

Fallout **EQUESTRIA**

By Kkat

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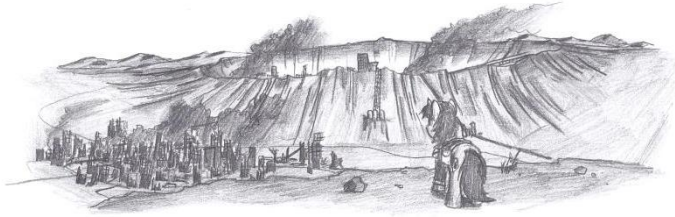
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VOLUME THREE:
GENEROUS SOULS

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



THE EARTH PONY WAY

“I pray for the safety of all good ponies who come to Fillydelphia, even slaves. But we can’t expect the Goddess to do all the work.”

Industry.

Spike had said he didn’t understand the “Earth Pony Way” until he had seen Fillydelphia. Even now, with the ruins of the city looming on the edge of the horizon, I began to understand why.

Industry had been the secret heart of Equestria since long before the war. How could you have pony-pulled trains without steel mills creating metal for the rails? How could you have the tall skyscrapers of Manehattan without glass companies producing windows by the hundreds? How could a small town like Ponyville have a dressmaker’s shop with all the finest fabrics without the textiles industry? Still, most ponies had barely thought about it -- out of sight, out of mind. Living in the idyllic, pastoral towns and halcyon cities of Equestria, it had been easy to forget. Unless you were a pony living in Equestria’s single center of manufacturing -- a mecca of earth pony industry.

Fillydelphia.

I learned these things from SteelHooves. I had sought his knowledge when it became abundantly clear that we were heading towards something far more than just a really big version of old Appleloosa. Because less than halfway between Manehattan and

Fillydelphia, my PipBuck had started picking up a broadcast out of Fillydelphia.

It was the same musical programming the sprite-bots kept playing, interrupted occasionally for messages from Red Eye. But now that I had a constant feed, I realized those little speeches were far more frequent, and carried more substance, than I had assumed. Now, Red Eye was able to talk to me as he did the ponies of Fillydelphia. And his words worried me. A lot.



“...we have Uncle and Aunt Fruitcup, a peaceful and loving couple, married for nearly a decade now, living in their quaint little house with their tiny garden on the outskirts of Roamer. No children, two dogs and a sunflower that Aunt Fruitcup has named Celestia.

“What kind of monster, I have been asked, would root up Aunt and Uncle Fruitcup, tear them away from their peaceful, pointless lives, and set them to work hauling carts heavy with scrap metal?

“A monster, indeed. But one with his eyes open and cast upon our future. The future of Equestria. Two hundred years ago, we lost our great nation, but we will have it again! And what would the Fruitcups and their little homestead be in two hundred years? Nothing, meaningless, not even hoofnotes in the annals of history. But... what will have meaning two hundred years from now? This factory!

“And it is from this factory, and the others like it, that Equestria will be rebuilt. It is from the work that Uncle and Aunt Fruitcup do now that a new national infrastructure will be created and a new golden age will be born -- the golden age of Unity! Equestria will rise like a phoenix from her own ashes! But not without our help, and not without our labor.

“This is what is important. This will make a difference. This will last!”

The words of Red Eye were met by the clapping applause of at least a hundred hoofs. The roar of the crowd was abruptly cut off, replaced by a gravelly voice:

“And there you have it: Red Eye’s speech marking the reopening ceremony of the Honest Steel factory. Word has it, Red Eye will be making a return visit later this week to inspect the factory’s output. And now, for some music, starting with my favorite: March of the Parasprites...”

The broadcast began playing the familiar marching music, heavy on tuba and harmonica.

I turned off the station, pulling out my earbloom. Red Eye, it would seem, didn’t live in Fillydelphia. But he made visits, and one was coming up very soon. I informed my companions of this.

Velvet Remedy was curled up on one of the bench seats of the Sky Bandit with Pyrelight sleeping next to her, a glowing patch of emerald and gold against her charcoal coat. I was amazed at how the balefire phoenix had stayed with her. Normally, even a pet bird would need a cage.

SteelHooves nodded, not turning towards me. He had been keeping watch on the ground sweeping below ever since we had flown over the last rubble of the Manehattan suburbs. I tried to avoid doing that.

“Ah have bad news, folks,” Calamity called from in front of the *Sky Bandit*. “She’s startin’ t’ sag. Keep yer peepers out for someplace t’ put ‘er down long enough t’ swap out the spark batteries.”

“All I’ve got is dirt, rocks and dead trees,” SteelHooves called back. “Nothing you want to land on out here.”

I floated out the binoculars and moved to the edge of one of the windows, braving the possible vertigo. “What are we looking for?”

SteelHooves continued to scan the ground below. “Anyplace the hellhounds are less likely to get at us.”

Hellhounds. I recalled *Homage*, as DJ Pon3, warning ponies about hellhounds in the stretch between Manehattan and Fillydelphia. I’d been picturing rabid dogs, like the ones Uncle and Aunt Fruitcup had, only vicious. Possibly overgrown and mutated, like the bloodwings. Sure, the first time I heard of a hellhound, I learned that

just one could take out a wagon train of slavers. But then, so could I. And I was hardly frightening.

SteelHooves's even voice, however, betrayed a hint of worry. And nothing my mind had been conjuring would even strike alarm in the ancient, steel-clad soldier. "What are hellhounds?" I caught a shiver pass through Pyrelight. I suspected the answer would be something much worse than I dismissed them to be. When even the nigh-immortal bird is worried...

The suspicion was nailed home when SteelHooves and Calamity both turned to look at me as if I had just asked what a gun was.

"You don't know what a hellhound is?" SteelHooves asked evenly. "And you decided we should all go to Fillydelphia anyway? Without finding out what lies between?"

Velvet Remedy chimed in, "I've never even heard of a hellhound."

SteelHooves facehoofed with a clank of metal on metal. Calamity muttered something about "Stable folk" from ahead.

"You could fill us in," Velvet Remedy suggested. "Or you two can just keep being melodramatic."

SteelHooves bristled. "The hellhounds," he nickered, "Are simply the most dangerous creatures in the Equestrian Wasteland. I'd rather face off against alicorns."

Velvet Remedy and I exchanged looks. She deadpanned, "Wow. Informative. What, are these things a secret?" I smirked.

Calamity pushed back his hat, glancing over his left wing at us. "Either of ya folks ever heard 'bout Splendid Valley?"

My "Yes" came simultaneously with Velvet Remedy's "No." While hellhounds had not struck much of a note in my imagination, a terrifying specter of Splendid Valley had been painted in my mind by all the dark rumors and foreboding mentions of the place. I looked down over the ruined plains below us, all brown dirt and blackened trees. It didn't look like the barren landscape in the picture in

Twilight's Athenaeum, but that had been before the end of the world. It could be...

"Is that what's between Manehattan and Fillydelphia? Splendid Valley? Are we over it right now?" I scanned for what could be Maripony. A structure in the distance caught my eye. A large building topped with smokestacks. It looked fairly intact. Giant metal skeletons fanned out from the building in all directions, holding up lines of cable.

Calamity barked a laugh. "Aw hell no. Splendid Valley's closer t' Ponyville than t' Fillydelphia." I was suddenly thankful for the slavers who captured me my first night out of the Stable. Without them, what pony could say the direction I would have struck off in? "But... what all do y'know 'bout Splendid Valley?"

"Well... that's where Maripony is," I started, trying to remember everything I had heard, all while wondering where Calamity was leading with this. SteelHooves was silent, which could mean he thought that Calamity was taking the right tack. (Or just that SteelHooves was SteelHooves.) "Maripony used to be there because of all the gemstones they mined out of Splendid Valley, but it was converted to something else once the gems were all gone." I licked my lips, trying to think of more. "They stored all sorts of magical toxins in the caves under Splendid Valley. And it was the second place hit by a megaspell..."

"Second place, huh?" Calamity whinnied. "Ah didn't know that."

"You're missing the most important thing," SteelHooves interrupted.

More important than megaspells, radiation and magical toxins? I looked from Calamity to SteelHooves.

"Ayep. When the ponies decided t' mine Splendid Valley, they had had one small problem. The valley was inhabited..."

Velvet Remedy's eyes widened. "Wait... they mined ponies' *homes*?"

"Not ponies," SteelHooves answered, interjecting, "Gemstones meant magical energy weapons. Crucial for the war effort. It was decided that

the creatures living in Splendid Valley had to move. The valley belonged to the nation of Equestria, and it was needed.”

I felt a rock growing in my stomach.

“Only, not alla the inhabitants seemed t’ get the message. An’ after ponies had stripped the place clean, several families moved back into those caverns.”

“Back in... to where the Ministry of Arcane Sciences was storing hazardous magical waste?”

“And to where the zebras set off a balefire bomb,” SteelHooves added.

“Goddesses,” Velvet Remedy gasped. “And they... survived? Those poor... what were they again?”

“Diamond dogs,” Calamity called back.

I froze. Waaaaait.... “Hold on! Are you telling us that the creatures that Rarity *defeated by whining* have become the most terrifying monsters in the Equestrian Wasteland?”

“Ayep.”

I looked to SteelHooves in disbelief, but his helmet nodded. “They’re big. They’re fast. And they’re *extremely* aggressive. They have claws that can tear through armor like it was soft cloth. I’ve even seen one claw their way through an alicorn’s magical shield.”

Fuck. “Well, makes me glad we’re up here where we can shoot at them and they can’t get at us!” I paused, “They can’t fly, can they?”

“Nope,” Calamity said, much to my short-lived relief. “But they c’n dig. Fast. An’ pretty much through anything. When they come after ya, they c’n stay underground ‘till they’re right beneath ya. Ground might tremble a bit; that’s all the warnin’ y’all will get before they rend ya apart. An’ they sure ain’t gonna stand around outside where ya c’n shoot at ‘em.”

“Worse,” SteelHooves asserted. “They’re smart. These aren’t animals like manticores or bloodwings. They’ve gotten hold of magical energy

weapons, reverse-engineered them, and rebuilt them for holding in their claws. They don't have the magic to create new ones, but they sliced their way into the Splendid Valley Armory and stole over a hundred weapons – all of which, we must assume, have been repurposed.”

“So...” Velvet Remedy said slowly, “They can shoot us, and we can't get at them.”

Cocking her head towards me, she snarked, “Well thank you, Littlepip. I adore the places you take me.”



“What is this place?” I asked, staring at the huge smokestacks as I stepped out of the *Sky Bandit* and onto the broken roof of the building that I had spotted in the distance. All around, metal structures, like the skeletons of standing giants, stretched out across the plains, most marching towards Manehattan or Fillydelphia.

The building was huge, and offered the best protection against hellhounds.

“A power station,” SteelHooves answered. “Massive furnaces burned coal to generate the power necessary to operate a lot of the non-magical conveniences that came out of Equestria's technological revolution. There were hundreds of these all over Equestria before the war.” He pointed a hoof to the cables that the metal skeletons were holding up. “Those carried the power created here to the cities.”

Wow. I floated out the binoculars and gazed out along one of the marching lines of metal structures. About a mile away, several had collapsed, the lines severed and dangling from their still-standing compatriots. This was so much bigger than the once coal-powered train engines I had seen in New Appleloosa and Junction R-7.

Calamity had detached himself from the *Sky Bandit's* harness and was preparing to crawl under the passenger wagon as Velvet Remedy fished spare spark batteries out of her saddleboxes.

Floating my binoculars back into my saddlebags, I cast a look about the roof. On one end was small tower with a door. My curiosity woke up and began digging into my mind with a persistent hoof. Shrugging, I trotted towards the door, pulling out my screwdriver and a bobby pin in anticipation. No reason not to just take a look.

I was thrilled when the door was locked. Crouching, I got to work.

Click. Such a sweet sound. I nudged the door open. Stairs, up to the tower and down into the power plant itself.

As I stepped into the darkness, a deep, rumbling voice asked, "Where are you going?"

"Exploring," I smiled back. SteelHooves just shook his head, but took up position behind me as I headed up the stairs.

The tower stairwell opened onto a single room with a balcony that looked like it was designed for pegasus wagon landings. The back half of the room was nothing more than a huge cargo elevator. A circular company logo painted on the elevator door (Hippocampus Energy: Hydroelectric, Coal, Sewage) was flaked and peeling into slow oblivion.

The rest of the room had large windows looking out towards the Fillydelphia and Manehattan skylines. Both were far enough away that the horizon hid them, but Fillydelphia was closer and I could see the clouds on that horizon hung low: black, angry clouds lit by reddish light from below. Fillydelphia's ivory tower was clearly visible, slashing up into the clouds like a needle.

"Wow. The sky over Fillydelphia actually looks... kinda evil."

"Red Eye must have several of the factories going again," SteelHooves commented.

I nodded although I had no idea why that would change the cloud cover. Then again, I thought as I looked out across the power plant's massive chimneys, maybe it would.

There were four boxes of ammo sitting under a bank of dead lights with labels like "generator #11 output" and "sector #7 load". I knelt by the

ammo boxes. Two were empty, the other two locked. I opened one easily enough, retrieving ammo that didn't match any firearm I had seen before. A big and frightening caliber. The other box, to my surprise, was jammed. Somepony had tried picking the lock and failed badly. It was literally the first evidence I had seen that anypony in the Equestrian Wasteland other than me had learned lockpicking. Unfortunately for both of us, this pony wasn't very good at it.

I sat back. I had no idea how to open a force-jammed lock, aside from the sort of massive firepower that would likely destroy the contents of the armored box. The damn thing was designed so you couldn't just shoot the lock.

I telekinetically lifted the box and tried to pry at it, but that was utterly futile. A pony might think that having the strength to lift a train car would give me more than enough power to tear open a box, but no. The levitation field of my telekinesis makes the objects trapped inside, like the boxcar in Appleloosa, virtually weightless... until, of course, I let it go. There simply wasn't enough force behind my single magical spell to break a lock. I'd have better luck with a crowbar. But I tried anyway. And failed. And tried again. And failed again. And finally tossed the box as hard as I could. It hit with a thud that did no further damage to the box but left a small crack in the plaster covering the wall.

"Done now?" a smooth, feminine voice asked from the stairwell. "Or would you like to jump on it with your hooves for a while first?"

I blushed, looking at Velvet Remedy. "um... How's Calamity doing?"

She sighed, looking out the window at the Sky Bandit on the roof below. "Do you think there's any chance of getting him a bath in Fillydelphia?" She looked across at SteelHooves. "I suspect an actual spa is right out."

I laughed. Good luck trying to get Calamity into a spa even if there is one!



The stairwell down lead to a set of offices adjacent to a break room. While SteelHooves and I took the offices, Velvet Remedy trotted towards the latter to scavenge any foodstuffs from what had once been the employee refrigerator. I felt confident that everything she would *find* would be vegetarian, no matter the actual contents.

The offices had windows on opposite sides. To the back, the windows had once peered outside, but they had been so caked with dust over the centuries that the weakened sunlight that made it through the clouds above was not strong enough to penetrate.

Opposite these were windows that stared out over the power plant's main floor, filled with enormous generators and a wall of furnaces. A metal catwalk bisected the air above, leading from the offices here to what looked like an Overmare's office on the far side.

"How did catwalks over heavy machinery become the dominant aesthetic?"

Horrrifying memories of Ironshod Firearms were flashing through my head. Although, fortunately, this place seemed utterly deserted. Looking around, I could see where there had been turret emplacements, but they were destroyed. Further catwalks and suspended stairwells lead down to the floor of the plant, and on one was the crumbled remains of a brainbot and a few piles of mildly-pink ash. Further evidence of the scavengers who had come before us.

I turned back, already having decided to cross the catwalk and explore the office beyond. But not with SteelHooves. Previous experience told me that having someone as heavy as he was on those catwalks would be four hooves of "no".

SteelHooves was looking at a framed sheet high up on another wall. A badly faded page from a newspaper stared back. I trotted over, having to plant my forehooves on the wall to get the height to read it. The pony who hung the frame was not thinking of shorter ponies.

The main article featured a picture of this power plant (or, at least, one that could be its identical sister):

Hippocampus Energy Plant #12 Opens Amidst Controversy Pegasus and Unicorn Protestors Decry Environmental Impact

The story dominated the page, pushing aside lesser stories (*"Fillydelphia's prestigious Alpha-Omega Hotel to host this year's Summer Sun Celebration"* and *"Coal prices continue to rise as relations with zebra nation remain strained. Princess Celestia promises amiable resolution soon"*) to make room.

A thought hit me. Back in New Appleloosa, Calamity had said something...

All the coal's in strange far-away lands... full of zebras!

I dropped to all hooves, turning my head towards SteelHooves.

"Hold on," I said, feeling dumbstruck for the second time in as many hours. "Equestria didn't have any coal!" I waved a hoof at the power plant. "Are you telling me you ponies built Equestria's entire infrastructure on a power source *you didn't have*?"

SteelHooves said nothing.

"That's... insane! What pony does that?"

SteelHooves just stared as I had a mental meltdown trying to parse that idea. Finally, he stated, "Why would it be a problem? We had resources the zebras needed, they had coal. We trade. Everybody's happy."

Yeah, sure. Until somepony... or some zebra... figures out they don't have enough to go around anymore. Or decides they just don't want to share.

I turned away, my eyes falling on a desk and the strangely pristine coffee mug still sitting on it. I allowed myself the distraction of marveling at how, in all these dusty, tattered, decaying ruins, a coffee mug would be the thing in finest condition. I glanced across at the

other desks and a table beyond. Yes, there wasn't one that I wouldn't have felt safe drinking out of... except for the one where a baby radroach had apparently decided to drown itself. I shuddered a little, and decided that the coffee mug maker had employed some minor magic in their creation. A little spell meant to keep them from being stained by the coffee had left them the cleanest things in all of Equestria.

Several of the mugs had the company emblem: Hippocampus Energy. Hydroelectric, Coal, Sewage. Okay, so Equestria hadn't been *entirely* dependent on trade with the zebras, but this power plant spoke volumes to just how much of it had been.

I snorted in wry amusement. Unicorns gave us power through magic. Earth ponies had given us power through water, rocks and... "oh horseapples!" I said, suddenly realizing we had all left Calamity on the rooftop alone.



We all galloped back only to find Calamity still at work. "Shouldn't be more'n a few minutes," he said, half his body hidden under the *Sky Bandit*. "Why...? What's got all y'all actin' spooked?"

Pyrelight was circling overhead, keeping an eye out for danger. (Or food. Or small, shiny things.)

"Nothing," SteelHooves started to reply, but Velvet Remedy stepped forward, levitating a rolled sheet of paper that she had slipped through the straps of her saddleboxes.

"I found something I wanted you to take a look at," Velvet almost purred. "Building and fixing things is your forte, after all."

Calamity pushed himself out from under the *Sky Bandit* to take a look. Velvet Remedy cringed back slightly. He was as filthy as she had feared. "Sure. Whatcha' got fer me?"

Taking a few steps back from Calamity, Velvet floated the roll of paper between them, uncurling the schematic. The paper was darkly stained

with blood, but most of the writing was still legible. Calamity leaned forward to study it.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Pyrelight dive down below the roofline. A moment later, there was a crackle of green flame. The majestic predator returned with a roasted squirrel in her beak. She dropped it on the roof next to Velvet Remedy and began pecking at it. I boggled internally as Velvet, who not minutes ago had edged back from a dirt and grease-smeared Calamity, only smiled at the very carnivorous actions of the balefire phoenix.

Calamity let out a low whistle. “Well, *somepony* was sure... inventive.” He looked up to Velvet Remedy. “Where’d y’all find this?”

“On a table, beneath the remains of a dead unicorn pony,” Velvet Remedy fretted. I could guess by the waver in her voice that the body had not been a skeleton. Somepony more recent, one of the scavengers I assumed. “I think she may have died for that.”

“How did she die?” Calamity asked with an odd sense of urgency.

Velvet Remedy, ever the medical pony, was swift to answer. “She was hit by a magical weapon. It didn’t turn her to ash, but it melted half of her face and neck,” she said grimly.

Calamity nodded with a frown. “Well, that rules out... ‘bout nothing.”

“The power plant had robotic security that wielded magical energy weapons,” I informed him. “I’ve seen the sort before.”

Calamity let out a sigh of relief. Pyrelight looked up from her meal, a strip of barbecued squirrel dangling from her beak.

“This here’s a design fer creatin’ a helmet usin’ the claws of a hellhound. Thing is, Ah don’t think a unicorn could use it,” he told us. I could imagine why; I had no desire to trade in my horn for such a helmet. “But it would sure make one hell of a weapon if Ah ever gave up shootin’ for headbuttin’.”



“One of the children asked me, ‘Red Eye, what is your cutie mark?’”

The charismatic voice of Red Eye spoke to me in my earbloom as I moved back down into the power plant. This time, I left SteelHooves behind with Calamity. In return, Velvet Remedy insisted on accompanying me. No splitting up.

“To that child, I answered ‘I do not have one.’”

I paused, lifting a hoof to my earbloom. I recalled with a shudder how the alicorns were blank-flanked. Was Red Eye an alicorn? He certainly didn’t speak like one. I racked my brain, trying to remember if I’d ever encountered a male alicorn. I couldn’t think of one.

“Of course, the next question was ‘Why, Red Eye?’ Why don’t I have a cutie mark? Because I choose not to have a cutie mark. Why would I want one? Am I really going to let a picture on my flank determine my future? If I find something that I really enjoy, do I need an icon on my ass to tell me? Of course not.”

“To too many ponies, cutie marks are more about what you can’t be. How can you expect to be a great scientist if your cutie mark is a rake? Or an amazing artist if your flank has a picture of a pile of hay? Who is going to give you the chance?”

“But if your flank is bare, then the possibilities are endless. And the choice is up to you. That is why I had my cutie mark removed. And why the Children of Unity have all chosen to do the same. In the new Equestria, we will all be lifted up by the Goddess, freed from the shackles of cutie mark coercion.”

“But there is still much work to be done before that day. So in anticipation for it, we have chosen to take the first step ourselves.”

As I took my first step onto the catwalk, I shut off the broadcast. I didn’t need any of that nonsense threatening my concentration if a section of the walkway started to give.

“Velvet, you stay here. I’m just going to go across to that office...”

“Because that’s what ‘not splitting up’ means to you, right?” Velvet chided.

I sighed and tapped at the catwalk. “Because I don’t want to risk putting extra weight...” I clammed up two words too late.

“So... you’re saying I’m heavy?” Velvet Remedy said with a voice like chocolate silk. “Is that why you no longer seem attracted to me? And here I had thought it was because of the... wagon. But no, it’s because you think I’m fat.”

I facehoofed. “Velvet... I...”

“Oh no,” she said, putting an extra sway into her hips as she stepped out onto the catwalk in front of me. “It’s good that you’ve finally told me. All this adventuring... I’ve really let myself go, haven’t I?”

“Velvet...”

The more mature unicorn mare tossed her mane as she turned to look at me over her shoulder, pouting alluringly. I felt a flush of arousal mix with cringing shame. She lifted a hoof to her muzzle, suckling it in thought. “I suppose I’m getting old too.”

Luna’s tidal mareheat!

I began to follow behind her, head hung low, using my levitation to keep most of my own weight off the catwalk. She tortured me the whole trip. It was the longest catwalk in history.



I was working the lock on the door to what I had mentally labeled the power plant’s “Overmare’s office” when Velvet Remedy bit my armored utility barding and gave a tug. My mind immediately conjured two possibilities. Either something was wrong, the sort of wrong that required *silent* notification, or Velvet Remedy had decided to ramp up my punishment with nuzzles and nips. Either, really, seemed just as likely.

