catch it.

Reaching the sprite-bot, I enveloped it with my horn's magic, dragging it to attention before me. "Watcher!"

Calamity landed, looking at me strangely. Velvet, considerably further behind, dropped to a trot as she saw no sign I was in immediate danger of being crippled yet again.

"Watcher!" I shouted crossly, giving the annoying sprite-bot a firm shake, as if doing so would shut off the music and summon my cryptic acquaintance. "Watcher, I know you can hear me! I need you right now!"

"Littlepip," Calamity began slowly. "Ah don't think..." He stopped, eyes widening fearfully as the music ended in a mid-song pop and the sprite-bot spoke directly to me in a voice he had never heard come from a sprite-bot before.

“uh, hello, Littlepip. How can I help you?” The tinny, artificial voice addressing me clearly spooked my wasteland-experienced companion quite deeply.

“I need you to send a message to New Appleloosa! “ I waved a frantic hoof. “There’s a caboose headed down the mountain, without a train. The train pony inside will make sure it reaches the bottom safely, but there are lots of ponies inside, including five young ones, who cannot survive out here on their own. New Appleloosa needs to send wagons to get them.”

Watcher was silent, hesitant.

“Watcher, they’re not in good shape. They have no food or water. Time is of the essence!”

Watcher spoke slowly, “I don’t know, Littlepip. I’m not in the habit of...”

“I. Don’t. Care!” I shouted crossly. “You care about those ponies, don’t you? Do you want to see those foals die?!”

“No! I mean, yes, I care. No, I don’t want to...”

“Then get help! You don’t have time to indulge your shyness, Watcher. Lives are at stake!”

With a pop, the sprite-bot’s song continued. I released it, unsure whether to feel relieved or disgusted.

“Littlepip,” Velvet nickered, clopping up to me. “If you keep ordering your friends around, you’ll soon find you don’t have any.”

I frowned, reminded suddenly of my friendless nightmare. Calamity gave me a look that suggested she might be right. Velvet kept walking, and I fell in line behind her.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Light Trot - You are agile, lucky and always careful; or maybe you have just mastered the art of self-levitation. Either way, you never set off enemy mines or floor-based traps.

CHAPTER NINE



THE MORAL OF THE STORY

"I'm the one who should be mobbed by strangers wherever I go!"

Clouds.

When I first stepped outside into this new world, the world was impossibly big, the sky terrifyingly high. Now, the omnipresent clouds -- shifting, boiling, darkening with rain -- was just another ceiling. Grey, like the one in Stable maintenance. Only rarely, like on that first night, would small fissures open in the cloud cover, like gaping wounds that would slowly heal. The tantalizing glimpse of a bright, wondrous blue above, cheerful and serene, tempted and tortured those living in the gloom below.

"Littlepip," Velvet asked, her own thoughts not far from my own, "Does the air seem strange to you outside? The day is so warm and bright, and yet the air is... sickly. I feel so eager and yet so hesitant to be enwrapped by it."

"Like it's poisonous," I agreed. Calamity said nothing. I supposed that to him the air was the air and had always been like this.

The strewn wreckage of pegasus vehicles, cast from the sky when the metropolis of Cloudsdayle was obliterated in a single hoofstomp, stretched on for miles. Some of the sky chariots and wagons were marred further with the old skeletons of the poor ponies who were struck dead or mortally wounded by the megaspell, but whose bodies were not wiped from existence entirely.

The mountains rose up to either side of the valley, sickly grass forested with blackened trees. New plants grew around them, feeding on their corpses. Up and ahead was the worn and faded image of a giant Sparkle-Cola bottle, the stylized carrot immediately identifying the drink even though the words on the sign had faded too severely to read. A badly faded yellow pony with a pink mane was holding it aloft in nearly orgasmic glee. According to Calamity, these giant signs, called billboards, had once littered every major skyroute between Cloudsdayle and other cities, advertising goods and services from all over Equestria. I could spot a second billboard on the opposite side of the valley perhaps half a mile further down. Even from this range, I thought I could recognize the familiar image of heroic pegasi with rainbows exploding across the sky behind them as they swooped over the armies of wicked zebras. Better Wiped Than Striped.

A large, enclosed delivery wagon lay battered, bent and sunken partially into the ground. I spotted on its side what appeared to be a business logo -- a pattern of seven ascending circles -- which struck me as strangely familiar. I didn't have to ponder it long, for as we drew closer, my PipBuck's automap christened it: Wreckage of Ditzzy Doo Deliveries. Now I remembered where I had seen the pattern before -- on the interior title page of *The Wasteland Survival Guide*.

Calamity was looking at the wreckage with similar comprehension. Velvet looked between us, confused at why we had stopped to stare. "What?"

"This is where Ditzzy Doo fell," I said, feeling awe and intense sadness. This... this would have been her only grave marker, had she not suffered a stranger fate.

“Who?”

“Ditzzy Doo,” I repeated, lost in my own thoughts. I was trying to imagine what it had been like. Velvet, who did not know the name, gave me a look indicating just how helpful she felt that answer was, and turned to Calamity.

“Ayep.”

Velvet nickered and walked past, circling around the back. Moments later, I heard her call out, “Littlepip, would you please come look at this?” Her voice had a tone of... hope? I trotted around to find her (not at all like a little puppy at her owner's call).

Boxes and crates littered the ground around the back of the Ditzzy Doo Deliveries wagon, and many more were toppled and crushed inside. Some had been torn open, all had been looted for anything of value. Except, that was, for a safe and a footlocker in the back. It was the latter which had drawn Velvet's excitement because, while identical in make to every other footlocker I had run across, the markings were very distinct: three bands of yellow, the center one with a pink butterfly emblem. This was not a medical box, but the colors and symbol were clearly those of the Ministry of Peace.

“Sure, no problem,” I announced proudly, floating out my screwdriver and bobby pin as I watched Velvet struggling not to prance in anticipation. Turning away, I started on picking the lock on the safe first. I could hear her stomp her hoof, and bit my lower lip to stifle a laugh.

The safe's lock gave up almost too easily. Considering the level of looting, I was surprised that such a weak lock had been such a long-lived deterrent. Was I the only one outside who had developed this skill? I opened the safe.

One item inside immediately captured my attention. The entire interior of the safe was filled with a rosy glow emanating from a bottle of luminescent purplish-red liquid:

**Sparkle-Cola
RAD!**

**With an invigorating touch of radiation and a blast of radish
flavoring!**

(It's like a buck to the face! With radishes!)

The Sparkle-Cola RAD floated out of the safe past me, enveloped in a magical glow by Velvet's horn. Raising the bottle to eye level, she winced at it with a disparaging gaze. "That's insane. How could any pony be so stupid as to think consuming *radiation* is *healthy*?"

My own levitation abilities had been so overstrained that it actually took effort to snatch the bottle back, but I proudly kept myself from panting. Velvet Remedy stared in something approaching horror as she saw me slip the bottle into one of my saddlebags.

"You're not actually intending to *drink* that, are you?"

I shrugged. It did sound like it might be tasty; and according to my PipBuck, the radiation still present was minor enough to be washed away with a RadAway potion later. I turned to the footlocker, prompting Velvet to forget (or at least ignore) the beverage in my saddlebags.

This lock was *not* easy. It selfishly refused to give up its secrets. After the third try, I began to worry that this one was beyond me. And I desperately didn't want Velvet Remedy to see me fail. I had one other option... but I didn't want her to see that either. "This is a tough one... I'm going to need concentration. Velvet, could you step out?" And, considering her warning earlier, I added, "Please?"

I could tell she didn't want to, but with ladylike grace, she departed. As soon as she was out of sight, I brought up my PipBuck's sorting spell, and pulled the tin of Mint-als out from where I had hidden it at the bottom of my pack. This wasn't the incredible Party-Time treat I had before, but I didn't need to talk to the locker. Opening the tin, I popped one into my mouth and began to chew.

The effect was immediate. It was like a grey film was being washed away from all my senses, like my mind was clearing after having been in

a deep fog! I was more alive and aware than ever before! This was not Party-Time, and definitely not as candy-licious, but it was enough to make the damn lock sing for me!

Outside, I could hear Velvet Remedy's voice: "Calamity, may I ask you something?"

"Ayep, Ah reckon you can."

"Why is it that you are the only pegasus pony I've seen in the Equestrian Wasteland? I was under the impression that pegasus ponies should be as common as earth and unicorn ponies."

My ears perked. Their conversation wasn't meant to be private, so this wasn't eavesdropping exactly. And I had to admit, I wanted to know that too.

There was a pregnant pause. Then Calamity nickered, "Wow, lady, when ya ask a question, ya go right for the throat, don't ya."

"I'm sorry. I apologize if this is a personal..."

"No, no. Ya should know, Ah guess." I could hear Calamity sigh; my perceptiveness was heightened to an amazing degree! As I had predicted, the lock was now easy, and clicked open in surrender.

"Ya ain't gonna find any other pegasus ponies. Not unless they're... like me." He paused as if speaking about this was physically taxing. "Ya see, back durin' the war, we pegasus ponies were Equestria's greatest fighting force. We were the elites! The best of the best! But after Cloudsdayle was hit, well... that was it, game over. They abandoned the war, abandoned Equestria... although it's not like either one of 'em lasted more'n a few hours past that anyways. The pegasus ponies closed up the sky an' went inta hidin'."

"Closed. Up. The sky?"

"Ayep. They kicked the cloudmakers up t' full power an' locked 'em like that. Saved their other cities, their families. The zebras couldn't well target what they couldn't see. Not that they didn't try. Got a few lucky hits, but not many." I could hear one of them dig at the ground

with a hoof. “Ain’t been a day that ain’t been at least mostly cloudy in Equestria since.”

Velvet Remedy gasped. “That... that’s horrible!”

“Oh, they keep tellin’ themselves tha’ any day now, they’ll turn ‘em off, open the sky, come swoopin’ down t’ save the rest of ya. When they’re ready. When the time is right.” Calamity nickered in clear contempt.

“Been tellin’ themselves that for upwards of two hundred years now. Truth is, they’re too arrogant an’ lazy t’ bother. S’long as they c’n keep tellin’ themselves that they’ll do the right thing eventually, they c’n live with themselves. Meanwhile, y’lot are all dyin’ down here, from slavers an’ raiders an’ monsters... and yer making a damn hard effort of savin’ yerselves without their help.” Sounded more to me like the pegasus ponies were scared.

I opened the footlocker and started looking at the items inside.

“And you?” ,Velvet asked.

“Ah didn’t find the livin’ with myself so easy as that lot seem to, buncha winged horseapples.” Wow, Calamity, so very *glad* to have you on Equestria’s side, but bitter much?

A few moments later, Velvet trotted into the back of the delivery wagon. She spared a glance back in Calamity’s direction, then noticed I had opened the footlocker. With a pleased sound, she virtually danced over the debris to reach me.

Inside: numerous scrolls, ruined when a bottle of something had shattered, and the glass shards of said bottle, a framed picture of a bunny rabbit, a small crystal orb sealed in a clear bag (Property of the Ministry of Peace -- Restricted Viewing Only -- Unauthorized Viewers Will Be Prosecuted!), and a book (*Supernaturals*).

“Oh!” Velvet gasped and made a sound that I felt I could fairly describe as a squeal. I watched her, the corners of my mouth twitching upwards as I realized that Velvet Remedy, the amazing unicorn of unparalleled beauty and musical grace who had inspired least three hundred fans, was herself more than a bit of a fanfilly.

"I know what this is!" Velvet announced, floating the bag with the orb up for closer inspection. "It's a memory orb. Used to record events not only with sound but moving picture. Much better than a recorder or a camera. Rare too!" Velvet collected the memory orb and the bunny photo. I was surprised when she left the book.

"Oh, I already have that one. But you should take it, Littlepip. I know you'll find it useful." Something in her expression made me think there was a joke here, and at my expense. Still, I wasn't one to turn down a book, especially if it was one Velvet Remedy suggested.

I had just finished sliding the book into my saddle bags when my Eyes-Forward Sparkle compass exploded with red. I froze. Crap... that's a *lot* of enemies! In my mind, I knew the slavers had found us again. And, from the looks of things, they had brought an army!

"Littlepip? What is it?"

Anxiously, I whispered, "Go get Calamity. Quietly. ...please." I turned slowly in place. There was a gap in the red; we weren't entirely surrounded. "Trouble!" More than we could handle!

Velvet immediately tensed, nodded nervously, and trotted out as quickly and quietly as she could, only knocking over one crate along the way. We both winced. As she reached the back end of the wagon, she stopped, aghast. "Zombie-ponies!"

What? Not slavers? I moved up next to her. I was already forming how I was going to explain to her about ghouls, but the words died on my lips as I took in the blank, hungry stares and shambling, grotesque movements of the approaching herd. These did not look like ghouls; these looked like zombie-ponies! I remembered the warning: *Ya get into the wrong places, y'll find yerself hunted by whole packs of cannibal ghoul-ponies gone zombie.*

Moving closer to Calamity, I whispered, "Follow me." We watched them shuffle a foot nearer. Two. The closest zombie-pony broke into a slaving charge!

"Run!"

We ran. Ran like we were being chased by a mindless hoard of monsters intent on eating us alive. Because we were!

The zombie-ponies exploded into action, joining the hunt, our flesh the prize they were after. Many launched into the air and flew towards us. I tried to telekinetically grab a downed sky chariot as we raced past, but the glow around my horn sparked and died. I had no telekinetic tricks to save us.

Velvet Remedy shrieked as a zombie-pony dove from the sky. She ducked, the creature overshooting her and crashing into a tree. I leapt over the body and kept going, my side beginning to hurt.

That hurt swiftly grew into burning coals buried in my side, bringing tears to my eyes and threatening to sap my strength. Two more zombie-ponies dived towards us. Calamity, wide-eyed in fear, suddenly scowled and spat out, "Aw, screw this!" He skidded to a halt, rearing around, and opened fire. The shot ripped the fealtherless wing off one of the zombies, causing it to lurch into the other. The two tumbled out of the sky in a spin, splashing gorily into the half-buried metal skeleton of a huge wagon designed to carry smaller wagons.

Ahead, the rusted hulk of a long passenger chariot rose out of the ground like a barricade. Launching himself into the air, Calamity yelled for us to go around it and keep running. "Don't slow down! Not fer an instant!" he cried out as he dodged another flying zombie-pony, kicking his saddle to reload.

Velvet was pulling well ahead of me, my shorter legs and my burning side threatening to spell out a most horrific death for me. Velvet tore around the side of the passenger wagon and disappeared behind it. I could hear the herd right at my tail, hooves thundering over the ground in a hungry stampede, foul breath hitting my mane. I couldn't make the turn; they'd be on me if I tried. Hoping that my small size would come to my aid for once, I instead leapt for one of the shattered, gaping windows.

My body, saddlebags and all, sailed cleanly through the opening. I hit one of the benches inside and jumped for the opposite window without

breaking speed. Jagged shards of glass cut at my neck and legs, slashing against my armor before snapping away as my saddlebags hit them. I was out again, and almost clear, when the strap for my sniper rifle caught on a piece of jagged metal, and I was jerked to a halt, swinging back into the wagon's side with a jarring thud.

I was caught! I tried to pull away, but my hooves barely brushed the ground. I could hear the hoofbeats of the multitude of zombie-ponies as they reached the long body of the wagon, the herd splitting to go around either side. I twisted about, trying to bite the strap loose before they were on top of me. Somewhere above, I heard Calamity taking shots; I heard the metal of the wagon dent and puncture, his hits for once not striking the enemy. Panic flared through me. If the zombie-ponies didn't get me, one of Calamity's wild shots might. (Terribly, I realized how preferable a fate that would be, and I prayed that Celestia would grant him the wisdom and mercy to shoot me if they started eating me!)

With a final strong bite, the strap broke, and I fell free. Instinctively, I grasped the sniper rifle in my teeth, realizing only later how foolish a waste of a precious second that was, and ran as hard as my screaming legs and side would let me!

The zombie herd was already coming around the passenger wagon and closing on me. Their hooves brutalized the discolored grass beneath. Even more swooped over it with an ease that made my shortcut laughable. My clear mind and heightened perceptions had become a horror. I could feel the ground tremble beneath me. I could calculate how swiftly they would be gnawing on my hide. I could make out a strange, faint pop even through the rumble of the herd.

I could feel myself lifted into the air as the wreckage of the passenger wagon was consumed in a flare of unleashed wild magic. I could see the pulsing cascade of colors cast strange shadows as swirling magical energies erupted through the air. I could smell the fetid corpse-stench of the zombies as they were blown apart, even as their body parts caught fire.

I hit the ground still running, the valley lurching about as I fought to keep from tumbling. Bits of zombie-pony splattered down about me like rain. Ahead of me, Velvet Remedy had stopped and was just staring, eyes fixed on a scene behind me I preferred not to imagine.

Most of the herd was killed in the blast, and many who were not had scattered... but not for long. Calamity swooped over me, crying out for a panting Velvet to turn back around and keep running.

A cluster of odd sky vehicles, painted a mottled light blue and grey with tiny splashes of white, formed the only possibly defensible position. Beyond that, the valley spread out into rolling, rocky hills that offered no cover at all.

We reached it as more zombie-ponies overflowed us, landing just yards away. Velvet Remedy lowered her horn, charging at them, and skewered one messily, unable to hold back an “Eeeew!” that I empathized with completely. I tried to grasp Little Macintosh telekinetically, but my magic just couldn’t. Desperately, I looked around for something I could grasp in my mouth, a piece of sufficiently spear-like debris would do.

What I found was infinitely better. At least, I thought so. As Calamity shot the zombie-pony moving towards me, I scrambled over to where the cargo of one of the vehicles had spilled. I had seen, in small and cruel glimpses, the beautiful light blue sky above the clouds. My Mintal-clear mind quickly realized the paint on these strange sky chariots would have once served as camouflage. A pegasus military convoy! And, praise Celestia, one of the things they had been transporting was turrets!

I was trained to reprogram the spell matrix of a PipBuck. Tweaking a turret to run off my PipBuck’s definitions of friend and foe was comparatively easy! Especially right now!

“uh, Li’lpip? Ya sure ya know what yer doin’?” Calamity asked, sparing me a glance as he landed between me and more zombie-ponies, firing again.

I was all grins. “You betcha!”



♪ *“Celestia watch you and keep you safe,
As you travel down the path you choose.
May Luna be with you and keep you strong,
So your courage you will never lose.
Remain loyal, honest and brave,
Forget not the ones that you save
And in our hearts you will do no wrong...”*

Velvet Remedy’s tune wove between humming and lyrics, the latter in a state of constant flux. For me, watching my idol actually crafting a song was amazing. Calamity didn’t complain, he too found her music to be uplifting in the bleakness of the wasteland, although his occasional eye-rolling suggested he wished she would stick with one set of lyrics rather than seeking perfection.

It had been several hours since the zombies and the valley was safely behind us. A darker grey began to seep into the sky again. Not a storm, Calamity said with some encouragement. Just the approach of nightfall. (If I ever meet the pegasus ponies, I thought, I’ll have to thank them for making the Equestrian Wasteland so depressing. Somehow, it was worse than the drab monotony of Stable Two, because I never believed the Stable could be better. Although that could have been the post-Mint-al depression talking.)

“oh my!” Velvet gasped as we crested a rolling hill and saw it: an absolutely *gigantic* billboard, far taller than any of the buildings I’d seen, loomed just beyond the next hill. The image, amazingly un-faded yet marred with the grime and water damage of centuries, was nothing but the giant face of an almost unbearably pink pony with a mane that age had turned into a candy cane. She was smiling, her eyes seeming to follow us.

I'd seen this before from the train. Even now, recognizable in this light and at this distance as a billboard, it -- merciful Celestia! -- still gave me a nervous chill. I stared as I walked closer, trying to imagine it before so many decades had taken their toll, before it had been repeatedly peppered by wind-blown dust and ash, streaked by rivulets of rain; back when its placement would have been clearly playful, set behind the raise of the hill so it looked like the pony was playing peek-a-boo with the whole damn countryside. Back when it wasn't so...

"...Luna-damned. Fucking. Creepy!"

I tried to shake off the feeling with a shudder, turning away from the massive billboard... and found myself staring at a sneaky sprite-bot.

"Hello, Littlepip!"

I would have been in the next country if Calamity didn't bite my fleeing tail. He held me while I ran in place until the panic left me. By that time, Watcher had wisely floated out of hoof's reach.

"You are so lucky I can't telekinetically hurl rocks at you right now!"

Velvet Remedy looked like she'd help me. Calamity was glaring distrustfully at the sprite-bot, wings out, legs spread in a defensive stance. "Li'lpip...?"

All I wanted to know at that moment was, "Watcher, are they safe?"

The sprite-bot bobbed. "Yes. Wagons are on their way. Although Ditzzy Doo might now be under the impression that you can hack sprite-bots and send messages through them. Sorry 'bout that."

"Li'lpip?" Calamity would have been growling if he could. "Ah don't trust that thing!"

So, Watcher had found a way to relay the message without alerting the ponyfolk of New Appleloosa to what Watcher was able to do. At Calamity's words, I realized I really didn't trust Watcher either. And now that I knew the ponies we fought and nearly died to rescue were safe, or soon would be, quite a few more questions tumbled into my

mind. First and foremost being, “You sent me into that raider pit knowing full well what, and who, I would find in there, didn’t you?”

Calamity broke off staring at the strangely-behaving bot, looking to me. I had never told him *why* I had gone into the Ponyville Library.

“They needed help.”

“You could have told me the truth!” I scowled.

“Hey, I didn’t exactly know you, now did I? You seemed like a good pony who would do the right thing once you saw it for yourself, but...”

Now I felt like growling. “You lied to me!”

“No!” If it was possible for the toneless, mechanical voice to sound heated, it would have. “I told you that I didn’t mean you harm. And I didn’t. I told you that you would find something you needed to survive in there...” The sprite-bot flew close. “And I’d say you found more valuable things in there than just a book. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Dammit, Watcher was right. I found Ditzzy Doo, who was an acquaintance I valued far more than the guide she wrote (which I held in fairly high regard). Spinning a mental web, I could make an argument that my friendship with Calamity arose out of what happened there. Possibly, although less firmly, I could say my relationship with the New Appleloosans, and thus my ability to save many more ponies, including Velvet Remedy (for certain definitions of “saving”) stemmed from what Watcher pulled. I still wanted to stuff a hoof through the damn bot’s frontplate. But I knew it wouldn’t do any good. The sprite-bot wasn’t Watcher.

Velvet Remedy spoke up. “Littlepip, what’s going on here?”

I told them everything.



“Whoops! Almost out of time...” Watcher warned as I finished up my tale, Watcher only rarely commenting. Calamity was still giving the floating bot nasty looks.

I organized the questions in my head, prioritizing. “Watcher, you seem to know a lot about things...”

“Well, yeah.”

“What were the Ministries?” I had seen enough references to Ministries scattered in the artifacts of the past that I suspected such information would be helpful for context. I didn’t realize that I had just asked what was arguably the most important question of my life. (It was, at least, Celestia Tier.)

Watcher was silent for a while. Long enough that I thought our strange pseudo-companion might have winked away again. Watcher’s words came slowly, deliberately. “Remember when I told you that you should search for your virtue? And I told you about the greatest heroes of Equestria?”

I nodded. “You mentioned them, yes.”

“Well...” Watcher’s words came slowly, as if they were painful. “The Massacre at Littlehorn broke Princess Celestia’s heart. After that, nearly midway through the war, Princess Celestia decided She wasn’t the right pony to lead Equestria anymore. So She stepped down, abdicated Her position to Her sister, Princess Luna...”

I listened in awe. I had never heard the Goddesses spoken about in this way before.

“The war had been devastating, both abroad and at home. Equestria was in severe distress, suffering from troubles within as well as from the enemy armies. You can’t imagine what it was like back then.

“Those heroes I told you about? They were six amazing ponies with true hearts and virtuous souls, whose friendship held the power to change the world. Princess Celestia had always been like a mother to them. She saw them, one in particular, as Her children. She loved them and wanted to protect them. So Princess Celestia shielded them from the worst of the war, finding quests for them that kept them, mostly, out of harm’s reach, or at least away from the

battlefields. Sending them on diplomatic missions to the griffins and the buffalo -- things like that.

“Princess Luna met them for the first time in a much different circumstance. Princess Luna respected them and saw them as Her equals. And, I really think, as Her saviors. And so when Princess Luna ascended to rule Equestria and fight the war, She called Equestria’s most valuable heroes to serve as Her personal advisors. She called for the creation of new offices of government, one under each of them, whose job would be to take their advice and find ways to implement it.”

“And those were the Ministries?”

“Yes.”

I looked around at the bleak, ruined wasteland that had once been the beautiful nation of Equestria. “Doesn’t look like that went so well.”

Silence. Then Watcher spoke again. “Have you ever heard the old saying ‘The portal to hell is opened with the incantation of good intentions’? If there was a moral to their story, I guess that would be it.”



As night closed in, we approached a farm that seemed largely intact – no animals in the fields, but smoke curled up from the smokestack and there was a welcoming glow in several of the windows, as well as light seeping through the cracks around the silo doors. It was just the three of us again, Watcher having vanished with a pop, replaced by tinny, patriotic music and an oblivious sprite-bot. Calamity had kept a wary eye on the bot until it had wandered out of sight.

A raven fluttered down, perching on the first of what looked like a row of three planks sticking out of the ground near the edge of a barren pasture. The last plank was smaller and crooked. The last fellows standing of a fence, I presumed.

Quickly but carefully, we trotted down the rocky hillside and through the stone-strewn fields to reach the house. We needed a place to sleep, food to eat and, if possible, medical supplies. The house seemed like it was sent from Celestia Herself... assuming the ponies inside didn't shoot us for trespassing. Hanging hope on the hospitality of strangers was unwise in the Equestrian Wasteland.

A creaky windmill with two thirds of its blades missing squeaked rustily as we passed.

"Maybe this isn't such a good idea," I began. Just because there was no awful graffiti did not mean that the place wasn't full of raiders.

Velvet Remedy marched past me. "Really, Littlepip, you shouldn't sound so jaded..." She was raising a hoof to knock when the door swung open, bathing us in warm light. Velvet blinked at the empty space in front of her, then looked down to see the filly in the doorway.

She was pink. Garishly pink! It was oddly like looking at the face in the giant billboard, only much, much (much!) smaller. And younger. And a very imperfect match. It was hard to tell in the light, but she seemed wrong somehow. My eyes first lighted on a rough scar on her head, like she'd recently fallen headfirst, possibly at very high speed, and scraped herself up rather badly. The first guess that popped into my head was that she had jumped off the roof of her barn. Trying to fly? My eyes moved to her sides, looking for wings, but she was indeed an earth pony. Then my eyes caught her bare flank. She was young, but not that young. She stood less than a head shorter than me. I knew what it was like to strive for a cutie mark that wouldn't come; my heart went out to her. She had waited longer for hers than even I had, and was still wait... no, wait.

The wrongness snapped into focus. (If I'd still been on Mint-als, I would have realized it immediately!) Her coat wasn't actually her coat.

She'd painted herself pink!

I looked to Calamity and Velvet Remedy. From their expressions, they had seen it too, and it didn't sit well with them.

"Hello, dear," Velvet began. "Is your mother..."

"OH MY GOSH!" The filly jumped up, squealing in delight. Then just as quickly she brought a hoof to her mouth, gasping as if in horror. "Oh no! You're too late! I waited for you all day, but now we're closed!" Tears welled up in her wide eyes.

Velvet Remedy took a step back. "Oh dear. I'm so sorry, young one, but we're not..."

The look of horror dissipated instantly, replaced by a wide grin. "Of course you're not! As if we ever close!" She giggled exuberantly. She ran out of the house, dashing past us, then spun with a suddenly somber expression. "You really should hurry though. Nasty things haunt these fields at night!" With that ominous proclamation, she squealed with glee and ran towards the silo.

We looked at each other. I was confused. Calamity simply shrugged and started trotting after the young, pink girl.

As we reached the silo, Velvet called out, "I'm sorry, sweetie, but we didn't get your name?"

"OH!" The pink filly jumped. "Hee! Of course! Sorry! I'm just so excited! You're the first visitors I've had to the museum in... oh ages!" Giggling again, "Oh, I'm Pinkie Bell!"

"Museum?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

Pinkie Bell braced herself and pushed open the silo door. The inside of the silo looked like a party had exploded inside it. Not in a good way -- more like a party had ingested a grenade, and the room was now splattered with party-gore and party-entrails.

"Welcome to the Pinkie Pie Museum!!" The girl was practically bouncing. "This here is the *number one* museum of all things Pinkie Pie in all of Equestria!"

Calamity was shaking his head, but there was a relieved smile on his face. Velvet Remedy gave Calamity a smirk and he rolled his eyes in return. This was weird, no doubt about it. But: no slaver, no raiders,

no horrible monsters -- a descent into the slightly bizarre was almost a welcome change.

Pinkie Bell didn't let up, didn't even stop for breath. "And what do you know, you're just in time for the tour! Now where's our tour guide? She better not be sleeping again... oh wait! It's ME!"

The "museum" was a single huge room. There wasn't much to tour. But Pinkie Bell made a point to stop and show off one item after another, most of them adorned with saggy balloons or vomited all over with confetti.

"... and they danced and danced all day and all night! And best of all this is the *very silo* where Pinkie Pie, as a young filly, invented the first party ever and got her Cutie Mark!"

Velvet leaned close to me, murmuring, "I'm fairly certain that parties have existed for more than two-hundred and fifty years." But Pinkie Bell was clearly on a roll and not about to stop for questions.

"During the first years of the war, Pinkie Pie traveled all over, throwing parties for Equestrian troops about to head into battle! Bringing them a taste of their homeland, and more importantly, bringing them cheer and putting smiles on their faces!" Pinkie Bell waved her arms at several easels with framed photographs of Pinkie Pie, dressed in frills and fishnets, dancing on stage in front of nearly a thousand ponies. "That is, when she wasn't on super secret missions for Princess Celestia!"

"She looks a lot smaller in person," I commented back to Velvet, thinking of how much less threatening the real pony seemed than the insane billboard just a few miles from this farm.

"Pinkie Pie's only regret was that she couldn't be everywhere helping all the troops all the time! (Although with Dash, she could come pretty close!) So of course..."

Calamity raised a hoof. "Dash her friend or Dash the drug?" Pinkie Bell seemed not to notice.

Prancing towards a familiar poster, Pinkie Bell rambled on, unstoppable. "...when Princess Luna offered to give Pinkie Pie a whole Ministry of her very own to do whatever she wanted to with it, she pounced on the chance! And the Ministry of Morale was born!"

It was the PINKIE PIE IS WATCHING YOU FOREVER poster, this one intact. The elderly pink mare was smiling mischeviously, as if she'd just played a wonderful prank. And with the whole face visible, I swore I caught a curious look in her eyes. I no longer felt guilty with the poster staring at me; now I felt uncomfortably exposed.

A practiced twirl took Pinkie Bell to a table covered in a chemistry set and several...samples. "Pinkie Pie was always really great at cooking things. And when Princess Luna (boo) declared that the drugs that were flooding Equestria from zebra lands were harmful to the people, Pinkie Pie decided to prove that they could be good, a fun addition to any party! Working day and night, Pinkie Pie concocted a mixture of Mint-als and some of her favorite things, creating... dun DUN DUN! Party Time Mint-als!!" Pinkie Bell lifted up a tin, showing them off.

I wanted that tin!

Pinkie Bell set it down next to the chemistry set and continued on. I lost track of her monologue because my mind insisted that I needed to be absolutely sure I remembered where that tin was.

"...by that time the Ministry of Morale had transformed Pinkie Pie into an iconic figure who transcended the boundaries of one pony to become a mystical figure that easily stood alongside Princess Celestia and Princess Luna Themselves!"

Okay, that was just wrong.

"Little colts and fillies knew that Pinkie Pie was always watching them. She saw everything they ever did. And if they were good little colts and fillies, who were nice and friendly, who did their chores and smiled and laughed and never spread seditious lies, then on their birthdays, Pinkie would bring them a wonderful party!" Pinkie Bell

waved a hoof in warning, “But if they were bad little colts and fillies, Pinkie Pie would bring them a rock!”

What the...?! I looked to Velvet Remedy in disbelief.

Meanwhile, Pinkie Bell had stopped. Her eyes went wide, and she sucked in a huge breath. And waited. One second, two, three, four... Finally, Pinkie Bell let out the breath with a disappointed sigh. “I’m sorry. I thought I felt an impromptu musical number coming on.”

Velvet Remedy studiously looked elsewhere.

“Anyway, what was I saying... oh yea, how Pinkie Pie brings parties!”

Velvet turned back to the little filly, a little startled. “Brings? Dear, you do know that Pinkie Pie is dead, don’t you?”

Pinkie Bell didn’t miss a beat. “Oh, she’s physically dead! But her spirit lives on inside all of us!

I watched Velvet Remedy’s eyebrows raise. And then she snickered, seeming to accept that on a level I just couldn’t. While I facehoofed, Velvet leaned close to Calamity and whispered, “I think Pinkie Pie’s spirit has a stalker.”

I managed to miss most of the rest of the “tour” because I was trying to come up with a way to talk Pinkie Bell into parting with what was probably a prize part of her collection. But I was snapped back when Pinkie Bell announced that she had something to ask of us. A proposal.

“It turns out, I have the *only copy* of the recipe for Party-Time Mintals!...” Okay, I knew that wasn’t true. Calamity’s friend also had it. But this might be the fastest, easiest way to get it for myself. And why stress over asking for a single tin when I could get the damned recipe!?

“...And I’d be willing to share it with you if you can bring me the one piece of my Pinkie Pie Museum collection that I’m missing! A limited edition Pinkie Pie magical statuette! Bring it here, and I’ll throw the party to end all parties!”



"I shouldn't have made fun," Velvet Remedy was saying as she trotted nervously about the cramped upstairs bedroom that Pinkie Bell had absolutely insisted we stay in for the night.

When Pinkie Bell explained that a few sets of very special magical figurines had been crafted of each of the Ministry Mares, my mind had immediately gone to the orange pony statuette with the three apples on her flank. Finding another one like that, one specifically of Pinkie Pie, could be virtually impossible. On the other hoof, Pinkie Bell insisted that the statuettes would have survived even the apocalypse. And really, I'd found one after being Outside for roughly what, a week?

Calamity sat on the bed, one ear to the wall as he watched Velvet fret.

"That poor filly. She's so terribly sad."

Calamity whinnied. "Sad? Were ya listenin' t' the same little pink-painted ball o' Dash tha' I was?" Then remembering his own earlier confusion, he clarified, "The drug."

Velvet Remedy stopped. "Oh yes. And that poor girl is *not happy*. Not at all." She hung her head. "She's full of pain. Something horrible must have happened to her."

Looking at Velvet Remedy, I was once more struck by the scarlet and gold stripes in her silvery-white mane, again finding them oddly reminiscent of the Ministry of Peace pink and yellow. Only then I was thinking of it as coincidence or destiny. Now, I wondered if it wasn't more like Pinkie Bell's painted-on pink coat.

Velvet caught my stare and seemed to fathom what I was thinking eerily quickly. "It's not the same!" she insisted quietly.

Calamity was paying more attention to the wall. Abruptly he jumped to his hooves. "She's gone. An' if ya don't want somethin' horrible t' happen t' us, Ah suggest we be leavin' too." He moved to the door and pushed on the handle. It didn't budge.

It was locked.

"Maybe she's just trying to us safe from the 'nasty things' that haunt the fields at night?" ,I offered, not really believing it.

Velvet Remedy had pushed past me to try the door herself. Now she whinnied, "Doesn't matter. We're leaving. I will not be locked in a cage."

Calamity had moved to the window and was looking down on the farm below. I reared up, putting my hooves on the ledge, and peered out through the glass. For a moment, I saw nothing. Just the night. Then, a crack of dimly pulsing, colored light appeared as Pinkie Bell pushed open the door of the barn just enough to slide through, then pushed it shut behind her.

Calamity waited, quiet and still, until the door of the farmhouse opened, casting a rectangle of light across the ground with a Pinkie Bell shape cut out of it. The moment the door closed, he turned and bucked at the window.

The crash was terribly loud.

The escape would have been treacherous, if not impossible, without a pegasus pony to fly us down. We started across the farm, crouching low, keeping to the deeper shadows in the darkness. We were creeping alongside the barn when impulse overtook me and I slipped inside.

I later told Velvet Remedy and Calamity that I wasn't sure why I entered the barn. But the truth was, I had exactly two reasons. First, the recipe for Party Time Mint-als had not been in the museum, and I had not spotted it in the house. It could have easily been hidden anywhere -- in a book or under a rug -- but I was guessing that Pinkie Bell's obsession would not allow her to not put it on display. So I was hoping it was in the barn.

Second, that oddly glowing, pulsing light reminded me uncomfortably of the way that passenger wagon had exploded after Calamity shot it. I had asked Calamity about it later, and he had explained that some of the really big skywagons, like that one which had been designed to carry dozens of ponies, used a magical field generated by a spark engine so that a single pony could pull it through the air. Like spark batteries,

those engines of arcane science still hold serious magical energies. Calamity didn't understand it at that level, of course. He just knew that shooting a hole through the magic box in one of those vehicles unleashes one hell of a vortex.

Such a vortex was brief and very violent. The idea that Pinkie Bell might have something akin to that in her barn, possibly a somehow stable or perpetual magical vortex, deeply worried me.



“What am I looking at?”

It was small, geometrically shaped with surfaces that seemed to twist through each other. The whole thing was the size of a bushel of apples, and swirled with sickly mesmerizing colors.

I could feel it drawing me in. I was losing myself in it. It took physical effort to pull myself away from the thing. Casting my gaze about, I found a safe. The rest of the barn was almost completely barren. I slipped over to it and began to ply the one trade I had which seemed truly unique.

The safe popped open with a whisper.

Inside was my prize: the Party-Time Mint-al recipe!

But it wasn't mine. I scavenged. I looted the homes of slavers and raiders. But this was stealing from some poor young earth pony not yet a mare.

But... Party-Time Mint-als! And really, all I had to do was take it long enough to copy it onto my PipBuck. It'd put it right back. And that wouldn't really be stealing, right?

Except Pinkie Bell was offering it as a reward for helping her with something. And that made it feel like stealing. Like I was taking a reward I hadn't earned.

I sat, staring into that safe for I don't know how long. Finally, I focused my levitation magics... and picked up the one other item in the

safe. A recorder with a single imprinted message. I copied it into my PipBuck and started it.

I didn't recognize the voice, but she sounded young. At least as young as Pinkie Bell was now.

"Peartree,

"The raiders came back yesterday. They didn't take kindly to daddy running them off last week with his shotgun, so this time they came in force. Mama made us hide in the upstairs bedroom and cast a spell over us to keep us from being seen. She made us promise to be quiet and still. But Silver Bell...

"My little sister has always been able to make beautiful music, like the tinkling of dozens of magical bells. We all adore it. But Silver Bell, sometimes when she's frightened or worried, the spell happens all on its own. She didn't mean to. It was an accident.

"The raiders killed mama and daddy. They killed them really slow and brutal. And they made us watch. It was...

"I buried them out by the end of the east field. Put up a couple planks as tombstones. I hate that they won't last long, but I can't carve their names into rocks. And mama and daddy deserve to have their names over their graves.

"Silver Bell has nightmares every night. Honestly, I do most nights too. And during the days she just curls up silent-like. Never crying. Never smiling. I can't even get her to eat. I don't know what to do.

"I'm going to try taking her to Tenpony Tower. I've heard there's a buck up there who takes in orphans. It's a long walk, and so I'm headed up to gather provisions from the neighbors. If I'm not back when you get here, please load up the wagon. I know I can't ask you to come with us; you have your own folks to take care of. But I would really appreciate it if you could hang around so I could say goodbye.

"You're the best buckfriend I could have asked for.

"Love, Memory."

I sat there, stunned. Oh sweet Goddess Celestia...

"You shouldn't have listened to that!" I turned with a start to see Pinkie Bell (...no, Silver Bell!) staring right into my face. "It's. Not. Yours."

This close, I got a much better look at that scar. Horrible realization hit me like ice water. Silver Bell was a unicorn. *She'd cut off her own horn!*

I recoiled, backing into the open safe.

"You want it so much? Keep it!" Pinkie/Silver Bell reached up to swing the safe closed on me.

From behind her, Velvet Remedy's voice broke the air. "You're not like Pinkie Pie."

Pinkie/Silver Bell froze. Then slowly turned away from me. Still, she blocked the front of the safe, and I somehow couldn't bring myself to barge through her to get out.

"You're nothing like Pinkie Pie," Velvet Remedy spoke slowly, calmly. Her voice wasn't accusing now. It was mostly sad. "You are, if anything, the opposite of Pinkie Pie."

I watched the filly in front of me shake. Emotions seemed to rush through her as if they didn't want to stay or were eager to get out of the way so the next emotion could take hold.

"You don't bring happiness. When I look at you, all I feel is sad," Velvet continued, her voice giving gentleness to her words. "If Pinkie Pie were to meet you, she wouldn't throw a party..."

"Yes she would!"

Velvet paused only a moment, "Maybe she would, but she wouldn't throw a party because she wanted to have fun with you. She would throw a party because she wanted to help you. Because you would make her very sad."