I heard a shuffling noise below.

Okay, not a punishment. Carefully, I set down my tools, not wanting to risk a shock making me drop them. I peeked over the edge of the catwalk. Below us, hidden behind the last of the massive generators, was the shredded body of a Steel Ranger. Gasping in horror, I almost called out SteelHooves' name. But this wasn't SteelHooves. The armor had subtle differences to the design which told me this Ranger had been a mare. Lumbering over the corpse was a hulking, demonic creature, canine only in the broadest comparison, three times the size of the armored pony whom it was tearing to ribbons with deadly claws that sliced through the armor like it was paper mache.

The hellhound stopped, sniffing at the air. It raised itself up to full height, then let out a pained howl, dropping back to all fours again. One of the creature's legs was crippled and deformed. The Steel Ranger had gotten in one good hit before falling to the monster.

The monster reached over and picked up a bizarrely designed magical energy rifle from the floor. Again, it began to look around. Velvet Remedy crouched flat against the catwalk. I shied away from the edge. We held our breaths.

We heard a grunt. Then a whimper and shuffling. It was moving... but to where?

I carefully lifted the screwdriver and bobby pin again, hoping that this office offered a back way out. I didn't want to crawl back across the long catwalk. If it could smell us, I wanted out of this room quickly.

The tumblers fell into place. The door opened with a click that felt deafening.

We both heard an odd vocal sound from somewhere below.

We both rushed into the room as quietly as we could and I gently pushed the door closed behind us. But it was too late. I could see the monster climbing up one of the sets of stairs like a monkey -- if that monkey were made out of death.

I looked immediately to the wall where the elevator had been in Ironshod Firearms. No such luck. I took in the room quickly -- desk,

terminal, wall, weapons cabinet (a weapons cabinet in a power plant?), filing cabinet, office fridge, miscellaneous badly decayed furniture. No other exit at all.

I figured it would take the hellhound all of seconds to claw through the door. It would take longer, with its bad leg, to get across the catwalk.

Velvet Remedy galloped to the far corner, horn beginning to glow. Dammit... if these things could claw through an alicorn's shield, what good would Velvet's do?

I floated out Little Macintosh and my sniper rifle, although I would have only the slimmest chance to get a shot off with the latter before the monster closed the distance and killed me.

We waited.

As the seconds dragged on, I started counting the missed opportunities to swap out ammunition for something with more punch. But as much as I yearned to do so, I was certain that the moment I emptied Little Macintosh would be the moment the hellhound came through the door.

Velvet Remedy was trembling, tensely holding her spell. She was shooting me furtive looks that I couldn't interpret, but didn't dare even whisper.

We waited several more seconds. By my estimation, the hellhound should have already reached the door. Was it just sitting outside? Or had it gone away? I forced myself to think through the clouding effect of fear. SteelHooves said these things were *smart*. It could be planning. But what would it be planning? What would I plan if I was an incarnation of death? A wounded one?

What I *wouldn't* do is charge in through a door where the ponies on the other side were waiting to shoot me. No, I'd set a trap.

It was setting a trap!

My mind had snatched that idea when Velvet whispered one of her own. "It tracks by scent," she hissed. "What if it went the wrong way?"

I didn't think that was likely. It must have heard me shut the door behind us. But, if Velvet Remedy was right, then that meant it was heading up towards SteelHooves and Calamity! And we were wasting precious seconds that we didn't have!

Of course, if I was right, rushing out to save them would be exactly the trap-springing mistake it was looking for.

Cautiously, I inched towards the door. I was nearly to it when I heard a sound from somewhere on the other side, faint and brief and unfathomable.

I jumped, backpedaling until my tail hit the far wall. I crouched, cowering, and readied my weapons to shoot. All of them.



With a sense of utter dread, I grew tired of waiting. My nerves were frazzled from adrenaline. The room's musty, dilapidated odor was giving me a headache. I thought I had heard the strange sound a few more times, but it was so faint through the door that it could have just as easily been the whispers of my mind playing tricks on me.

By now, if the monster had gone after SteelHooves and Calamity, they were already dead. If it was stalking us, it was clearly willing to wait forever.

"Fine," I hissed. "I'm going to find out what we're going to die for, and then I'm leaving. Slow and careful. I'm expecting a trap."

Velvet Remedy nodded. "Just keep out of the hellhound's way. I've got a plan."

Velvet Remedy had a plan? *Velvet?* I quickly chided myself for being so surprised. She was smart and capable, if not exactly what I considered Wasteland-wise. And besides, it was bound to happen sooner or later.

I started with the weapon's locker, only to find that, like the ammo box upstairs, the lock had been mangled by an amateurish lockpicking attempt. I felt a flare of hatred. SteelHooves and Calamity might be dead, we might be about to die, and this idiot had fucked up the lock.

I moved on to the desk only to find it had been unlocked and emptied. The filing cabinet had been unlocked as well, but inside I found mostly ashes, with the burnt remains of documents and folders as well a partially-melted audio recorder with no recording remaining. My rival lockpicker had opened this filing cabinet with the intent to destroy the contents, not loot them.

I turned to the terminal. Hacking it was hard, but not as hard as Pinkie Pie's terminal. But either my rival had gotten into it before me, or the terminal's spell matrix had been programmed to wipe out all the contents. The terminal was blank.

That left the wall safe, which I had purposefully left for last. Looking it over, I had to bite back a whistle at the craftsmanship. The lock was, by far, the most complicated and demanding I had ever attempted. Not to mention the sturdiest. My rival had clearly tried and failed here too, but the lock resisted even jamming. The bitch had responded by breaking off a bobby pin in a mean attempt to prevent me from getting the prize it had denied her. I pulled it out with simple telekinesis.

My first attempt failed. As did my second. I thought I had it the third time, but was only rewarded with a broken bobby pin.

Dammit! I wasn't sure if, without the benefits of Party-Time Mint-als, I could manage it.

No. I wasn't going down that path. Not again.

Instead, I pulled out every lockpicking tool I had at my disposal and tried again. And again. And again, until I finally got it right.

The safe clicked open.

Inside was a fair amount of pre-war gold coins, two clips of those very scary bullets, a StealthBuck and a memory orb. And a golden "Iron Pony" saddle buckle. (If it's an *Iron* Pony buckle, why is it colored *gold*?) That last I left behind.

Motioning Velvet Remedy behind the desk, I crouched down and focused on the door. A telekinetic field enveloped the door, depressing the handle with a click and pulling it open.

The first thing I saw was the hellhound crouched at the far end of the walkway, holding its rifle as it tracked a target I couldn't see. The first thing I heard was the symphony of beeps as the magical energy mines that the hellhound had attached to the door prepared to detonate.

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

My instinct was to slam the door shut, but even if the backlash didn't kill us, the explosion would destroy the bridge. Instead, I grasped them each with my telekinesis and shot a prayer to the Goddesses that the actual strength of my spell was enough to pry them off the door.

The hellhound turned and fired a beam of orange light at me. It struck inside the open wall safe, scorching the back. The energy splash turned the Iron Pony buckle brightly hot.

The damn mines wouldn't budge. The hellhound might as well have attached them with wonderglue. (And, in retrospect, probably did.)

BEEP!BEEP!BEEP!

There was no more time. I slammed the door shut and ducked.

The explosion melted the wall.

It also turned enough of the floor to goo that the desk fell into the room below us. Without thinking about it, Velvet and I leapt down after it. The last thing I thought I saw before I plunged into the darkness below was Pyrelight soaring across the wide open space above the generators, the hellhound trying to track her with its rifle. The last thing I heard was the rending sound of metal.



Pain lanced up my left foreleg with every step. Considering what we had momentarily escaped, I was happy for it. I had merely twisted my hoof. I still had all my limbs attached.

The hallway lead past bathrooms on one side and what I suspected was the supervisors' break room, complete with vending machines. The opposite side of the hallway bore a set of three framed and backlit posters, each with a different illustration but the same proclamation in big, bold letters:

PROGRESS.

The highly stylized images were, in order: a train engine bellowing smoke and hauling multiple passenger cars all by itself, ponies staring up in marvel at a monorail train passing overhead, and a mare marveling in near orgasmic glee as her spider-like hover robot dusted her furniture. The last poster's backlighting was flickering maddeningly.

We found two more slashed apart Steel Rangers before we made it to the stairwell. To my dismay, the only way out was back into the generator room. Velvet Remedy whispered to me, "When I say the word, gallop for all you're worth."

A shot of fear went through my breast. "I don't know how much run I can manage right now," I said, but my real fear was that her plan was self-endangering.

"Try self-levitating just enough that you aren't putting any real weight on your hurt hoof," she recommended. "And don't worry. I know that look. I'll be right behind you. Promise."

Honesty, a pony in my head reminded me, was not Velvet Remedy's virtue. "You better be. Or I'm coming back."

She nodded. I had Little Macintosh in front of me, now loaded with magically-enhanced bullets. I took a breath.

We stepped cautiously out onto the main floor of Hippocampus Energy Plant #12. We were able to spot the injured hellhound almost immediately. It was perched on top of a generator, shooting at Pyrelight, who in turn was twirling and dancing in the air, occasionally sending puffs of green flame in the monster's direction.

Pyrelight was distracting it for us. Belatedly, I realized those odd sounds I had been hearing were shots from the magical energy rifle, muffled by the door.

Notes to self: First, Pyrelight is willing to risk herself for Velvet Remedy (and possibly me as well). Second, Pyrelight is an amazingly agile flyer. Third, hellhounds may be fifty different flavors of murder, but they aren't necessarily good shots.

The hellhound took less than a second to notice our presence, leaping savagely at us, bloodthirsty claws outstretched. It gave a slight yelp as its ruined leg hit the floor, but its good leg pushed it towards us with a speed that caught me off guard. I froze, forgetting to fire.

The light around Velvet Remedy's horn pulled away, becoming a ball of light that soared towards the hellhound, striking it in the shoulder. The monster seemed to instantly lose all coordination, collapsing in a jumble of limbs, skidding towards us on the floor out of sheer momentum.

"Go!" Velvet Remedy yelled as she started galloping, giving the monster a wide birth as she made for the far end, leaping over bits of the catwalk which had collapsed into the room. I followed, taking her suggestion. The pain still slowed me, but it was manageable. The hellhound slashed out at me with those huge, terrible claws. I darted deftly out of the way. It tried to crawl after me, managing only a wicked slither. The hellhound had fallen and couldn't seem to get up.

Ahead of me, Velvet Remedy stopped and motioned me to continue ahead. I worried but didn't argue. As I reached the opposite stairwell, I heard her calling out to Pyrelight behind me.



“Did you kill it?” I asked, panting hard as Pyrelight swooped into the *Sky Bandit* through a shattered window, Velvet Remedy galloping up just a pace behind.

The charcoal-coated unicorn tossed herself into the passenger wagon.

I’d arrived just enough ahead of them to yell warning to SteelHooves and Calamity while gulping for breath. (I think what I said amounted to “Aaaah! Hellhound... generators... rifle... Velvet... spell... Go! Go! GO!”) Calamity had barely gotten the harness attached when Velvet had dashed out onto the roof.

Calamity spread his wings and with a firm beat, pulled us off the roof and into the air.

Velvet Remedy cocked her head to me, even as she caught her own breath. “Killed it? Why ever would I do that? I’m not in the habit of killing my patients.”

Blink. “Itwasawhatnow?”

“Anesthetic spell,” she smiled. “The poor thing was clearly in pain.”

I stared at Velvet like she had completely spit her bit.

“Plus, it does have the very helpful side effect of preventing the patient from running around. Very hard to do when you can’t feel your legs.” She smiled cleverly, her eyes twinkling.

I fell to my haunches.

Damn. That plan... damn.

Recovering a little. “You didn’t... actually heal it, did you?”

Velvet rolled her eyes. I took that as a no. Personally, I would have killed it if I had realized it was virtually helpless. But in a way I was happy that Velvet had not. I had been worried that the wasteland was robbing her of that compassion which made her so special. It had eroded her spirit, there was no getting away from that. But it was good to see that my Velvet Remedy (in a “my Pinkie Pie” sense) was still there.

Even if, contemplating those three Steel Rangers, I really disagreed with this particular decision.

“When did you learn to do that?” I asked, amazed.

Velvet tossed her mane and smiled. “Back in Tenpony Tower while you were... out. Doctor Helpinghoof had quite a nice selection of old Ministry of Peace medical spells for sale.” Velvet Remedy smiled wistfully. “Apparently, Fluttershy’s Ministry had a whole department of unicorn ponies dedicated to magical research.”

The pony in my head perked with alarm, but was ignored. “You can *buy* spells?”

Velvet Remedy nickered. “If by that you mean barter for tutelage, then yes.”

“But... Doctor Helpinghoof was an earth pony?”

“Yes,” Velvet patronized. “But his assistant was a nice unicorn buck. Anyway, don’t feel too bad. I doubt you’ve missed out on anything. All the teaching in the world won’t help if you don’t have a natural talent for the type of spell you are trying to learn. I’ll never be able to cast lightning from my horn, or turn a rock into a top hat, or conjure a door out of thin air. Not matter how many bottle caps I try to spend or hours I try to learn. Entertainment and medical spells are my gift.”

I tried not to visibly droop. “Yeah. And mine is to do the same spell every single other unicorn can do. The first one we learn. And that’s it.” It was like having a PipBuck as a cutie mark. The epitome of non-special.

“No,” Velvet’s voice chided. “Your gift is to do that spell better than anypony else in at least two hundred years.”

I gave her a weak but thankful smile. That did make it sound better.



“Sorry ‘bout this,” Calamity said as he hung from the harness, wings drooping. The entire *Sky Bandit* was wrapped in the soft light of my levitation spell, glowing against the darkened sky as I drifted us slowly towards a freestanding section of overpass three piers long. It looked plenty sturdy, and should be safe from hellhounds. A place to spend the night.

“No need to apologize,” I insisted. Calamity had been flying for hours on end with only the stop at the Hippocampus Energy Plant for a break. I envied the pegasus’ endurance.

“Muh get up an’ go.” Calamity bemoaned, “...just kinda got up an went.” He looked out towards the standing chunk of overpass. “Ya gonna make it that far?”

“No sweat.” Actually, much sweat. I was already beginning to feel the strain, and the overpass was at least half an hour away. I would have said there was no way I could hold us that long; but after all Calamity did, I’d be damned if I couldn’t find the fortitude to take us this tiny bit farther.

We moved across the sky with aching slowness.

“I still can’t believe...” I fretted, “I mean, the idea that you could barter for spells never even crossed my mind.” I let out a sigh. “I guess that explains why Velvet Remedy is our diplomat and master trader, and I’m...”

“A toaster repairpony?” Calamity supplied when I was at a loss for words. I laughed and nodded.

Pyrelight fluttered out and perched on the rust-coated pegasus’ battle saddle, clamping onto it with her claws. She spread her wings and flapped, as if with my magic in play she could hope to pull the *Sky Bandit* herself.

“Drat!” Calamity chuckled. “Pretty soon, y’all won’t need me fer anything.”

My eyes widened in alarm. “What? Don’t say that!”

“Well, it ain’t passed muh attention that Ah’ve been *not* with ya on yer adventures far more lately than Ah’ve been *with* ya.”

I opened my mouth to tell him how not true that was... and stopped as the reality of the statement sank into me. Instead, “Calamity, you’re my closest and dearest friend...” Not including Homage, I mentally added. “You keep me strong. You keep me from losing it. I will *always* need you.”

“Sure, ya say that now.”

“And next adventure, we’ll go together. You and me. I promise.”

The setting sun dipped below the cloud line, setting the clouds ablaze with brilliant oranges and dark crimsons. The effect was magnified against the black clouds that hung over Fillydelphia, turning the whole post-apocalyptic city into a fiery hell.

“Dayumn!”

There were dark spots floating around over the city. We were close enough to make them out, but just barely. Calamity had spotted them too, as he asked me to float him the binoculars. He scanned the air between the silhouetted ruins of Fillydelphia and conflagrant sky.

“Aw hell,” he said, motioning for me to take a look myself. I floated the binoculars to my own eyes and stared towards Fillydelphia, seeing hundreds of molten fires in the black below. Chimneys poured out constant smoke. The draconic skeleton of a massive roller coaster added an alien touch to the city’s skyline. The dark silhouette of the Fillydelphia town shot upwards into the sky. Following it with my gaze, I saw them...

Dozens of pink dirigibles, shaped like creepy pink smiley faces complete with ears and mane, floated around the sky above the city ruins. “Pinkie Pie balloons.”

“There’s a name fer ‘em?” Calamity gave a shudder. “Anyway, Ah was more lookin’ at what the ponies in those... Pinkie Pie balloons were packin’. We sure as hell ain’t flyin’ into there.”

I looked again, turning up the magnification as high as it would go. I saw earth ponies attending mounted rifles easily two ponies long, scoped and terrifying. They were what my sniper rifle would like to be when it was all grown up.

“Anti-machine rifles,” Calamity informed me. I now had a very good idea what my scary new bullets were supposed to be for.

He was right. Taking the pegasus-pulled bomb anywhere near that skyline was a death sentence. From here on in, we walked. We’d be sneaking into Fillydelphia on hoof. I sincerely hoped we were out of hellhound territory.



“How did the much-deified Princess Celestia and Princess Luna allow our land to become like this? How did the mares of the Ministries allow the greatest and most glorious nation in the world to die in balefire and agony? The answer is quite simple.

“Incompetence.

“For generations, the hard-working ponies of Equestria toiled to build this great land, and the leaders sat back and reaped the benefits. And not only them, but a great majority of ponies throughout the land. They enjoyed the fruits of hard labor without lifting a hoof themselves. They lay back, slept on clouds, idled their days away like parasites feeding on the sweat of the workers. Workers like you. Workers like me.

“They became selfish and lazy. And laziness, my little ponies, breeds stupidity.

“The destruction they brought down on us was, in a word, inevitable. They couldn’t do any better because they weren’t any better. But today, we all work. And tomorrow, when our toil is done, we will step forward and be accepted into the loving embrace of the Goddess and be transformed. And in the coming Unity, we will all reap the rewards of our own brows. Together. As equals...”

I shut off Red Eye's broadcast. Somehow, they always left me feeling twisted inside. He was unpleasantly convincing sometimes. A steady diet of this fodder and I might find myself biting his poisoned apple.

Calamity had collapsed from exhaustion the moment we touched down on the overpass and was snoring softly nearby. There were other vehicles up here, including a large Sunrise Sarsaparilla delivery wagon that had been heading towards Fillydelphia, a faded painting of a smiling Celestia watching over happy sarsaparilla drinkers adorning its side. A couple of camouflage-painted chariots were abandoned on the far edge -- part of a military convoy, the rest of which was crushed and buried under the collapsed section of overpass beyond. I wanted to poke around, explore... but I'd promised Calamity. And while looking in the backs of a few wagons wasn't really an adventure, I was sure he'd be sore with me if I didn't wait for him. With good reason.

Velvet Remedy was asleep as well. Pyrelight perched on her shoulder, plumage seeming to glow in the dying light. The balefire phoenix looked proud and, if it wasn't my imagination, possessive.

SteelHooves was on guard again. I didn't think I'd ever seen him sleep. Did ghouls even need sleep? So much I didn't know.

"I like you," I said, smiling to the mythical bird. "You're..." The word that came to mind was simple, but after my mistake with Velvet Remedy earlier, I was watching my choice of vocabulary. "...straightforward. I don't have to worry about any hidden agendas or dark secrets with you. You watched us... dare I say out of curiosity? If so, it is something we have in common."

The balefire phoenix let out a pleasant whistle.

"Velvet Remedy helped you, and you decided to stay with her. Friendship, pure and uncomplicated."

The phoenix preened.

"You chose well," I added looking to Velvet Remedy. "She really is a very good, very special pony." I reached over and put a hoof on her flank, touching her cutie mark. A singing bird.

Pyrelight scowled, giving a hoot backed by a little burst of green flame. My PipBuck briefly click-clicked, then was quiet again. I drew back my hoof with a laugh. "Don't worry, I'm not a rival. She's all yours." A touch chagrined, I added, "Maybe once I would have been. But... things have changed."

The green and gold phoenix cocked her head. I found a way to explain. "Velvet put me in a cage. It was for my own good... I was sick and hurting myself. But after that..." I paused. "We're just good friends."

Pyrelight seemed satisfied with that. But I wasn't going to pet Velvet Remedy's flank to find out.



I was having trouble sleeping. The fright earlier and the worries of what lay ahead merged into a constant buzz in my head. I couldn't afford to go into this new situation half-stupid from lack of rest, but that worry only made it worse. I couldn't force myself to sleep. I'd tried.

A distraction might help derail the worried thoughts swarming my head. I pulled out the memory orb from the power plant. I stared at it for a moment, running through a mental checklist. I wasn't in battle or imminent danger, so it should be safe. On the other hoof, these orbs were always a gamble. I remembered the sickening experience of the damaged memory orb all too vividly.

Part of me also wondered if I was just using lack of sleep as an excuse to indulge my curiosity. I probably was. Well, that was okay. Who didn't have their vices?



The memory held within it something amazing, wondrous, inspiring. Sunlight!

Pure, radiant sunlight. Unfiltered and unmolested by a cover of clouds. The ball of fire in the sky was at once terrifying and majestic. The living symbol of the Goddess Celestia herself. Its light was powerful, capable of slashing through darkness and shadows, revealing and cleansing. It was warm and compassionate, and it brought with it a sense of peace and hope.

Sunlight was as miraculous to me as a PipBuck was to the ponies of the Equestrian Wasteland. And, likewise, it was as pedestrian to the pony I was riding as my PipBuck was to me.

I was standing on a balcony with several smartly-dressed gentlestallions, staring down into a huge sunlit foyer lined with clear windows of glass that rose at least three stories high. The scene outside was idyllic. Colorful ponies, finely dressed, went about their business along cobblestone sidewalks bordering a boulevard of grass – a geometrically perfect field of green divided into precision shapes by cobblestone paths and a huge reflective pool. The buildings on the other side were largely obscured by trees, but I could tell they were as regal and impressive as the one I was in.

Balconies and mezzanines arced around the airy open atrium. Large gardening boxes held full-grown apple trees. And everywhere, ponies moved about busily. After looking about briefly, my host focused on the light-colored marble floor below, where a throng of ponies were causing a disturbance.

It was a small mob, pressing in towards the single figure in the center. A zebra.

“Go back where you came from!”

“Did you think you could just trot into a Ministry?”

“Better wiped than striped!”

“What are you doing here? Are you a spy?”

A voice rang out over the crowd as a familiar orange pony with blond mane and tail came trotting down an arching stairway. “Simmer down, sallie. Zecora ain't no spy!”

Applejack reached the throng and quickly dispersed the ponies, who grumbled as they went back to work. In just over a minute, it was just her standing alone with the extremely out-of-place zebra. Other ponies were giving them a wide berth, shooting stares. Applejack shot even better stares back, causing several to shy away, picking up their pace.

Finally, she turned to the zebra, looking deeply apologetic. "Zecora, ya really ought not t' be walkin' 'round like that. T'ain't safe these days."

"I thought I could visit a friend," the zebra replied in an exotic and strangely poetic voice. "I should have known how it would end."

"Well, there is a war on," Applejack said reasonably. She lifted a hoof to scratch beneath her ear, looking embarrassed.

"Ponies hate and fear me still, no better than in Ponyville." The zebra's voice was deep with disappointment. "To you folk zebras may seem strange, but ponies... ponies never change."