"W-w-what do y-you know!?"

“I know that laughter, real laughter, isn’t forced. It isn’t something you paint on to hide how you are truly feeling.” Velvet Remedy walked slowly towards the filly, who was trapped between flying into a rage and breaking down in tears. “I know that you are very badly hurt inside. And it’s not the sort of hurt that can be fixed with a party. Or healed by my horn.”

By the time Velvet Remedy had reached the filly, Pinkie/Silver Bell was shaking badly.

“What happened to your parents wasn’t your fault. What happened to your sister wasn’t your fault...”

To her sister? Suddenly, I remembered the three planks in the field. The last one crooked, like it was planted by someone smaller and younger who didn’t manage so well. I thought of an older sister named Memory trotting out alone towards the nearest neighbors, another farm probably a dozen miles away through territory being savaged by raiders. My heart broke.

“YES! IT! WAS!” And with that, Silver Bell collapsed into wretched sobs. Velvet Remedy was there to wrap her head and a leg around the filly, giving her a mane to cry into.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Math Wrath - You are able to optimize your PipBuck’s targeting spell logic. S.A.T.S. is now 20% cooler.

CHAPTER TEN



COURSE CORRECTION

“Yeah. It’s a good thing they aren’t paying me to agree with them. Holy Flame, my ass!”

Fireworks.

Pinkie Bell (no, Silver Bell -- I really should think of her as Silver Bell) called it fireworks; she had been saving it until her Pinkie Pie Museum collection was complete. Of course. If you were going to throw a “party to end all parties”, you would need fireworks.

“Is that what I think it is?” Railright moaned, staring at the strange object full of pulsing, twisting colors from the open barn door. Not willing to take a step inside. Outside beyond him, I could see Ditzzy Doo helping the little filly into her delivery wagon. (“I Deliver Absolutely Everything!” was emblazoned on the side, along with the constellation of circles that I supposed was the ghoulish pony’s trademark.)

Watcher had come through again. A sprite-bot had silently wandered into the farm deep into the night. Watcher was keeping an eye out for us. My slightly creepy guardian stranger. It had taken considerably less

persuading to get Watcher to contact Ditzzy Doo again for help. Maybe it was because Velvet Remedy's warning had been still fresh in my head, and I had asked nicely, saying please this time. More likely, it was because Watcher had totally freaked out the moment I had lead the sprite-bot into the barn.

Watcher's panicked reaction at the object in the barn had been unexpected and frightening. Rather unlike Velvet Remedy's more refined freak-out when she met Ditzzy Doo. Once I had assured her that the ghoul pony was a friend, and not a ravenous zombie-pony like the herd which had chased us down yesterday, Velvet had smiled and acted perfectly polite. But she was still keeping her distance and giving the ghoul horrified looks. I think the medical pony inside of her was having an allergic reaction to the very existence of pony ghouls.

I had expected Ditzzy Doo's personal arrival. Silver Bell needed help, and we couldn't provide it ourselves. There was a possible place in Manehattan that could help the poor filly, if it still existed. But as my oh-so-uneventful trek across the Equestrian Wasteland had already proven, it was far too dangerous to drag somepony like Silver Bell along. She needed love and comfort, safety and prolonged therapy. Wandering the wasteland wouldn't provide that, and another hostile encounter might scar her even worse. I worried that her pain and wounds were too deep to heal already. I couldn't risk that. And with the lack of alternatives, New Appleloosa was the only real option I saw. And with what I knew of Ditzzy Doo, it would be hard to find somepony better to help her, outside of a professional psychiatrist pony. And I knew Ditzzy Doo would really care about her.

I had not expected Railright to arrive on the wagon. And although he had seemed pleasant before, something about this visit felt foreboding.

I turned away from him and back towards the strange object, careful to look slightly above and to the side of it rather than right into the swirling surface.

“Ayep.” Calamity was standing just inside the barn, having pulled the door open. He too refused to get much closer, although out of reasonable caution rather than abject fear. “That’s a balefire bomb.”

Pinkie Bell had an undetonated megaspell in her barn.

For fireworks.



Shafts of pure sunlight pierced the air from hundreds of tiny breaks in the omnipresent cloud cover. It was like the night I first stepped out of Stable Two, only instead of a fathomless abyss sprinkled with stars, what shown through above was a sky of the most beautiful blue. I wanted that sky so badly. But the breaks closed up even faster than they appeared. By noon, the grey covering would be solid again.

Ditzy Doo had wrapped Silver Bell in a blanket and was strapping herself to the front of the wagon with practiced ease. She caught me watching her and smiled back, her one odd eye rolling up. I tried not to shudder at that, and gave her my best smile back. Then cast a mildly reproachful gaze towards the stack of barrels that Velvet Remedy was trying to remain in the vicinity of without actually hiding.

“What in tarnation d’ya plan t’ do with that thing?” Calamity was asking Railright as they clopped away from the barn. “Ah’d suggest collapsin’ the barn on it, but that might set it off. Hell, fer all we know, movin’ it might set the gol-darned thing off!”

Railright neighed. “Ah have no idea.” He held up a hoof to block Calamity. “Y’all mind if Ah have a word w’ Littlepip? Alone-like?”

Calamity shrugged and trotted over to Ditzy Doo. Railright approached me. My sense of unease increased.

“Y’know, if ya keep sendin’ us folks, we’re gonna hafta build a bigger town,” he began casually, but I detected a stern tone underneath.

“Well, I’m hoping to be freeing a lot more ponies from slavers,” I admitted, thinking once again of Fillydelphia. “But I’m only sending them to you because you’re the kindest, most decent folk I’ve met so

far.” In all honesty, I was beginning to feel a little uncomfortable sending ponies to live in a town that had a history of trading with slavers. I only hoped the influx of mistreated slaver captives might swing their view.

“Don’t get me wrong. We admire what yer tryin’ t’ do. You’re out there savin’ lives, an’ there ain’t nopony complainin’ ‘bout that. We’ll give ‘em a good home, and see the little filly an’ the others from old Appleloosa are cared fer right.”

Here it comes, I thought.

“But...” Railright grimaced. “Y’all are reckless an’ dangerous. Ya got six of our best train ponies slaughtered, some of ‘em bein’ friends o’ mine fer longer than Ah can remember. Ya destroyed one of our only functionin’ trains, and y’all pretty much set fire t’ any peaceful relations New Appleloosa had managed with the slavers. Ah’ll hafta be puttin’ extra guard ponies on all the walls now, an’ we’ll need t’ be sendin’ more guards with the caravans. Honestly, Ah’m worried if we got enough ammo in the town iff’n they should decide to take things out on us fer what ya ponies did.”

I fell back onto my haunches, ears flat. My heart was sinking.

“So Ah’m sorry t’ tell ya this... Ah truly am... but y’all aren’t exactly welcome back in New Appleloosa anymore.” He tried to soften the blow. “At least, not fer a good long while.”

I felt a little numb.

Railright glanced over his flank to where Ditzzy Doo and Calamity were stomping hooves, bartering over the scavenged goods that had begun to weigh down our saddlebags. Railright rolled his gaze back to me. “Ditzzy Doo has been damned insistent ‘bout tradin’ with ya. But Ah have convinced her t’ conduct her business with y’all at the gates.”



The cloud ceiling had fully mended itself, casting the Equestrian Wasteland once again into a dreary grey. Velvet Remedy and Calamity

trotted ahead of me, deep in discussion over song lyrics; Velvet had somehow manages to persuade Calamity to try a duet with her.

My heart felt like lead, but I was surprised that Railright's news didn't hurt a lot more. I did not feel like a rug had been pulled out from under me. In my mind, I had forged no real ties to New Appleloosa, save perhaps a fond respect for the author of *The Wasteland Survival Guide*. I had never considered making it my home, particularly not after learning why Calamity had refused to make it his. So I was no more adrift now than I had been last night.

I checked my PipBuck. Its automap had several new locations flagged now, including the one towards which we were traveling: Manehattan. Calamity had bartered quite well, gaining us medical supplies, food, canteens and even ammo for Little Macintosh; he had also bartered to let us look over some maps from Ditzzy Doo, recording the information in my PipBuck. It was from those maps that I had obtained markers for Manehattan (which was less than a week's trot) and Fillydelphia (which was not). The Bell farmhouse had possessed a small water purifier, allowing us to fill our canteens for the long walk ahead.

Silver Bell was leaving behind her Pinkie Pie Museum. I had asked her permission, very quietly, to look at her Party-Time Mint-als recipe. It was now stored in my PipBuck. For some reason, I hadn't felt like mentioning that to the others yet.

Fatigue was beginning to take its toll on all of us. We hadn't slept, staying with Silver Bell until Ditzzy Doo arrived. Even when the filly cried herself into a nightmare-filled sleep, we had stood vigil.

In the distance, I could see a very narrow white tower rising up into the sky, so high it pierced the clouds. Part of me was strongly tempted to divert towards it, just to have a look, but it was miles away and would add many hours to our trip.

Instead, I'd try to sate my curiosity with the small series of buildings up ahead. I trotted faster to catch up to Calamity and Velvet.

Velvet Remedy had paused in her songwriting, bothered by a question, “Calamity, if the pegasus ponies live in the clouds, what do they eat?”

Calamity answered nonchalantly, “Oh, they grow their own food up there.” He looked at her, “Haven’t you ever heard of cloud seeding?”

Velvet Remedy stared at him. To Calamity’s credit, he held the deadpan expression for quite a few seconds before breaking into a grin.

Velvet chuckled. “Very funny. Fine, have your secrets. But one day, I’ll expect a real answer.”

I tried to float my binoculars out and take a closer look at the buildings, but I was barely able to get past opening my saddle bags before my levitation was exhausted. By Luna’s grace, I needed sleep.

Calamity launched into the air, zooming forward to do an aerial sweep above the structures. He came back, looking grim. “Raiders.”



BLAM!

Another raider pony went down, most of her head splattering on the wall behind her, mixing with the graffiti. I dipped back behind the apple cart (the apples had long rotted away and the raiders had taken to decorating it with pony skulls). Little Macintosh had two more shots left. I had more bullets, but I wasn’t quite sure how to reload it without relying on my magic. It was strange enough firing the gun in my teeth.

Velvet Remedy crouched beside me, tending to a gash in Calamity’s side. To her credit, she’d actually tried to talk to the raiders. They returned her hello with some extremely perverted suggestions, at least one of which involved necrophilia. That’s when Calamity started picking off the ponies who had taken sniping positions on the roofs.

“Hook me t’ the cart,” Calamity insisted.

“Excuse me?” ,Velvet looked at him questioningly.

Calamity hoof-tapped the apple cart. “Instead of hidin’ behind it, let’s use it. Hook me up an’ climb in!”

I looked between the cart and Calamity. “Wait... you mean you’re going to pull us through the air as we shoot these guys? You can do that?”

“Ayep.”

I blinked. It would certainly make for a novel combat. I nodded to Velvet, and she began strapping Calamity in.

Moments later, we were in the air. It was exhilarating. The wind blowing through my coat, the ground no longer holding me. It was like falling, only fun. A little bit terrifying, but fun.

“Don’tcha forget t’ shoot back!” Calamity called out, realizing that I was enraptured by the experience. A raider pony’s bullet thudded into the bottom of the wagon. I suspect it hadn’t been the first. My mind snapped back to the battle, and I took aim.

BLAM!

Down went another raider pony. I lined up on a third with the scope and tongued the trigger. My target fell, blood pooling under him. This was almost too easy.

Only now I had to reload or switch weapons. The combat shotgun was going to be useless at this range, and I had lost my assault rifle in the train battle. That left the sniper rifle, a weapon so large it required either telekinesis or a mounting to fire. I looked at the cart, figuring I could brace it on the posts.

“Whoa!” Calamity shouted as the sky filled with bullets, one coming close enough to scrape his battle saddle. “Pesky varmint! Li’lpip, see if ya can’t take that one hidin’ behind them mailboxes. Ah’ll bank so’s ya c’n get a better shot.”

I lined up the sniper rifle, bracing it as best I could, then aimed down the scope as Calamity swung the cart around. I spotted the raider unicorn, an ugly mare with only scraps of purple left in her mane. She

was mostly protected behind the row of mailboxes, floating a scoped assault carbine, a serious upgrade to the assault rifle I had used before. I held my tongue until Calamity's maneuvering gave me a better shot.

The raider dived almost fully into view, unleashing a torrent of bullets up at us. Slipping into the targeting nirvana of S.A.T.S., I barely noticed Calamity's cry as I tongued the trigger and sent the raider to the Goddesses' judgement.

I felt the wagon tilt dangerously. "Calamity!" Velvet Remedy cried out beside me. The wagon turned sharply in the air.

I gasped. Calamity had been shot, clean through his right wing! The wing was seeping with blood and he grunted in agony as he tried to keep the wagon aloft. "Ah'm sorry, folks," he whinnied painfully. "Y'all might experience some turbulence..." The wagon dropped five feet, eliciting a yelp from both Velvet Remedy and myself. Calamity caught the fall, pulling up, trying to make it to the roof of the most intact building.

He made it. Mostly. My friend crashed down onto the roof hard, skidding along the broken tiling, the wagon slamming down behind him at a bad angle, one of the wheels snapping off as it threw Velvet Remedy and me. I found myself airborne in the not-fun falling way. I hit the roof once, bouncing, pain bursting in my shoulder, and flew into a pile of crates and ammo boxes (the former splintering on impact).

I looked up in time to see the apple cart roll over Calamity, jolting off the lip of the roof with a loud crack, and proceed over the edge, dragging Calamity along with it! Blood smeared the rooftop from his shot wing. The wounded pegasus gasped and kicked out with his legs, catching and bracing himself against the lip of the roof. He stopped, trembling, the weight of the wagon pulling at him through the still-mostly-intact harness. "Help!"

Velvet Remedy moaned nearby. The lucky mare had managed to land face-first on a nice, soft mattress -- raider bedding (on second thought perhaps not so lucky). I pulled myself to my hooves, wincing in pain

from splinters and scrapes and a brutal bruise in my shoulder, and dashed towards Calamity. Velvet galloped past me, her longer legs carrying her to the pegasus's side where she started biting at the strained harness. I swiftly joined her. Calamity groaned.

After only a few very long seconds, harness cut, the cart fell down the side of the building and smashed on the fragments of sidewalk below.



Velvet Remedy knelt on the mattress (which she had tried flipping over to a less grossly stained side, only to be deterred by the colonies of bugs living beneath), and contemplated the memory orb we had found in the wreckage of Ditzzy Doo Deliveries. She hadn't actually played it yet.

Velvet had taken care in cleaning and mending Calamity's wounded wing as best she could, then wrapping it in healing bandages, assuring the pegasus that he would be ready to fly again by the next morning. Presuming, of course, that he follow her advice and stay earth-bound until he could get some rest.

Likewise, she had treated the rest of our injuries with healing potions and poultices. Once again, our medical supplies had been reduced below what I would have wanted; I was counting on scavenging more from the buildings. Surely the raiders had been hoarding some.

There was a hatch down into the building. Moments after we had cut the apple cart loose, a single raider pony had burst up out of it, armed with a metal rake whose tines had been sharpened into deadly claws. He was felled by a twin-shot from Calamity's battle saddle. Even at the edge of passing out, Calamity was still a perfect shot.

"Why a balefire bomb?" I asked as I reclaimed my sniper rifle, struggling to put it back into its harness without levitation. (It turned out that reloading bullets into Little Macintosh had been within my capabilities still, but only so long as the beautiful gun was held in my mouth.)

My companions both looked up, startled. I clarified, "I mean, why was it a bomb? I thought megaspells were cast."

Calamity, who had curled up near the roof hatch, simultaneously resting and keeping guard, answered, "Unicorn ponies cast spells. Zebras did not. They mixed their magics into potions and phylacteries and fetishes. Their megaspells were either worked into enchanted missiles, like the one which obliterated Cloudsdale, or snuck into population centers and detonated, like the balefire bomb which annihilated Manehattan."

I nodded at that and turned my attention to pulling ammo from the raider's ammo boxes. One locked box provided me with several grenades. Nice.

Looking up to Calamity, "Ready to brave the building?" I was hoping that all the raiders were already dealt with, and we could scavenge freely. But that was probably wishful thinking.

Calamity nodded, getting onto his hooves. Velvet Remedy got up, moving past me towards the hatch. I leaned forward and bit the end of Velvet Remedy's tail (trying not to think of what it tasted like) and reined in her forward trot. "Stay here," I whispered. "Let us scout it first." Velvet nickered at me unappreciatively but stopped.

Calamity gripped the hatch handle with his teeth and flapped his wings (getting a disapproving sigh from Velvet Remedy) pulling it open. The warm, flickering light and acrid smoke of burning trash barrels greeted us. Crouching down, I made my way down the stairs. Calamity followed.

There were three raider ponies inside, barricaded and waiting nervously for us to show ourselves. I waved Calamity back, then backed up myself. A moment later, I sent several of my new grenades down to see them.

"oh fuck!" came a voice from below, followed by three rapid explosions, then a silence marred only by the sound of falling debris.

Creeping back down, I found three bloody corpses and a hell of a mess. The rest of the building was raider-free, although Calamity and I had to clear a few tripwires and “disarm” a bouquet of grenades hanging over the front door before I was ready to declare the building safe for looting. (Sadly, neither Calamity nor I had the sort of finesse with explosives and traps that would allow us to safely collect the grenades. Disarming the grenade bouquet was done at a distance, and involved a thrown bucket and a lot of running.)

I returned to the stair, calling Velvet Remedy down.

“Oh, I can come down now? How nice.” Velvet gave me a flat expression and trotted down past me.

Crap.

Below, I heard her suck in a breath at the slaughter below. I closed my eyes, wincing, then opened them and walked down after her.



The buildings had included a postal office, a grocery and Equestrian Army Recruitment Center. The last of those had taken a direct hit, leaving only two freestanding walls, one of which still boasted a large recruitment poster. (“You too can be a Steel Ranger!” it proclaimed, with an image of a rearing pony... or at least a rearing pony-shaped suit of fully-enclosed armor, complete with a shining lamp on its forehead, towering over a rock-strewn landscape littered with dead, bloody zebras). The rest of the building had collapsed into a crater at the bottom.

We had crash-landed on the roof of the post office. It turned out to be the most scavenge-worthy, as the raiders had stored everything from cartons of cigarettes to most of the various odds and ends I would need to build a poisoned needle gun. No medical supplies however. That hurt.

The grocery had long since been looted of any foodstuffs and the raiders had turned the interior into their camp; the disemboweled bodies of their victims hung from the ceilings between filthy mattresses and pots full of disgusting food. Pornographic and blasphemous graffiti covered everything. Velvet had insisted on coming into the grocery despite our warnings, but swiftly fled, vomiting into one of the mailboxes across the street.

Trotting to the corpse of the unicorn, I picked up the assault carbine with my teeth and struggled to put it into my saddle bags before giving up and carrying it around my neck by that strap along with my canteens. Calamity had stripped the other raider ponies of weapons and goods, leaving their barding behind; and now he was tearing apart their firearms and rebuilding better ones using the best parts. I trotted over to watch him; I had done the same thing before, but he was much better at it.

Velvet Remedy, looking a little worse for wear, called out to me as she trotted up. "There's a safe in the crater that still looks intact, dear. Do you want to have a go at it?" I let her lead the way.

Mercifully, bobby pin and screwdriver was still within my abilities. As I tried to pick the lock, I asked Velvet, "We need a place to rest. What do you think of sleeping here?"

"In a raider town?" she asked incredulously. "Have you seen their décor? Beyond being unbelievably disgusting, it's exceptionally unhealthy. I half suspect that the reason they were such easy targets for you two was that they were all impaired from disease. No offense."

I nickered and focused on the safe.

"Besides, there could be more out... raiding. Do you really want to be asleep here when they come back?"

She had a good point. As tired as I was, this was a horrible place to bed down.

The safe opened with a click. Looking inside, I found another Stealth Buck and a copy of *Zebra Infiltration Tactics* ("Know Your Enemy!"), as

well as several badly-aged documents and a number of slightly glowing magical energy grenades. A recorded message was tucked into the back. I downloaded it to my PipBuck and listened.

"I'm sending you one of the devices recovered from Shattered Hoof Ridge. Intelligence suggested that the zebras had developed invisibility spell fetishes, but *this* looks like something designed by the Ministry of Magic. It's even PipBuck compatible. I hate to say it, but it looks like we've got traitors in our midst. If somepony in M.A.S. is leaking arcane technology to the zebras, the Princess will need to take action."

No voice I recognized, but this was the third Ministry I now knew by name. Third of six. Six heroic best friends; six Ministries. The Ministry of Morale and the Ministry of Peace were the only others I knew anything about... or were they? No, there was one other, although I hadn't learned its name. The orange bucking pony statuette was clearly one of the limited edition magical artifacts that Pinkie... no Silver Bell had told us about. The cutie mark of three apples was identical to the design on the handle of Little Macintosh. The fact that I could mentally draw a line from one of Watcher's heroines to a weapons factory guarded by pony-shaped robots with living brains in them made me cringe a little inside. I got the feeling I wasn't going to like a lot of what I was bound to learn about these Ministries.

At least the Ministry of Peace seemed benign.



A curving set of train tracks cut a swath through the rolling, rocky hills and intersected with our path, so we had begun to follow it. It wasn't exactly the right direction, but it was close, and I suspected the tracks would wind slowly back, probably leading all the way to Manhattan. Plus, it had the benefit of being relatively flat. All the hills were sapping me.

♪ *"No more living in this gilded cage,"* Velvet began to sing.

"Shackled to what is supposed to be.

"I am ready to exit this stage; it is time for this bird to fly free."

♪ *"Ah've been blinded cuz Ah've closed muh eyes,"* Calamity stepped in. His voice was no match for Velvet Remedy's but he carried a tune amazingly well.

♪ *"Seein' just what they told me t' see.*

"Time t' get up an' shake off the lies;

break their rules, stretch muh wings

and just leave!

Wow. For the second time that morning, I fell to my haunches, my mouth hanging open. Velvet Remedy and Calamity continued their song, unaware that I had stopped and was staring at them. I threw myself back to my hooves and trotted to catch up.

There was a part of my spirit that was just welling with happiness, seeing my friends like this. A part of my mind that was in constant squee at hearing Velvet writing a new song. And there was an annoyingly earth-ponyish part of me that insisted these two were alerting everything in our vicinity that we were here. I suspected Velvet Remedy didn't know any better -- for having been in the wasteland several hours longer than I, she had less experience with traveling through it; and her mind seemed more inclined to other paths of thought. Calamity, on the other hoof, probably just didn't care. There weren't many threats out here that he couldn't just fly away from, and I assumed he sometimes forgot he was traveling with two earth-bound ponies.

I studiously ignored that part of me. For now, the song was helping me keep my legs working.

As we rounded a steep hill, Velvet Remedy and Calamity's song reached an abrupt end. "I have no idea yet what to do for the bridge," Velvet admitted a little sheepishly. "But the chorus is strong."

Calamity agreed, having taken a real shine to the project. Spreading his wings, he swooped up to land on a tall rock jutting from the hilltop then crouched down. "Got somethin' ahead" He glided back down to us. "There's a batch o' ponies clustered 'round a heap o' vehicles all

mashed together.” Calamity checked the load on his battle saddle. “They look like they could be raiders...”

“Look like?” I said warningly.

Calamity paused, blushing. “Yeah... well... um, better t’ approach cautiously. Safer rather than sorrier an’ all that. Fortunately, they ain’t seen us yet, so...”

“You sure about that, pony?” said a gravelly voice from the air above us. The armored griffin thudded down in front of us in a battle stance -- talons sharp as razors, a jagged scar running up her beak and across where her left eye had once been, and a tri-barreled magical energy shotgun in a quick-draw holster under her breast.



The battle-scarred griffin was named Gawd, and we were her “guests”. I must admit, I found her... impressive.

Gawd marched us up the tracks towards what my PipBuck labeled Junction R-7. Calamity’s “heap o’ vehicles” turned out to be an old, rusted train and a stack of wagons forming a barricade over the tracks. The train cars were strange -- I had never seen cattle cars before. The wheels on the engine were missing. From the cactus vines growing over much of it, Junction Seven hadn’t seen moving traffic for at least a decade.

Ponies had converted the trapped train into a guard outpost. Rusty sheet metal formed sheltered huts jutting out from the wagon stack. From the stench of manure, the old switchhouse on the opposite side was their outhouse. Velvet Remedy lifted a hoof to her nose, eyes watering.

Calamity noticed me eyeing the cattle cars. “Ah’ve heard stories of slavers usin’ those t’ transport slaves long distances over the rails,” he muttered, adding after a moment’s thought, “Never seen it with muh own eyes though.” Taking in the size of the cattle cars then the number of them on this train, it struck me: that’s a lot of slaves!

On the other hoof, these ponies were certainly not using them for the buying and selling of ponies. They were dressed in the same sort of makeshift armor that I had taken from the raiders, but a closer look revealed that several of them carried magical energy weapons of one sort or another. And as we neared, most of those weapons were swiftly pointed at us.

My ears flattened as I remembered one of the train ponies vaporized, leaving only glowing pink ash behind. It occurred to me only now that I had seen the same effect my first day outside -- the Watcher-controlled sprite-bot had used a similar weapon on the bloatsprite. (So maybe the sprite-bots weren't entirely earth pony engineering after all.) Despite our situation, my thoughts jumped-track. What did Watcher say about bloatsprites? When you mix parasprites and Taint. Which is magical radiation, right? Or is it something different?

"Hoi!" Gawd called out. "Let 'em pass. Me an' these little ponies are going t' have a talk."

Hooves raised in greeting, several ponies echoing responding "hoi"s before returning to what they had been doing before. One brown mare with a missing leg was using her peg to jam spark batteries into the array for mounted multi-barrel magical energy cannon. A pink unicorn pony had several barrels stripped out of the cannon and was cleaning them with his horn. He moved slowly, like his motor skills were impaired, but his telekinetic hornwork was fluid and precise. I could see old scars -- dozens at least, possibly over a hundred -- all down his back and legs. He'd been whipped to the edge of death. Many times.

I looked to my companions. Calamity had slowed down, giving the mounted weapon a curious eye. Velvet Remedy was more concerned, if not downright appalled, at the condition of some of the ponies.

A half-starved foal trotted out of a shadowed alcove of rusty metal, carrying a canteen around his neck which he offered to the each of the half-dozen ponies I could spot.

Velvet leaned close, whinnying nervously, "What are we getting into?"

With talon and wing, Gawd directed us into the single passenger car on the train, nestled up against the crippled engine. From the reek of dander inside, this was clearly the house of Gawd. Or, at least, her office.

“Close up the door,” she ordered a blue-coated earth pony as she stepped inside behind us. The door swung shut with a metallic squeal, and I could hear braces thudding into place. We were locked in with the griffin.

Ironically, in better circumstances, I realized this would be a big tactical mistake for the griffin -- three against one, and at least two of us could handle ourselves in combat. (It was odd, and somewhat uncomfortable to think of myself as somepony who could face a fight with confidence. Not for the first time, I had to wonder if the wasteland was changing me for the better, or just changing me.) Right now, however, with my levitation magic at its most feeble, we were probably hosed if this came to blows and guns. It was the same reasoning that had prompted me to accept Gawd’s “invitation” in the first place. Things hadn’t changed.

The room was spartanly furnished, save for the desk with a glowing terminal and a tattered black flag on the back wall showing wicked talons coming out of darkness. Gawd strutted around behind the desk, placed her talons on it, and faced us. I shook my head, trying to clear the webs of too little sleep when I caught myself musing that she’d look really attractive if she was a little closer to my age and, you know, a pony.

“First things first,” Gawd glowered at the three of us. “Who are you ponies, and who do you work for?”

Calamity bristled. “Ah could ask ya the same thing!”

“Mind yer manners, pegasus! You’re in our territory and in my home. I ask, you answer.”

I put a steadying hoof on Calamity’s flank, indicating that this was okay. Stepping forward, “I’m Littlepip. This is Calamity and Velvet Remedy. We’re just passing through.” We also had an increasingly

desperate need for a place to sleep, but I wasn't going to reveal that, much less suggest we sleep anywhere near here.

"Did Mister Topaz give you permission to cross our territory?"

Something made me suspect a trick question. But before I could formulate a strategic response, Velvet Remedy asked, "Who's Mister Topaz?"

The grizzled griffin leaned over the desk and locked Velvet Remedy with her one good eye. "Say again?" She stared at Velvet appraisingly.

Velvet Remedy stood up straight. "You asked us about Mister Topaz, somepony I'd never heard of before. I asked you who that was. What's so difficult about that?"

I had to force myself not to facehoof.

However, Gawd apparently saw something in Velvet that impressed on her that the unicorn was sincere. The griffin sat back, "You really don't know, do you?" A smile slowly crossed her beak, her scar turning it into something unpleasant. "Well now, isn't that interesting!" She tapped her talon-tips together as she considered us.

"Well?" Velvet Remedy prompted.

Gawd leaned back, smiling quite a lot now. "Mister Topaz is the lord and master of Shattered Hoof and all territories adjacent."

Calamity nickered. "Ah call horseapples. This ain't anywheres close t' Shattered Hoof Ridge."

Gawd rolled her eyes. "No. But you are less than half an hour's flight from Shattered Hoof, the rock-breaking compound, which was named after Shattered Hoof, the battle."

"Rock-breaking compound."

Gawd facewinged. "Really? Surely you understand rock-breaking." She stared at our uncomprehending faces, then sighed. "Sometimes rocks have gems in them. Unless you got a unicorn who can tell you which ones do and which ones don't, y'have

to break them open to see what's inside. Fer crying out loud, you had to have passed at least *one* of the rock farms in order to get here."

Velvet Remedy raised an eyebrow, confused. "How do you farm *rocks*?"

"Ugh. Easy. You pick a plot of land where rocks have shown a higher likelihood of hiding gems and you farm them!" We were clearly not impressing the griffin with our ignorance. Waving a talon, "Some ponies even used to rotate the rocks around from one field to the other to help improve the chances of gems..."

"That doesn't make any sense," I blurted, interrupting. It wasn't like the gems grew in the rocks like seeds, after all. My mind twinged.

Calamity only made it worse by suggesting, "Ah think it's tradition."

"Well it's a stupid tradition," I argued back. "These are rocks. Gems aren't magical; a rock isn't going to be any more likely to have gems in it if you give the rock loving care, or extra sunlight or better dirt to sit on."

"Well, gems could be magical. Ah mean, how many magical artifacts use gems? Y'need gems t' build magical energy weapons. They use 'em t' focus an' amplify th' energies."

I stared. First, that was way more technical expertise on anything related to the arcane sciences than I ever expected from Calamity. Second, it had never actually occurred to me that gems *might* be magical.

Gawd sat in front of us, impatiently waiting. After a silent pause, I turned back to her. "I think we're done now. Please continue."



Gawd had a job for us. Promised bottle caps and safe passage in return.

Naturally, we had some questions. Starting with, "Why us?"

"Because you ponies aren't from around here. You've got no loyalties t' any of the people hereabouts. An' that makes you free to operate

where I can't, do things a member of Mr. Topaz's employ couldn't get away with." She gave us a narrow look. "You getting me?"

I nodded slowly. "You want us to do something that you can't do without being disloyal to Mister Topaz."

"But isn't it still disloyal to hire somebody else to do your dirty work?" Velvet Remedy questioned.

Gawd glowered. "Now look here. I have only two loyalties. To the contract, and to bottle caps. And in that order." She leaned back, looking over her shoulder at the flag behind her. "My old crew learned that when they decided t' take up Red Eye's offer and turn over the caravan we were hired t' protect t' Red Eye's slavers." She turned back to us. "Talons don't break contracts. Not even for barrels of caps. They learned that the hard way when I shot 'em in the back."

Her smile turned grim, "It was a point of honor."

Shooting your friends in the back didn't sound like any code of honor I could understand. Still, Gawd's words opened up a whole flood of new questions from us, stampeding one after another. Gawd was gracious enough, for a little while, to answer.

"Red Eye, that guy on the sprite-bots, he runs the slavers?"

"Yes. Irony isn't it. He preaches all that horseshit about peace and unity and building a better tomorrow, and he's been building it on the backs of hundreds of slaves. I can't understand how so many of you ponies buy into his hypocritical rubbish."

"But griffins don't?"

"Hell no. He couldn't pay enough to make me bite into his poisoned apple." Gawd grimaced, adding, "Not that he's offering. No Unity for griffins. We're just hired wings to him."

"And the griffins will work for him?"

"Yes." Gawd seemed to take that as either offensive or stupid. Or possibly offensively stupid. "The Talons will work for whoever pays. Slavers, raiders, good little townfolk, caravans. Whoever's got

the caps. We don't play politics and we don't take sides. Unless, of course, it's in the contract. That's been the griffin way for over two hundred years. Red Eye, he gets that. And unlike some folk, he has no reservations 'bout strengthening his forces with our kind."

"Talons?"

"The Talons," Gawd boasted, looking back at the flag, "Have been the best mercs in the Equestrian Wasteland since before Equestria was a wasteland." She thumped her armor proudly. "Can't hire yerself any better."

"Why does...?"

But Gawd had finally reached the end of her conversational composure. "Enough! I'm not your fucking teacher. I'm the one who is hiring you to perform a service. Get it done, and done right, you can ask me everything you want to as I lead you safely out of here."

I looked to my companions. The chore itself shouldn't be too hard. It was, after all, right in my skill set. I'd barely need the magic I barely had.

Gawd clicked her talons together again. "Oh, one last thing."

Why did I know I wasn't going to like this? "What?"

"Collateral." Gawd smiled, a cold and friendless smile. "Not that I don't trust you. But I need to make sure you don't plan t' march in there and tell Deadeyes all about our little arrangement. So... one of you is staying behind with me."

"Oh hell no," Calamity all but growled.

"Or, maybe instead..." I suggested reasonably, "You could sit on my horn and spin."

Gawd actually smirked at that. She opened her talons in a wave. "If you decide you don't want the job, yer free t' go. I'll just have the ponies outside open up that door, and tell them you're not under my protection anymore." She raised an eyebrow, pretending to give us

time to mull over the non-choice. “You do the job, this is the way you do it.”

Okay, not so attractive. I glared at the griffin. “Fine. You can have me.” I winced a moment later, and clarified, “As your prisoner.”

Gawd contemplated that for less than a moment. “No.” A razor-sharp talon jabbed the air in Velvet Remedy’s direction. “She will stay.”

My mind echoed Calamity’s words: oh hell no! I opened my mouth, expecting the stream of profanity working its way to my tongue would shock even a raider. But Velvet Remedy pre-empted me.

“Agreed.”

“What?!” I turned towards her, aghast.

Velvet merely nodded. “There are ponies here that I might be able to tend to. And your special skills are needed for this undertaking...”

“Wait,” Gawd interrupted. “‘Tend to?’ Don’t tell me you’re another Preacher.”

Velvet Remedy fixed the griffin with a stare of her own. “Maybe you should have asked more about me *before* insisting that I stay here with you.”



Calamity passed me the binoculars and crouched back down behind a formation of boulders lining the hilltop. I took them and looked down into a small, unnatural valley surrounded by ridges.

Several rows of tracks cut through the valley, ending at the iron-gated mouth of a fortress. Walls of concrete and barred windows rose up from the ground surrounding a courtyard, most of which was barely visible through a roof of razor-wire (although there was a gaping hole in the razorwire towards one side that somepony on a better day could drop boxcars through). The broken remains of a road, cut up by multiple concrete barriers, terminated at a second gate of thick metal

beneath the watch of a guard tower. I could see a scarce few ponies walking between it and the towers.

Shattered Hoof Re-Educational Stockyard

"Reforming aberrant morality through hard work and loving care."

We had been warned that the surrounding valley had been mined. The road would be a killing zone. And even if I went it alone using the Stealth Buck, I doubted I would be able to get through that door. It looked like it only opened from the inside. If we were going to sneak in, there was only one way to go. I looked at Calamity and saw that he had come to the same conclusion.

"Ah figure we wait 'till it gets a bit darker, then Ah fly you in."

I nodded. "Are you sure your wing's up for it?"

Calamity stretched out his bandaged wing and gave it a few flaps. "Ayep. Good t' go. Take more'n a bullet t' take me out of the sky." He quickly added, "When Ah'm not pullin' an apple cart, at least."

A shadow passed over his expression as he looked at his bandaged wing. Flying in still had risk. A dark, pony-shaped blotch against the sky -- somepony might spot that, particularly if they're on the lookout for griffins. I didn't want to risk Calamity getting shot again. And the Stealth Buck couldn't conceal both of us. I mulled over the problem until an idea struck me. It could help, but I hated asking Calamity to fly on his wounded wing. (Even if he had just suggested it.)

"Calamity, remember those mattresses back at the grocery?" I asked.

An hour later, with the clouded sky darkening, Calamity gently circled down towards the huge hole in the razor wire above the rock-breaking yard. His forelegs wrapped around me. And I in turn strained my telekinesis to keep the cover sheet from one of the raider outpost mattresses flying along beneath us. The mottled, mostly-grey color of the rectangle camouflaged our shapes against the sky.

Shattered Hoof had become the home of escaped slaves, many from the train that had been ambushed at Junction R-7, who had turned to a life of raiding the local farms. The very idea made my stomach tighten. Having fought to save several captured ponies, risked my life and those of my friends (not to mention the lives of innocent train ponies) to give them freedom, the mere idea that some former slaves would turn to the most vile sorts of barbarism made my skin want to tear itself off.

Their leader was a pony named Deadeyes, who spoke for a supposedly higher pony whom no one but Deadeyes had ever seen: Mister Topaz. It was for Mister Topaz that Deadeyes organized raiding parties out of Shattered Hoof and kept the rock-breaking yards in operation.

Inside that fortress, Gawd had told us, secure in Deadeyes' office, was a safe. In the safe was a ledger. Gawd wanted it. She didn't say why.

Honestly, I had my own reasons for wanting to take a look at that.

Deftly, Calamity arrowed through the torn section of razor wire and landed us gently at one edge of the yard. "Y'see?" he whispered cockily, "Nothin' to it!

Not more than a heartbeat later, two Shattered Hoof Raiders trotted by. Calamity and I backed into the shadows, and I pulled the mattress cover over us. We held our breaths.

"Didja hear something?" I heard one ask the other.

"Yeah. My stomach. Growling."

They seemed to pause there for several long seconds. The stench creeping off of the fabric began to make my eyes water and my stomach twist in knots. I was afraid I would sneeze or vomit.

Finally, I heard their hooves clop away. Tossing the wretched cover aside, I sucked in fresh air. Then Calamity and I slid along the wall to the first door we could find. It was locked. That didn't last long.



“Not the safe yer supposed t’ be pickin’,” Calamity commented as he stood guard by the door.

We’d managed to break into the Visitor’s Center of the re-educational... let’s face it, prison. The posters on the walls had pictures of smiling, happy ponies bucking at rocks and revealing beautiful gems, or carrying said gems to facility matrons who just glowed with approval. (“Here, we teach those poor ponies who have lost their way how to reconnect with ponykind!” one banner boasted. Another: “It’s not long before our guests find themselves taking pride in good, hard work that supports the war effort!”)

There simply weren’t enough facehoofs in the world to express my feelings.

Two vending machines stood side-by-side next to Calamity, their lights flickering. Both had been pried open and emptied of Sparkle-Cola and Sunrise Sarsaparilla respectively (the latter machine bearing an image of the Goddess Celestia raising the sun over happy Sarsaparilla drinkers.) We had, however, managed to loot a fair bit of old pre-war coins from both machines.

“It’ll just take a moment,” I replied, floating up bobby pin and screwdriver. The safe I was working on was not Deadeyes’; it was the storage safe for valuables in the Visitor’s Center Lost and Found. This part of the building didn’t even connect internally to the prison proper. We would have to brave the yard again and try another door.

Calamity shook his head. “Honestly, Ah don’t feel right. Ah don’t know why we’re doin’ this. Ain’t we helpin’ raiders?”

I paused. The feeling had occurred to me too. “We’re doing this because we’re not in any condition to fight these people. It would be tough if we were fully rested and healthy.” I took a deep breath, “Plus, this is a chance to dig a little into what’s going on.”

“Ah don’t really care ‘bout what’s goin’ on in a raider camp. ‘Cept for how Ah c’n put a stop t’ it.”

I turned to Calamity and shook my head. “No, not just here. Everywhere.” I was beginning to put together something in my head that I didn’t much like. “I’ve been seeing things that suggest that this isn’t situation normal for the Equestrian Wasteland. My first night outside, I was captured by slavers. They marched right up to a raider bridge expecting to have to pay a toll, and instead the raiders started shooting. At the time, I just took it as luck; but I don’t think so anymore.”

Calamity gave me a considering look, weighing the ideas I was putting forth.

“That pseudo-goddess at old Appleloosa, she was new. The slavers there hadn’t seen anything like her before. But somepony named Stern sent that bitch here from Fillydelphia to oversee things. And that happened, what, a week or two ago?”

I returned my focus to the safe. “Something’s going on out here, and that pony Red Eye is in the center of it. Whatever it is, it has been building up for a long time...” I searched for the right words; with a mental lightning flash, they came to me. “It’s like a river in a storm that is just now on the verge of breaking its banks and flooding everything.”