"Gee, thanks," Applejack frowned, bristling a little. Then she let out a sigh. "Let's jus' get ya outta sight, okay? Come with me..." Applejack paused, looking around the huge atrium. "Ah *should* have an office in here somewhere."

This is her Ministry, and she doesn't even know where her office is?

"Lady Applejack, how good to..." a gentlestallion called out, approaching from a different stairwell. He stopped as he spotted the zebra. "oh my!"

"ugh," Applejack grimaced, facehoofing. "Not you too, Starshine. Ain't nothin' wrong with Zecora. She's muh friend."

"Oh, of course!" the gentlestallion said gracefully. "I have nothing against zebras. In fact, my company is one of the only in Canterlot who make a practice of hiring zebras." Well wasn't he a smarmy buck. "Let the Ministry of Propaganda say what it will..."

"Ministry of *Image*," Applejack corrected.

"I believe that's what I said," Starshine stated dismissively, turning his attention fully to the zebra. "Anyway... Zecora, is it? Should you ever

find yourself looking for work, look me up. Anyone who has Lady Applejack's hoofprint of approval..."

"Was there somethin' you wanted, Starshine?" Applejack interrupted impatiently.

"Oh yes. I just wanted to pass on a little thank you for M.W.T.'s support for our Stalliongrad and Manehattan expansions. Everything's working smoothly, and I expect nothing short of a stellar success."

"uh... Ah told ya before, Starshine. We don't take buckbacks. Ain't how we operate here."

"Of course, of course. Banish the thought!" the gentlestallion said in genial apology "No, this is just a friendly gift. But never you mind then." He didn't want to offend, of course. Greasy git. Absolutely everything about this pony was striking a negative note with me. From the look on her face, Applejack didn't seem to like him much either.

"Now, Zecora..." he said, turning back to the zebra woman. "How do you feel about public transportation?"

The stallion standing on the balcony next to me spoke in a quiet voice, drawing my attention away from the scene below:

"Now she's trotting around publicly announcing friendships with zebras. The publicity alone could sink us."

I felt my host nodding along with the others.

"Gentlecolts, I think it's time we discussed Applejack's retirement."



I came out of the memory feeling cold. It was appalling, the sort of memory you only kept for blackmail. I pushed the memory orb far away from me.



“SteelHooves?” I approached the Steel Ranger cautiously. “I want to talk to you about Applejack and her Ministry.”

The helmet of the armor-clad Ranger turned towards me. He said nothing.

“You knew her... probably better than anyone other than family and her lifelong friends. What... what happened?”

“Megaspells fell,” SteelHooves deadpanned. “Everypony died.”

I sighed. He was going to be that way about it. I tried again. “What happened between her and the Ministry of Technology?”

“Are you ordering me to tell you?” he asked strangely.

“No...” I said, the question making me feel awkward. “I’m *asking* you. I just... I wanted to know.”

“Because you know it will be tactically advantageous to have that information?”

I hung my head in exasperation. “No. Because...” I stopped, unsure. “Because, as dumb as this probably sounds, I care.” My words surprised me, as did the truth behind them. Somehow, I’d come to actually care for this group of six ponies from two hundred years ago, the Ministry mares. I didn’t understand why. It made no sense. But at some point, my glimpses into the past had evolved from mere academic curiosity to a genuine feeling of attachment.

Maybe it was meeting Spike. Hearing his stories of a bright and joyous past, and the adventures of these close friends, certainly sealed the transformation. Part of me wanted a happy ending for at least *one* of them.

Reality painted the chance of that as heart-wrenchingly bleak. I knew that, but I wasn’t willing to stop hoping anyway. Looking past SteelHooves, I took in the night-shrouded Equestrian Wasteland. The low clouds over Fillydelphia glowed a dark red, reflecting the lights from below.

Hell. We were literally going into hell.

The low rumble of SteelHooves' voice startled me.

"Applejack had no taste for being an administrator," he began. I turned toward the ghou pony who had, I was certain, once been Applejack's lover. "It wasn't like running a farm or organizing the Winter Wrap-Up..." I heard a snort of laughter from inside his helmet. "...Which, come to think of it, she needed Twilight Sparkle's help for anyway. So she just hired a whole bunch of business ponies to do it for her."

I wondered how many of those I had just shared a balcony with.

"Applejack's intention," SteelHooves continued with a touch of uncharacteristic nostalgia, "was for the Ministry of Technology to help encourage and subsidize enterprises that were pushing greater technological and industrial advancement. The Ministry promoted the principles of the earth pony way and sought to help make Equestria better for all ponies through that ethic."

SteelHooves was looking out at the horizon. At Fillydelphia. His voice held firm, but I could tell this was an emotional thing for the ghou pony to talk about. I listened reverently, knowing that this was a gift.

"Applejack didn't want to stick her hooves into other pony's businesses any more than she wanted anypony messing around with her farm. She believed in the inherently good nature of ponies, and felt they should be left to the guidance of their own virtues..."

He turned to me suddenly, a note of bitterness creeping into his voice. "The problem is, industries and corporations *aren't* ponies. They don't *have* a good nature. They're like... maneframes, calculating risk and profit. And if the numbers are strong enough, they'd throw baby fillies into the gears of their own machinery to grease the flow of capital." I suddenly found myself thinking of the Crusader Maneframe in Stable Twenty-Nine.

"When Applejack returned to the Ministry of Technology after the death of her brother, her only intention was to focus the efforts of the Ministry for as long as it took to create a new, better suit of armor. One that would not fail to protect a pony like Big Macintosh's armor had failed to save him.

“But the longer she stayed, the deeper the pit of horrors she began to uncover. What wasn’t corrupt was out of control. And so she tried to fix things. Tried to put bit and reins on development, regulate corporate misconduct.”

SteelHooves fell silent, staring at me for a long time. I felt he was assessing my understanding, and perhaps with it my worthiness of this gift.

Finally, he finished by adding, “And that’s not something anypony was going to be happy about. And that some ponies wouldn’t stand for.”



“Do you know what word I hate more than any other? Slave.

“Yes, we are all bound in the chains of industry. But even more, there is a greater chain that holds us together. It is the chain of mutual responsibility. And to break free of that chain is to become nothing better than a raider, the most loathsome and repugnant sort of leech on our great Equestria.

“If I am a slave because I am not independent of virtue and accountability to my fellow pony, then I do not want freedom! The freedom to be worthless, destructive, unproductive... license to abandon the future that only together we may achieve... this is not liberty. It is anarchy at its most vile. And the good, hard-working and honorable ponies of Equestria will not stand for it. Will you?

“Raiders are the epitome of the sins of the past. Selfish, lazy, greedy. They take what they cannot build for themselves. And they destroy what they cannot take. They infest the Equestrian Wasteland like termites, chewing away at the already frail bones of our once-great nation. They even skitter about in the ruins of Fillydelphia, chittering just outside The Wall.

“Rest assured, my little ponies, that when the rebirth comes, there will be no room for such harmful and parasitical insects in our new world. Those who do not join the Unity will be crushed under our hooves. Stamped out, once and for all.

"We may not even have to wait that short time. Even today, the glorious army of the Children of Unity grows stronger, mightier. And the Goddess sends out Her children, created in Her image, to scour the wasteland.

"Yes... to those of you out there who are termites... to the raiders, the Steel Rangers and the cannibals, I have this to say:

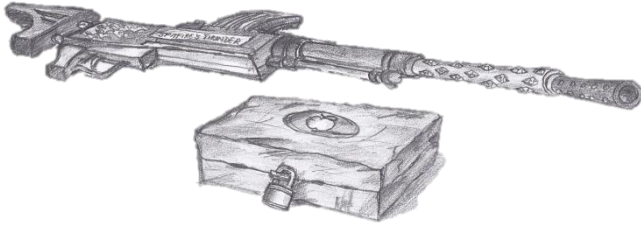
"The Purge is coming!"

Footnote: Level Up.

Skills Note: Lockpicking has reached 100%

New Perk: Clever Prancer - Through agility and reflexes, you have become deft at striking where it hurts while preventing your enemies from doing the same. You gain an additional 5% chance to score a critical hit; your enemies suffer a 25% penalty to their chance to critically hit you. This perk is only effective when wearing light or no armor.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



PATTERNS OF BEHAVIOR

"Well, my child, it's quite dangerous to explore places where you do not belong. Where were you headed that you ended up in my private chambers?"

"Curiosity."

I halted, bobby pin and screwdriver hovering between me and the wall safe, at SteelHooves' muttered comment. This safe was the only container within the Helpinghoof Clinic which hadn't been successfully scavenged by ponies before us. Anything that could hold valuables had been already looted; brighter spots on faded walls showed where medical boxes, probably locked, had simply been torn away from their mountings.

"Huh?" Eloquent as always, Littlepip.

SteelHooves whinnied, "Your little friend Homage asked me what I thought your defining characteristic was."

"What? When?" Oh Goddesses, what did SteelHooves tell her? Please don't let it be bad. Or embarrassing.

"While you were hospitalized," SteelHooves responded bluntly. "Do you really find it surprising that she would ask your companions about you?"

No, not really. She was probably trying to get to know the real me more, especially before taking our relationship to a new level. It was...

wise. I just wasn't sure SteelHooves was the pony I would have wanted her getting a reference from.

"What did you say?" I asked nervously. And then felt immediately stupid. He'd just answered that, didn't he? "I mean... okay. Curiosity. That isn't so bad. Yeah, I'm curious. I don't think you could call it my *defining* characteristic."

"We're walking into hell," Velvet Remedy interjected, "And Littlepip is sightseeing."

"No," I argued. "I'm not..." I stopped talking at her knowing smile. "Hey, the Clinic was right here; right on our way. And you know we could use the medical supplies, if we find any."

"Ayep. Y'all should 'ave seen Li'l pip in Stable Twenty-Four," Calamity agreed. Mimicking my voice (poorly, I might add), he called out, "Dangerous critters? Let's explore!"

"Hey. You're the one who wanted to go on the next adventure with me."

"Ah figure she's been like this ever since steppin' hoof outta her own Stable," Calamity concluded. "Reckon' Ah can't blame 'er. Livin' in a box..."

"Oh no," Velvet Remedy chimed in. "She was like this inside the Stable too." I sighed. Apparently, this was going to be Tease Littlepip Day. I turned away, choosing to focus on the wall safe. Let them have their fun.

Velvet continued, "When other colts and fillies decided to try new things in an effort to provoke their cutie marks into showing, they'd try soccer. Or ballet. Littlepip? She tries to invent the art of breaking into other ponies' private things."

I broke the bobby pin. Which was really frustrating since this lock was well beneath my skills.

I took a deep breath, looking in a random direction that was neither the safe nor my friends. Pyrelight had perched on an IV stand in the corner

near a medical bed. Behind her was a Ministry of Peace poster of a smiling Fluttershy with a white rabbit sitting on her head and colorful birds and butterflies flocking around her. The top of the poster read simply “Remember:” but the bottom half was so badly damaged that I couldn’t tell what it was trying to say. There must have been some gentle but insidious power in Fluttershy’s image, for I found myself feeling ashamed that we had forgotten what she told us not to.

“Well,” I grunted, hovering out a replacement bobby pin. “Maybe curiosity is my virtue then.”

My three companions looked at each other quietly, skeptically. Pyrelight let out a soft whoop as smiles broke across their faces (or, at least, across the muzzles of Calamity and Velvet Remedy). Simultaneously, they turned to me and told me that no, it was definitely a vice.



“Well, that was unexpected,” Calamity noted, staring through the open safe into the building adjacent to the Helpinghoof Clinic. The entire back of the safe was gone, as was a significant amount of the other building’s wall. Judging by the damage, it looked as if a large magical energy weapon on the scale of the Junction R-7 cannon had been used to melt through the wall. “Somepony had a hard-on fer this safe.”

“They were stupid then,” I commented. “That blast probably destroyed anything that was in here.”

SteelHooves spoke, “I don’t think this was the safe they were intending to use that weapon for.”

“How do ya figure?”

“First, this safe was hidden. It’s likely they didn’t even know it was here.”

SteelHooves was right. The safe had been hidden behind a large, framed sign; most scavengers wouldn’t have thought to pull it down and look behind it. But ever since Homage revealed her safe behind the

Splendid Valley painting, I'd fallen into the habit of peeking behind frames. Something which undoubtedly added fodder to my companions' discussion of my so-called vice.

I glanced over to where the sign was propped against a medical rack. It was very much unlike the posters I had grown used to. A more forthright and clinical warning from the past:

Wartime Stress Disorder

For over a thousand years, ponies have known only peace.

It should be no surprise then, that so many are not able to cope with the harsh realities of war.

Wartime Stress Disorder is a very real illness that affects thousands of ponies each year.

Know what to look for:

Depression

Anxiety

Lack of Sleep

Loss of Appetite

Unpatriotic Thoughts

Suicidal Impulses

If you, or any of your loved ones, are experiencing two or more of these symptoms, it may be WSD.

If so, ask for help. No pony needs to suffer alone.

Knowledgeable and Caring Ponies trained by the Ministry of Peace are waiting to help.

I spared it only a glance before turning my attention back to SteelHooves. (Having read the sign before floating it down, I didn't need to read it again.)

"Second," SteelHooves continued, having apparently paid more attention to our surroundings than I had, "the building next to the clinic was a bank."

I had admittedly dismissed the building next door after discovering the doors were blocked by interior rubble. I could see now (through the safe) that a fair amount of the interior was intact. And a bank promised to be interesting. “Okay,” I said, floating out the zebra rifle. “I’m going through.”

I started to climb up into the safe only to feel teeth bite down on my tail and pull me back.

“Oh no y’aint!” Calamity said, letting go. “Ain’t no way any o’ the rest o’ us c’n wiggle through that thing,” he said, pointing a hoof at the wall safe. I opened my mouth to protest, but he cut me off. “Ah ain’t lettin’ ya brave the place alone. Whatever destroyed that wall might still be lurkin’ in there.” Calamity smirked, “Besides, y’said yer next adventure would be with me. Ya promised an’ Ah’m holdin’ ya to it.”

I slumped. He had a point. Then I brightened. “Once I’m inside, I’ll be able to see the rubble blocking the front door and levitate it out of the way. I can let you all in through the front. It will only take a moment.”

They looked at each other again and I could read on their faces a begrudging acceptance that this was going to happen. I’d set my hooves to it; there was no stopping me (short of a tranquilizer dart to the breast).

I floated the zebra rifle ahead of me, my current weapon of choice. Calamity and I had spent time in the early morning looting the locked ammo boxes from the surviving convoy chariots on the overpass; as a result, I was no longer worried about ammo for the zebra rifle. (I had been surprised to find that, even up here, everything that wasn’t locked up had been looted. But Calamity reminded me that he wasn’t the only flier in the Equestrian Wasteland.)

I counted us lucky when we had moved beyond hellhound territory and into the jagged hellscape of the Fillydelphia suburbs without any encounters. During our trek, Calamity and I had scouted ahead, being by far the stealthiest members of our group. I had kept my PipBuck radio off. Only the tiniest amount of noise leaked out of my earbloom for others to possibly hear, but I suspected the keen-eared hellhounds

might notice even that. I was yearning to turn it on again and hear what else Red Eye might have to say.

With a second look at the safe, I decided to shuck my saddlebags. It was going to be tight and I didn't want to get stuck. I could float them through behind me once I was inside. Or, worst case, go back into the clinic and get them after I cleared the bank's front door.

No encounters also meant I still owed Calamity an adventure. And I wanted to pay off that debt before we got into the heart of Fillydelphia. We were looking at trotting into slaver territory, and I feared for my companions' safety. It's not that I doubted their ability or courage. But... the anxiety I felt didn't lend itself easily to words. I suppose I feared that my friends were not only dear to me, but would be dear to them in an entirely different and unpleasant way. In the eyes of the slavers, what kind of prize would a pegasus be? Or Velvet Remedy?

The Goddesses only know how they would react to a Steel Ranger. And the last thing I could afford to do was launch an assault on the entire damn slaver army.

Honestly, I was almost to Fillydelphia and I had no idea what I was going to do when I got there. My entire plan was to get there, take a look, and pray that what I saw would tell me where to go next. With dismay, I accepted the very real possibility that I might get there only to turn around and slink back home. My friends were counting on me to be better than that. All those slaves were counting on somepony to stand up for them.

I suddenly pictured myself trotting up to a gate, knocking and telling the guard on the other side, "Hello, I'm here to stand up for the slaves." The daydream ended with the image of me getting shot in the head.

So yeah, maybe I was sightseeing. Distractions to give myself time.

I pulled myself up into the narrow black rectangle of the safe and slithered through.



“A mare approached me just the other day. ‘Thank you, Red Eye!’ she said. ‘You have given my life meaning. I was wretched before, but now I am part of something great. And I know that something even greater waits for me. The opportunity of a lifetime.’

“Of course, she was only saying this in an attempt to get close to me so that she could use the crude knife she had crafted out of stolen metal. But still, her words moved me. So I did not have her killed on the spot.

“Instead, I sent her to The Pit, where she would have the chance to exercise those murderous impulses for a more worthy goal...”

Velvet Remedy had darted into the mares’ room off of the bank lobby, and we were all politely pretending not to hear her. The lobby radio helped, Red Eye’s words adding to the buzzing of the flies. Looking around, it pained me that my stomach wasn’t rebelling nearly as hard. The stench made my eyes water. But I had seen too much, too often. I could tell I was becoming numb. And it scared the horseapples out of me.

I heard water start to run in one of the restroom’s sinks, and I felt the sudden urge to dash in. We hadn’t checked the local water, but I was sure that it was radioactive. Velvet must know that, but I doubted she was thinking clearly.

“Splayed pony bodies and profane graffiti,” Velvet said with a weak smile as she rejoined us. “Raider chic.” She turned to me, “Let me thank you again for taking me to such lovely places.”

I honestly felt bad about this one.

Once, the lobby been a place for ponies to mill around while waiting their turn with one of the tellers whose counters lined one side of the room, or who had business in the back meeting rooms like the one I had crawled into through the safe whose backside had been obliterated. But the raiders had taken a perverse glee in defiling this place, the extent of which I hadn’t seen since the Ponyville Library. The crucified dog hanging from the ceiling lamp was a particularly revolting touch.

“Ah agree with Li’lpip,” Calamity noted, having taken a look at the rear meeting room which had abutted the clinic. “Raiders livin’ here tussled with some invaders who were a heap more dangerous. Lotsa raider bodies, none of their attackers.”

“Well, one,” I corrected him. “Sorta.” The pile of ash at what had been the center of the magical destruction had still been glowing slightly pink, suggesting the battle wasn’t that long ago.

Calamity nodded. “Muh guess? Lucky shot,” he said. “From the way that whole wall was disintegrated back far ‘nuff t’ touch the safe next door, muh guess is that one o’ the invaders was carryin’ a saddlebag fulla magical energy grenades or somesuch, and one o’ the raiders put a bullet through it.”

“Well, they obviously didn’t get in through the front door. Or the safe. So that means there’s another way in here.” I looked to SteelHooves. “Do you remember what the building on the other side of the bank was?”

Noise from somewhere above us killed the conversation. Dust rained down from the ceiling as pony hooves clopped over the floor above. The hanging lamp swayed as they passed over it, a rotting piece of the crucified dog falling to the floor with a meaty sound. I floated my rifle close. Calamity gave his battle saddle a reload kick.

“Honestly,” Velvet Remedy whispered. “Has it ever occurred to either of you that they might be friendly?”

“Nope.”

“Stand back,” SteelHooves growled. Gleaning his intention, I dashed for the bathroom, wrapping a surprised Velvet in a levitation field and pulling her in after me. Pyrelight dove through the doorway over our heads. Calamity swooped back towards the meeting room.

*Cha-pwoot. **BOOM!***

The shot from SteelHooves’ grenade machinegun detonated against the ceiling in a flash of fire and stucco. With a rending crash, the ceiling came down, bringing five raider ponies crashing into the lobby. One

buck with mangy coat and a flaming skull for a cutie mark landed hard on a teller counter and bounced out of sight. A mare with a spiked pink mane got herself tangled in a gruesome exhibit fashioned out of at least three colts' entrails, a zebra sword falling from her muzzle and clattering across the floor. It slid to a stop at Calamity's hooves.

One last raider pony stood above us at the edge of the collapsed floor, a hunting rifle floating at his flank. His gaze fell on me, sliding down my body ... and now I *did* want to vomit. His eyes suddenly widened, and he darted out of sight.

The other raider ponies tried to scramble to their feet. SteelHooves rapid-fired six more grenades into their midst. I saw Velvet Remedy's shield flicker around the two of us, just in time to save us from the blast of shrapnel and bloody body parts. The eyeball of a raider pony splatted against the magical field inches from my face and began to slide down it.

I ended up violently emptying the contents of my stomach after all. Canned corn does not taste as well coming up as it does going down.



"The one that fell over here got away," Calamity called out, hovering in the air on the other side of the teller aisle. A doorway into the bank's back offices marked the raider's most likely avenue of escape.

Spitting out another mouthful of water from my canteen, I replied, "Had another one upstairs who bolted too." I felt weak and embarrassed, but tried to focus on the danger at our hooves. The surviving raider ponies could be getting reinforcements, assuming there were any to get. I was more worried they were setting traps.

Calamity snorted. "Raiders run from us now?" He flew up into the room above. "Course, they could be fixin' an ambush."

Velvet Remedy looked up at Calamity's underside. "Oh come now. Are you really that surprised?"

She poked a hoof at me. “The smallest of us is a walking arsenal. You’re a pegasus with a custom-built battle saddle, and SteelHooves... is SteelHooves. By Luna, we look like grim reaper ponies.”

Velvet Remedy trotted towards the carnage. “Any raider *this* well armed...” she said, floating a bloodstained baseball bat with gruesome nails driven through it out of the rubble, “...is going to take one look at us and gallop for the hills if she has any brain left at all.”

I grimaced. Not that I minded looking like a reaper pony to raiders (I damn well *ought to!*), but because Velvet’s comments brought back memories of the twisted view of us that SteelHooves had once professed to Calamity.

SteelHooves was looking at the zebra sword. The gemstone in its hilt was cracked and blackened; whatever enchantment the weapon had once held had died with that stone.

“Okay...” I said, collecting my thoughts. “The main vault is in the basement. The other way into the bank is probably upstairs, coming across from the next building.” I looked to my companions, giving them an opportunity to disagree. “Velvet, SteelHooves, you two head up. Between the two of you, I’m sure you can greet anypony you find up there with the appropriate levels of loving kindness or overwhelming force.”

Velvet Remedy shot me a wry look but nodded. (How in Luna’s Name did I end up the defacto leader again?) After seeing how my fellow Stable Dweller handled a hellhound, I wasn’t so worried about her safety.

“I’m the safecracker, so I have to head down. Calamity, you’re with me.”



POW!

A well-placed twin-shot from Calamity’s battle saddle caused the magical energy turret to explode, flinging shrapnel across the hall.

Slipping into the zen of S.A.T.S., I targeted the two remaining turrets and unloaded two rounds into each of them. They barely got a shot off, scorching an armor plate on my utility barding and giving me a painful but bearable burn beneath.

We crept up past the guard desk and peered down the hallway beyond. It had a few doors that opened to side rooms, and at the end was the massive metal door of the vault, a terminal glowing on the wall beside it.

As Calamity started into the hall, I paused at the desk. I spotted a book which had slid down behind it. *Increasing Your Sales Figures*. The picture on the front was a satisfied customer eating an apple. I floated the book into my saddlebags, having exhausted my current book collection and left it at Junction R-7. I trotted into the hallway, catching up with Calamity.