Calamity sat down, tipping his hat back as he and gave that a good pondering.

“Ah suppose that makes sense.” Calamity chuckled, “Sides, how often c’n Ah say Ah’m on a mission from...”

“Don’t.”

Calamity nickered. “Ah guess not even once.”

My bobby pin broke. Slipping out another, I tried again. I had a distinct urge to see the contents of this safe, based on one of the last prewar entries on the Visitor’s Center terminal. The terminal itself had been encrypted so tightly that the Shattered Hoof Raiders had never been able to access it.

Entry 42:

Just got word that Shattered Hoof will be closing down the Visitor's Center portion of this facility. The Ministry of Morale has decreed that the friends and family of ponies who have been determined guilty of sedition or treason will no longer have the right to visit our guests until rehabilitation is deemed complete, for fear that our guests might spread their poison to their loved ones. As such, this is going to be my last entry.

Fortunately, the severance package will be generous. I plan to take my family and move to Cloudsdale. The world below is just a little too ugly for me to be raising my foals in.

We've done our best to contact ponies with items still in the Lost & Found, and most of what remains will be mailed out today. Unfortunately, we've had no luck reaching our recent guest entertainer. Sweetie Belle has apparently fallen off the face of Equestria. I've taken care to store her belongings in the safe.

It amuses me that we shut this office down just after we repainted. If somepony had said something sooner, we could have saved ourselves a lot of trouble. (Not to mention Tiara's new dress, although the rest of us are upset about that. That mare is unbearable.)

It cost me a bobby pin, but the safe finally opened. (I would discover later, to my chagrin, that I could have just opened it via the terminal had I been more patient.)

Inside was a single package. Carefully, I pulled it out with my teeth and set it on the ground. I gave a tug on the drawstring with my teeth and it opened easily. I was stunned to see a statuette of a jaw-droppingly gorgeous white unicorn with a sensual purple mane and tail, and a darling three-gem cutie mark. (There were other things in the package too, but I totally forgot about them.)

"Are ya done visually molestin' that statue, girl?" Calamity's words disrupted my reverie. He looked impatient. I blushed hotly.

"She's a looker, Ah'll give ya that. But Ah'm guessin' she wouldn't much appreciate the way yer lookin' at 'er."

“I was... just... looking...” I stammered, then focused all my energy to floating up the statue and slipping it into my bag. I knew I was risking burning myself out completely, but just had to keep her! And I didn’t want to risk marring the statuette with my teeth. The statuette trembled, not wanting to rise from the ground. Then I felt a surge of magical energy, and the statuette floated up gracefully. Whatever blessing this one had bestowed, it had rejuvenated my horn. Just a little, but enough to float the statuette and even Little Macintosh. I turned the hot, gorgeous mare around in the air until I could read the engraving.

“Be Unwavering!”

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Stable Shot - Your attacks are smooth, graceful and precise. You have a higher chance to score a critical hit on an opponent in combat, equivalent to 5 extra points of Luck.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



FACTIONS

"Didn't know anyone would willingly walk into this place, not unless they were looking for trouble."

"Gone

"Everypony in Manehattan is just... gone. I-I was talking with my best friend, Silver Spoon, over terminal chat when the connection went dead. My... my best friend is dead. Only she's... she's not... laying dead somewhere. One minute she was talking to me, telling me about the concert she went to last night at Hoofbeats, and then she was just gone. Erased.

"Th-they say the ponies in a few of the Ministries' buildings might have survived... but that doesn't sound real. Shattered Hoof is more than two days trot from Manehattan, and some of the guards said they could hear the megaspell go off. It was unnatural, alien... not like a real sound. A few of the guards ventured up the highest ridge. They came back describing a huge pillar of perverted green fire with a strange rainbow sheen, wrapped with rings of black smoke, lifting up into the clouds from just over the horizon where Manehattan is supposed to be.

"Now they're saying Cloudsdayle was hit too. And that Equestria's own megaspells have already been cast back at the

zebras. Oh... oh no... will the zebras hit Ponyville? It's so small! They wouldn't, would they? I... I've got to warn mom and dad!

"Maybe they can get into the Stable at Sweet Apple Acres. Oh please, oh please, it's got to still be open! Last week, Silver Spoon told me that Stable-Tec was filing ponies into the Stables around Manehattan, but that was only as some sort of test run. Nothing for ponies to panic about. It's not like

they knew..."

I turned off the log. While it had played, several others had been downloaded into my PipBuck. I had been finding bits of this pony's audio diary scattered all about the guardhouse. I had pulled an earbloom from my armored utility barding and tuned it into my PipBuck, allowing me to listen to the recordings in one ear without giving away my position.

Calamity returned from scouting ahead, signaling with his tail that the path was clear.

Movement through Shattered Hoof was proving swifter than I felt we had any right to expect. Our progress was partially due to keeping our hoofprints as small as possible -- no lining our saddlebags with items that could be missed. (I made an exception for the contents of the Lost & Found safe, justifying the theft with the reminder that the safe had not been opened since before the megaspells, and so no pony here would be suspicious if it was empty, so long as I closed and locked it again.)

But more than that, these ponies didn't seem to consider that the fortress could be infiltrated; they weren't on guard. I'm not a mistress of shadow, but I hardly needed the advanced tutelage from *Zebra Infiltration Tactics* to slip past ponies whom were being this oblivious. (I'd skimmed through the book while Calamity was fetching the mattress cover.) Calamity wasn't quite as good and had nearly tipped a Shattered Hoof Raider to his presence twice now, but we'd managed to hide each time. I figured once we got back to the train-fort

of Gawd, I'd pass him *Zebra Infiltration Tactics* to peruse himself. (It's not as if books can only be read once, after all.)

The inside of Shattered Hoof proper was a cold, monotonous grey -- much like maintenance in Stable Two, except here all the walls were cracked and chipped, the ceiling decayed, the light weak and uneven, cast from small lanterns hung from railroad spikes chiseled into the walls. The darkening sky of clouds outside turned the high-set, barred windows into dead eyes staring vacantly into the halls. Somewhere down the hall, a terribly sad song was playing over a radio -- we were within the range of DJ Pon3's broadcast again.

♪ "...Ponies on the expressway, with no features, with no faces,
Ponies milling about me, trudging off to nameless places..."

The song pulled a melancholy chord in my heart; the singer somehow managing to make the Equestria of before the war seem as dreary and bleak as the wasteland itself. As I followed Calamity, I considered turning on one of the other entries from the audio diary just to drown it out; but I realized that with it playing in only one ear, the two would likely mix into something even more depressing.

♪ "...Waiting foals, for their birthday; have a party, please be happy,
Growing up all too swiftly; losing hopes of what they might be..."



"Well, crap!" I muttered dourly as I hugged a shadow behind a placard ("Hard Work is Happy Work!") and stared across the open rows of desks to the well-lit room beyond. Inside, a pony matching Gawd's description of Deadeyes was sitting behind a desk, reading a book (*Applied Gemstones*). He was flanked by at least one guard pony that I could see, and possibly others I could not. The safe was directly behind him. There was no way to get at it stealthily. Even if I used the Stealth Buck, he'd hear the safe opening less than a foot away from his ears.

"Time for our backup plan," I whispered to Calamity. "Got one?"

Calamity raised his eyebrows, "Yeah. Load 'em all up in the caboose an' kick it free." I winced as he reminded me how well one of his last plans had gone.

"Could be worse," he whispered with a smile. "Ah'm sure Velvet's plan would be t' go up an' ask 'im nicely."

I closed my eyes. Damn it. We couldn't just sit here, waiting for the bastard to move. The longer we hung around, the better chance of getting caught. "Okay," I said finally. "We'll do that."

Calamity's eyes went wide. "Ah was joking!" he hissed.

Thankful to the hot mare statuette for returning some of my telekinetic magic, I carefully levitated my sniper rifle and assault carbine to Calamity. "Take these. Go back and hide in that side room with all the old flashlights," I instructed, recalling a room that looked like it hadn't been used for anything other than a few quickies in several months. "I'll go up and say hello."

"An' when they all shoot ya, then what's the plan?"

"I'm winging this here, but if all else fails, I still have the Stealth Buck. That should get me out. If shooting starts, don't wait for me. Get safely back to Remedy." With an afterthought, "Please."

Calamity scowled and moved off, muttering something under his breath about the wisdom of leaving "winging it" to non-pegasus ponies. I started up another audio log, listening while I gave Calamity time to position himself safely away. The voice of the same mare leapt through my earbloom, sounding panicked.

"The communication web is down. I tried and tried to reach mom and dad, but I couldn't get through. At first, it seemed that the web was flooded, and my calls kept getting bounced. Then it just died completely.

"We can't reach any of the Ministry of Morale hubs either. No pony was expecting the one in Manehattan to respond, but not even Canterlot? Could... the zebras couldn't possibly have destroyed Canterlot! Could they? What... what happened to Princess Luna??"

Having heard of the Canterlot Ruins, I knew the answer. I toggled to the next log.

"It's starting to rain outside; it was bright and sunny less than an hour ago. I think the pegasus ponies are mourning Cloudsdale.

"Most of the guards are gone now. They've left me the codes to open the cells. Scoops said it was up to me. Nopony else was going to risk setting our guests free. Why me? I-I'm not the one who's supposed to be in charge!

"If I don't, these ponies will starve to death in here! But if I do... some of them are Really Bad Ponies. Some have even confessed to helping the zebras at Shattered Hoof Ridge when they tried to assassinate Princess Celestia. If I let them go... who knows what harm they might do? What is worse? Letting them die here? Or inflicting them on a wounded, suffering Equestria?

"No, no, no! I'm just an inspector. I'm not supposed to make these kinds of decisions!

"Mom? Dad? Silver Spoon? What should I do?"

I wasn't sure why I was listening to these logs now. Curiosity? Or maybe, in a way, I was paying my respects to the past by listening? By learning?

Either way, it didn't matter. Time to go.



"How'd you get in here?" Deadeyess scowled, staring down at me. I had three magical energy weapons pointed at my head (although the big, brutish pony to Deadeyess's left looked like he'd rather kill me with his teeth).

"I..." Dammit, think! Watcher might call honesty a virtue, but sometimes the ability to lie your tail off is a virtue too. "...used magic. I am a unicorn, after all." I felt a rush of relief -- that had

sounded plausible. Even I might have bought it if I didn't already know how much I suck at spells.

"Better question is: why?"

"Why? Why I came in here?"

"No, why are fillies different than colts." The slate grey pony's voice dripped with sarcasm. "What do you think?"

Stammering, I realized I should have thought my approach through a lot better. "I-I wanted to..." I glanced away, mentally searching for inspiration. My eyes fell on a framed news article, yellowed with age, which featured a faded picture of a pretty unicorn. ("Sweetie Belle Performs Patriotism Concert at Shattered Hoof"). My eyes snapped back to meet Deadeyess's own. "...to join your crew. You're all escaped slaves, right? Well, I just escaped from old Appleloosa."

I realized just after I said it that I was wearing armored Stable barding and probably looked nothing like an escaped slave. Deadeyes was regarding me with deep and well-deserved suspicion.

If they started shooting, I was probably dead. Small and fast is helpful against long-range gunfire, but not so much against point-blank shots from weapons that will melt you into a puddle. Worse, my heart sank when I realized that Calamity would almost certainly share my fate. From what I knew of my new friend, running and hiding weren't in his normal book of tactics. No matter what I told him to do, I suspected he'd choose to join in the firefight.

"Tell you what, filly," Deadeyes seemed to finally decide, fixing me with a glare. "Let's see how you do with a couple of errands. Show yourself to be useful, and we'll chat again."

I gulped. Well, at least he hadn't shot me yet. "What do you need me to do?"

"I have a letter that needs to be delivered. Not far, just to Yellow Hill Ridge. Maybe an hour's trot. I've got a map you can download to your PipBuck. Deliver it, come right back, we'll talk again."

As he pushed the sealed envelope across his desk to me, I wondered if it said something like “Kill the pony carrying this letter.”

“Oh, and you’ll need this legband. It will let Gawdyna know you’re okay to pass through.”

“Who?” I asked as I slipped on the legband, feigning ignorance.

“The bitch of a griffin who runs our welcoming committee. Honestly, she’s more trouble than she’s worth; but the boss seems to like her, so she stays. For now.”

“The boss? I thought you were the boss.”

Deadeyes clearly did not have the patience for questions that Gawd did. “Scramble, if she talks again, start pulling off her legs.”

The grin on the brute to Deadeyes’ left widened eagerly. I left quickly and wordlessly.



I hadn’t gotten far before one of Deadeyes’ guards came trotting out after me. He motioned for another, seemingly random, Shattered Hoof pony to flank me on the other side. Without words, it was clear they were making sure I “found my way out.”

As we approached the small room where Calamity was hiding, I blurted out as loudly as I could without sounding suspicious, “So, escorting ponies out. Is that your official job? Are you the escorter-outer?”

“Shut up,” Deadeyes’ guard said warningly, but the other replied easily.

“Actually, no. I’m just a rock-breaker.”

I raised an eyebrow. “A rock-breaker? So what’s your story?”

He seemed amiable enough. “Slavers assaulted my family homestead. My brother and I fought back, while my wife tried to hide our foals. They killed my brother, took my lovely Sugarplum and the foals and left me for dead.” As he spoke, a cloud passed over his face. His eyes narrowed and a tone of sadness tinged with seething

crept into each word. "Crawled myself here for the protection. I'm not a raider. Don't do any of that shit. Just work the rocks and thank the Goddesses that I'm not alone out in the wastes."

I nodded solemnly. What else could I do? In the heavy quiet that followed, I could hear that radio playing in some nearby room. The music had stopped, and DJ Pon3 was reporting the news.

"...been warning everypony for some time now to steer clear of Appleloosa. Well, seems like the Stable Dweller either didn't get the message, or chose to ignore it. I've gotten confirmed reports that the little gal marched into Appleloosa, and brought hell on her hooves. Freed over a dozen slaves, many of them foals. I'm happy to report that they're safe and sound. But there's a bitter note to this song. When a small army of slavers tried to take their captives back, our heroine of the wasteland sacrificed herself making sure everypony got away safe. So this next song goes out to you, Stable Dweller. May Celestia and Luna wrap you in Their tails..."

I stumbled, missing a step, my mind shocked by rapid realizations. The radio was talking about me. Again. The poor ponies I helped to freedom had made it safely. I was dead! ...Well, according to the radio; somepony must have assumed I had died in the train crash. Either that, or somepony who knew better lied.

I wanted to stop, go back, hear the rest of it. To kick or shout at the radio to somehow make it repeat everything from the beginning.

"Keep moving!" Deadeyes' guard barked as I fell momentarily behind. I trotted faster to put myself back between them.

Looking at the guard, I asked him this time, "And what's your story?"

With a glare, "I won my place here in the annual Stomp an Annoying Unicorn to Death competition."

Back to being quiet it was then. We were taking a slightly different, more direct path back to the yard than the one Calamity and I had used. The hall we were passing by now had several doorways opening onto a combination of amphitheatre and mess hall. There was an old

stage in the back with tattered and befouled curtains which I imagined Sweetie Belle, the mare who would become Stable Two's first Overmare, performed on. The room was crowded haphazardly with tables and benches and several dozen raider ponies scarfing a pale stew, the odor of which was mixing unpleasantly with the stench of unbathed ponies and an under-scent of dry rot.

I kicked on the next log on my PipBuck to distract me.

"I wasn't fast enough. I should have known better. No wonder the rest of the staff fled so quickly. I should have known that Shattered Hoof would go into lockdown as soon as the mainframe realized we were cut off from the outside. Assisted jailbreak prevention protocols. By the time I made my decision and released the guests from their cells, we were already all trapped inside.

"I know how the weaker ones fare. I can only imagine what they will do to me when they find a member of the staff got locked in with them.

"I took the food from the guardhouse fridge and locked myself into this bathroom. I locked several other doors too. With luck, they will think it's normal for this door to be locked as well. Because if they really try to break it down, I'm sure they can.

"I've got maybe three days of food. Plenty of water. A little bit of medicine. I only hope it will last me long enough for them to find a way out of Shattered Hoof. My only chance is if they leave before they realize I'm here."



As we exited into the yard, the guard turned on me, pushing me up against the wall. "You want to know my story?" he growled. "I'll tell you. I was a merchant on a caravan that Gawd's Talons were supposed to be guarding. Saw them try to buck us over to slavers, and saw her take them down. So how'd I get here? She flew me in. Just like we all know she flew you in."

My ears tilted. I could feel the stone wall grinding into my backside.

"I used to be one of those ponies out there, following Gawd. But you don't become a good merchant if you can't read changes in the market. So I made my allegiances with Deadeyes," the merchant-turned-guard informed me, his voice rumbling with warning. "Gawd's heading for the chopping block. And trust me, you don't want to be standing on the wrong side when the axe comes down."

The two then turned from me. The other one chuckling, "You go 'teleport' out now." They left me in the rock yard, locking the door behind them. Looking around the yard, I realized that any structure designed to hold ponies prisoner would have wards to prevent unicorns from just teleporting out. It was a rare magical ability, but one they would anticipate.

I moved over to where the mattress cover had been thrown and hid myself, clicking another audio log as I waited for Calamity. The voice was soft, nearly drowned out by the sounds of heated argument in the background.

"Out of food. Made what I had stretch... I think. No real way to tell time in here, but I think its been a week. At least four days. After the food was gone, I raided the garbage can. Some old apple cores... they were brown, mushy and tasted horrid.

"The guests outside are doing much worse. There was less than two days food in the pantry when we went into lockdown. Now they're starving. I-I can hear them outside... arguing about who they're going to eat first! Oh nonono. They can't! It's beyond horrific -- "

The pony's voice was cut off by a muffled scream. The chaos in the background heightened, and I could clearly make out a pony shouting "Carve her up!"

"NO! Oh nonononono! Don't make me hear this! Celestia, Luna, please! I can't hear this!..."



Night hugged us in its darkness as Calamity carried me towards Yellow Hill Ridge. “Now why are we helpin’ this Deadeyes feller again?”

“Still trying to get a chance at that safe for Gawd. Remember Velvet.”

“Ayep,” he said dourly. We flew in silence a few more minutes before, “Where’s this place supposed t’ be again? Ah can’t see a damn thing out here tonight.”

I had the location marked on my PipBuck’s automap, but I hesitated to lift my leg and look; shifting myself around while being carried by a flying pegasus seemed unwise. Instead, I brought up my Eyes-Forward Sparkle to check the compass.

Nothing. Either I had forgot to set the compass to keep track of Yellow Hill Ridge, or we were off course.

“Dagnabit, Ah overshot!” Calamity banked, the cool night wind cutting through my coat and mane. The turn brought a number of flickering lights into view. “Is that what we’re lookin’ for? Looks like a whole mess o’ campers t’ me.”

I checked my E.F.S. Now I could see the marker; it was pulsing at the very edge of my compass. “No, we’re still off course. It’s back that way.”

Calamity didn’t turn. “Hold on an’ hush. Ah wanna see what this is then.” He swooped a little lower, aiming to fly a pass above the lights. As we neared, I too could make out a mass of tents, cookpots, and ponies. And, as we drew closer, banners: red and black, a stylized white eye with a crimson iris dominating the center.

The ponies down there were armed, and there were a lot of them. I spotted two griffins amongst them. Talon mercenaries, by their armor, but wearing neckbands of red and black with the distinctive eye. Clearly not Gawd’s Talons. Different company. Towards the back of the camp, I spotted the rows of slaver wagons.

Calamity beat his wings, grunting softly in pain as he pulled us higher into the darkness, hopefully before any of those below had taken a glance up. “Well, ain’t this a barrel of bad apples.”

“Calamity,” I whispered, not able to un-hear that grunt. “Your wing...”

“Ah’m fine. Hush now.”

We continued to fly. I was now keeping a closer eye on my E.F.S. compass. Yellow Hill Ridge was a quarter-mile back towards Shattered Hoof, with just enough hills between to have ensured that we wouldn’t have spotted the camp had we come straight to it. This time, I spotted the tiny speck of the waiting courier’s lantern. I suggested to Calamity that we fly past and let me trot up alone, coming from the expected direction.



Deadeyes clopped his hooves together, reading me. I had mentioned nothing of the Red Eye slaver army. “Good work,” he said finally. “Go get yourself some rest. You look like a griffin’s playtoy. Come back tomorrow. I’ll have one more job for you. Do that, and you’re in.”

With that, he waved me off. This time, to my surprise, no pony jumped to escort me. I was only a few yards down the hall when Deadeyes, accompanied by all his guards, simply walked out of his office, leaving the door open behind him. They turned, moving off in a different direction.

I stopped. The safe was unguarded. This was... almost too easy. No, it was definitely too easy.