A scorching bolt of green energy shot past me, hitting the wall behind us and melting a hole, turning the faux wood paneling and bricks beneath into glowing green goo.

“There’s nothing better than the smell of melting zebras in the morning!”

Crap. One of these.

“Back!” I shouted to Calamity. The two of us barely made it to the corner when the multi-limbed hoverbot floated around the corner. I felt flame lick at my tail as the robot hosed down the hallway we had just been in with its flamethrower.

“Ow! Ow ow ow!” I pranced, flames licking at my tail, until Calamity stomped the fire out. “AAAAAooooooooow!”

“Pardon.”

I whimpered, tears in my eyes. “Thanks.”

On our way down, Calamity had prodded me to unlock every ammo box, coin till and desk. His saddlebags were now virtually overflowing with golden pre-war coins as well as packages of cigarettes and bubblegum and other things he considered worth the weight. I wasn’t

really expecting to find a merchant we could trade with in Fillydelphia, but I said nothing. I had taken most of the ammo, including a prince's prize of four magical energy grenades.

"Well, grenades did the trick last time," I whispered, floating two of them out. "And unlike alicorns, I'm pretty sure I can trick these things the same way twice."



I sat on my haunches before the wall-mounted terminal next to the vault door, the smoldering wreckage of the hoverbot in the hall behind us. The door to this vault was almost identical to the one under Shattered Hoof, except that this one had no exterior lock, rendering all my skills at lockpicking useless. However, by hacking into the terminal, I was sure I could tweak the spell matrix and get the door to slide open.

Calamity stood guard over me as I worked. We both looked up when the muffled sound of an explosion echoed from somewhere several floors above.

"Not loving kindness, then."

"Nope."

"If I survive all of this, one day I'm going to sit down and write a sequel to the *Wasteland Survival Guide*, covering all the things Ditzzy Doo managed to leave out." I loved the ghoulish pony, but... seriously, a whole section on radhogs and barely a mention of hellhounds? And the chapter about making robots work for you was completely hoof-fucked.

I concentrated on the puzzle before me, working my way through possibilities of code until I settled on the right one. This was almost as hard as Pinkie Pie's terminal. Almost.

With a series of loud clanks, the vault door slid down into the floor. I raised an eyebrow at that, then stepped into the vault.

Somepony had already been in here. Only a scattering of pre-war coins remained, and most of the smaller safes that lined the walls were open and empty.

“Well, now Ah’m depressed.”

I took note of three smaller safes and one large one which still seemed intact. The locks on these suggested a level of skill required that was beyond... was this the work of the same rival lockpicker who made such a mess of the Hippocampus Energy Plant #12?

No, that would be absurd. But the little pony in my head wouldn’t give up the notion.

I started on the largest safe first, confident in my ability to beat it, and eager to show up my imaginary rival.

It took effort to open the safe, but the tumblers finally fell into place. The large door nudged open. I pulled it back with my telekinesis enthusiastically, driven to see what was inside.

Inside were two objects, one of which I had seen before, recently, through binoculars: an anti-machine rifle. Only this one was pristine, with golden, flame-styled filigree, a custom bit, deep citrines embedded in the barrel and an embossed nameplate that read “Spitfire’s Thunder”. It was also broken down to fit in the safe. Some assembly required.

Calamity whistled at the sight of the massive gun

My own attention was drawn to the small box next to it. The box had a familiar apple insignia on it, although just one rather than the three on Little Macintosh. I floated it out. The box had its own lock, but it looked significantly easier to pick.

“Them gems on that there barrel? Ah’ve seen gemstones like that b’fore,” Calamity was saying behind me, still fascinated by the gun. “They hold an enchantment that sucks up the buck of the gun. Makes it so’s a Pegasus can fire it without getting’ knocked off course.”

I chuckled. He probably thought he was being subtle. “You want it? It’s yours.” I grinned. “I’ve even got some bullets for it.”

The box with the apple clicked open. I realized I'd seen a box like this before as well. In Vinyl Scratch's safe. Like that one, this held four memory orbs.

I set the opened box down. Behind me, Calamity was doing his best not to squee. "Thank ya, Lil'pip. That's mighty gracious of ya..."

"Calamity," I shushed him with a smile. "Stand guard. I might be gone for a bit." The orange-maned pegasus spotted the box of memory orbs and nodded, turning to face the vault entrance in a battle-ready stance.

I tilted my horn down towards the box, picking a memory orb at random, and focused. The bank, Calamity and the entire Equestrian Wasteland washed away.



Applejack was looking at me like I had lost my mind.

"And just what the hay d'ya think yer wearin' that fer?"

I had really hoped to learn more about the past... and, with any luck, the Mares of the Ministries. But to find one of them addressing me, up close and personal? This seemed beyond the stroke of fortune.

The room around us looked very much like the suites in Tenpony Tower must have in their prime. This was a Ministry Hub, perhaps? There was a song playing in the background that I had heard before:

♪ *"I want to calm the storm, but the war is in your eyes.*

How can I shield you from the horror and the lies?

When all that once held meaning is shattered, ruined, bleeding

And the whispers in the darkness tell me we won't survive?"

It took me a moment to place it, but I had once seen SteelHooves virtually entranced by the song.

"To remember tonight," I felt my mouth say. The words came out in a smooth, low rumble. Oh Luna... it was SteelHooves' voice! More

urbane and not nearly as gravelly as the ghoul's we knew, but it was definitely him.

How the hell had this memory ended up here? In this bank? It only now occurred to me that maybe SteelHooves had known what the building next door had been not because he had noticed it today but because he *remembered* it.

"Ah hell no. Ah ain't doing nothin' with ya while yer wearing that ridiculous recollector, Applesnack!" Applejack put her hoof down. "Now take it off."

Wait, what? Oh no. I really, really shouldn't be here. This was... private. And...

"I'll tie you up. With your own lasso."

Applejack's eyes went wide, a blush forming on her freckled cheeks.

Oh sweet Celestia have mercy. Not only was I invading SteelHooves' private memories, but the buck was aroused. I could feel a hot hardness that I fought to escape from. I prayed to the Goddesses to pull me out of this memory, spare me this. And my ghoul companion too. He didn't deserve to have me *here*. And I very much *didn't want* to be here.

Eyes narrowing dangerously, "An' jus' what makes ya think ya have what it takes t' best me w' muh own lasso, soldier-buck?"

(Part of my brain paused to marvel that the country filly turned major political figure had fallen for a city buck turned soldier.)

SteelHooves... no, Applesnack leaned forward (that hot pressure in his groin becoming unbearable to me) and whispered huskily, "Because I know it turns you on."

Way too much information! Please, Celestia, Luna, anypony... stop the memory... need to get off now! Aaaaah! I mean leave. Need to leave now!

I almost felt my prayers were answered when a loud chiming sound rang out from a nearby, glowing terminal. Applejack shook off her deer-caught-in-sleigh's-lights expression. "Still no," she decided,

turning away towards the terminal. “Now, Ah gots t’ take this. And ya best not be wearin’ that thing when Ah’m done. Y’look ridiculous!”

I felt my host sigh, then trot slowly towards what I recognized as the bathroom door. A sudden shot of horror went through me. Applesnack was still sporting his... hardness. Goddess, please don’t let them have a full-length mirror in there!

A cry of dismay from the orange-coated older mare solved my concerns with startling quickness. “What’s wrong?” I felt myself say in Applesnack’s voice.

The mare of the Ministry of Technology was scrolling through information on the terminal’s screen as fast as her hoof would let her. “No...” she moaned. “No, they wouldn’t!” Her voice was becoming louder and more strained. “No! They... they... How could they?!”

Again, more firmly, “AJ, love, what’s wrong.”

Applejack turned towards her soldier-buck with the start of tears in her eyes and a frightening edge in her voice. “Ironshod’s what’s wrong!” She spit as the other emotions struggling behind her face lost out to fury. “One year! The Steel Rangers ‘ave been around for *one year*, and Ironshod Firearms has gone an’ built a gun designed t’ punch through their armor! They’ve build a gun to kill our own!”

I felt Applesnack go rigid at the news.

The blond-maned mare was strutting back and forth in barely contained outrage. “They’re callin’ it the anti-machine rifle. But what it really is... is the anti-magical-power-armor rifle!” She spun, tears in her eyes. “How long before the zebras get ‘hold o’ this? They’ve just *killed our own!*”

I felt my host swallow. He was doing amazingly well at keeping his heart rate down, but while I couldn’t sense Applesnack’s emotions, I could feel the physical toll.

“Ah put everythin’ Ah had inta findin’ a better way t’ keep our soldier ponies safe,” Applejack raged. “Ah sold muh farm! Ah fought the ponies of muh own Ministry t’ get this done.”

She turned, her wide eyes filled with tears. “Ah. Sold. Muh. *Farm!*”

A lump formed in my throat. My heart hurt for the mare, and my hooves wanted to lash out at the evil ponies who could be so thoughtless.

The orange pony spun and bucked her bureau so hard it shattered into splinters and piles of clothing. “This is a betrayal! They can’t do this!” My host watched as his mare looked around for something else to buck; then she seemed to have a better idea.

“Ah’m goin’ down there!” Applejack decided abruptly. “Ah got family down in Ironshod. Braeburn will listen...”

I felt a sinking sensation in my heart.

“SteelHooves,” Applejack barked, addressing my host not by her lover’s name but by his military designation. “Call Wingright. Tell him t’ be on the roof in two minutes an’ t’ have my personal chariot ready. If Ah leave now, Ah c’n make it t’ Ironshod b’fore mornin’. Maybe Ah c’n head this whole thing off b’fore...”

“AJ, love...” Applesnack offered slowly, trying to be reasonable, “If they’ve already invented it, then you can’t put that apple back on the tree.” I knew he was right. The other item in the safe had been proof enough of that.

Applejack shot us both a look (or, at least, it sure felt that way). “Well, *somepony* ain’t gettin’ any fer a good bit.” If I could speak, I would have told her that such expectations had long passed. “Now make that call!”

The orange pony turned back to gaze at the scattered fragments of wood and dresses. “Great. Now Ah’ve got t’ find somethin’ official-lookin’ t’ wear.”

Less than three minutes later, SteelHooves was saying goodbye to Applejack as she stepped into the elevator outside their suite. The call to Wingright had been made and the Ministry Mare’s chariot was waiting on the pegasus landing platform.

“Ah’ll be back b’fore ya know it,” Applejack insisted, dressed in a stiff, formal suit-dress (that did not appear to get much use) and looking slightly less murderous but no less determined. “Ah’m sorry this night ain’t gone like ya was hopin’ fer. Ah’ll make it up t’ ya. Promise.”

She turned and raised a hoof, touching the button for the landing platform. As the ornate doors slid closed, she cocked her head. “An’ take that recollector off. Ya look...”

The doors closed. A soft whirr could be heard as the elevator began to ascend. My host looked up, watching the arrow above the elevator doors slowly glide across the numbers. Floor four. Five. Six...

Applesnack turned back towards the door of his and Applejack’s suite. The recollector was actually starting to itch.

A loud TWANG sounded from inside the elevator shaft behind him. He spun back towards those ornate doors as he heard Applejack’s elevator carriage rumble downward past his floor, gaining speed.

Then there was a loud, horrendous, metal-twisting *THUD*.



I burst back to the real world, shaking from the memory, still feeling Applesnack’s scream as if it had come from my lips.

Looking up, I found SteelHooves’ visor staring down at me. I cringed back, wanting to crawl into the safe.

His low, gravelly voice simply stated, “Definitely a vice.”



“*What is Unity?*” the voice of Red Eye sounded in my earbloom.

Calamity and Velvet Remedy had naturally taken the lead as we worked our way back through the bank. My hooves felt heavy, like mine were the ones wrapped in steel. I couldn’t look at SteelHooves. I could feel

him staring into me, not saying anything. It was so much worse than being yelled at.

“Unity is you. Unity is your family. Your mother and father. Your brothers and sisters. Or, at least, it will be. I have seen it. And yes, Unity will be me as well. But for now, I am merely its, and thus your, humble servant. The Goddess has gifted me with the vision of Unity, and it is She who will bring peace to this troubled land.

“Think of me as nothing but a courier, delivering the message of evolution. We follow the Goddess in Her great quest to heal this land and all the good ponies within it.

“No pony dies in Fillydelphia unless they choose to. And in the New Equestria, no pony will need ever die again. When the time has come for your toil to be over, you have but to submit yourself. Already, the Goddess is taking those who come to her, pulling them to her bosom, and transforming them. Their old, weak, sick bodies are peeled away, replaced by a new, transcendent form...”

As we were passing the open doorframe of an office, SteelHooves lifted a metal-clad hoof and shoved me inside. He followed. Clearly, he wanted to be alone with me. Looking anywhere but him, I stammered an apology. He ignored it.

“Which one did you see?” he asked coldly.

I looked up at him, startled.

“Which. Memory. Did you see?”

I flushed with icy embarrassment. “The... one where...” I fought to find the least intrusive description. “...Applejack learned about Ironshod making anti-machine rifles?”

“Oh,” SteelHooves said. The other three memories were locked safely away in his pack. “The ‘accident’.”

I recalled Apple Bloom’s strained voice:

Some folks ‘re sayin’ that maybe t’wasn’t so much of an accident. They say... that maybe t’was somepony within ‘er own Ministry.

"The biggest row Applejack had was over the anti-machine rifle," SteelHooves informed me. I sensed that, having seen the memory, he wanted me to have a touch of context. It was abnormally forthcoming of him. Even more odd considering how deeply in the wrong I was.

"On one hoof, I couldn't really blame them," SteelHooves admitted. "You wouldn't either if you saw some of the robots the zebras had begun to deploy on the battlefield."

I found myself nodding, despite the ache in my heart for Applejack. I remembered that tank-like sentinel robot in Four Stars. I'd fired on it with armor-piercing bullets from a sniper rifle at a distance of yards, and only a precision shot to a volatile area had managed to stop it.

"But I knew how bad that hurt her, and how deeply personal she took it. Only made it worse that she had family in Ironshod. Whole thing just about tore her apart..." He nickered behind his helmet. "Damn thing was, the zebras came out with armor-piercing ammo a few months later anyways. Not as effective as an anti-machine rifle at taking down my fellow Rangers, but a well placed round from a rifle could punch through a Ranger's helmet."

SteelHooves looked me over until his visored gaze stopped on Little Macintosh in its holster. "Truth is, with AP ammunition *that* gun could do it. Little Macintosh is possibly the most powerful firearm of its size," a touch of nostalgia crept into his voice. "Designed with the kind of buck to the teeth that only a mare like Applejack could handle easily."

Despite how low I was feeling, a snort of laughter escaped me. According to Spike's story, Applejack was strong enough in the tooth to haul not only her own weight but that of all five of her friends with nothing more than a bite on a dragon's tail.

I had just begun to notice that all the context I was getting was about the firearms, and none about the accident itself, when a thunderous gunshot rang out. Was that Spitfire's Thunder? How far ahead had Calamity and Velvet Remedy gotten, and what had they run into?

I darted around SteelHooves' bulk, dashing out of the room and towards the sound. I could hear the heavy hooves of the Steel Ranger fall in behind me.



"That was a warnin' shot," I heard Calamity state ahead, his voice muffled and slightly mumbling. "Ah don't give two."

"Warning shots are supposed to miss!" Velvet Remedy barked sternly.

"Ah didn't hit anything vital," was his response. He was speaking slow, his words sounding like they came through clenched teeth.

"That weapon," a gruff mare's voice insisted, "Is the property of the Ministry of Wartime Technology. Surrender it, tribal, and we'll let you live."

"Horseapples!" Now I could tell why Calamity's voice sounded so warped. He was talking while holding Spitfire's Thunder in his muzzle. He was better at it than the slaver with the shovel-spear whom I had encountered my first night out, but not by much. "The only reason ya ain't blown us 'tribals' t' bits is that ya don't wanna hurt the pretty gun."

I heard Pyrelight let out an alarmed squawk.

"Damn!" SteelHooves muttered from behind me as he broke into full gallop, leaving me swiftly behind. I lowered my head, charging forward, trying to keep up. Little Macintosh floated beside me, ready for action.

I came barreling into a lobby full of ponies and stumbled over the severed hindleg of a raider, losing my balance and face-planting into the rubble of the collapsed ceiling. Little Macintosh clattered into the rubble.

"uh... She tripped me!" I offered weakly, getting up. My eyes widened as I took in the five Steel Rangers in the room, only one of which was SteelHooves. One of the four new arrivals had taken a shot through the leg, and Velvet Remedy was fussing over it to the pony's chagrin. Calamity seemed intent on staring down the other three. Without the

massive Spitfire's Thunder, my companions and I would have been helplessly outmatched. Even assuming SteelHooves remained on our side.

SteelHooves was standing rigid, staring from Calamity, the unique anti-machine rifle held in his teeth, to the Steel Ranger he had shot through the leg. It was as if Applejack's fears were playing out right in front of him. Calamity's habit of shooting first couldn't have reared at a worst time.

The lead mare of the Steel Rangers quartet was splitting her focus between Calamity and SteelHooves. Addressing the latter, "What are you doing with these primitives?"

SteelHooves ignored her, staring at Calamity. "You shot a Steel Ranger."

"Them friends o' yers came at us with intent t' murder."

Velvet Remedy spoke up again. "Calamity's right. The moment they saw us, that one's missile launcher opened up," she said, pointing a hoof at one of the other Steel Rangers. "And this one charged at us with a magical energy lance."

"I ask you again," said the lead mare, stepping forward, "What are you doing here? Soldier, report!" The two uninjured Steel Rangers behind her changed their battle stances to better cover the room, one of them targeting me. I cast my eyes to the floor, searching for where Little Macintosh had fallen.

SteelHooves growled at Calamity, "We will have words." Then, bothering to spare the mare his attention, he answered. "You are not cleared for that information. You need only know that I am on assignment and that you are interfering. Now order your knights to back down."

The tension in the air was nearly suffocating.

"I am a Senior Paladin in the Ministry of Wartime Technology. You will address me with proper respect befitting my rank!"

“As will you,” SteelHooves replied with gravelly calm, “When addressing a superior officer.”

A younger buck’s voice sounded behind the helmet of the missile-launcher Ranger. “Elder SteelHooves?”

The question was met by a still room. I spotted Little Macintosh but didn’t dare float it up from the floor, certain that somepony would start shooting.

Calamity broke the silence. “Elder? Well, guess who’s been holdin’ out on us.”

“My apologies, *Star Paladin* SteelHooves,” the senior paladin said carefully. “I did not recognize you. Your armor is that of a much lower station.”

SteelHooves nickered. “Apology accepted.” He turned to the younger buck, “And I would thank you not call me above my station. If you know of me, then you know I refused that position.”

The leading mare was not done, however. “You are far from your stomping grounds, Star Paladin SteelHooves. By protocol, I shall lead you to meet with Elder Blueberry Sabre.” The light on her helmet swiveled to illuminate each of us in turn.

“As for the disposition of your... friends,” she began.

“They are with me,” SteelHooves said firmly. “Lead. I shall follow.”

The steel-encased mare turned and trotted out of the bank. Velvet Remedy stayed close to the wounded one as he rose to his hooves, favoring his injured leg.

As the rest of us began to follow, I floated Little Macintosh to me. The gears in my mind were beginning to turn again. And while I knew better than to start asking questions in the middle of a tense diplomatic situation, it was clear that SteelHooves and I needed to have a big talk.



“Star Paladin SteelHooves, sir,” the young knight called out, trotting closer to SteelHooves while the other uninjured knight covered Calamity and me with the light machine gun of her battle saddle. “Again, my apologies for before.”

“The matter is passed,” SteelHooves said flatly. I sensed this was not a conversation our ghoulish companion wanted to have. I found myself mentally cheering the young knight on.

“Permission to ask a question, sir?”

“No.”

“oh...” The knight stopped in his tracks, letting us pass him, then trotted to catch back up. “In that case, permission to speak freely, sir?”

SteelHooves’ head drooped just a little. “No.”

The knight slowed but did not stop this time.

“Permission granted, Knight Boom,” proclaimed the senior paladin. To SteelHooves, she whinnied, “My troops. My territory. My rules.”

“Sir, I just wanted to say... there are a lot of Steel Rangers who felt the same way you do. About following in the path of the Ministry’s Mare, I mean. If you had taken your rightful place as Elder, a lot of us would have gladly followed you.”

SteelHooves remained impassive.

The silence stretched out as we trotted through the suburban wreckage that surrounded Fillydelphia. Slowly, the young knight dropped back into position behind us. I heard his last words, muttered to himself before he fell quiet for the rest of the trip.

“We still would.”



“When I was a young buck, I was taught that somehow, some ponies were inferior to others. That those not born as earth ponies were weak, frail,

unsuited to labor. Incapable of pulling their own weight without relying on magic.

“You, my children, prove every day that the only ponies who are inferior are those who choose to be. Unity is more than just the blessing of the Goddess. It is our search to transcend the laziness and weakness of our ancestors, to reach a higher level of existence. Unity with our fellow ponies, not tearing each other apart, but building each other up, and Equestria with us. And you, my children, are already halfway there.

“In you I see that Unity already lies within us, should we just choose to embrace it. The glorious evolution that awaits us is just icing on the cupcake...”

Explosions ripped through the street. SteelHooves stood alongside the other Steel Rangers as they tore into the slavers taking cover behind the ruined chariots and carriages and even behind the wagon full of slaves that they were transporting into the heart of Fillydelphia. Red Eye’s voice died when the grenade barrage from our ghoul’s battle saddle obliterated the slaver’s radio.

Through the din, nopony heard the shot from above that tore through Knight Buck’s helmet, ripping it off his torso, his head turned to jellied mush inside. A Pinkie Pie Balloon floated overhead, turned a raging fuchsia by the dipping sun.

“Take cover!” the senior paladin yelled and the Rangers scattered.

At the turn of events, the surviving slavers began to press forward, filling the street with suppressive fire. I hid behind a trash barrel as bullets riddled it. If the bin hadn’t been full of another age’s refuse, the bullets would likely have tore through it and perforated my body. As it was, the few which punched through were stopped by my saddlebags and barding.

“Ah got this one,” Calamity called out, soaring into the air, Spitfire’s Thunder strapped across his back, intent on going one-on-one with the Pinkie Pie Balloon. From behind a mailbox, Velvet Remedy focused on invoking her shield spell, bringing it to brief life between our pegasus and the slaver ponies who turned their guns to fire at him.

The moment their guns were trained away from me, I dove around the trash barrel, slipping into S.A.T.S. and putting shots into the heads of three of them, courtesy of the zebra rifle. Their heads erupted in flame as they fell. Two more were doused in flickering green balefire that sent my PipBuck clicking. They stumbled, screaming, as Pyrelight flew over the slavers.

I could hear shots exchanged above.

The slaver pony who had been hiding behind the slave wagon, a lavender and green unicorn mare, wrapped the remains of Knight Boom in a levitation field and floated it towards herself. S.A.T.S. died only to activate again, partially refreshed. I looked down the scope of the zebra rifle, but couldn't get a clear shot with the wagon of slaves in the way. They were cringing, trapped in the open. I saw one tan-coated mare mouth "don't shoot me!"

Wait... what was I thinking? I focused, wrapping the entire wagon in a field of my own, and gently hauled the slaver's cover out of my way.

One of the other slaver ponies opened fire at me, forcing me to dive back behind cover. I felt the levitation field slip, but caught it before I dropped the wagon full of helpless ponies.

A hoot and a flash of green flame announced the death of the slaver pinning me.

I turned to look back into the street just in time to see the lavender and green unicorn floating Knight Boom's rocket launcher and firing a rocket through the display window of the store where the wounded Steel Ranger had taken cover. The storefront blew out in smoke and rubble. A moment later, the Ranger mare with the light machinegun tore at least a dozen holes in the unicorn slaver.

The unique sound of Calamity's battle saddle rang through the air, coupled with an explosion. "Hoo-rah!" The pegasus swooped down to hover over me. "Ya see that? Shot the grenade right outta her mouth! While doin' a triple summersault dodge!" He pumped a hoof in the air. "Who's the best shot in the Equestrian Wasteland?"

I waved a hoof at him, urging him to take cover. A crackling whoooooosh sound filled the air. My shadow leaped across the ground as the sky above us suddenly lit up.

Pointing at his breast, Calamity indulged in a bit of gloating. “Winner o’ the Best Young Sharpshooter competition four years runnin’, that’s who!”

“Oh dear,” Velvet said, staring up into the air from behind her mailbox. Her face was painted with flickering light.

I felt a splash of dread. Calamity, still hovering in the air above me, turned his face upward, his voice trailing off.

He was watching, astonished, as the Pinkie Pie Balloon was consumed in flame. His mouth hung open. “Flammable gas?” he finally mouthed. “The fuckin’ slavers fill their dirigibles w’ flammable gas?”

Apparently.

“Littlepip... Calamity...” Velvet whimpered, waving for our attention. “It’s falling our way!” I knew I should move, but the holocaust above transfixed me. Bits of burning material started to rain down around us. My trance was broken when a blazing swath of thick cloth landed on the trash barrel next to me, draping it in flame.

Celestia clop my clit with a hoof-full of sunfire!

“RUN!”

I dove round the bullet-filled trash barrel, running down the street as fast as my short legs could take me. The light above was getting brighter and I could feel waves of heat pushing down at us.

“Ah didn’t know. How could Ah have known?” Calamity shot past me. “What fuckin’ psycho pony would do that?”

The imprisoned ponies turned towards the inferno in the sky and screamed. The air burned in my throat. Mercifully, I still had my levitation field around the wagon. I floated it off the ground, towing it with me as I galloped down the shattered street, trying to put distance

between all of us and the massive ball of fire (shaped like Pinkie Pie's head) that was slowly crashing to the earth.



I gave a prayer of thanks to Celestia and Luna. All of my companions had survived. Two of the Steel Rangers, however, had not.

"Why?" the paladin mare asked as I unlocked the wagon to set the captive ponies free.

I looked to her in surprise. I started to ask what she meant, only to recall Homage's words of warning about the Steel Rangers:

Honestly, most of them would be more interested in saving your PipBuck than saving you.

I realized the Steel Rangers probably engaged the slavers for a motivation completely different than my own. The revelation tasted sour.

"Because it's the right thing to do. And because, if I was in their place," I said, remembering that at one time I had been, "I would want somepony to do the same for me."

Velvet Remedy's ears perked. She listened in on our conversation as she moved to give aid and comfort to the ponies who had been trapped in that wagon cage for what looked (and smelt) like weeks. They were malnourished, scarred and had slept in their own filth. One of the ponies was dead, had been long enough to begin to smell, but the slavers hadn't bothered removing the corpse. I felt a simmering rage.

Turning from the sight, I stared into the impassive mask of the Steel Ranger. "Why did you?"

"The more Red Eye's forces advance, the more ground we lose," the senior paladin explained. "He covets the technology of the past that is rightfully ours to protect. We cannot engage his army directly, so we attack his supply lines."

Part of me wanted to scream at the metal-clad pony about her priorities. Instead, I scowled at the news; I had not expected the outskirts of Fillydelphia to be a war zone.

“Fillydelphia was home to major hubs for both the Ministry of Wartime Technology and the Ministry of Morale. But we lost our Hub to Red Eye’s forces three years ago, and have been forced to fortify in a secondary position.”

My scowl increased. “Any imminent plans to take it back?”

I felt the Steel Ranger mare glare at me behind her mask. Presumably, she was taking me to their fortification, so there was no cause not to tell me about it; but that freedom of information did not extend to anything tactical.

SteelHooves, however, stepped up and answered. “No.” I heard the mare nicker, bristling inside her armor, but SteelHooves didn’t care. “Why should we. By now, the building has been stripped of anything worth reclaiming.”

Stepping closer to me, SteelHooves demanded, “Come with me. I wish to talk with you alone.”

Perfect, because I wanted to talk to him.



“Why are you with us?”

We were in the burned-out husk of a small diner. SteelHooves remained, as always, hidden and expressionless behind his armor.

“And not that hogwash about having nothing better to do this time,” I demanded. Once we were alone, leader-SteelHooves had vanished. Once again, I was inexplicably in charge. Only this time, I really wanted to be. “You said you were on assignment. *What* assignment?”

SteelHooves’ tail swayed. “Remember when you eavesdropped on my conversation with Calamity? The picture I painted of you and your friends?”

I nodded tightly. He surprised me with his next words.

"I don't believe any of that," he told me. "You're not a spy or a secret agent of some Ministry of Awesome black ops stable. You're a good pony who is a victim of her own good nature and incessant curiosity."

Sitting on his haunches, SteelHooves continued, "In my assessment, you have survived through luck, growing skill, and the unusual fortune of having capable friends who are willing to stick by you even when you are amazingly stupid."

Well gee, thanks.

"I follow you because you are a better pony than I am. And you remind me of somepony else. You honestly strive to help and protect other ponies. I believe..." He paused. There was a hitch in his voice. "I believe she would have approved of you."

SteelHooves dug a hoof at the red and black tiles, charred and shattered, that covered the floor.

"I told you before, not every Steel Ranger has the same view of our Oath. I have always believed that we should follow in the example of our Ministry's Mare, Applejack. That we should be pledged to her goals and priorities. That we should protect other ponies, both with our technology and our fortitude. We weren't meant to steal and hoard. We were meant to defend."

I nodded slowly.

"I haven't been faithful to my Oath for a long time. But at your side, I can be again."

I looked away, the ghoul's words sinking in. When I turned back, I fixed him with a stare. "That was the most heartwarming cart of horseapples I have ever heard."

He stopped digging. "It's the truth."

"Of course it is," I said, "That's how you lie. If you recall, I've seen you do it before." I started walking around the Steel Ranger as he continued to sit. "You tell enough truth that anypony would buy your story. But

here's where the saddle rubs: all of that assessment had to have happened after you insinuated yourself into our group. If anything, you just explained why you are *still* with us." I stopped in front of him and pointed. "So I ask again. Why. Are you. Here?"

"All right," SteelHooves nickered, standing up. Repeating his words almost verbatim, "Do you remember when you eavesdropped on my conversation with Calamity? The picture I painted of you and your friends?" Again I nodded.

"That's what my Elder believes you are. And my assignment is to assess the potential threat that you and the other residents of the Stable you come from represent."



No more secrets. That was my condition for not abandoning SteelHooves. He responded by giving me the box of memory orbs as a token of submission. I had not expected that, but he insisted. After all, we both knew I really couldn't just take his word.

I focused on one of them, showing him trust in return by allowing myself to become helpless in his company. The world melted away.



I was wet. Rain was coming down in sheets from the blackness of the night sky. I was wearing a rain-slicker, but the wind buffeted at it, pulling it away. Only the top of my mane was remotely dry under the hood.

Lightning flashed, illuminating the pegasus landing platform, over two dozen floors above the bustling lights of the city below. I recognized the form of a giant scooter hovering over a well-lit building in the distance. This was Manhatttan.

"Sure ya want ta be flyin' on a night like this, Applesnack, sir?" a dapperly-dressed grey pegasus buck asked as he shimmied himself into

the harness of a sky chariot. It was a particularly beautiful chariot, adorned with a very familiar three-apples design.

"Very important business," I heard myself say in Applesnack's voice. "Has to be tonight."

"Well, that's whatcha pay me for, right?" the pegasus smiled. "Although it's likely ta be a beastly ride."

"I'll survive," Applesnack said as lightning flashed across the sky.

The pegasus gripped the harness strap in his teeth and pulled, drawing it tight. "An' how's Miss Applejack? I was really sorry ta hear 'bout her accident. The ponies who were supposed ta be keeping those elevators in top shape ought ta be sent ta jail."

I felt my jaw tighten. But Applesnack kept his voice pleasantly even. "Strapped in tight, Wingright?" I both felt and heard him ask. "Don't want you slipping free in the rain now."

"Yeah," the pegasus laughed. "That would be one unpleasant fall."

Applesnack stepped into the chariot, pressing as far forward as he could as if afraid he might slip out the back the moment the pegasus launched forward. The grey pegasus spread his wings, rain dripping off of the feathers.

Applesnack moved with alarming speed. I felt myself lurch forward, biting down, grasping the pegasus' wing in my teeth. My host drew back, pulling, drawing the wing back over the metal front edge of the chariot as he raised up a hoof.

"Applesnack! Whatcha...?" the pegasus squeaked in surprise before I felt my hoof come down on that pulled wing with a bone-crunching blow. The pegasus screamed!

Spitting out the feathers of Wingright's now-crippled wing, SteelHooves growled, his low voice like thunder. "Only three ponies knew exactly when Applejack was going to be riding up that elevator!"

"Aaaah! My wing! My *wing*! What the hell...?!"

“I checked your finances. Your account got a sudden influx of coins three weeks ago. And an even bigger one less than eight hours after Applejack’s accident!” I was staring into the widening eyes of the blubbling pegasus. My voice was dangerous low. My heartbeat wasn’t raised at all. “Really, you should choose something other than your filly’s middle name as a password.”

“I-I can explain!” the pegasus wailed, cradling his shattered wing. “My sister died in the war. That was an inheritance!”

“I don’t think so.” Applesnack turned and stepped down off the chariot. Then I felt as my host lifted his back hooves and planted them against the rear of the chariot. Slowly, he began to shove, pushing it across the rain-slicked rooftop and the hapless pegasus along with it.

“What?! No! What are you doing? Don’t!” the pegasus cried out, trying feebly to push back as he was shoved closer and closer to the edge.

“Please! I have a family!”

SteelHooves grunted, stopping. “Maybe you should have thought of them before you made your choice.” He gave a final, hard buck to the back end of the chariot, sending it toppling over the lip of the roof, pegasus and all.

I could hear the winged pony scream right up until the chariot bounced off the first outcropping on its way down to the streets below.

I felt utterly stunned, numb, as my host’s legs carried me towards the nearest door at a casual, splashing trot. I felt him rehearsing under his breath,

“There’s been a terrible accident. No, I have no idea where he was flying in from. I could tell he was coming in too low, but I expected him to pull up before he hit the building. It was horrible. I feel it was my fault; I shouldn’t have asked Wingright to fly in this weather. I should have known that the wind sheer would be too much for him.”



The memory ended.

I stared at SteelHooves in horror.

He stared back calmly. "No secrets."



"... We are not primitive tribals, striking our hooves against stone, hoping to create fire. We are building a better tomorrow for our children. And our children's children.

"We build it through the sweat and blood we spill to restore the foundations of industry to our great nation. Because without industry, there is no progress. And we are not content to allow another two hundred years to go by with ponykind reduced to scavengers!"

Red Eye's speech ended, his voice replaced by what sounded like carnival music.

Twilight was descending over Fillydelphia when we crested a small hill and I could glean where we were heading.

Nearly two-thirds of Fillydelphia had been cut off, sealed up from the ruins beyond by a great metal wall. The bulk of the industrial center, the amusement park whose roller coaster towered in the fading light, and Fillydelphia Crater itself all hid inside. Not only did towers just inside the wall harbor guardponies, but griffins patrolled the skies around. The glaring dirigibles above provided additional sniper cover.

The "secondary position" of the Steel Rangers was obvious: the largest and most defensible building still intact outside of the wall. The massive, gear-shaped emblem on the front of the building proclaimed what it had been even better than the crumbling, two-story letters that cut through it. The Steel Rangers had taken over the headquarters of Stable-Tec and converted it into a citadel.

Calamity flew casually past me to hover near SteelHooves.

"So, ya ain't an elder cuz ya chose not t' be?" he asked curiously. "Maybe we ain't so different after all."

I felt ice water run down my spine.

SteelHooves turned to Calamity, studying the rust-colored pegasus for a moment. “No. *You* flew towards your responsibilities in defiance of your own kind, heedless and ignorant of the consequences.”

Calamity flapped backwards a bit, a frown forming across on his face.

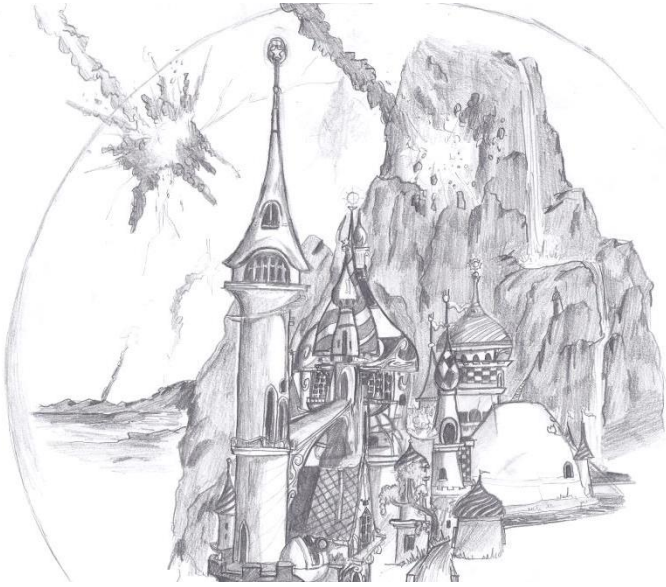
SteelHooves continued. “I ran away from my responsibilities because I understood exactly what the consequences would be if I did not. I knew there were ponies who would follow my example, and I was not willing to risk a civil war amongst the Steel Rangers.”

Turning away from Calamity, SteelHooves said firmly, “We are nothing alike.”

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Tough Hide (level two) - The brutal experiences of the Equestrian Wasteland have hardened you. You gain +3 to Damage Threshold for each level of this perk you take.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



DANCES OF LIGHT AND SHADOW

“Mmm! I can smell the muffins baking now!”



Death.

The battlefield was strewn with bloody corpses under a charcoal-grey sky that heaved and threatened rain.

I was dying. Or, more precisely, my host was dying. And, trapped in his memory, I was along for the ride. Part of my mind remained coherent enough to wonder about that. I could feel the press of metal against my host's head, a helmet which could easily hold a recollector. Was I going to experience death?

The rest of my mind was overloaded by the pain that tore at my abdomen. My host had fallen against the wall of the trench, head

propped up just enough to see that most of his body below the stomach was no longer as attached as it should be. I could see his intestines and internal organs spilling out onto the recently dug dirt. Mercifully, I couldn't feel that... my host had lost all feeling below the top of the wound.

He was already dead. He must have known it, but his body just hadn't gotten the message yet.

Who was I? I had assumed this was Applesnack's memory, since it came from one of the orbs in his memory case. But that seemed unlikely now. Between the armored barding and the blood, I couldn't be sure.

Several pegasi flew back and forth over the battlefield, searching, relaying messages or calling out names. For a moment, a familiar sky-blue mare with her shockingly brilliant rainbow mane and tail swooped over my trench. She hovered, looking about frantically. Her blood-stained purple suit looked nearly black in the light and her battle saddle was scorched. Her eyes fell on me and she winced. Then she was off again.

"Hey!" The large form of a particularly statuesque red stallion in similar military barding slid down into the trench next to me. His eyes went wide as he took in the morbid reality of my wounds.

"So... Sarge... we drive those striped bastards back?" I felt my muzzle move, and the words came out in a low, masculine voice.

I felt a drop of wetness hit our cheek. At first, I thought the other pony was crying. But then another raindrop fell out of the sky, and another, and another.

"Ayep," the red pony nodded, wisps of orange mane fell from under his helmet, caked a dark red by blood. He spoke slowly, "Ya did good, soldier. Mighty good. They'll make ya Sergeant after this." Rain was beginning to soak into his coat, washing caked blood out of it.

My host choked, coughing up blood. The taste was warm and coppery in our mouth. "Post mortem, I'm afraid, Sarge." My host's voice was eerily calm and even. He had minutes left to live, if that. And he

seemed... at peace with it. "I'm afraid I won't be joining you when you go after all."

We felt cold. A chill deeper than that from the rain. I felt drops of rain kissing the seeringly painful wound. I was thankful I couldn't feel drops landing *inside* me.

"Don't talk," the big one said, looking deeply wounded. "Ah ain't ready t' let ya go, buck."

"Think the zebras had different to say." My god, my host actually chuckled. He was in utter agony... I hadn't felt pain like this since the dragon set me on fire; I was sure that my own body was screaming... and he just chuckled. Like it was nothing. "Don't worry, Sarge. We won the day, right? No regrets..."

The big red stallion looked like he was fighting tears. My host just grinned, his muzzle full of his own blood. "...Well, one regret. Never did get to meet that hot sister of yours."

The stallion frowned dangerously, and I suddenly realized that his mane was the same color as Applejack's coat. And they had similar freckles. Big Macintosh bristled, then burst into a gruff laugh. "Now ya got t' pull through," he grinned, "So's Ah c'n buck yer backside, boy!"

It was too late. Darkness was already creeping into the edges of my host's vision. The reaper pony had come to take him home. Wherever home was before Celestia and Luna were goddesses. My host tilted his head back, staring into the darkening sky, feeling the rain on his face for one last time...

A flock of pegasi soared in from overhead, two of them pulling a passenger wagon full of other ponies, mostly unicorns. All the newcomers wore barding of yellow and pink and carried saddleboxes with little butterflies on them, just like Velvet Remedy's. All except the lead pony. She didn't need the uniform... Fluttershy already *was* the uniform.

"um... oh.... Oh dear!" The shy pegasus pony looked out over the hills and trenches full of dead and dying. Her eyes filled with tears and she

began to tremble. But she stomped a hoof down, and forced herself to find her voice. "Oh... okay. Everypony, everyone... please be calm. We're going to help."

Fluttershy turned and called out to her team, "Please, if you would, take your positions. And hurry. Thank you."

Sleeping shadows had nearly engulfed my host's vision, and his other senses were fading fast. I was looking at the world from the bottom of a deep, dark well. Thankfully, the pain was at the top of the well, far away from us. We closed our eyes.

It was hard to open them again. Our eyelids were heavy, like they were made of gold. When we did, there wasn't much to see. Just clouds and rain. Barely visible. We were in a much deeper well.

Fluttershy's head moved between us and the clouds, looking strangely upside-down, cringing at the sight of my host. "Ooooh... Oh no." She dashed up to us. "I... we... I think we can help. Just, please, hold on!"

We strained to speak. It only came out as a whisper. "...bit beyond you. Go help the... *ponies* who can..." Our words trailed off. There was no more energy to put behind them. That was enough, hopefully, to get the point across.

A unicorn in a yellow and pink dress stepped into view. "Fluttershy," she said, her voice the whisper of a whisper, "We're ready for the test run..."

The world faded to black. A black that was all-encompassing. No sight. No sound. Nothing to smell or feel. Even the taste of blood was gone from our mouth.

We were dead.

We should have been dead.

But a pleasant warmth was spreading through us. I could feel it all the way to my host's tail. The world came rushing back like we were being released from a memory orb. There was no pain. It was replaced by the

bone-deep chill. Our body was soaked in rain. The trench had become squishy with mud.

We opened our eyes. Our body was healed. Complete.

It was a miracle. It was *impossible!*

“What did you do?!” I heard a mare’s voice cry out from above. I looked up to see the rainbow-maned mare dive out of the sky, a rainbow-colored wake stretching out behind her. “Fluttershy! What. Did. You. *Do?*”

Rainbow Dash stopped, hovering in the air, staring in utter shock at her fellow pegasus.

“We healed them,” Fluttershy said graciously, her voice somehow filled with happiness but not a hint of pride. Several of her unicorns were trotting up to stand by her side.

“I know that,” Rainbow Dash assured her. “But... how?”

Fluttershy blushed, looking pleased. “We call it a ‘megaspell’.”

Rainbow Dash blinked. “A what now?”

One of the unicorns cleared her throat and Fluttershy took a meek step back, allowing the mare to explain. “It’s a new, underlying spell framework that allows smaller spells to be augmented in scope and intensity.”

The blue pegasus looked lost. And worried.

“This way,” Fluttershy claimed, “We can heal everyone on the battlefield with a single spell. No one has to die because we couldn’t get to them in time.”

“Every...” Rainbow Dash turned her stare over the battlefield. My host did too. Everywhere, ponies were getting to their feet with expressions of awe and bewilderment. Only the dead remained dead, their corpses strewn across the hills and filling the trenches. The wounded, even those at the very brink of death from impossible wounds, were healthy and whole.

Like my host.

“...all of them?...”

And like the zebra who was pulling herself from amongst the bodies, a zebra sword clutched in her mouth, crackling with electrical fire.

Rainbow Dash shouted at Fluttershy, “You healed everyone!? Indiscriminately? Even the zebras!?”

“um...”

“Do you know what you’ve done!?”

“I... we...”

*“Do you know how many ponies **died** here today?”* Rainbow Dash bellowed. *“And now we have to fight the damn battle all over again!”*

I could hear the yellow pegasus squeak, beginning to cry. My heart broke at the sound. I wanted Applesnack to turn towards her... I wanted him to comfort the mare who had just saved his life. But he didn’t even spare her a glance. Instead, my host lowered his head, sinking his teeth into mud to pull up his rifle, ignoring the slimy texture and earthy taste.

Shots began to sound across the battlefield outside the trench.

“Fluttershy, get down!” Rainbow Dash cried out a moment before the blue pegasus tackled the yellow one, sending them both rolling into the trench next to me, her wing catching the wake of a missile as it shot over the trench and exploded, raining dirt down on us.

The battle was engaged. Again.



Velvet Remedy stopped as we approached the massive gate that the Steel Rangers had built in front of Stable-Tec Headquarters. The armored plate looked like it had been taken from a battleship’s hull. It

was slid down into grooves in a concrete wall that bisected what had once been the squat skyscraper's courtyard.

Steel Rangers stood guard along the roof and in the open half of the courtyard, accompanied by two of the tank-like sentinel robots that had ironically helped prompt the creation of the anti-machine rifle.

This outer half-courtyard was a mess of cracked steps and shattered cobblestones, concrete planters where nothing grew, and a dried fountain. Above the fountain rose a cracked and badly-weathered statue of a once-beautiful white unicorn with a curling purple and pink mane and tail. The statue had suffered from not only weather but generations of graffiti before the Steel Rangers had taken possession of the building and began fatally discouraging raiders and miscreants from approaching their base of operations.

Everypony else was focused on the guards in magically-powered armor and sentinel robot in front of the gate. The senior paladin mare trotted forward, addressing them. I perked my ears to listen, but felt a sudden hoof-nudge from Calamity. He pointed a hoof and turned to see Velvet Remedy walking up to the fountain.

"Hello, great grandmother," she said softly. "Great, great, great, great, great..." She paused, blushing. "I've sung your song. And I just wanted to say: you saved us. I'm here because of you. Stable Two worked."

The Steel Rangers had quieted, themselves strangely interested in my friend's almost internal conversation with the statue. Calamity moved away from us, flying quietly towards her.

"You got it right." Velvet dug at the ground. "I... just wanted you to know." There was a tear in her eye as she turned and stepped away, moving to rejoin us. Calamity landed next to her, wrapping a foreleg about her in comfort.

Velvet Remedy stopped, leaned into the embrace, and sniffed once. Then broke away, wiping a tear, and returned to her place behind me.

Pyrelight fluttered out of the sky and landed on the statue, causing the Steel Rangers to fall into battle stances.