I activated the Stealth Buck.

The safe was tricky, but within my range of skill. It popped open with a snap. The only thing inside was the ledger.

I slipped the ledger into my saddlebag and was just snapping the safe shut when Deadeyes and his entourage returned, looking around. If it hadn’t been for the spell, they would have seen me. Deadeyes began to trot around the back of his desk from the right, his brutish bodyguard circling from the left, trapping me. It didn’t matter if they could see me -- the slightest bump would let them know I was here! As they drew closer, I scrambled up onto the desk itself.

The two other guards, one of them the ex-merchant, took their positions by the door. I turned on the desk, crouching, and prepared to crawl down and out between them. One of them shut the door.

Luna fuck me with the moon.

I turned slowly. Deadeyes had stopped and was staring at his safe.

"Think she took it?" the former merchant asked. My heart sank into my stomach.

"Oh, I think our little spy did whatever Gawdyna wanted her to do," Deadeyes smiled. "All the better. Let the griffin cook herself."

He turned to his guards. "Best prepare the others. Red Eye's forces are set to raid Shattered Hoof the sunrise after tomorrow. We want to make sure they have no trouble getting in. It's time to meet the big man himself."

My mind reeled. Deadeyes was making deals with the slavers? He was going to let Red Eye's forces come in and capture the ponies he was supposed to be protecting here? The treachery mirrored the betrayal of Gawd's Talons but on a much larger scale.

Deadeyes strode behind his desk and clopped his hooves down on it forcing me to lift one of mine to avoid being touched. I could feel sweat break out across my forehead as I balanced silently.

Deadeyes leaned forward to grab his copy of Applied Gemstones in his teeth. With a fright, I realized I was standing on it. I lifted my hindleg away with just barely enough time. Now my balance was much more strenuous. My whole body was achy from sleep deprivation. I searched frantically for a place to put one of my raised hooves before I fell.

The door banged open. I toppled onto the floor with a thud as a pair of earth ponies burst in. Deadeyes jumped back, startled, his book dropping to the floor.

"Sir, sorry to interrupt, but we've got an intruder!"

Deadeyes stared at the two ponies. "Little unicorn girl, 'bout this high?" he asked casually, raising his hoof.

"No sir. This one's a pegasus!"

With the moon!

My PipBuck alerted me that the invisibility spell was about to wear off. I didn't have a choice. I lurched to my hooves and skirted around the ponies, barely slipping between them. Then dashed out through the open door.



I galloped to the meeting spot as fast as my weary legs could take me. Calamity was waiting for me, hidden under the mattress cover. "No need for that now. They spotted you. Got the ledger. Let's go!"

We were airborne in moments. I could tell how tired Calamity was; we kept dipping in the air. I winced at the workout we were giving his mending wing. "We get back to Gawd, and we sleep. No matter what else, we *have* to sleep!" He hadn't complained, but I could tell his wing was killing him.

I played another audio log. This time, the mare was no longer whispering, but I could still barely hear her over a thundering racket.

"Dammit. They know I'm in here. I woke from my nightmare with such a start that I kicked over the garbage can, and they heard it. They'll break through the door soon."

I could hear one of the ponies on the other side of the bathroom door call out abysmally profane promises.

"I don't have to guess what they'll do to me anymore. They want me to know. But I'm not going to let them."

"Go figure, this crappy little gun is going to save me after all. Used the handle to shatter the mirror. This is going to hurt... but if I do it quickly... it won't hurt for long."

There was one audio log left.

Junction R-7 swam into view through the darkness. Exhausted, Calamity brought us in for a slightly rough landing. Ponies pointed glowing magical energy weapons at us from all directions. Gawd stepped forward. "Welcome back. I was beginning to worry about you two." She looked us over. "Got the ledger?"

I nodded shakily. "Yes. But before you look at it, I want to look at it. And there's something you should know."

Gawd raised an eyebrow. "Oh?" she asked appraisingly.

"Deadeyes knows. He pretty much let me steal it. I overheard him saying something about letting you cook yourself."

Gawd sat back, regarding me. Finally, "I'm impressed. You didn't have to tell me that." Then, with a narrow look, "So why did you? What's in it for you."

I swayed on my hooves. "There's more. But I'll only tell you that after my friends and I get some sleep. Here. Under the safety of your protection."

Gawd's beak broke into a grin, the scar twisting it on one side. "All right. You've got yourself a bargain." Pointedly, "But while you sleep, I want that ledger."

I nodded. "What I want out of it won't take long."

Gawd guided us back towards one of the cattle cars. As I stepped a hoof inside, I felt a rush of relief to see Velvet Remedy, curled on a bed of slightly moldy hay. She was talking softly with another pony as she watched over a third whose hindleg was wrapped in what had been some of our precious remaining bandages. I wondered how many medical supplies we had left, if any.

Velvet Remedy jumped up at our return, giving us a weak but bright smile. "What did you two do, take the scenic route?"

"Ayep. Somethin' like that," Calamity responded.

"And what did I say about this wing!" Velvet Remedy pushed Calamity towards the corner of the train car that had clearly become her

impromptu clinic. “Let me take a look at it and change those bandages!”

Shaking my head in a combination of adoration and despair, I followed behind her. I was too tired to even appreciate how nice a tailside she had. Finding a bit of hay that looked filthy but soft, I curled down and levitated out the ledger. Flipping through, I found entries going back many years. The newest ones, I felt, were suspect. Whatever Deadeyes was up to, I rather expected he had doctored the ledger as part of it. But the older entries, faded as they were, couldn't have been altered without being obvious. At least, not by an earth pony. (I found myself wondering what a forgery cutie mark would look like.)

It was easy to find the entry I was looking for:

Some of the nearby farmers have begun to put up resistance. Armed themselves from that merchant caravan that passed through last month. One of them took a few shots at the raider party I dispatched to the east side. Mr. Topaz doesn't care, just wants the rocks to keep coming. So I think it's time we reminded these rock farmers just why they do as we say. Tomorrow, I'm sending some of the boys up to the Bell farm to make an example. Told them to make it real graphic, so the rest of these ponies don't have any room to misinterpret.

I slammed the book closed with more telekinetic force than I thought I had left in me. The ledger went flying across the cattle car, bouncing off the far wall. Now I didn't want to sleep. Now I wanted to march back in there, stuff Little Macintosh down Deadeyes' throat, and open fire.

Instead, I got up, fetched the ledger, and walked out to have a talk with Gawd.



“So what now?”

Gawd looked up from the ledger, gazing at me from across her desk.

“Now? Now, you go t’ sleep. Tomorrow, we chat a bit over breakfast, then you’re free t’ go. By then, all the border patrols and outposts will know I’ve said you’re free t’ pass. You did the job. A verbal contract is still a contract, and I don’t renege.” Gawd frowned slightly. “Too bad, too. We could really use a skilled medic here.”

I let that sink in. Still, not really what I was looking for. “How about you?”

“What about me?”

I pointed a hoof at the ledger. “What do you do now?”

Gawd huffed, then drew herself up. “Mister Topaz contracted me to protect Shattered Hoof and its ponies from threats. Ain’t hard to argue that Deadeyes has become just such a threat.” She jabbed the ledger with a talon. “I can’t ignore this. I knew Deadeyes was up to something shady, but this is beyond the pale.”

A little too on the nose, part of me thought. Almost like Deadeyes’ treachery was custom tailored to get under Gawd’s feathers. I told her as much.

She laughed, a bitter but still humored laugh. “Think I don’t see that?”

I could guess what she must be planning. And another question surfaced in my brain. “What would you do with this place if you were in charge?”

She gave me a look.

“Shattered Hoof, I mean. What would you do?”

Slowly, evenly, she intoned, “I’m not in charge. I’m not going to be. Even with Deadeyes gone. Mister Topaz runs this joint, and I’m still contracted to him.”

Right, I thought as I nodded. But what if you weren’t?



Velvet Remedy approached me as I returned to the cattle car. I was so tired, but my heart still fluttered a little at her approach.

“So, is the griffin actually letting us go?”

I nodded. Velvet Remedy looked surprised more than relieved. “We get to spend the night. We need sleep...”

“I would insist. Calamity’s done more damage to his wing with all that flying around. He needs time to heal.”

I winced painfully. Velvet Remedy switched topics with what my sleep-deprived mind insisted was a jarring abruptness.

“Littlepip, I had the most interesting conversation while you and Calamity were out stealing.”

I sighed weakly. I wasn’t really up for this.

“See the buck over there?” she asked, pointing a hoof towards a dark shape that I assumed was a sleeping pony. “His name is Preacher.”

I nodded, vaguely recalling Gawd saying something about a Preacher.

“He says he came here to spread the word of the Goddess out from under the hoof of Red Eye.”

My ears perked. Velvet Remedy had my full attention. “The word of the Goddess?” I asked. The way she spoke made it clear that she wasn’t talking about Celestia or Luna.

Velvet Remedy nodded. “He claims this Goddess of his has been speaking to him in dreams since he was a tiny colt.” Her tone suggested her prognosis didn’t involve the divine.

I wasn’t ready to dismiss it so quickly. Looking sternly to Velvet Remedy, I whispered back, “He might be right.” Her eyes widened in disbelief. Before she could open her muzzle to mock, I elaborated. “Ever wonder how the slavers got ahead of our train like that? I’ve been wondering if there might be some sort of... telepathic magic?... involved somehow.”

I felt a sudden urge to travel to Tenpony Tower and talk with DJ Pon3. He seemed to have an incredibly good, if imperfect, network of informants... or possibly some sort of magic or technology that was giving him the lay of the land. I wanted to trade information. Find out what he knew. There was a puzzle here, and I was still several pieces short of seeing the picture. If any pony had those pieces, it would be DJ Pon3.

Velvet Remedy seemed to be digesting my comment. Finally, she spoke again, "Well, if that's true, it puts the rest of what Preacher said in a more ominous light." She lead me to the far corner of the cattle car, whispering, "According to Preacher, the Goddess chooses to speak to very few ponies..."

I found myself questioning that. Chooses? Or are there limitations to this so-called Goddess's powers.

"...And the pony Red Eye is the one she speaks to the most. However, Preacher isn't so sure Red Eye is..." Velvet Remedy paused, searching for words. "...getting the message right. He seems to think that Red Eye's reception is being garbled." Clearly, Velvet Remedy was not satisfied with the analogy, but I got the idea.

"Either that," Velvet continued, "Or he's just not listening. Either way, Preacher is here to spread the 'True Word' of the Goddess. Away from Red Eye and his bands of slavers."

I thought of the armed camp parked a few hours trot outside of Shattered Hoof territory. Preacher didn't go far enough.

I hesitated to ask, "And what is the 'True Word'?" I really didn't want to ask Preacher directly. Sure, I'd get an answer that wasn't tainted by Velvet Remedy's own prejudices, but at the cost of being roped into sermon. I was too tired to even contemplate that tonight.

"To paraphrase: Praise Me, worship Me and I will lift you up and you will all become One, Unified under Me." Velvet Remedy had clearly suffered through hours of this. I could understand why Gawd had been wary of gaining another Preacher.

I nodded to Velvet. "There's a pile of hay calling my name. We're going to talk to Gawd again at breakfast tomorrow, but after that, we're free to go." I wasn't so sure, however, that I wanted to leave just yet.

I played the last audio log before I headed to bed. This time, the banging on the bathroom door was much louder, rhythmic. It sounded like the ponies outside were using a piece of furniture as a battering ram. I could hear structural cracking from the doorframe.

The mare's voice was weak, and she spoke in a disturbing sing-song.

"I hear you knockin' but you can't come in!

"I hear you... yeah, I hear you. wow... I just realized I've got all these diaries and the only ponies that will every hear them are you fuckers. Fuck you all! Every last one of you!

"My....

"Oh wow... dizzy... What was I...?

"Y'know, I kind of think red is my color... Splish splash, clop clop! Hey, Silver Spoon... let's paint the town red! Or... you know... at least the bathroom...

"Oh keep knocking you bastards!

"...doesn't go with my cutie mark though. That's okay, it's a stupid cutie mark anyway. Really, a crown of diamonds? What the fuck's that supposed to mean?

"I mean, I get the diamonds. Celestia knows I've inspected enough of 'em... Sent the best ones below for years now. Ha! There's something else you're never gonna get! Ha... ha ha... Just like you're not going to get me!

"my... my name is Diamond Tiara and you fuckers didn't get me! I got... I got away!

"I mean... really, though... a crown? What was that supposed to mean?

"he heee hee! You can't geeeeeet meeeeeee!

"You can't...

"...can't...

"...get..."

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Silent Gallop - You have mastered silent movement, allowing you to move quickly and still remain quiet. You can Sneak at full speed with no penalties.

CHAPTER TWELVE



MUST GO ON

“So... you think you have what it takes to beat me, on my stage, in my town? Come on down, we’ll see.”

Breakfast.

I hoofed a small pile of bottle caps across the sheet metal counter while a scarred pony with a dark tan coat and a roasting meat cutie mark pulled a rabbit shish kebob from the barbecue grill. Guests or not, we were expected to pay for our food; I’m not sure why I had expected otherwise. I picked up my meal, the savory aroma assaulting my nostrils, and carried it over to the table where Calamity was already digging into a bowl of oatmeal.

“Littlepip, what are you doing!??” Velvet Remedy nearly shrieked as she saw me approach. I stopped short, looking at her quizzically. Velvet Remedy looked stricken. “You’re not going to *eat* that are you?”

I nodded, unable to respond with the shish kebob still in my mouth. My stomach was rumbling. I sucked up a bit of escaping drool and was hit by the flavors of barbecued rabbit. It wasn’t quite what I was expecting, and made my stomach do an odd lurch, but it was *good!*

“Littlepip...” Velvet raised her hoof to her chest in exaggerated offense. “That’s *meat!*”

“uhf-huf,” I mouthed through my breakfast, hoping in vain that having established this fact, I would be allowed to eat in peace.

Velvet Remedy’s eyes narrowed. “We’re vegetarians,” she said flatly.

I paused at that. True, all I had ever eaten in Stable Two was apples. But I had assumed that was because it was the only thing we had for eating. And I felt I would be perfectly happy never eating another apple as long as I lived. I thought back to my first meals outside... how I had found cooked meat stored in a refrigerator, and simply assumed that’s what ponies ate in the wasteland. My stomach had fought it uncomfortably, but I figured that was more the result of a lifetime of apples, and that outside food would just take some getting used to. For the most part, I felt I’d acclimated well.

Of course, now that I thought about it, it had been a *raider* refrigerator. So diet was suspect.

Calamity finally pulled his head out of his oatmeal bowl, winging in on the conversation. “Oh, we c’n eat meat all right. Jus’ don’t much like to. Ain’t really good for our diet.” Calamity looked sideways, his oatmeal-covered lips curling into a frown. “Muh brothers used t’ challenge me t’ hotdog eatin’ contests. Which mostly meant them shoving the disgustin’ things down muh throat.”

Velvet Remedy looked appalled.

“Course, they were prob’ly disgusting more cuz they were two hundred years old than cuz they were meat.”

I felt my appetite slip. Ugh! By Celestia’s grace, I hoped that they’d at least been kept frozen that entire time!

Velvet Remedy turned up her nose and trotted away from our table. She was just leaving as Gawd alighted next to us with a plate of roasted rats. She watched Velvet shudder in disgust and quicken her pace. Sucking up a rat by the tail and swallowing it whole, Gawd turned to me and asked, “What’s her issue?”



"I suppose you'll be heading out after breakfast then?" Gawd asked. Between bites of grilled vegetables and rabbit meat, I had told Gawd about Red Eye's forces. She'd taken it in with a grave expression. "Did you want that escort?"

It was a question that had plagued me all night. (Not the escort issue, but leaving now in the first place.) We could leave now, put Shattered Hoof behind us completely. Get out before the impending drama, and leave these ponies to the fates they had created for themselves. It was, I had to admit, not without its appeal. Especially considering that the alternatives almost certainly involved getting shot at, with a high chance of dying.

Was there anyone or anything here worth risking my life, or the lives of my companions?

"I-I've been considering staying," I admitted. "Just for a little longer." Gawd smirked at that.

On the other side of the bottle cap, I didn't have any place else pressing to be. I didn't have a home. The one friendly town I had encountered so far had just kicked me out. I was still as lost and adrift as ever before. I felt like I had in Stable Two when I was without my cutie mark, without a place. Same feeling... only the walls had changed. (Even the ceiling was still grey -- just higher.) I was the pony with the PipBuck on her flank -- a symbol that didn't mean anything special in Stable Two didn't mean anything at all in the wasteland.

Watcher had told me to search for my virtue. What virtue did I have if I walked away? Okay, sanity perhaps. Was sanity a virtue? Self-preservation?

Truth be told, I didn't really have a larger mission. Personally, I found slavery a vile practice and I wanted to take on Red Eye. (And yes, I'd seen signs that Red Eye was involved in something big; but it was only curiosity and worry that cajoled me to investigate.) I could leave under the auspice that I was moving forward in the goal of stopping Red Eye,

if indeed that was going to be my goal. But the small army just over those hills were Red Eye's ponies. And if I really wanted to take the slavers on, why not here?

"Maybe we should talk," Calamity told me pointedly.

Gawd was staring at me thoughtfully, obviously weighing options. Finally, she came to a decision. "If you were interested in staying, I have a contract t' offer you."

I raised my eyebrows. "Oh?"

"How would you feel about taking out Deadeyes for me?"

My ears shot up. Calamity stared in surprised. "Me? Why?"

Gawd grimaced. "Because if you don't, I'll have t' do it myself. And while I'm convinced it's within the wingspan of my contract with Mister Topaz t' do so, the political fallout wouldn't be good. Deadeyes' got a lot of supporters, and I don't relish watching for the spear in my back."

"Ah don't see how hiring us t' take out this feller is gonna make ya any less of a target."

"Might not," Gawd agreed. "But it's worth a try. If," she added, turning her stare towards me, "Yer up for it."

My mind reeled. Was I up to killing Deadeyes? Hell, I'd already been wanting to do that. I'd been contemplating that and more. But to be *hired* to do so? I was already a vigilante, but was I ready to be an *assassin*?

I'd been out of the Stable more than a week, less than two. If I did this now, what will I have become by the end of the month? By my next birthday?

I'll think about that," I answered honestly. Gawd frowned. Of course she would want an answer right away. There wasn't exactly much time. We had less than a day before Red Eye's people marched into Shattered Hoof.

It occurred to me that, considering what I knew of Gawd and the Talons, she'd have more respect for me if I asked: "What would we get out of it? What's the pay?"

I swear the hint of a smile touched Gawd's beak. "Deadeyes has a key. Keeps it hidden in his tail at all times. Key opens a vault under Shattered Hoof, down where the old mines are."

Made sense. Naturally, a place like Shattered Hoof would be built on top of a set of gem mines. They couldn't have always relied on just the rock farms. When the gem mines ran dry, what else was there to do with them but use them as storage. Diamond Tiara's last message had even said something about sending the best gems "below."

"What's in the vault?"

Gawd smirked. "Your payment, whatever that happens to be. Could be gems. Could be weapons. Pre-apocalypse ponies used the gemstones from Shattered Rock to build magical energy weapons. Considering that the armory was filled with them, it's a fair assumption that the vault might have even more."

The idea of storing a mass of magical weapons just beneath a prison seemed more than marginally insane to me. After all, surely they didn't build the things here.

But then, if I killed Deadeyes, it wasn't going to be for the reward anyway.



"You can't do this."

Velvet Remedy stomped and snorted about the cattle car, empty but for the three of us. "Littlepip, it's one thing to kill in self defense. Or to protect others. But this..." She turned on me with a stare that could petrify the Overmare herself. "This. Is. *Murder!*"

Calamity was scowling. "Ah have t' agree with Velvet Remedy on this one, Li'lpip," he said flatly. "Ah understand the Talons, c'n even

respect ‘em just a bit. But Ah ain’t a mercenary. You do this, Ah ain’t with ya.”

Velvet cut deeper. “You know that song I was writing about staying noble and true? That was about you, Littlepip. And this is you failing that on every level. To even consider this...” She backed away from me, her voice softening with regret, “I am. So. Disappointed in you.”

I felt like I was bleeding out, dying. But the more they yelled at me, the more I realized I had already chosen my course. I just had to make them understand why.

“Silver Bell.”

Both of them quieted, staring at me. After a long, pregnant pause, Calamity asked, “What’s Silver Bell got t’ do with any o’ this?”

I felt weak, but I clamped down on my resolve. “Silver Bell’s mother and father were murdered by raiders. And they made Silver Bell and her sister watch. Do you remember that?”

I could see Velvet Remedy’s expression quiver. “Of course we...”

“They made. Them. Watch!” I emphasized each word with a stomp of a hoof. “And they made it slow. Really slow and really painful and really horrible!” I asked again, “Do you remember that?”