"At ease," SteelHooves rumbled. I was willing to bet that, behind his mask, he had rolled his eyes.

"Those things are dangerous," one of the knights explained.

I chuckled grimly to myself. "Yeah, she might lift your visor and breathe, baking you." The mental image was grotesque -- having seen a pony killed cruelly like that was horrifying - but somehow the image of Pyrelight pulling the same trick struck my funny bone. Goddesses, there really was something wrong with me.

The knight mare next to me (the one with the machine gun battle saddle) giggled in her armor. "You can't lift the visor in these helmets." She turned to me, "That would be a serious weak point in the armor. I can't imagine such a design getting through the Shield Committee."

I didn't know exactly what she was talking about, but I gleaned the general idea. "It wouldn't," I agreed, "If protection was the primary goal of the armor."

"What other purpose could *armor* have?" she scoffed.

"Intimidation."

Behind us, Calamity had flown up to look Pyrelight in the eyes. "Ya crap on it, an' she'll kill ya. Fair warnin'."

A sky-rending squeal tore the air. Above us, the giant arm of a crane swung into view from behind the wall. The massive steel talons on the end of it lowered and grasped onto the metal gate. Slowly, with the tortured cry of metal grinding on concrete, the gate to the Steel Ranger's citadel in Stable-Tec Headquarters lifted to allow us access.

"Poppyseed," the knight mare next to me said.

"Hm?" I blinked, confused.

"My name," she said. "I'm Knight Poppyseed." At my continued blank expression, she expounded, "Poppies are a flower from zebra lands. They have seeds."

“Oh.” I smiled back. “Littlepip.” I lifted my right foreleg, showing off my PipBuck. “Pip is short for PipBuck,” I told her, choosing to conveniently forget my name was my mother’s play on ‘pipsqueak’. “All the ponies in the Stables have them.” Even as I said that, I wondered if that was true considering the often-fatal strangeness of other Stable-Tec stables. I looked beyond the lifting gate, a sudden lump in my throat. “...well, in my Stable, at least.”

“Really?” Poppyseed commented. “I’d always heard that to pip somepony meant to shoot that pony with a firearm.” I had never heard that before. And really, what do you say to that?

The rest of us started to move forward. Pyrelight seemed intent on staying outside in the Fillydelphia outskirts. I wished her well, expecting she would still be nearby when and if we left. She had survived on her own for a long time. I was more concerned about the rest of us.

Calamity looked back at the base of the statue, bent his head forward and snatched a bottle cap out of the dry fountain bed. He flew back to us, taking his place walking at Velvet’s side, dropping the cap into one of his saddlebags as he did so.



The sounds of sporadic gunfire danced in the air. Steel Rangers trotted laps around a track running along the towering wall which encircled the lower floors of Stable-Tec Headquarters. In the inner half-court, a senior paladin was barking orders at initiates as they struggled to master movement in their suits of magically-powered armor.

“Ah get it,” Calamity said to SteelHooves as one of the initiates bucked at a badly dented steel plate, leaving hoofmarks nearly half a yard from her intended target. “Yer armor’s spell matrix enhances yer strength an’ endurance t’ compensate fer the bulk o’ it, right?”

SteelHooves nodded without a word.

“Interestin’,” Calamity mused. “The enchantments in an Enclave suit negate its weight. Kinda like one o’ the enchantments on Spitfire’s Thunder.” SteelHooves glanced back at the unique anti-machine rifle strapped to Calamity’s battle saddle. The thing was almost twice as long as he was when fully assembled, so he kept it broken down while traveling. “Differe’n’t approaches, but still... it’s all about keepin’ the weight down.”

SteelHooves had slowed, staring at Calamity. This was the first time he had witnessed Calamity’s freaky knowledge of magical engineering, rarely seen as it was.

The senior paladin mare led us up the steps to the once-grand doors of Stable-Tec. What had once been gleaming, polished bronze inlaid with richly varnished wood was now tarnished and discolored metal with inserts of warped and rotting timber. Above the door, the gear-shaped Stable-Tec logo was embedded into a mantel over a pair of decorative nooks where fires had once burned. Ashes from the nooks had stained the wall and doors below in streaks, making the building look like it had been crying.

I shuddered, feeling a chill.

Cocking his ear towards the gunshots, Calamity asked SteelHooves, “Ah take it that’s a shootin’ range out back. If your friends here ain’t inclined t’ kick us out or shoot us anytime pressin’, think Ah could take a few turns at it?”

“Trying to impress the Rangers?” our ghoulish companion retorted.

Calamity laughed. “Hell no. That ain’t it a’tall.”

I trotted closer, my own curiosity waking. “What then? Surely the four-year-running sharpshooting champion doesn’t need lessons. I’ve never seen you miss...”

Velvet Remedy snarked, “Even when he was supposed to.”

“...so why the shooting range?”

The leading mare had stopped at the front door and was speaking to somepony on the other side through an intercom. Poppyseed trotted in place next to me, looking anxious. Or bored. Hard to tell without being able to see an expression.

“Y’see, this new gun, Spitfire’s Thunder, is a magically enhanced anti-machine gun. Made fer a pegasus sniper.” Calamity tipped the brim of his hat forward. “It’s enchanted so’s to weigh only a few pounds an’ t’ have only a feather-brush of a kick. Fires more like a magical-energy weapon than a firearm. Even has a lightnin’ gem fuelin’ her insides -- that’s why she sounds like thunder when she’s shot. She fires probably twenty percent faster than the non-magical model and won’t never jam. No moving parts.”

Now it was my turn to whistle.

“Alla which means she’s more magical energy rifle than firearm. But she still uses bullets, just like muh battle saddle. An’ bullets are subject t’ wind and gravity. So that makes for an odd combination.” He smiled to me then looked frankly at SteelHooves. “An’ that means Ah best get some love in with her on the firin’ range before takin’ her inta battle proper.”

The door into Stable-Tec was opened from the inside.

Velvet Remedy pushed past us, rolling her eyes and tossing her mane. “Do you and your gun need some alone time?” she shot as she passed Calamity.

He blinked. “Well, yeah. That’s what Ah jus’ said.”

I facehoofed. Velvet Remedy nickered and trotted inside, ignoring the confused pegasus.



“Does the news today make you anxious? Worried about what might happen to yourself or your family should the megaspells fall? I know and understand your fears because I share them...”

My companions and I looked around, startled. The lobby of Stable-Tec had been designed to be a welcoming self-advertisement. The sad, sweet voice seemed to come from right in front of us, no matter which way we were facing. It filled the air.

"That's Sweetie Belle," Velvet Remedy whispered, searching for the speakers.

"Like you, I hope for the best... but like you, I need to prepare for the worst. I want a safe place for my loved ones to survive if that horrible day should ever come where our beautiful Equestria falls beneath a megaspell holocaust."

"It's automated," Poppyseed told me. "Starts up every time we go through that door. Didn't use to, but then we tried to disable it. Only made it worse." She pointed to the large Stable-Tec logo embedded in the floor. "There used to be an image standing there of that unicorn from the statue out front. Made out of dancing lights -- looked like a damn ghost. Killing that also killed the interface for the tour presentation." She giggled wryly inside her armor. "Enjoy."

Explained why neither our guide nor the Steel Rangers milling about seemed to be paying the voice of Sweetie Belle even the slightest bit of attention.

"I too need to know my family will be safe. But more than that, I want them to be happy. I don't want them locked away in a dark, cramped shelter for the rest of their lives. That's no better than a prison. No... I want my family to be safe and secure inside one of Stable-Tec's magnificent Stables."

Our guide lead us past display cases, most of which were destroyed and the displays plundered, and framed posters on the wall, all badly faded. The posters ranged from terrifying portents of armageddon (all of which somehow managed to be more wholesome and pleasant than the post-apocalyptic reality they attempted to prophesy) to pictures of a smiling Sweetie Belle urging parents to trust their children to Stable-Tec's promise of long and happy lives. All of them had a unifying message, although rarely put into these exact words: We care. You need

us. You will die without us. Buy your tickets for the Stable-Tec lottery now.

We were approaching the end of a hallway, passing a pristine Sparkle-Cola machine (this one with a large, back-lit plate showing an orgasmic Fluttershy drinking her favorite carrot-flavored drink) and an ammunition vending machine which had been broken into and thoroughly looted. The end of the hall was adorned in false rocks, so the hallway would appear to transform into a small, darkened cave. The illusion would have been effective if chunks of plaster from the “cave wall” hadn’t broken loose, revealing the wire mesh beneath.

As our leader stepped into the cave, loud clunking vibrations echoed through the hall and display lights came on, revealing a huge mock-up of a Stable door.

Sweetie Belle’s voice came to life around us again, the recording playing at a strangely low speed for the first few seconds, making her voice briefly sound similar to SteelHooves’.

“Stable-Tec welcomes you to our new line of subterranean stables, featuring our patented S.A.S. arcano-technology. S.A.S. technology is the product of years of dedicated, uncompromising effort by our Stable-Tec scientists to bring you the most advanced and enduring designs based on the three pillars of post-apocalyptic survival: Safety, Amenities and Sustainability.”

Velvet Remedy and I exchanged looks.

The mock-Stable door (numbered “0”) swung open on hinges as we approached while a soundtrack played the sounds of an actual Stable door being pulled open. Spinning yellow lights topped off the simulation, something that hadn’t been present in Stable Two.

“You and your loved ones will be able to sleep in peace, knowing that our impenetrable Stable doors are built to survive and protect even if zebra invaders detonate a Balefire Bomb directly outside of your new, safe and secure home. (With only a projected seven-percent failure rate under even those extreme and unlikely circumstances.) Stable-Tec’s mighty Stable doors are guaranteed to protect you and your family.”

Wow.

Velvet Remedy stifled a giggle. Before I could stop myself, I whispered "Velvet Remedy's barn door doesn't swing that way." I gasped and quickly corrected myself, "I meant, Stable Two's." Too late. The charcoal-coated unicorn with the scarlet and gold streaks in her white mane was fixing me with a stare that told me I wouldn't be hearing the last of this for a long, uncomfortable time. Dammit, sometimes I hated my mother. Not that my slip-of-the-tongue was really her fault... but it was her fault.

"Still thinking of that dark, cramped cellar that you feared would be your family's home? Let the magical light of S.A.S. technology burn those fears away! Through the magical power of your Stable's appointed Overmare, each Stable will enjoy fully realistic sunlight even underground, with all the warmth and joy it brings," Sweetie Belle's voice boasted. "And at night, a softer light will fill the halls, provided through enduring earth pony technology."

So far, the most accurate part of the exhibit was the hall lighting with it's ever-present, high-pitched whine. Of course this "night-time lighting" had been sixteen hours a day, every day, all the time. The realistic sunlight promised through the Overmare had been reserved for the underground apple orchard. And based on the color and taste of the things we had called apples, I had my doubts about how "fully realistic" it was.

"Concerned about security? Fear not. Each Stable is supplied with a security level and a fully-stocked armory. Our 'Friendly Pie' camera system allows the Overmare to keep an eye on every pony in public areas, without prying into your private affairs," Sweetie Belle's disembodied voice seemed especially pleased with this feature. "We here at Stable-Tec believe in returning your life to the level of respectful privacy that you deserve without compromising your safety."

We began to trudge through the bizarre mock-Stable. Its layout was nothing like the real thing, designed more like an amusement park ride than a functional shelter. Every few yards we would pass a large window. As our leader approached, lights would flicker on inside

eternally sealed rooms where mannequins would play out scenes of utopian underground life. With each room we passed, Sweetie Belle's ghost would regale us with some other aspect of how wonderful and safe living in a Stable would be.

After the other Stables I had been in, I found that this was creeping me out. I couldn't stop thinking about how so many Stables had apparently turned into lethal traps, very not like these promises. Somehow, the reaction I saw on Calamity's face made it even worse.

"Here at Stable-Tec, we have taken the time to think of everything. We know that, in the event of the worst kind of megaspell cataclysm, it may take Equestria not months but decades to recover. Those of us who choose to survive the destruction may have to live most of the rest of our lives underground and see a new generation born without knowing the world outside. So each Stable includes a Stable-Tec Apple Orchard, providing not only more than enough food for a growing underground community, but complete with grass for your children's hooves and mist fountains to simulate rainbows, run off one of our patented S.A.S. water talismans."

Did other Stables run out of food? Stable Two's Apple Orchard was, simply put, vast. Which may explain why the rest of the Stable never enjoyed magical sunlight. Did Stable-Tec actually design the other Stables with orchards that could only support a generation or two of growth? Or was Sweetie Belle purposefully downplaying the horrors that she and her two friends anticipated?

"Of course, we all hope and pray that these Stables will never be needed. But can any of us afford to take that gamble and not seek a place of safety and joy for our loved ones and ourselves?"

Velvet Remedy seemed on the verge of tears at the parting words of her ancestor whom we both knew had become the first Overmare of Stable Two -- the Stable whose special purpose was to keep us down there, safe, forever.

Or, I knew, until Spike could find the right ponies to cast *Gardens of Equestria*.

“Ah can’t believe you lived yer whole lives in a place like that,” Calamity said as we walked up the steps that lead out of the exhibit. “Ah mean, one that actually worked. This... explains so much.”

I opened my mouth, but couldn’t find words. Only a little squeak escaped.

“We here at Stable-Tec hope you’ve enjoyed the tour today. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask at the lobby desk. One of our friendly staff would love to tell you everything you need to know.”



We were made to wait in the long hall of rotting wood paneling outside Elder Blueberry Sabre’s office, under the watchful glares of armor-encased ponies, as SteelHooves spoke with the Elder in private.

I tried to engage Poppyseed in conversation. That worked until I misstepped by asking what she thought of the Steel Ranger’s Oath, wondering whether she felt the same way as Knight Buck had about following Applejack’s principles. What I learned instead was that talking of the Oath to outsiders (or ‘tribals’ as she called us) was forbidden. After that, she ignored all my further efforts to chat. I couldn’t tell if it was because I had deeply offended the knight, or because there were other Steel Rangers watching.

I contemplated trying to eavesdrop, but then realized the guards wouldn’t let me close enough to the door. And I wasn’t entirely sure I wanted to know what was being said. I was sure there were some elements of the conversation that I would do well to hear, particularly anything regarding us or SteelHooves’ mission. But there was probably more than a bit of discussion about internal politics and current affairs within the Steel Rangers. Such things were none of my business; and after entering one of SteelHooves’ memories without permission, I didn’t want to stick my hoof into his affairs uninvited so soon again.

Furthermore, I found that I really didn’t want to know. The Steel Rangers were... distasteful.

SteelHooves was a Steel Ranger. Not just a former member who still wore the armor because (for some reason I didn't quite understand) he couldn't remove it, but a current and still active part of the organization. A Star Paladin at that. Which, although I didn't quite know what that meant, sounded impressive.

Between this side-trip and the memories in his memory orbs, I was beginning to learn a lot about my newest companion. (Well, newest *four-hooved* companion.) And I found I could accept most of it, although not always easily. I felt I could trust him... within certain parameters... and call him a friend. But I did not envy his karma, and I was apprehensive about where his loyalties would fall if the hooves met the apple tree.

Learning about him had also meant learning about the Steel Rangers. I was interested in them as they connected to SteelHooves... and to Applejack, a mare in that special circle of friends whom Spike had personally known and whom I had grown to care about regardless of the centuries between us. The notion of defenders still sworn to the values of Applejack was like a light in the sea of darkness that the Equestrian Wasteland often seemed to be.

But the Steel Rangers themselves, or at least a great many of them, struck me as little better than well-equipped, more principled raiders. They didn't go about raping and torturing. No bodies hung mutilated from their walls. But they had no compunction about just sitting back and letting ponies suffer and starve and die when they had the technology to do some good. They were like Spike, only without the noble and self-sacrificing reason that justified their actions.

I frowned and turned my thoughts away from internal contemplation and back into the hallway. Having decided not to eavesdrop, I slipped my earbloom into one ear and tuned my PipBuck back into the Fillydelphia broadcast. But instead of Red Eye, I got another iteration of "March of the Parasprites". I looked towards my friends. Velvet Remedy and Calamity were sitting together, occasionally casting furtive glances at the door to Blueberry Sabre's office, as Velvet helped divorce

Calamity from the more egregious misconceptions of Stable life that the tour had planted.

I contemplated joining the conversation, but I had missed a fair part of it, and both Poppyseed and the guards seemed more interested in them than me. So instead I sat, growing restless (bored). I stared at the pictures on the walls, tattered and age-darkened oil paintings of buildings. I recognized one of them, barely, as the Red Racer factory.

I got up and started to walk the hall, giving the paintings a closer examination. There were pedestals as well, set at regular intervals, each holding a small architectural model. Most of the models had collapsed, overcome by the weight of at least twenty decades. But a few were still standing, mostly intact -- an amazing testament to the model builder.

When Stable-Tec built something, they built it to last.

I was just about to pull the earbloom from my ear when the current song ended (something both patriotic-sounding and yet heavy on the use of an oboe), and Red Eye's voice spoke into my ear.

"My friends, let me share with you a secret, just between you and me. I was not always like this. No, once I was a young colt, irresponsible and carefree. I did not understand the need to toil, to labor. Nor should I have. For I was but a child, and childhood is the time for innocence. For exploration. For happiness and growth.

"I was lucky, fortunate beyond my deserving, to be blessed with safe places to roam, security from the fiends and horrors of the Equestrian Wasteland, and companionship in the form of my beloved dog, Winter. Oh, the adventures we had.

"Sounds beautiful, doesn't it. A time of peace and joy that I can return to in my mind at the end of the day after the Equestrian Wasteland has thrown at me the worst of its horrors and despair. Between the visions of my peaceful past and our gloriously bright future, I find the strength to go on, no matter how hard the path or heavy the load.

“But... my childhood, picturesque and ideal and safe... is that what your own children enjoy? Tell me, Equestrian Wasteland, how many of our children today are truly happy? Truly carefree?”

“Sadly, we both know the answer. None. Today, Equestria is a hard, miserable, unforgiving place. Our colts and fillies live with fear, violence, rape and death. The bleak and poisoned world offers our children only meaningless struggle and, all too often, a cruel and terrifying end. There is no joy out there, no hope.

“No more! This ends here. This ends now. One day, yes, the New Equestria we are building will offer them that same utopian security that I once enjoyed... but we cannot wait for that while our children suffer. The leaders of our past may have forgotten how much each colt, each filly, is to be cherished when they unleashed their arrogant wrath upon our world, but we who have lived through hell know better. And we will not wait another day.

“As those living within lands already being reclaimed know, our nation’s young ones are, and have always been, my highest priority. All that we sacrifice, we do for them, to give them a better place. And in the meantime, we strive to give them what safety and security our hooves can offer.

“And more than that, dear friends. Oh, much more. We provide schools where they can learn, medical centers where they will obtain free treatment -- the best medical care in all of Equestria, and homes where they can live together with other children, making friends, all under the watchful care of loving, approved mares and stallions.

“Soon, the armies of the Children of Unity will come to your town. Not as an invading army, oh no. But as an army of engineers and teachers and doctors. They will rebuild your schools, establish hospitals that will provide the best care in this ruined and tortured nation, and bring to you the Words of the Goddess, so that you too may know Unity.

“And once again, our children will be able to play.”

The door to Blueberry Sabre’s office opened. SteelHooves took a step out.

“Littlepip, could you come in here for a moment?”



Elder Blueberry Sabre was the first Steel Ranger I had actually laid eyes on. She was a rather pretty older mare. I suspected that, when she was closer to my age (or even Velvet's), she must have been quite cute. She had a pleasant blue coat and her mane and tail had once been a berry purple before it turned mostly silver-grey. There were still a few wisps of the original color. I couldn't see her cutie mark; her robes concealed a modest portion of her body.

SteelHooves guided me in, closing the door behind him with his metal-sheathed tail. Blueberry Sabre stood in front of me beside a heavy iron table whose interlaced frontal design reminded me oddly of scaffolding. She had one hoof up on the table, although with a closer glance I could see that her hoof was not actually touching the metal surface. Trapped between hoof and desk was the round black ball of a memory orb.

“Littlepip,” SteelHooves said, his voice oddly strained. “I need you to look into that orb and tell me what is inside there.”

I looked at him, puzzled. Then at the Steel Ranger Elder. She nodded with a smirk that looked ugly on what should have been a pretty face.

“All right,” I said, approaching slowly. I was a little surprised at my own hesitation. Something in the room just felt off. Still, I did as SteelHooves asked, lowering my horn towards the orb and focusing. I felt the odd washing sensation as reality slipped. Part of me panicked, suddenly thinking that they were incapacitating me. A memory of my own -- that of Velvet Remedy shooting me with my own dart gun -- flashed through my head.

And then I was no longer with them.



The first sense I gained was smell. Even before I could see the barn, I could smell the rich scent of hay, overlaid with other, less pleasant,

earthy odors. Sight came next. I wanted to blink as dazzling sunlight, beautiful and pure, filtered into the barn through an open hayloft. Then came touch. First the touch of the cloak I was wearing, a rough but not unpleasant cloth. Then...

I felt odd.

The body I was in was different... but I couldn't really put my finger on how. I had been in earth ponies before; the lack of a horn was no longer startling to me. And the body was less alien than that of a horny male, much less my exceptionally freaky experience as Spike. But I still felt wrong somehow. And it was like an itch that wouldn't go away.

My host was standing in a bed of hay, watching as two familiar mares walked into the barn. They ambled right past me without so much as a glance.

"Now what's this ya wanted t' talk about, Rarity, that we needed t' hide out in the barn fer?"

"Well," the elegant white unicorn said, looking at her freckled friend with the frazzled blonde mane, "Rainbow Dash said that last week at the Summer Sun Celebration, she came on to you, and you didn't mind..."

I wanted to snicker. Rarity had managed to strike a perfect tone between gossip and suggestiveness. Yet I could tell, without a doubt, that she was only playing with the orange mare with the three-apple cutie mark. Call it intuition, but I just knew that Rarity only had eyes for the stallions. And that made Applejack's expression all the funnier.

"Oh hay no!" Applejack nearly shouted, backpedaling. "Gauldangit, not you too! Rainbow Dash was drunk. Again. An' I told 'er..."

I really wished my host would laugh, because it was hard to be in stitches when your body wouldn't cooperate. But in the very least, I could tell Applesnack that whatever he had been afraid I might find in here was rubbish.

Applejack regained her composure as Rarity fluttered her eyes but failed to stifle a ladylike snicker quite fast enough.

“Oh for the love’a...” Applejack stomped. “Didja drag me all the way back here jus’ t’ mess w’ me.” She put a hoof to her freckled face. “Aw hell... did Rainbow Dash put ya up to this? This is one of her practical jokes, ain’t it?”

“Actually... well yes,” Rarity admitted. “It was her idea...”

“Ah knew it!” Applejack huffed, stomping again.

“...but I really do have something I need to talk to you about,” the graceful unicorn said, abruptly turning quite serious.

Applejack could tell the mood had changed. Fun, even that at her expense, was over. “What is it?”

“I’ve... come across some new magic,” Rarity said cautiously. “Zebra magic.” She stopped, measuring the country mare’s reaction.

“Ya mean, like the things Zecora used t’ brew?”

“Not exactly, no.” Rarity lowered her voice. “Have you ever heard of a soul jar?”

Applejack stared at her purple-maned friend. “No. An’ Ah ain’t sure Ah want to.”

But Rarity wasn’t ready to stop. “A soul jar is an item... it can be any item really, it doesn’t actually have to be a jar... that you put a soul into.”

Applejack looked taken aback, but the unicorn continued. It was as if, now that she had started talking, she couldn’t stop until it was all out. “Putting a soul into a soul jar *changes* the object. It becomes effectively indestructible, for one. And you can use the soul to hang other enchantments on...” The unicorn stopped at a thought, then added, “It becomes a foundation. Not unlike a megaspell framework, I suppose.”

“Rarity!” Applejack gasped. “What the hell has gotten into you, girl! Where did you even get this magic? This is...” The orange mare’s voice lowered to a hiss. “This is *necromancy*!”

Rarity looked to her friend and nodded, her own eyes wide. “I know.” Then, in answer, “It’s from a zebra book called *The Black Book*.” Again she paused, thinking, “Well, the *Black Book* of... something I can’t pronounce. A name, but it doesn’t have vowels in the places it ought to. It has all manner of extremely icky things in it. Soul jars. Bypass Spells. Magic to tear souls apart...”

With each word, Applejack’s expression became more horrified. Rarity seemed not to quite notice. She gave a smirk like she was revealing a particularly juicy bit of gossip, “If you buy into the more colorful background of the book, they say that it was written by a mad zebra alchemist who communicated with the stars through dreams.”

“Who is ‘they’?” Applejack asked, but never got an answer.

“Now, I know all of this is perfectly dreadful, and my first instinct was to burn the book and be rid of it,” Rarity said. For the first time since the conversation turned dire, Applejack looked a little relieved. That relief was short lived.

“But the top magician in my Ministry says that he ought to be able to take that soul-shredding magic and rework it, turning it into a precision spell that would allow him to cut off just a small portion of a pony’s soul. Enough to create a soul jar without doing any real damage to the subject of the spell.”

“And... why would you want to do that?”

“Think of it, Applejack! What soldier wouldn’t be willing to give up just a small bit of her soul to be put into her own armor, making it completely impervious to *any* bullet? Any weapon?” Rarity was positively glowing in the rapture of her Idea. “And it wouldn’t have to be those ugly metal things your Ministry has been working on. We could make perfect, impenetrable armor out of dresses. Beautiful dresses!”

Applejack was reeling.

“And not only would our soldiers look absolutely fabulous, and be immune to the weapons of the enemy,” Rarity continued, “They

wouldn't be weighed down, encumbered. Until now, armored barding has always come at the price of mobility, but now..."

"Rarity?"

The unicorn stopped, putting her hooves on Applejack's shoulders. "Applejack, just think. None of our family would have to die in battle anymore. If Big Macintosh had..."

"NO!"

Rarity dropped back, stunned by Applejack's sudden outburst. But the orange earth pony wasn't done. She advanced on her friend, jabbing a hoof at her breast. "*Don't you dare bring my brother into this **blackness!***"

Rarity gasped, eyes wide.

"This talk stops now!" Applejack demanded. "Ah don't wanna hear another word. This is... vile. No soldier would give what yer suggestin'. An' even if they were willin', how could we let 'em? Some prices are just too high! Don't ya think, if there weren't horrific consequences t' playin' wi' these things, we'd already be facin' zebras with impenetrable armor? Or bullets what could shoot through anything? Or worse?"

"I..." Rarity stopped. She turned her gaze away from Applejack, a flush of embarrassment on her cheeks. "Oh... you're *so* right. I... I don't know what I was thinking!"

Applejack let out breath in deep relief. "It's okay, sugercube. Ya got wrapped up in a notion an' didn't really think it through. Happens t' alla us now an' again."

The unicorn looked up to Applejack, smiling weakly. "Well, then... I'm lucky I have a good friend who can slap me out of it."

Applejack gave a chuckle. "No harm done then. Now Ah want ya t' go back t' Canterlot and continue workin' on your designs. Ya have a heap o' work on yer plate as it is. An' neither o' us will mention this ever again."

"Like it never happened," Rarity said, genuine thankfulness in her voice.

“Like it ne’er happened,” Applejack agreed.

Rarity and Applejack embraced each other in a hug. Then the unicorn slipped elegantly away and started back for the barn door.

“Hey,” Applejack called out. Her friend stopped, looking back. “An’ when ya get back, burn that book. Or better yet, have somepony else do it fer ya,” the orange pony suggested. “Ah get the suspicion that even readin’ it was messin’ with yer head.”

Rarity lifted a hoof to her chin in thought, then nodded. “Yes, I do think you are right, Applejack.” She gave a lady-like frown. “That book is *dangerous*.”

Applejack watched Rarity push the barn door open with a hoof and walk out. Finally, my host moved, stepping lightly so as not to make any noise, following the beautiful white unicorn.

“Hey!” Applejack called again, galloping past me fast enough to make my cloak flutter. She stopped at the door, calling out, “An’ fer whatever nonsense Rainbow Dash put ya up to, that hug does *not* count!”



I was back. Back in my own body, and back in the presence of SteelHooves and Blueberry Sabre, both high-ranking members of the Steel Rangers. The wearers of those “ugly metal things” Applejack had gone ahead and designed. Gears were starting to move in my head again. The pony in my brain was busy shoving puzzle pieces into place. And the first one that clicked was the memory of Applejack and Rarity talking in Spike’s memory:

“Ah sure hope this ain’t nothin’ t’ do with... that... thing we never talked about.”

“Oh no, darling. I gave that project up ages ago.”

SteelHooves interrupted my mental puzzle-solving with an uncharacteristic tone. “Well. What was the memory?”

I blinked. I was no longer thinking that the issue was Applejack's fidelity, which should never have been in question. But I was at a loss as for what had SteelHooves on edge. Clearly, Applejack had talked her friend away from that horrifying course. Otherwise, such perfect armors would be still around today.

"It was... a conversation," I offered, my brain working to figure out how to pull the information I wanted out of them. "Between the mares of the Ministry of Technology and the Ministry of Image." I wondered if I should have called it the Ministry of Wartime Technology, but it was too late to change my wording.

"It was a long conversation about several things, most of them trivial," I said, not exactly dishonestly. "What specifically were you looking for?"

SteelHooves shook his head. "Telling you would bias your answer."

Elder Blueberry Sabre snorted. "Well, if you won't, I have no problem telling her." The elderly mare smiled at me. "Tell him that this memory proves the values of the Ministry Mare he so stubbornly clings to are a fiction. This memory proves that she didn't really care about the lives of the soldiers, but only about advancing her own designs. And when some other pony came up with a much, much better armor design, she made sure it never saw the light of day."

Oh. That's what this was about.

I blinked, feeling angry now. *That's* what this was about? Of all the much, much worse things in that memory, the Elder of the Steel Rangers was focused on *this*? I about spit my bit.

Standing up as tall as my little frame would allow, I huffed, "How about I tell you what I *didn't* see in that memory?"

Blueberry Sabre blinked in surprise. SteelHooves took a tentative step towards me.

"What I didn't see was my host!" From the blank look in the Elder's eyes, I realized I was using terms I had come up with myself. I had no idea what the proper term for a memory's host was. Not that it mattered. The Elder was an earth pony. She couldn't see into a memory

orb without a recollector anyway. It seemed increasingly likely that she had never actually seen the memory herself, or that she had many years ago and lacked a clear recollection of its contents.

So I tried again, keeping my anger at this nonsense tightly under control. “I didn’t see the pony whose memory it was. Not even a forehoof. And while that’s not entirely unusual, I’m quite certain that the two Ministry Mares couldn’t see her either. I don’t think they would have had that conversation if they knew somepony else was present.”

Both the Elder and SteelHooves were still for at least a moment, actually paying attention.

“What I saw in there was that somepony was spying on the Ministry Mares. Invisible.” I remembered the itchy strangeness. “And I don’t think it was even a pony. I’m pretty sure I just shared the memory of a zebra.”

Another puzzle piece slotted into my head. I lifted my PipBuck, saying, “I found this in the rubble of a recruitment center out near the Shattered Hoof facility.” I played back the old recording, removing the earbloom attachment so that both of them could hear:

*“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.”*



What followed the recording was much discussion; but in the end, the only thing resolved was that I had gotten at least a bit of the Elder’s trust while managing sidetrack both of them from their earlier argument.

It was over an hour later when Elder Blueberry Sabre got up and trotted to the window, staring out at the angry red glow coming from the walled-off portion of Fillydelphia.

"If you're going in there, you won't be able to do it like that," she said. "Not with armor and an arsenal and a squad of companions."

"Why not?" I asked. "I'm not worried about getting past the wall. I can just float us over when there is a gap in the patrols." That was, at least, my plan.

"Because," Blueberry Sabre turned to me, "You will never get close to Red Eye that way. He's always protected. In the very least by a flock of griffins if not by a wing of those damned alicorns. The first sign of trouble, and he'll hop his sky chariot and leave the city. You'll lose any chance you have of taking him down before you even know it."

Damn. I was confident of being able to sneak close until she mentioned the alicorns. I should have figured this couldn't be so easy. But I was damned if I would just give up and go home. Not after the fresh reminder of what these slavers were doing to innocent ponies.

"I can help you," the Elder offered. "If you agree to help me in return."

Oh. This was going to be one of *those* days.

The Elder laid it out for me. She could get me and maybe one of my companions into the walled section of the city... stripped of our possessions and dressed in the rags of slaves. I'd have to work my way to him from there, preferably by gaining his trust rather than by body count. The latter method was likely to backfire for the same reason a covert assault would.

"You may have more to fear from the inmates than the guards," Blueberry Sabre noted. "Red Eye's armies have started rounding up raiders and putting them to work as slaves along with the rest. Some of the ponies you'll be stuck with in there are exceptionally nasty refuse."

This plan just kept getting better.

"And what do you want from me in return?" I asked finally.

“Two things.” Blueberry Sabre walked round the office as she spoke. “First, Red Eye has managed to develop some sort of engine fueled by radiation. He’s been having the slaves mine the Fillydelphia Crater itself for irradiated debris, which he can turn into usable energy to run his factories.”

SteelHooves nickered, “Well, that’s a game-changer.” Red Eye’s claims of building a New Equestria, at least on an infrastructural level, suddenly gained a lot more authenticity.

“Indeed,” Blueberry Sabre agreed. She turned to me. “I want the plans for that engine.”

Okay. Plans for a Radiation Engine. That was one. “And number two?”

The Steel Ranger Elder frowned even more deeply. “Our intelligence states that Red Eye has gotten ahold of research into something called a Bypass Spell.”

I felt a jolt. I had heard of that sort of magic not two hours ago, and not in a pleasant context.

“I want you to find his research on Bypass Spells. Confiscate what you can. Destroy the rest.” The Elder stomped both her forehooves. “Thoroughly obliterate it.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Since when is the Ministry of Wartime Technology interested in spell research?”

SteelHooves stepped in. “Since it’s a matter of survival.” He explained, “The zebras created Bypass Enchantments midway through the war. A Bypass augments another magical effect, allowing it to ignore one specific type of thing. The zebras, for instance, used it to create balefire bursts... the much smaller version of the megaspell you are familiar with... with a zebra bypass. With that, a zebra could trot into an area crowded with ponies, set off the blast, and kill everypony within a block or two without being harmed herself.”

The mental image of an invisible zebra walking into a crowded Stable atrium during one of Velvet Remedy’s performances suddenly lodged in my mind and refused to leave.

"The unicorns of the Ministry of Arcane Sciences failed to crack the enchantment before the megaspells fell," Blueberry Sabre informed me. "But it's impossible to know how close they were. And thus how close Red Eye is. I think, however, that you can grasp why it is in everypony's best interest that Red Eye is not allowed to finish this research."

I nodded, now imagining spells with an alicorn bypass. By the Goddesses!

"So," the Elder asked, "Do you agree to my offer?"

As much as I hated to, I didn't see another way. Not now, now that simply killing Red Eye wasn't enough.



"This is a *stupid* plan."

I sighed, looking at my friends. "Almost definitely, but it's the plan we've got."

"Ah ain't lettin' ya go in there alone!" Calamity insisted. "Especially unarmed!"

I smiled at his loyalty. "I won't be totally unarmed," I assured him. "They won't be taking my horn. And they can't take my PipBuck either." Instead, we would be wrapping my forelegs in bulky rags to hide its presence.

"Why do you have to go alone?" Velvet Remedy asked, almost pleading. If anything, she seemed to like this plan even less than Calamity.

"Because..." Because I don't want the damn slavers to get their hooves on you. You're gorgeous. And in there, beautiful is a really bad thing to be. "I need you out here. You're a non-combatant, and that place is full of enslaved raiders." Please, please don't make me explain further!

Velvet Remedy scowled, clearly hating every word, but said nothing more.

"One o' us needs t' be with ya!" Calamity demanded. "Why not me?"

At least with Calamity I felt comfortable with a direct answer. “Two reasons,” I said, feeling bizarrely like Blueberry Sabre for a moment. “First, because you are a pegasus. And Luna only knows what they would do with a pegasus. You folk aren’t exactly a common prize down here.” I pressed my lips together in chagrin. “I don’t think we’d be able to stay together past the gate.”

Calamity was not at all satisfied. “Ah don’t care. Let ‘em try t’ do what they think Ah’ll let ‘em get away with. Ah’m not abandonin’ ya cuz o’ that!”

I had expected that, but I still felt a wave of genuine gratitude. But before I could move on to my second reason, Velvet Remedy interrupted.

“How about SteelHooves?”

“I can’t go,” SteelHooves said simply. “A Steel Ranger is a bit... conspicuous.”

Velvet sighed with exasperation. “We all know you’re a ghoul now. You don’t have to hide in your armor. You can take it off.”

“No. I can’t.”

Calamity cocked his head, giving SteelHooves a querying look.

“Why not?” Velvet Remedy pushed.

“Because my body is fused into it,” was the ghoul’s answer, eliciting several gasps (one of which was from me).

“Oh!” Calamity took a few steps back. “Yer *that* kinda ghoul!”

Wait... there are types of ghouls now? Other than ghoul-pony and zombie-pony?

Velvet Remedy looked equally surprised by Calamity’s reaction. “What kind of ghoul?”

“He’s a *Canterlot* Ghoul.”

SteelHooves nodded. Velvet Remedy and I were still in the dark.

“Would somepony care to explain?”

No more secrets.



Ponies who suffered massive amounts of magical radiation and survived were forced to endure the cruel deterioration of becoming a ghoul-pony. Since the zebras had employed different kinds of megaspells, it only stood to reason that there were minor differences in the effects. In most cases, these differences were barely recognizable except between the ghoul-ponies themselves. But Canterlot ghoul-ponies were an entirely different sort. Because the megaspell unleashed in Canterlot was unlike any other.

“When the bombs started to fall,” SteelHooves told us, “Princess Luna threw up a magical shield over the entire city. Canterlot was bombarded by hundreds of missile strikes. None of them were megaspells, like the missiles which hit Cloudsdale or Fillydelphia, but they would have been devastating all the same had they struck home. But the Princess kept the shield up.”

Velvet Remedy and I sat, listening, almost entranced. Calamity paced off to the side fretfully.

“I was stationed in one of the hamlets that surrounded the city, just outside the perimeter of the shield. My squad’s orders were to evacuate the hamlets, getting as many of the ponies to shelters or Stables as we could. The blast-wash from those missiles exploding against the shield wiped out hundreds in the first few minutes. The bombardment lasted hours.”

SteelHooves took a deep, trembling breath and pressed on. Even hidden in his armor, I could tell he was shaken. Although at the time I thought it was by the memory of those deaths. I would realize later it was because of what happened next.

"Applejack was with me. But when strikes started, she fled back to Ponyville, leaving us to do our work while she tried to ensure all her family got safely into Stable Two."

I suddenly wondered if Applejack herself had made it. Had she been in Stable Two when it closed? I saw Velvet Remedy glancing at me and suspected she was wondering the same thing.

"But the missile strikes were just part of the zebra's ploy. The megaspell was already in the city. A special one... after all, this one was meant to kill Luna and Celestia, not just three-quarters of a million ponies."

"The Pink Cloud," Calamity said abruptly, stopping.

"Yes."

Calamity momentarily took over the tale. "The Pink Cloud is... was... a great radioactive cloud of entropic, necromantic gas. Like taint, it didn't care if you had gas masks. Nothing protected against it. Everything it touched, it seeped into and rotted. I've heard horror stories of bodies found partially melded into sidewalks, or with their saddles fused to their bones. Canterlot is still toxic today. The streets and buildings soaked it up like sponges and are slowly releasing it as they decay."

"The zebras wanted the shield," SteelHooves continued. "It kept the Pink Cloud concentrated in the city, strong enough to fatally poison even Celestia and Luna. By the time they comprehended that they were dying, it was too late. But still, they kept up the shield. I'm told they took turns, one powering the shield while the other tried to regain a little strength. That, in the end, they were holding each other for support."

"Why?" I asked, feeling tears forming in my eyes. "Why didn't they just let the shield fail? The city was already doomed! Why didn't they escape?"

"Would you have?" SteelHooves asked simply. "I was still in one of the more remote hamlets when the shield finally came down. The city had

soaked up enough of the Pink Cloud that the exposure wasn't fatal, but..."

Calamity again added to the tale, a tone of disgust in his voice. "By the time Luna and Celestia realized the Pink Cloud was killin' them, the first attack had been hours ago. The pegasi had already closed up the sky. The wind was beginnin' t' go wild."

With a sad flap of his wings, our Dashite friend explained, "If Celestia and Luna had let that spell o' theirs drop, they probably woulda survived... 'though most likely at only a fraction o' their former selves. But a whole heap o' other ponies woulda been doomed as the uncontrolled winds blew Pink Cloud out over all them evacuating hamlets, over farms... t'would 'ave destroyed all life far as Ponyville. Maybe farther."

Mournfully, he informed us, "Ah'm so sorry. T' both of ya. Ah really am. But... Luna and Celestia ain't Goddesses watchin' ya from the heavens like yer Stable teacher taught ya. The Princesses gave their lives so's that yer ancestors could make it inta that Stable and live."



It was a long time before Velvet Remedy and I were ready to talk again. For a while, we just moved away from the others, found a corner by ourselves, and held each other in silence.

In that time, I decided that I was damn well going to keep praying to Celestia and Luna anyway. It didn't matter if the accounts didn't match my beliefs. I still believed in my heart that somehow, Luna and Celestia were up there. Watching us. Caring about us. Giving us guidance.

I just didn't know if what I believed was true. I realized it probably wasn't. But I could choose to believe anyway.

Finally, we gathered together again for round two of everypony not going into Fillydelphia with me. I have to admit, with my faith shaken, I no longer felt as confident. But I plowed on anyway.

“Second,” I told Calamity, picking up where we had left off, “You’re a pegasus.”

“uh, Li’lpip? Ah think that was the first one.”

“Well, it’s also the second one. Because you’re my escape route. My lifeline. No pony else can swoop in and rescue me if things go bad. I need you out here so you can do that.”

Calamity frowned but seemed to find that more palatable. “Wait!” He looked at me like I was trying to dupe him. “How the hell am Ah s’posed t’ know when yer in trouble, or where t’ find ya, if Ah’m out here an’ yer in there?”

Fortunately, I already had this planned out. “These slavers, at least the rank and file, don’t seem to be the most educated lot. I’m pretty sure they wouldn’t be able to tell where my PipBuck ends and a peripheral begins. So I’m confident I can get in with a slotted attachment.” I smiled. “That means either a StealthBuck or the broadcaster we got from the griffins.”

I floated out both. “I’ll take the broadcaster. You take the StealthBuck. SteelHooves can activate it for you when...”

“Ah know how t’use a StealthBuck,” Calamity interrupted, holding up a hoof to the device. “So, how do Ah get yer call, genius girl. Case ya missed it, Ah don’t have one of them PipBucks of muh own.”

I grinned as I next floated out Velvet Remedy’s custom PipBuck, still in my saddlebags after all these weeks of travel. Velvet Remedy gave me a pained expression.

“Yes, I kept it,” I told her before she could say anything. “And yes, I know you don’t like wearing it. You shouldn’t have to. This is just the backup plan if the main plan fails.”

Calamity raised an eyebrow. “An’ that is?”

Finally, I levitated Homage’s override device out of my saddlebags. “I have a very important mission for all of you to complete while I’m gone.” I looked my companions over and decided that there had never

been a better team assembled for such a job. "I need you to take this to the Fillydelphia Tower and attach it to the maneframe in the base station. Once you do, it will give DJ Pon3 both eyes and voice in Fillydelphia, kicking Red Eye out. And that will free up the receivers in the station to pick up my broadcast."

"Red Eye's almost certainly got some heavy forces guarding that tower," SteelHooves noted. "I expect we'll be in for a battle."

"Then you'll definitely need a medical pony," Velvet Remedy asserted.

Calamity tipped up the brim of his hat. "Well then. Looks like we got ourselves a plan."



"Go ahead," SteelHooves said, holding the last of his four memory orbs out to me on an armored hoof. "You've seen the others. You might as well see the last one before you go."

I didn't think I was ready for another trip into Applesnack's memories. The day had been too much of an emotional maelstrom. I felt weak and fragile, like another gust could cause me to break. I put up a warding hoof, shaking my head.

SteelHooves grunted. "Compared to what you've seen, this one is gentle." He pressed, "You trust me, don't you?"

"To very specific extents," I admitted. "It's not... you and Applejack having sex, is it?"

SteelHooves stared silently. Then he put the orb down, letting it roll towards me on the floor. "You have a dirty mind." He turned and walked out.

I stared at the orb as it rolled to a stop against my right forehoof.



"This isn't fair!"

I recognized the voice of Rainbow Dash almost a full minute before I heard her.

I was SteelHooves. Not Applesnack this time, not with the heavy armor pressing all around me. My vision beyond the inside of the helmet was limited to the view out my visor, but I was graced with an exceptionally complex and sophisticated Eyes-Forward Sparkle. Within the helmet, I seemed to have access to everything my E.F.S. and PipBuck provided... and more.

Breathing inside the armor was unpleasant. My muzzle was pressed into a rebreather. The air was cool and fresh, likely supplied by a minor air talisman, but the mouthpiece was simply uncomfortable.

The armor itself was bulky and weighed down on me, but I felt strong. Stronger than in any memory I had experienced before. The weight, however heavy, felt no more taxing than carrying a light pack.

My hoofsteps were heavy, like my hooves were... well, encased in steel armor exactly as they were. It was, all in all, an enlightening look into SteelHooves' existence. And while I could see the advantages, I did not envy him for it.

I trod down a hallway, focused on the wooden double doors at the end. This, I guessed, was an office building of some sort. Not, mercifully, a battlefield. There seemed to be no imminent threats.

I felt myself raise an armored hoof and push open the door with measured gentleness.

Inside was a barely-furnished office that looked almost unused. A few shelves and a desk. And this was where Rainbow Dash and Applejack seemed to be having an argument. Applejack was standing behind the desk, dressed in a suit that she looked distinctly uncomfortable in. Rainbow Dash, on the other hoof, was wearing that same purple and black uniform I had seen her in earlier today and years ago. Or, rather, a pristine new version of the same basic design. It had a jagged yellow neckline and a skull-shaped cloud on the flank shooting a rainbow-colored lightning bolt, covering where Dash's actual cutie mark would be.

Both mares turned to look at me. Applejack nodded, giving SteelHooves a smile of gratitude. Rainbow Dash only seemed to size up the metal warrior, clearly unable to recognize the pony beneath. I recalled that the pegasus wouldn't learn about Applejack and Applesnack until a party that, I suspected, was still a year or two away. Her attention returned to her orange-coated friend.

"It's just not right!" the blue pegasus spat with righteous indignation. "The Ministry of Awesome is putting up almost fifty towers -- as tall as the clouds -- all over Equestria and here you are having to sell Sweet Apple Acres just to get a suit of armor built? How does that make sense?"