My companions were both silent.

“Those raiders came from *here*,” I told them finally, “And they were acting on Deadeyes’ orders.” Spitting, “I saw it for myself in his ledger.”

Calamity spoke first. “Well, now, that changes things.”

Velvet Remedy shook a little, but stayed firm. “What does it change?”

“Ain’t murder no more,” Calamity stated without reservation. “It’s justice.”

Velvet shook her mane. “Revenge, you mean.”

“Nope. Ah mean justice. Pure ‘n’ simple.” Calamity nodded to me. “Ah’m in.” He glanced at my horn meaningfully. “How’s yer TK?”

“Rest did wonders. I won’t be juggling train cars,” I admitted, “But I think I can manage barrels. How’s your wing?”

Velvet Remedy’s eyes jumped between the two of us over and over. With a touch of desperation in her voice, she tried, “Are you planning on finding out which raiders were involved and killing them too? Or are you just going to lay waste to the whole of Shattered Hoof?”

“They’re raiders,” Calamity said evenly, stretching his wing. “Honestly, Ah been wonderin’ just why we’re helpin’ them out at all. Ah figure, let ‘em and the slavers duke it out. Stomp down what’s left.”

I had another idea. “Actually, not everypony here is bad.” I was thinking of the rock-breaker I had talked with while he escorted me out. “I think... I believe this place could be turned around. Maybe become a trading town instead of a raider fortress.” Even as the words came out, I knew they were stupidly idealistic. But I pressed on. “I’m thinking: kill Deadeyes. Find Mister Topaz and deal with him -- amiably if possible, lethally if not. And leave Gawd in charge.”



Deadeyes had told me to come back for one more job. Feeling the comforting weight of Little Macintosh in my saddlebags, my sniper rifle and assault carbine now returned to my back and side, I suspected this wasn’t the job he had in mind. But his invitation was the perfect opportunity.

I’d left Calamity back at the yard, reading through Zebra Infiltration Tactics, as I went in alone. He didn’t like that one bit, but I had explained that I planned to take the long way, explore some of the wings of Shattered Hoof that I hadn’t seen yet. Including how to get down to the mine below. Seeing the yard in daylight for the first time, Calamity had immediately spotted the metal plates of a hydraulic cargo

lift, but the controls were damaged beyond repair. If it worked at all, it would only be from within the mine itself. There had to be another way. Somewhere, there was a door that went beneath the prison itself, and I wanted to know where it was.

Now, I suspected I had found it.

I was behind the stage in the mess hall. To one side, the curtains, heavy and stained, concealed this darkened space from the large, catwalked area where the raiders ate whatever passed for their meals. Enough dust had accumulated back here that I could tell no pony ventured behind that curtain. Why would they? The space was full of rotting stage props and the skeletons of hundreds of ponies. Countless bones were stuffed into cabinets, spilled out of metal boxes, and formed piles that must have been three ponies high when they still had flesh.

The “guests” of Shattered Hoof had spiraled into barbarism and cannibalism, and eventually every one of them had perished in here. I’d found logs; I’d found graffiti. I had wondered why I wasn’t tripping over their skeletons.

Above, a huge mural spanned the wall. A painting of the same noble-looking soldier pony I had seen a statue of back in Ponyville. Rearing up. Behind him, clear even though the mural was badly faded and chipped, was the Goddess Celestia herself, her divine features beaming with approval. Originally, I realized, this is what every pony who was a “guest” of Shattered Hoof would have seen each time they ate a meal. Until the stage had been built, hiding it away.

There was a barred gate set into the wall, wide enough to pull a wagon through. Beyond, a small kill-zone, only a few yards deep, with two magical energy turrets set into alcoves on each side, powered down. Beyond, a thick metal door. Based on the dead light above, I could tell the door had no power.

I wanted inside. And not because there was a vault filled with possible treasure. Only Deadeyes had a key to the vault, and only Deadeyes had ever seen Mister Topaz face-to-face. If Mister Topaz really existed at all, I was dead certain he was down in that vault. My mind was

conjuring up images of everything from a dedicated computer terminal that allowed Deadeyes to speak to a very remote Mister Topaz, to the vault being a Stable, to Mister-Topaz-the-Brainbot.

The gate was locked. I had to push aside mounds of crumbling bones to get to it, holding my breath as white flakes stirred into the air. It took several minutes of effort, but the gate finally opened to my talents. The metal door, however, was another story entirely. It could only be opened by a terminal elsewhere in the building, and only then if I could restore power to it.



I must have spent hours poking around Shattered Hoof, seeking to restore power to that door. It was just a simple matter of replacing a mouthful of fuses, and swapping out a row of spark batteries, but those proved annoyingly difficult to find.

I did find the armory through a side room off the guard barracks. It was completely devoid of weapons -- no surprise, as most of the raiders seemed to be armed with magical energy weapons that I assumed were looted from the armory. There was, however, a framed news article on the back wall, and behind it, a safe.

As I took the frame off the wall, the photograph caught my eye. The scene was in the midst of a light winter snowfall; picture was of a funeral. From the looks of it, a very important one, as the shadowy figures of two winged unicorns stood in the background, badly out of focus. One was markedly shorter than the other. My mind wanted to turn them into the Goddesses Celestia and Luna.

But that wasn't what had captured my attention. The photographer's eye had focused on a mare -- a single orange pony who, unlike all around her, had shunned the formal black dresses worn by others to wear only a black cowgirl hat and a black kerchief about her neck with an image of half an apple embroidered into the front. The camera had caught a splash of light glistening off a falling tear as she dropped a

single, beautiful flower onto the casket. The mare's cutie mark, three apples, was identical to the design on Little Macintosh.

All of Equestria Mourns Big Macintosh, Hero of Shattered Hoof Ridge

Two weeks ago, we didn't even know his name. But when Big Macintosh leapt in front of a zebra assassin's bullet meant for Princess Celestia, dying instantly, he also leapt into the hearts and minds of every loving and patriotic pony, becoming a paragon of courage, bravery and self-sacrifice to all of Equestria.

Funeral services were held this afternoon in the western courtyard of Ministry Walk. By decree of Princess Luna, pegasus ponies arranged for a light snow...



The safe had opened to reveal two (!) Stealth Bucks, the last spark batteries I needed, and a variety of ammo clips which, according to the documents found with them, were magically enhanced. Bullets for Little Macintosh, the needle gun, even Calamity's battle saddle. Plus two types for weapons of a caliber I was unfamiliar with (although I suspected one type was for the multi-barreled battle saddles I'd seen the slavers use).

I had just saddlebagged my new treasures and was putting the framed article back in place when the sounds of talking raiders froze me.

"...sure they ain't gonna blow themselves all t' hell an' back on the landmines?" One voice, a stallion.

A youthful-sounding mare snorted, "Like I'd care all that much if they did. You have any idea what those damned slavers did t' my town?"

I hastily finished replacing the frame and hugged a wall behind one of the empty sets of ammo shelves, ears alert.

"Ain't y'all from Littlehorn? Heard they massacred that place."

"Naw. But it would have been kinder to. They took all the mares and bucks they could, killed the rest and left them dead and rotting where

they fell. But the colts and fillies? Red Eye doesn't have any use for kids. So they just left us behind to fend for ourselves."

After a moment of awkward silence, she continued. "Place went bad real fast. Hell, it was bad to start with, so many of us seeing our parents sliced and splattered. But it got a whole lot worse. Got my tail out of there quick as I could. So personally, I'd be more than happy if a good deal of this raiding party died screaming with their legs blown off."

I could see the shadows of the two Shattered Hoof Raiders move across the floor of the armory as they walked past, too deep in their conversation to notice if anything was amiss.

"Ayep, Ah get that. But if Deadeyes' trap works, we'll have a whole mess o' them slavers as *our* slaves. Then ya c'n take it out on 'em all slow and personal-like. Ah'm sure Deadeyes won't mind if a few o' his new rock-breakers are missin' some non-vital internal organs."

Their voices faded as they turned a corner somewhere out of sight. I let out the breath I didn't realize I was holding.

My mind raced to put together what I'd just heard. Deadeyes wasn't, then, wasn't betraying Shattered Hoof to the slavers after all. He was just tricking Red Eye's forces into thinking he was -- luring them into a trap. Of course he wanted them to get *in* without any difficulties.

And he was deceiving Gawd into acting against him. Which, if this plan had the hoof-stamp of approval from Mister Topaz... or worse, was actually Mister Topaz's plan...

I needed to speak to Gawd. Before I went shooting anypony.



"I want you to kill Gawd."

I stared at Deadeyes. *This* was the second task he had for me?

Feigning ignorance as best I could yet again, "Who?"

Deadeyes snorted. "Gawdyna Grimfeathers. Griffin. Scar running up her beak and across her face. Only one eye. Can't miss her." He

leaned forward with a sadistic smile. "You do this, you're in. Part of my crew." Seeming pleased with himself, he sweetened the deal, "Hell, I'll even make you one of my personal guards. You'll get a nice room and some of the better food."

I was at a loss for words. He was playing me. I knew it. But I was still totally thrown.

I looked around like a drowning pony looking for a helping hoof. And once again, my eyes fell on the picture of Stable Two's first Overmare, Sweetie Belle. I remembered something that Velvet Remedy had told me. Something the Overmare had told her.

Looking straight back into Deadeyes' slate grey eyes, I nodded firmly. "Okay. Not a problem."

He blinked.

"Is that all?" I asked, as if killing Gawd was the easiest thing in Equestria.

He raised his eyebrows. "No... I think that will do."

I turned as if to leave, took a few steps, and stopped. Looking over my shoulder, "It's not like ponies here won't suspect you. You should have an alibi."

His eyebrows raised further.

"Tell you what. I've got a plan that will take care of your griffin problem and leave you looking clean."

His eyes narrowed now. "Oh do you? Please, do tell."

"Ever heard of a pony named Sweetie Belle?"

Deadeyes blinked in surprise and then laughed. He pointed at the picture on the wall. "Heard of her? I have every song of hers you can find in the wasteland. Do you realize she actually performed here? Right down on that stage." He pointed his hoof in the direction of the mess hall. "Take the stairs just outside my office, and they'll take

you to the balcony where the Friendship Warden watched the performance.”

Wow. I had hoped Deadeyes was at least familiar with the mare he had on his wall, but I never imagined the sadistic bastard was a *fan*.

He stopped gushing, his voice turning colder. “Why?”

I took a deep breath. “Well, by now you know I didn’t travel here alone. One of the people traveling with me just so happens to be a direct descendant of Sweetie Belle. And as it turns out, musical talent runs in the family.”

I had his attention. “Her name is Velvet, and she’s on her way to Manehattan to record some new music for DJ Pon3’s radio station.” Wait... that’s actually a pretty good idea! And it would give me a way to talk with the wasteland’s most famous buck.

“What I’m thinking: I think I can talk her into putting on a performance here. Using that very stage...” My mind was racing, trying to put together a decent-sounding plan as quickly as I spoke. “We’ll do it tonight. Invite everypony in to see it. And... Gawdyna Grimfeathers too.”

Deadeyes, I could see, was liking this idea. And with the battle coming tomorrow morning, he had to be figuring the timing for a morale-boosting celebration was perfect.

“I’ll be hiding up in the balcony. I’ll take two shots. One through the head of the griffin. The other into your table, close enough to look like you were also a target.” I levitated out one of the Stealth Bucks. “I’ll be gone before any pony can catch me or even see who it was. You can blame it on a slaver assassin. Who wouldn’t buy that?”

Especially if everypony knew the slavers were due to attack in mass the next morning.

Deadeye contemplated the plan while I stood there, feeling increasingly nervous. He had to realize this plan put him in the same crosshairs as Gaud, and he already thought of me as her spy. Would he believe I would betray her so quickly, that my loyalty was up for grabs?

"I like it!" Deadeyes broke into a grin. He clopped his hooves together. "Just one stipulation."

Uh oh.

"This Velvet of yours... I want to hear at least two songs before you go interrupting the show. Including something by Sweetie Belle."

"um... any particular one?"

He smiled. "Hell, I love 'em all." He leaned back. "Surprise me."

As I walked out of Deadeyes' office, I took another look around. I remembered how Deadeyes and his guards had gone off a different way just before I stole the ledger. Now, I was unsurprised to find the passage led to stairs that wrapped around to the balcony above. I looked it over. Shadowed. Occluded. It was a perfect sniping position.

On my way back down the steps, I noticed a sickly apple-colored glow which I hadn't seen before. One of the terminals in one of the desks in the room outside of Deadeyes office was powered up. I was sure it hadn't been before. Replacing those fuses and spark batteries must have powered it up. Pulling out my access tool, I hacked into the terminal.

There were no menus, no entries. Instead, just a single function. I had found the terminal that opened door to the mines and vault below.



"I'll put a bullet through Deadeye's head," I told Gawd. "And another into your table. Then use a Stealth Buck to slip out before anypony can identify me. You can blame it on the slavers who are attacking tomorrow." Gawd was pondering the idea skeptically. "Sure, some ponies might still have suspicions, but not the kind they could act on. Particularly if you take over and lead them to victory against the slavers."

Gawd shook her head. "I've got t' hand it to you. Yer one hell of a devious plotter." I felt a rush of pride, and then immediately questioned if enjoying such praise spoke good or ill of me.

A few minutes later, I joined Calamity and Velvet Remedy in the cattle car. Velvet Remedy was prancing around nervously. "A show? With only hours to prepare?"

"An' why are we doin' this again?" Calamity was confused. "Whose side are we on now?"

"Same as before. Basic plan shouldn't change. But first, I want to get those two in the same room together."

Velvet Remedy opened one of her saddleboxes, pulling out a notebook. "What songs will I do? Most of my music isn't really raider-appropriate. Somehow, I don't think songs about peace and love, nobility or freedom are really their fare."

Calamity whinnied, "Well most o' the lot are escaped slaves..."

Velvet Remedy was checking down her list of songs. "Well, that one's out. That one... might work. Oh, that could be fun, but it was originally meant as a duet. (I read in an old magazine that Pinkie Pie and Vinyl Scratch once performed it at Hoofbeats.) I could tweak it for one pony, but it really requires musical accompaniment. Maybe a Velvet Remedy original? How about...?"

I blinked, remembering, "Well, Deadeye's expecting two songs before the attack. And he says one of them has to be a song by Sweetie Belle."

Velvet huffed. "And you were going to tell me this when?"

"um... just now?"

She nickered. "Great. Two songs, one by my great, great, et cetera grandmother. Well, at least I know most of those by heart. But the other..."

I couldn't help but roll my eyes. As much as I adored Velvet Remedy's music, and fell in love with her in every song, tonight we were just looking for a distraction. It didn't have to be perfect.

"Ya think y'all will be able t' keep every set of eyes on you?" Calamity asked.

Velvet Remedy looked playfully insulted. “Why of course, dear. There won’t be an eye for anypony else in that room.” I believed it. I believed Velvet Remedy could keep every eye on her even if Ditzzy Doo was in the audience. Suddenly, Velvet Remedy gasped. “Every eye! I’ll need a bath! Oh no, what am I going to wear!?”

“I can help with that.”

Velvet cocked her head. “No thank you. I can bathe myself quite well enough, dear.”

I stammered, flushing hotly. That wasn’t what I meant, but now that she had said it, I couldn’t drive the image out of my mind. My heart fluttered in my chest.

Calamity neighed and turned away. “I’ll give you two some private time for...” he waved a hoof between us, “...whatever this is.” He made a quick exit, muttering something about helping Gawd’s ponies get their magical plasma cannon up and running before Red Eye’s forces got here. I wasn’t paying any attention. I only had eyes for Velvet Remedy, and I could feel my face burning.

“I...” I stomped. “I meant, I have the perfect thing for you to wear!” Focusing my magic, I opened my saddlebags and slid out the most beautiful dress in the wasteland, my find from Carousel Boutique.



♪ *“How can I fix this? How many times must I try?*

Please, this time, let me get it right...

Get it ri-i-ight!”

Velvet Remedy was gorgeous. The dress was perfect on her, making her more stunning than I had ever seen her before. Her horn was aglow, and the stage was awash with warm, colored light that shifted with her voice and the mood of the song.

♪ *“I rear up on my hooves, throw a buck in the air,*

And let firm resolve overwhelm my despair!..”

She'd chosen as her first number that same incredibly heart-breaking song from the radio. Something every pony would be familiar with. And she was more than doing it justice. She was... magnificent.

I crouched on the balcony, covered in the ever-disgusting mattress cover. S.A.T.S. was ready. My sniper rifle was loaded and tucked at my side. I actually hated myself for planning to ruin her performance.

Deadeyes hadn't been stupid. When I entered the balcony, I found a note had been left for me: *One shot to the target, one to the table. The stage is rigged to explode if you shoot anything else.*

Celestia burn him! Even if I could get a message to Calamity, he was no better at disarming explosives than I was. (Out of petty spite, I stole his copy of *Applied Gemstones*.)

Velvet Remedy drew the song to a tear-jerking close. The audience, scores of raider ponies, sat utterly stunned. Even Gawd's beak had dropped open. There were several seconds of dense quiet, the stage going dark save for the faintest glow from Remedy's horn. Then an explosion of hoofbeats shook the mess hall, vibrating the balcony and sending bits of debris down from the roof as dozens of ponies hoof-stomped in applause.

I caught Deadeyes shooting a glance up at the balcony. Out of the corner of her eye, Gawd caught it too. She dipped her beak into a tin drinking cup, her gaze never leaving him.

New music began to swell from the stage, an orchestra in a single horn.

Velvet Remedy began clopping a hoof on the stage, setting a rhythm. Soon, most of the ponies in the hall were matching her stomp.

"Enough of this slow stuff, who's here to party!?" she bellowed out, drawing a roar from the crowd.

My ears were up; my eyes widened. And for a moment, I completely forgot about the sniper rifle at my side. All that mattered was that I didn't recognize this music. I'd never heard this song!

♪ *“Gallop, don’t trot, night’s burning hot, don’t make me wait to go!
 Band’s playing loud, screams of the crowd, this here’s what feeds my
 soul!
 If you’re not smiling, you’re not trying!
 Start a riot! Don’t be quiet!
 Hoof to the floor, just give me more, I need my rock ‘n’ roll!”*

By Celestia’s grace! She’s going to set off any explosives under that stage herself!

I floated up my sniper rifle, now terrified of letting her complete the song. With the light and sound now bursting from the stage, Velvet Remedy absolutely had every pony’s (and griffin’s) attention. By Luna, I could probably start shooting and no pony would notice until half the room was down! Well, if the stage didn’t go up in a fireball.

♪ *“...Don’t be lazy; just go crazy!
 Why don’tcha get that it’s a PARTY?”*

Flowing into the perfection of my PipBuck’s targeting spell, I locked onto a sequence of three targets.

BLAM!! BLAM!!

First shot tore through the tin cup, splashing Gawd with her drink, and dug into the table. Before anypony could react, the second ripped the top half of Deadeyes’ head clean off, splattering several of the ponies in front of him. My third target was Velvet Remedy, who glowed with a light not of her own making as I telekinetically shoved her back through the heavy curtains and off the stage.

True to Deadeye’s word, the entire front of the stage detonated in a roar of fire and splinters not a breath later. Waves of ponies in the front row fell. I saw Gawd stagger, bleeding from wooden shrapnel.

I activated the Stealth Buck and galloped silently towards the stairs. From below, I could hear somepony yelling, “It’s the slavers! They’re attacking early!”

Completely fair assumption, I thought as I hit the stairs. I was halfway down when an explosion from somewhere outside let me know the panicking pony hadn't been completely wrong.

As I raced for the terminal, my mind boggled at the coincidence. But no, I realized as I got to the desk and activated the terminal's single function, it wasn't coincidence at all. Red Eye's slavers weren't going to trust Deadeyes. Just as Deadeyes planned to betray them, they must have always intended to attack early. And right now, *every single pony was in here*. In accordance with the plan, even Gawd was in attendance, as were her loyalists. We'd pulled all the ponies into one place and left the outskirts and guardposts undefended. Of course they would attack *now*.



The Stealth Buck was just wearing off as I dashed into the room behind the curtains. I found Velvet Remedy pulling herself out of a pile of skeletons. Her perfect dress had bones hanging from it.

Panting, I apologized, explaining about the note. She waved it off. "Oh that's quite all right. I'd much rather be buried in a pile of skeletons than actually join them." With a smile that melted my heart, "Thank you, Littlepip!"

Then, as an afterthought, "Couldn't let me finish the song, though?"

Sheepishly, "I was afraid you'd set off the explosives yourself." I looked back towards the curtains. From the flickering light around their edges, the front side of the curtains was on fire. They were thick enough that the flames hadn't chewed their way through yet. I looked up. Black smoke was beginning to coat the ceiling. On the other side of the curtains, I heard gunfire and magical energy blasts being exchanged. I looked around for Calamity.

The rust-colored pegasus galloped in a moment later, his black cowpony hat nearly falling off. A key dangled from a chain between his teeth.

Velvet Remedy rolled her eyes with a laugh. "You actually stopped to get the key?"

Calamity turned his head, hooking the chain to one of the guns on his battle saddle. "Hells ya!" He grinned to Velvet. "Dependin' on who wins out there, Ah'm already makin' plans t' swoop back in an' loot the bodies."

Velvet Remedy turned up her nose. Even I rolled my eyes. Then I turned and trotted for the gate. "Come on..."

Calamity bit the tip of my tail, stopping me. "Whoa there, dumpling." He nodded his head towards the gate. I turned to look.

On the other side of the gate, between us and the now open metal door, were four turrets pointing right at me.

I groaned. Turning back on the power turned on the turrets too. How could I have been so stupid as to not realize that would happen. I could have disabled them before, when it was safe.

"We take all four out at once?" Calamity asked.

"No... hold on... let me think."

"Why are we still going down there anyway?" Velvet asked, clearly assuming the rest of the plan was a bust.

I was tempted to agree. Now, more than anything, "I'm kinda hoping there's a back way out."

I lifted my PipBuck and looked at it. "Okay, we're in luck. I've got one more Stealth Buck. I can use it to get up to the turrets and reprogram them, just like the ones back at that pegasus convoy. That way, they'll let us through, and keep anypony who gets the idea to follow us out."

We had a plan. I pulled the dead Stealth Buck out of my PipBuck and slotted in my last one. Then I got to work.



We found ourselves creeping through caves converted to storage, piled with crates emblazoned with the name Shattered Hoof Re-Educational Stockyard. A few were marked with a circle proclaiming them Celestial Tier Priority and branded with either the initials M.A.S. or M.W.T.

“Well,” I whispered conversationally to my companions. “I know M.A.S. is the Ministry of Magic, but I haven’t heard of the other one.”

Calamity stopped, an expression of confusion clouding his face. “How does...?”

“Ministry of Arcane Sciences,” Velvet Remedy explained casually before he hurt something.

A voice, low and deep, rumbled through the caves, bringing us all to a halt.

“So! You’re the little ponies who have come to my town and made such a mess of things. You’ve killed my lieutenant, and now you’ve come for me.”

“Mister Topaz?” Calamity asked, echoing my own thoughts. Either he was using an impressively well-hidden speaker system, or he was using magic to augment his voice. I suspected the latter. And that probably meant a unicorn. Or... a worse idea struck me... one of those pseudo-goddess things like the creature from old Appleloosa.

And here I was, all out of boxcars.

I quickly passed out the magical ammo, giving a prayer to Celestia and another to Luna. If Mister Topaz was one of those monsters, we’d need all the divine assistance we could get.

Calamity quickly changed the load on his battle saddle. Velvet Remedy, however, looked unimpressed. Her horn began to glow, and when she opened her mouth, her voice cried out from every rock and timber in the mines:

“NOT. IMPRESSED.”

Her nicker rang off the walls. Velvet Remedy turned down the awesome until her voice was only a little more terrifying than his. ***“Now why don’t you be polite? Stop playing games, and come out to say hello.”***

I floated up Little Macintosh and prepared for the appearance of what I had now convinced myself was one of those pseudo-goddesses.

As the orange-scaled dragon loomed around the corner, licking his teeth, I realized I was so very wrong.



“Well,” Calamity shouted as his wings propelled him down the caverns faster than Velvet Remedy or I could gallop. “At least he’s not a *full grown* dragon!”

I poured on the speed, somehow managing to keep up with Velvet Remedy. Calamity was right, for what good that did us -- Mister Topaz was slightly smaller than a train car, not counting his sharply-spiked tail. He could swallow me in one bite; but for Calamity, he might require two. I didn’t see how that benefited him much.

Using my magic, I ripped another support beam out of the wall as we raced past. I could hear rocks crashing down as the ceiling caved in. I wasn’t stopping him, but at least I was slowing him down enough to stay ahead of those teeth!

“We could have tried diplomacy,” Velvet cried out as she ran for her life. “If Calamity hadn’t shot him first!”

My breath was becoming labored, and stitches of fire were growing through my lungs. I could hear Mister Topaz tearing through the newest collapse. “Left ahead!” I gasped. I was unable to stop and check my PipBuck’s automap, but my Eyes-Forward Sparkle compass indicated we were circling around.

“At least we know the new ammo works!” Calamity spun in place, firing off twin shots at the dragon, then took a hard left, disappearing

around the corner. We followed, not far behind. The hall we had just left turned into an inferno, the walls shaking from the dragon's roar.

The ammo was working. The shots punched right through the dragon's armored hide. But he was so big that they mostly just seemed to make him mad.

Without slowing, Velvet laughed as we ran past a large metal door. "Well, there's your vault! Anypony want to stop and open it?"

Smart-assed rhetorical question.

Calamity stopped at the next junction, hovering in a nicely controlled panic. "Littlepip, which way?"

"Should be right this time!" At least, I really hoped so. If not, I was sending us into a dead end. With extra stress on dead.

Calamity disappeared down the right passage.

Luna and Celestia were with us. The choice had been right, and the passageway led us back into the first tunnel. Recognizing it, Calamity had already flown back into Shattered Hoof, where the battle between the raiders and slavers was fully engaged.

Velvet Remedy was next out. But as I raced for the door, Mister Topaz finally caught up. He opened his huge maw, teeth glistening. A drop of saliva fell onto my neck.

The turrets opened fire as I raced through them.

The dragon screamed! The sound rocked the mess hall, and brought a temporary halt to the fighting as every pony turned to stare at the now quite wounded and extremely pissed-off dragon as Mister Topaz blasted all four turrets with fire. Internal components melted with a static hiss and they stopped. I felt the fire wash over me, my coat blackening, my skin blistering under the heat. One of my saddle bags caught fire.

My heart was pounding like it was going to explode. My sides burned from exertion. I tried to yell out to the others, but I couldn't get the breath. I wasn't going to make it outside before I collapsed.

I veered away from the others as the fire began spreading from the saddlebag to the harness that held my sniper rifle; I was running for a hallway too narrow for the dragon. Behind me, the mess hall was washed in flames. Mister Topaz was burning to death slaver and raider ponies alike.

And then the dragon was gone.



I collapsed against the wall of a washroom two corridors away from the mess hall, panting hard. Water filled the sink next to me, soaking my saddlebag and pouring onto the floor next to me. It felt cool against my burn-tortured skin. I flopped over and wallowed in the forming puddle, wishing I could dip every part of me that hurt into it. I was crying.

I tried not to think of how much it hurt. To focus elsewhere. It wasn't easy.

The dragon, I assumed, had headed back into the mines. He could fly around the mess hall all he wanted, but the rest of the halls were too narrow for him. He was probably born down there or...

Velvet Remedy collapsed next to me, breathing heavily. It was nothing short of miraculous that neither of us were more gravely injured, much less dead. I tried to get up, but now that I'd stopped, my legs were refusing to work again.

"Where's... the... dragon?" I panted, searching for confirmation of my theory. Velvet Remedy just shook her head. She didn't know.

"Where's... Calamity?"

"I don't... know... Lost... track."

Dammit. Calamity wasn't foolish enough to go back down there after him, or the vault, was he? No, of course not. He just got separated, that's all. But if the slavers and raiders were still going at each other in the yard, it wasn't safe to stand around at the rendezvous point. Would

he fly back to Junction R-7 and wait for us there? Or engage the ponies fighting in...

"Oh blessed Luna!"

"Littlepip?" Velvet Remedy, as exhausted as she was, held her ears alert.

I had realized that the giant hole torn in the razor wire over the yard must have been the work of the dragon. And that led me to: "The cargo elevator! The dragon's going to come up through the rock yard!"

I hissed in pain as I tried to move. Velvet Remedy looked to me with alarm. "Little... pip! Here... let me..." She weakly opened one of the yellow medical boxes she used as saddle bags and pulled out the very last of our healing bandages as well as a syringe. "This... will... dull the pain..." She panted slowly. "Trust me... you'll need it."

She was very right. The painkiller helped. I screamed anyway.

When Velvet Remedy had finished, I felt lightheaded and my vision was blurred with tears. I moaned weakly, my knees trembling, as I finally got to my hooves.

"Littlepip, you're in no condition..." But there was no conviction in Velvet Remedy's voice, just sorrow. She knew as well as I that we couldn't stay here. And she knew I had to try to help Calamity.

"Do we... have any Buck in our supplies?" I bit my lower lip, hating to ask her for such a thing.

Velvet Remedy spared me her usual gasp of disapproval, simply bringing out the bottle and passing me a few of the yellowish-orange pills inside.

"Thanks," I whispered, floating them into my mouth. I stuck my head under the waterfall spilling out of the faucet and swallowed them without chewing.

It took a few moments, long enough that I feared it wasn't going to have the effect I needed.

A burst of energy flooded through me. I felt stronger, faster, less exhausted and more awake. This... this was good. This would definitely do!

I lifted my soaked saddlebag out of the sink and back onto my flanks, hissing as they rubbed against my bandaged skin. "On second thought," I thought, lifting it off and letting it float beside me.

Turning to Velvet Remedy, I made an effort to keep from sounding bossy. "Velvet, would you please try to find Calamity? Just be careful. Don't get caught... by anypony."

She nodded. "What are you going to try to do, Littlepip?"

I glanced towards the door. "I'm going back down. I'm going to get to that vault. If we're lucky, there will be something inside that will give us a chance against that dragon."

"But..." Velvet Remedy frowned, "Littlepip, you don't have the key!"

With a smile, "When have I ever needed a key to get past a lock?"



The mess hall was a slaughterhouse. The charred frame of the stage was still licked with flame. The air was choked with smoke. The smell of roasted ponies, some of them still on fire, tried to strangle me.

I was in a hurry, but I still took the time to snag a few of the random, less-damaged weapons from the floor before I made my way past the heat-twisted gate and slagged turrets. Behind me, the flame-broiled crossbeam that once held the stage curtains came crashing down. I made my way towards the vault.

Turning a corner, I found myself face to face with a pony in leather armor wielding a magical energy lance. I couldn't tell which side she had been on, but it didn't matter; she immediately dropped into a combative stance.

"Wait..."

She thrust the glowing tip of the lance at me. I tried to dodge, my side slamming into the cave wall. A line of stinging agony swept across the side of my neck, my flesh bubbling and melting. “*AAAAaaugh!*”

The pony backed up, swinging the tip of the magic lance towards my head. I dropped to my belly, the lance passing over me, and flung my saddlebags into her face. The pony stumbled back.

As she recovered, I kicked into S.A.T.S. and aimed one of the random weapons at her. My heart sank as I realized it was a magical energy rifle and I had no idea how to fire it. The pony thrust the lance towards my eyes and I swung the rifle into its path, deflecting it. The rifle hissed and warped where the lance’s tip connected.

I dropped everything I was floating and charged the pony, head down. She swung the lance again, but I was inside its reach; the shaft slapped against my side with enough force to bruise through my armored utility barding, but not enough to knock me off course. My horn punched through her armor and buried itself deep into her chest.

I felt the lance bounce off my head as it dropped from her mouth. She tried to pull back, but I pushed forward until I felt her weaken, her body becoming dead weight.

I stepped back, my horn coated in blood. The pony fell at my feet, still breathing shallowly.

I felt the blood trickle down my head. A drop fell into my left eye, tinting my sight with scarlet.

Weakly, she whimpered. “...I don’t want to die...”

I cringed. I tried to blink the blood out of my eye, but instead more drops fell in, blurring my vision. “It’s too late. I’m sorry.” I was, honestly. “I can’t save you.”

I contemplated breaking her neck. She was already dead -- why make her suffer? I raised my hoof...

...And stepped over her. I just couldn’t do that. No matter what I was allowing the wasteland to make me, I hadn’t changed that much yet.

I walked down the shaft a few more feet, then stopped and turned. I floated my saddlebags to me, opening them and drawing out my blanket. I gently laid it across her. Then I floated the weapons up from the ground, leaving the magical energy rifle, but adding her lance to my collection.

I didn't have any further trouble before reaching the vault.



The tumblers fell into place and the metal door to the vault unlocked with a click. And then all the alarms went off.

Apparently, while I didn't need a key to open this door, I did need it to do so quietly.

I planted my forehooves on the heavy metal door and, straining, pushed it open. (Something I almost certainly couldn't have done if I wasn't hyped on Buck.) I stepped into the darkness beyond and focused, increasing the light of my horn to illuminate the room.

There were many things I had been expecting. This wasn't any of them.

The room was filled, top to bottom, with shelves of memory orbs. Each orb was tagged with a date and a "guest number". There must have been hundreds of them.

My ears and tail drooped. There was nothing in here that would help against...

"Well, well. Aren't you insistent."

I spun around. Mister Topaz was crouched at the door of the vault, the dragon's head sticking in. He was too broad at the shoulders to fit, but he completely blocked my only exit. And one breath of fire would incinerate everything in the vault.

"I was on my way up to chomp a few of your friends outside, particularly that delicious-looking pegasus, when you just had to ring the dinner bell."

I was able to back just out of chomping range before my tail hit the back shelf, sending memory orbs falling to the floor. I looked around frantically, but there was no place to hide or flee.

“You just had to get yourself eaten first. I admire that perseverance,” the dragon joked wickedly.

“F-first?” Mister Topaz was sadistic, but at least he was talkative. If I could keep him speaking, maybe I could figure a way out. I tried racking my brain for some telekinetic trick that could save my hide.

“The gemstones are dessert, of course. You ponies, you’re the main course.” The dragon scowled, making me want to scream. **“Of course, you went and mucked everything up. I spend all this time and effort ensuring a harvest perfect for a final pre-sleep meal, and now most of them are dead!”**

His glare was filled with hatred. **“You little ponies taste so much better alive.”**

I backpedaled, pressing myself into the shelf, knocking down dozens of the little mystical orbs which scattered across the floor, rolling in all directions.

The dragon’s gaze was drawn momentarily to one of the rolling balls. **“What exactly were you expecting to find in here anyway? Mountains of gems? Because you thought I’d enjoy needing to call down that imbecile Deadeyes every time I got a bit peckish? Did you even look in the crates?”**

“N-no.”

He laughed, the breath of his merriment heating the room until I felt I would faint. I lost all focus, my saddlebags and collected weapons clattering to the ground. He glanced at them with amusement.

“Or was it weapons? Did you hope to find a magical shotgun of dragon slaying, perhaps? Because there would ever be any dragon suicidal enough to keep something like that around the house.”

“n-n-no,” I said again, although this time he had been fairly on the nose.

The dragon reached into the room and flicked one of the orbs at me with a claw. **“Go ahead. Try one. You died for this, after all.”**

I was going to die.

Hesitantly, I reached a hoof towards one of the orbs, but then drew it back. I was sweating profusely. The heat in the room was draining my strength. Soon I wouldn't be able to stand. And still, the only strategy I had was to keep him talking.

“w-what are they?”

“Confessions.” The dragon smiled cruelly. **“Seems the old mare of your Ministry of Morale didn't exactly trust normal methods of interrogation. Some incident in her youth or something. So instead, they trained up unicorns like yourself to sift through other ponies' memories, find the condemning thoughts or experiences, and rip them out for public record. Didn't want any innocent ponies getting sent to Shattered Hoof, after all.”**

“wha... but... that's...”

“Of course, not every pony came out of the process in the same condition they went in, mentally speaking. But what is it you ponies say? Can't bake a pie without dicing some apples?” He laughed again. This time, I did lose consciousness. Only for a moment, I think. But I found myself laying on the floor with no memory of falling.

“that's... awful.”

The dragon stopped laughing. **“You see, little pony? Look at what you ponies are doing to each other up there. Look at what you did to each other in here. What makes you think your pathetic, wicked species is worth being anything other than dragon food?”**

I tried to get up. I just couldn't. The heat was making all my burns blaze in agony. I felt like I was on fire again, only this time it was worse. I cried out.

The dragon was going to eat me. There were no options, no tricks, no other ways out. I was going to die here. Like this. Alone in a tiny metal room underneath a prison.

But still, I tried to answer. “N-not all... of us... are bad. Some... of us... are good.”

The dragon snorted, adding smoke to the heat. **“Yeah, I can see that.”** He was staring at me, and it took a moment for me to realize he was staring at my horn. The heat had caked the blood.

Mockingly, he offered, **“Well, I suppose some of you are good... with ketchup. Makes you little ponies nice and slippery going down!”** I cringed, fearing he would laugh again. The air was almost too hot to breathe. **“Although personally, I prefer mustard...”**

The mine shaft outside erupted in green liquid fire, the blast catching the dragon in the side with enough force to yank his head out of the room, sending him sprawling.

“Yee HAW!”

Blessed cool air swam into the room, clearing my head. That was Calamity’s voice!

“How’d ya like them apples!” Calamity flapped into view, carrying the magical plasma cannon from Junction R-7.

“Hey Li’lpip! Boy am Ah glad t’ see yer okay! Sorry it took me so long t’ get back. These things are heavy when not properly mounted!” The monstrous, tri-barreled weapon was bigger than he was, strapped to his underbelly with its power array attached to the top of his battle saddle with rope.

I found myself giggling half-hysterically. “Y-you look ridiculous!”

“Yeah, well...” Calamity’s jovial voice cut off. “Oh you have *got* to be kiddin’ me!”

“What?”

“He’s gettin’ back up! Run!”

Run was a bit more than I could manage. A third of my body felt like it was being held to a flame. I staggered, trying to focus. My saddlebag started to lift.

Calamity fired again, the blast from the cannon obliterating the air, the kick sending the pegasus pony hurling backwards. The dragon roared in pain and rage.

Glorious Luna, what does it take to kill one of these things!?

Telekinetically grabbing the rest my possessions, I dashed out the door. Calamity was biting off the ropes holding the cannon. "Can't carry you an' this at the same time."

I looked back. The dragon was badly wounded, possibly mortally. One of his wings was warped and deformed. The scales on his side had melted back against his ribs. One of his legs was a deformed stump. And still, he was getting back up, his eyes, filled with rage. He opened his mouth to bellow fire.

The fire was only a fraction of the blasts he had managed before. I felt the wave of superheated air that rode in front of it, but the flames didn't reach us.

Moments later, Calamity was pulling me through the air. Up out of the hole left by the lowered hydraulic cargo lift and into the cloudy sky. We shot past Gawd, engaged in a brutal aerial combat with the two griffins from the slaver camp; out of the corner of my non-blooded eye, I saw her draw that magical energy shotgun and empty it point-blank into the breast of one of her opponents. Beneath us, the chaos of warring ponies filled the rock yard, explosions and bursts of magical energy forming a violent dance of carnage around the dark, hollow square of the lift.

The dragon, impossibly, followed.

Even with its ruined wing, the dragon was faster than we were, tearing through the hole in the razor-mesh in pursuit of us. Calamity would have been more maneuverable had his wing been fully healed and he

wasn't carrying the extra weight. As it was, we were a two-pony flying brick.

As the dragon drew closer, Mister Topaz opened his maw wide. Glancing back, I saw rows of viciously sharp teeth surrounding a dark, insatiable gullet.

I had an idea. "Keep flying straight."

Calamity grunted, straining his wings for more speed. "Ah hope y'know what yer doin'..."

I opened my saddlebags and pulled out the rest of my grenades. All of them. I noted with terror-tinged amusement that they really did look like metal apples.

"How do you like..." I whispered as I let go of everything but the stems, sending the grenades right into the dragon's ravenous throat.

Even as they disappeared, it occurred to me that I may have made a horrible mistake. Dragons can breath fire and eat gems. What made me think a few grenades would cause more than indigestion?

A moment later, I learned my reservations were right as the grenades did absolutely no harm to the healthy parts of the dragon... but blew out his damaged side, warped and deteriorated by potent assaults of magical plasma, in a blast of sick gore.

Mister Topaz, a gaping hole in his side larger than three full ponies, was almost certainly dead before he hit the ground messily and skidded thirty yards, leaving a swath of blood and internal fluids.

Calamity turned and banked, taking us back to the Junction. There were still battles raging in parts of Shattered Hoof, but we had both had enough excitement for the night.

"Oh horseapples," Calamity said wearily. "Ah almost forgot about Velvet Remedy." Before I could panic, he informed me, "She's hid herself in the Visitors' Center. Ah told 'er I'd be right back for 'er."

Gently, he set me down, and then flapped back into the night, looking utterly exhausted. I sat there, waiting for him to return, and at some point I fell asleep.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Sniper Pony - Your chance to hit an enemy's head in S.A.T.S. is increased by 25%.