Okay, maybe not an argument.

"That's cuz buildin' those towers is all y'all seem t' be doin'," Applejack explained patiently. "Meanwhile, muh Ministry is helpin' fund over four dozen industries, givin' them the subsidies they need t' keep runnin' until they c'n pull a solid profit. An' next year, there'll be twelve more."

Rainbow Dash gaped. Then cocked her head. "Don't you sometimes think the Ministry of Technology is a little *too* successful?"

Applejack nudged her cowpony hat and smiled.

"No, seriously," the blue pegasus claimed, spreading her wings. "It's gotten so sometimes I can't even recognize Equestria anymore."

The orange pony with the graying blond mane gave her friend a look. I hadn't noticed the grey in the other memories, although the difference in age was at best a few years. I realized with amusement that, at some point, Applejack had started dying her hair. I wondered if, at that age, I'd feel the urge to. But then, I'd be a lucky mare to live that long in the Equestrian Wasteland.

"For example, do you really need all those roads?" the rainbow-maned pegasus asked.

"Some 'o us ain't got wings, remember."

There was a clomp at the door. SteelHooves trotted to Applejack's side like a bodyguard. Rainbow Dash scowled but moved to the side.

"Come on in!" Applejack called out.

The door pushed open and Apple Bloom walked into the room. She was beautifully groomed and wore a business dress of mahogany and rose that went well with her mane. She looked infinitely more comfortable in her dress than her older sister did in the suit. There was a business bag strapped to her side.

"Wait..." Rainbow Dash said, looking between the two sisters. "You're selling your farm... to your own sister?"

"Technically," Apple Bloom said in a politely professional voice. "She's sellin' Sweet Apple Acres to Stable-Tec." The younger sister turned her head, pulling open her business bag and pulling out a clipboard with her teeth. She offered it to Applejack, who took the other end, then set it on the desk between them.

"Ah think you'll find everything is just as we promised," Apple Bloom told her sister. I noticed her voice was a touch more urbane than her older sister's, the country accent not as strong.

SteelHooves moved towards Apple Bloom, leaning close and whispering into her ear, "You're not going to plow the place and build a mall, are you?"

"Oh heavens no," Apple Bloom whispered back, looking uncomfortable. Almost... guilty. Her older sister caught the look.

"Hold on. Yer not gonna kick me an' granny off the farm, are ya?"

Apple Bloom looked wounded. "How can you even ask that? Ah'm your sister!"

"Cuz Ah know that look," Applejack said sternly. "An' it's cuz Ah'm yer sister that Ah do. Now spill it."

Apple Bloom sighed, then pulled out a set of blueprints, unfurling them on the desk in front of her older sister and the two (three, really) guests.

“You’ll still have rights to the trees an’ the apples, jus’ like we promised. Stable-Tec is only buyin’ rights to the land. But you’ll have t’ move all these apple trees in this section here. And you won’t be able to use the barn until next spring.”

“What?” Applejack cocked an eyebrow at her younger sister. “Why?”

“Cuz we’re gonna be buildin’ a Stable there.”



Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: A Little Dash - While wearing light armor or no armor, you run 20% faster.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



GENEROUS SOULS

“We stand at the dawn of a new golden age. Where others merely survive, we thrive! And while I have led your efforts, it has been by your own strength... Because, yes, freedom is what we all work towards.”

Alone.

I had given my possessions, even my barding, to Calamity. Knight Poppyseed had brought me soiled, filthy slave cloths to wrap myself in. Thick wrappings had gone around my right foreleg to hide my PipBuck, complete with twigs and bloodstains to suggest my leg had been cruelly wounded. (If anypony asked, I intended to tell them I’d been run through with a piece of rebar.)

Then I had been shackled. (As with the slavers before, Knight Poppyseed had been unable to shackle me properly at the hoof thanks to my PipBuck, so she had locked the manacles above my knees.) I had floated myself into the cage of a slave wagon and bedded down in moldy hay filled with small, itchy bugs. It had taken only minutes to become wretchedly uncomfortable. Between that, and nearly getting fucked in the tail by a giant flaming Pinkie Pie the evening before, I had been deemed to look decently pathetic.

I had been allowed to attach a few bobby pins to my rags, but I would have to hope I could find a screwdriver somewhere on the other side of The Wall.

Then, with worried goodbyes, my companions left me alone. I was to lay there and wait for a member of Red Eye's slavers whom the Steel Rangers had sufficiently bribed (or perhaps ensured the cooperation of in less wholesome ways) to come and get the slave wagon.

I'd forgotten what it felt like to be alone. I had spent my whole previous life alone. I hadn't had any friends growing up; and my mother, as much as I loved her, wasn't the sort of parent a filly could feel "together" with. Alone is cold and dull and miserable. It is a void that aches to be filled. And the little hobbies and distractions that I had turned to had never really filled that hole. Because it was a hole that could only be filled with companionship.

Growing up, the closest I had come to that was music -- the singing on the Stable Two broadcast. At least with music, there was another pony involved who was trying to make a connection. And I could pretend that pony was trying to make a connection specifically with me, not just anypony who was listening. The illusion was never perfect, and it couldn't be held beyond the song. But while the music was playing, the mirage of friendship helped protect me against the cold.

Needless to say, it was the songs of Velvet Remedy which I had cherished the most. I had even fallen in love, I think, with my dream of her. I still remembered the hurt when my ridiculous and unrealistic mental image of her was shattered by the real thing standing in a train car, a non-prisoner in a slaver town. And even then, I think, I still clung to little fragments of my dream-Remedy until the day she shot me.

That said, I wouldn't have traded my very real friendship with the actual pony for anything, much less for a relationship with my two-dimensional daydream. What I had was better. Far better. Because it was real.

When I left Stable Two, my life changed forever. And the most drastic change wasn't the vast open wasteland, or the sickly sunlight that

pushed its way through the clouds. It wasn't the horrors and wickedness and cruelty I had seen, or the daunting amount of pain I had suffered, or even the growing river of pony blood drowning my hooves.

The most drastic change was friendship. And it started just a few days out of the Stable with a pony named Calamity.

Calamity was unlike any pony I had ever met. He was fearless and noble and just in a way that I could only aspire to. And he cared about me in a way nopony, not even my mother, ever did. He was willing to stand by me, even when I was being foolish and wrong. Not that we never disagreed, because we did often enough. But he gave me the benefit of the doubt. He trusted me and he was somepony I knew I could trust in return.

I freely admit that I had been jealous when Calamity and Velvet Remedy had started to gravitate towards each other. (And, in retrospect, I have to wonder: was my conviction that they were a couple already accurate or a self-fulfilling prophesy?) How foalish I was to feel that way. But friendship was and is still new to me, and I had many lessons to learn about it. (And many, many more to go, if the sheer number of Spike's stories are to be believed.)

Only after I had come to accept their closeness, and take comfort in it, was my heart really open enough to embrace Homage. I had friendship, but the void goes deeper than that. I wanted more than companionship. I yearned for love and physical intimacy.

I will also admit that when Homage first opened the possibility, I was drawn to her out of desperation. But that changed. *She* changed that. Likewise, I would not blame a pony for thinking that our relationship had been fast and brief. But while it is true that I had not met her in coat and mane until Tenpony Tower, I had gotten to know much of her before seeing her face-to-face, as she had gotten to know me. In truth, I have known Homage almost as long as I have known Calamity.

True, I had not known her deeply and personally until Tenpony Tower, but who really knows their friends well in the first few weeks? And I can safely say that the connection we had built before meeting

was laid on a solid foundation. I can say this thanks in great part to the honesty that I realize Homage embodies. The Homage that I grew to know as DJ Pon3 was and is the real Homage. Not all of her, granted, and not without trappings. But real all the same.

Homage knows of me at my best, but has also seen me at my worst. And instead of being scared away, she has embraced me and let me in. She has held and comforted me. And she has done so much more, allowing me an intimacy that I had only daydreamed about before, and usually to my private shame. With Homage, I don't feel ashamed.

Having seen the memories of SteelHooves, a melancholy realization had crept into my thoughts. He was the only of my companions who has been in a similar relationship. (Yet... unless Calamity and Velvet Remedy have managed to be up to things with a far greater degree of sneakiness and stealth than I attribute to either of them.) Like me, he had a companion whom he could trust to be open and honest with him. And, like me, he chose to keep things from her. I am quite sure he did not reveal to Applejack the murder he committed. Whereas, in my case, I have kept from Homage... well, another murder SteelHooves committed.

Thinking on these things, I suddenly found the parallel downright creepy.

SteelHooves once told me that I would learn that he wasn't a "better pony" -- which I certainly have seen is true -- just like she did. And while I can only guess at what befell their relationship, I do know that he and Applejack were together the day the bombs fell. I must assume they at least worked at mending any damage his dark secrets had caused. And I also know that, ultimately, she left him. She chose her family over him, and she left him behind.

And he's been living with that abandonment for two hundred years. Alone.

With an aching heart and a sense of unease, I found myself desperately needing to talk to Homage. With any luck, I would be able to do so as soon as my friends had the override installed. I wondered if I would be

able to speak to her just by talking to the air. But from what I had heard, it seemed more likely that I would need to get to the station myself to have real communication with her. Either way, I was determined to come clean. For better or for worse.

Unlike the hobbies and distractions of my lonely youth, friendship really *can* fill the void enough for a pony to be happy. And while I wouldn't normally consider my experiences in the Equestrian Wasteland to be happy ones, I really have been happier out here than I ever was in Stable Two.

Being with friends is a blanket against the cold. A bulwark that makes you stronger. A connection that makes you bigger. Without friends, I was exposed, weak and small.

And, on an unrelated note, itchy.



Chain-link fencing crackled with energy, surrounding a barricaded outer gate. Guards watched with amusement as the slaver pulled my wagon up to The Wall.

"Only one?" a guard mare called out. She was heavily barded and wore a battle saddle bearing four combat shotguns. The sight made me cringe. "A whole wagon for just one? Been slacking, Gnash?"

The slaver pulling my wagon just grunted. I scratched at my neck with a hindhoof and tried not to wince every time the wagon jolted as it rolled over the broken, rocky streets. I unrealistically hoped that slaves were given baths.

"And such a small one too," a guard buck in similar barding called out. I noticed that I couldn't see any weapons on him, save for his horn and hooves. I wondered if that made him less or more dangerous? "If it wasn't a unicorn, I'd say toss it back in the lake."

Itching badly, I really wished I would be tossed in a lake. It occurred to me, however, that this was not the first time a slaver had suggested unicorns were considered an extra-valuable prize. Not entirely

surprising, considering that the unicorns in Stable Two were often expected to go into technical work thanks to the fine manipulation our magic allowed. I wondered what work Red Eye was putting us to. I'd probably find out soon enough.

While quadruple-combat-shotgun-pony kept aim on me, her male counterpart threw a lever, killing the electric crackle of the chain-link fence. He hoofed a button, and a section of the fence began to roll open with considerable clatter. Quadruple-combat-shotgun-pony continued to keep her battle saddle trained on me, a single unicorn pony shackled and caged, as did two snipers hidden within steel bunker towers on either side of The Wall's inner gate. The heads of patrol ponies could be seen walking the parameter of the wall on a raised platform just behind it. Even knowing me, it felt like a ridiculous amount of overkill.

A griffin arced overhead, checking out the latest arrival, and flew away laughing.

"By the you-know-who, Gnash, when I first saw this one, I thought you'd bucked your horseshoes and actually brought in a filly!" the mare snickered, making me feel ever smaller. "I was thinking maybe I ought to blow your head off before Stern got ahold of you."

Gnash, my "chauffeur", merely grunted again.

"What's this?" the guard buck asked, peering in at me. His horn glowed and a jagged, rusty spear jutted between the bars at me. I cringed back. The unicorn frowned at me and tipped the spear so the head of it caught on the blood-soaked wrapping around my PipBuck and pulled it away.

Crap! I wasn't even in the gate and the plan was falling apart.

"Oh," he said with a smiling grunt. "Think you're a clever pony, do you?" He gave me a cruel leer. "Let's see how clever you feel *inside*."

Inside? Did he intend to rape me, I wondered with a shot of panic, or just let me through the gate?

The guard mare shot him a look and then gave a cruel laugh. "Oh please, do it! Hell, here, let me help hold her down!" She gave her

companion an evil smirk, "Fifteen minutes of fun... if that... and you'll be scratching at the haybugs biting your sheath for a week!"

I felt suddenly thankful for the infested hay.

The buck backed up with a fearful look, then scowled at the mare. "You'd really enjoy that, wouldn't you?"

"More than life itself." What a disgusting couple.

"Bah!" He hit the button to close the outer gate and waved a hoof towards the sniper ponies. "Let it through!" He gave me one more look, this one barely containing revulsion. His eyes moved to my PipBuck, now partially visible through the wrappings. "Oh, and tag her to see Doc Slaughter. She's got one of them leg terminals that are a bitch to get off."

For a pony who had been so sorely disappointed that she had a PipBuck for a cutie mark, I was remarkably terrified at the thought I might lose it. As best I could parse the buck's attitude, these slavers had seen PipBuck's before. And had ways to remove them.

The buck threw the lever and the fence around us once again crackled and hummed.

With a rending grind, the huge metal inner gate of The Wall began to lower on massive chains -- a drawbridge, complete with a moat on the inner side of The Wall. My PipBuck began to click urgently as it picked up radiation seeping out of the sludge. The Wall was clearly meant to keep anypony from getting out as much as prevent ponies from getting in.

Beyond, I got my first glimpse of inner city Fillydelphia. Slave masters stood guard over mesh-covered workpits, wearing barding and gas masks, pointing weapons down to where poor ponies labored beyond the point of exhaustion. I couldn't tell what work they were doing, but I could tell they were filthy, sick and trembling.

A chimney rose out of the nearest workpit. Hellish, red-tinted exhaust poured out of it. I gagged on the stench of unwashed ponies and noxious fumes.

A swath of bright yellow and green fluttered around the chimney before perching on a nearby pile of rubble. Pyrelight! She cocked her head at me.

I was not alone.



“Behold!” called out the voice of Red Eye. “We stand on the threshold of a new dawn. With every factory we recover, every mill we rebuild, we move one big step forward towards an Equestria where our children can live in the safety and comfort of modern cities, not grovel in the dilapidated ruins of the past. With the stone and glass and steel forged by these, we can rebuild the homes and towers and lanes of mass transportation that will bestow freedom and prosperity upon generations to come! This, my children, is the very last generation that needs to cringe in caves and scramble for two-hundred-year-old scraps of food.”

The Fillydelphia broadcast poured out of speakers everywhere. The messages and music were non-stop, the constant companion of both slave masters and slaves.

Gnash pulled the wagon past several more workpits before drawing to a stop in what had once been a chariot lot. I coughed. My PipBuck was not shy about informing me that the gas pouring out of the workpit smokestacks was poisonous. The guards had gas masks, but they apparently couldn’t spare any for the slaves. I trembled with anger. The rate of attrition here must be unconscionable.

The lot was full of cage wagons, most of them recently emptied by other wagon-pullers who were amassing slaves in an open area of the pavement. The gate I had come through was not the only one, and I was not the only new arrival.

Gnash opened my cage and stuck his head in, biting on the chain between my shackles and hauling me roughly out. I was dragged into a throng of suffering ponies, each of whom had clearly been through weeks of torment before even getting here.

A large, black griffin in dark-grey Talon barding landed on the roof adjacent to the chariot lot and turned her white-feathered head to scowl at us. Above her head rose a banner that fluttered in the wind: the Red Eye flag. She had a whip curled under one wing and an anti-machine rifle strapped to her back.

"The work is hard, yes," Red Eye's voice continued out of the nearest speaker as the griffin above scanned the miserable group of ponies beneath her. *"But only through the generous gift of our efforts can our children, and our children's children, have a better world. We must selflessly give all we can so that a New Equestria may rise. And that is not an easy thing to ask."*

Honestly, Red Eye, I don't see much *asking* going on.

"Tribals care only about their own small groups, unable or unwilling to view a larger picture. Raiders and Steel Rangers are the epitome of selfishness, caring only for their own base desires and outdated codes, taking what they want from the rest of us and giving nothing back."

"But here, today, and every day, we give back. We create. Where others only know how to tear down, we build! And that, my children, is how we pave the way for..."

One of the other wagon-pullers shouted at us, making many ponies cringe and one actually burst into tears. "Make yourselves presentable, you worthless mules!"

The griffin's expression suddenly turned from something resembling mild contempt to cold anger. She drew the massive anti-machine rifle faster than I would have thought possible. The report of the gun was like the righteous anger of Luna. The wagon-puller was ripped in two, the bullet punching through the asphalt and burying itself deep in the ground.

A few of the ponies screamed. A magenta mare with an orange mane began backpedaling, trying to keep her hooves out of the spreading pool of blood, her terror-stricken face splattered with what looked like part of the dead slaver's stomach lining.

“...We are not animals. We are not zebras. We are ponies! We have a better nature, and a higher calling. We know that the road is hard, and yet we stand and face the challenge. We know that many of us may suffer and perish and never taste the sweet fruits of our labor. But out of generosity and hope, we give of ourselves anyway, so that others may know a better future. Because that future is worth any sacrifice! And yes, the New Equestria does demand sacrifices.”

Okay... but *pony sacrifices*?

Red Eye's speech ended. The music began again, uplifting and regal. The griffin looked not at us, but at the cowering slavers.

“You do **not** interrupt when Red Eye is talking!”

She then turned to us. “My name is Stern,” the griffin stated, looking down on her new slaves. “And this is *my* town.”



“You are workers,” Stern informed us as she paced along the rooftop above. “You work towards the building of a brighter tomorrow, towards the New Equestria which will be populated by the Unity. Your work is the gift that you give to the future. And you can either give it willingly, or Red Eye will give it for you.”

I found myself conflicted. I seethed at the treatment of the slave ponies, which amounted to nothing short of slow and torturous murder. And yet... I understood Red Eye's goal. Maybe not all of it. The whole Unity thing was getting downright creepy. But the progress? The striving to make the world a better place at any cost? The same drive had left me flank-deep in blood, and I was not apologetic for it.

Red Eye will put you to work doing things we probably should be working together towards anyway. (Although by choice and in safer conditions!) Me? I'll put a bullet through your head if you are a raping, murdering blight on ponykind. In both cases, we had decided that ponies who don't choose to live their lives the right way had forfeited their right to live freely, if at all.

There was a difference. There was a line between Red Eye and me. It just wasn't as thick as I would have liked. Even so, it didn't change the pain I was seeing and hearing all around me, and that these horrors had to stop.

"But most of you don't really care about the future, do you? I can see it in your eyes. You don't give a crap about other ponies. You just care about your 'freedom'. Well, then, listen closely, because I'm going to tell you how to free yourselves," Stern said, her voice gruff with disgust and conviction. Part of me wanted to cry out that I did care. But a much stronger part of me listened intently. Unless I could find a screwdriver and an unguarded place to hide, this might be my best chance.

"You earn it!" Of course you do, I thought. But Stern was quick to expound on that concept. "You can toil in the mills and the factories and the workhouses until you drop. Or you can volunteer for more dangerous jobs. Those who do are rewarded. Red Eye is a very generous stallion. He gives you three options."

The griffin held up three razor-sharp talons and began ticking them down. "You can choose to work on a Stable Recovery Team. There are a lot of Stables in the Fillydelphia area, each rich in resources. But Stables tend to be dangerous. They often have their own security or their own... unique dangers."

I shuddered, feeling a fresh wave of fury.

The griffin scowled. "And of course there are the Steel Rangers, who are also after the same prizes. And before you start getting any wrong ideas, let me warn you: the Steel Rangers have adopted a slaughter first attitude towards anyone that stands in their way of reclaiming old Stable-Tec property for themselves. They will slaughter you just as quickly as they will slaughter us. And in those rare cases where the Stables have still-living residents, they usually slaughter them too. At least Red Eye gives them the same options he gives you."

My eyes went wide, my jaw dropping. *Luna rape them with Her horn!*

“You work two years on a Stable Recovery Team and survive, and Red Eye promises you freedom. You’ll be tagged and will be allowed to live whatever life you chose.” The griffin gave a knowing smirk, “So long as you don’t decide to become a bother.”

Two years. That... was not an option. But I wasn’t really thinking about that. I was thinking about how Blueberry Sabre and I were going to have some very, very harsh words. I was already considering what ammo to use as punctuation.

Curling her second claw, Stern continued, “You can work in the Fillydelphia crater. Red Eye has need of radioactive materials, and that crater is a treasure trove of them.” If Blueberry Sabre was to be believed, and it would have been stupid for her to lie about my objectives, then I knew why Red Eye was mining the crater. He needed material for his Rad-Engine. But working at ground zero of a megaspell strike... even in radiation-protective barding, that was a death sentence!

“Red Eye has stated that any pony who works for six months’ worth of full work days in the Fillydelphia Crater will be treated for radiation sickness and freed.” A falsely kind smile crossed her beak. “But since he is such a charitable stallion, Red Eye has recently reduced it to only four months.” I suspected most ponies suffered fatal poisoning within three.

“Your third option,” Stern informed us, holding up the remaining talon, “Is to fight in The Pit. The Pit is arena combat, pony against pony. Each Event has six rounds, and there is usually an Event once every week. More if Red Eye himself graces us with his presence.”

The griffin stared down at us, assessing the pathetic herd of new slaves. “If you survive six consecutive events, not only do you gain your beloved freedom, but you gain an honored place in Red Eye’s army!” She stood up tall, glowering. “But frankly, none of you lot look worthy of such an honor.”

The black-bodied griffin snorted. “Still, I am honor-bound to give you the option. Just try not to make it too easy for your opponent if you do.” Then, scowling yet again at us, she warned, “These are the ways to earn your freedom. But there are two more ways to gain it. You may, at

any time, choose to join the Unity. If you do, your fate will be in the hooves of the *Goddess*,” she said the word as if it was distasteful. “Or, of course, you can gain freedom through death.

“Try anything stupid, try to rebel, try to fight, try to run... any of those are fine ways to die horribly.” Stern fixed us all with a stare. “But that is *all* they are.”



Welcome to the Fillydelphia FunFarm!

A weathered, oversized image of Pinkie Pie’s head and forehooves peeked over the top of the arched, wrought-iron gateway. Beyond lay the decaying ruins of what had once been a massive amusement park. I remembered it from the poster in SteelHooves’ shack. (“Everything the Grand Galloping Gala should have been! Every day! Forever!”)

We were herded through the gateway. A fair bulk of the old amusement park had been converted into the slaves’ quarters. I had been assigned a straw mat somewhere in an enclosure where ponies once galloped around in mock-ups of plow wagons, ramming into each other for fun. (Being new, I didn’t rate four walls, only a roof. And I was told to be glad for that. The rain in Fillydelphia, they warned me, burned.)

On the path up to the gateway, I had spotted slaves harnessed to actual plow wagons, pushing mounds of rubble as they pulled a chariot behind them, carrying the slave master pony who whipped them if they weren’t going fast enough. Or if the slave master liked the sounds the poor pony made when struck brutally with the lash. Or if she was just bored.

I wondered if any of those tortured ponies spent their nights sleeping in the Bumper-Plow Pit. Sometimes, irony sucked.

Once, colts and fillies would drag their parents from miles around to romp and play in the silly rides and spectacles the Fillydelphia FunFarm provided. Now it was a monstrous monument to slavery and death, wrapped in garish, peeling paint.

Pinkie Pie wouldn't approve.

Above us, three Pinkie Pie Balloons floated, in constant orbit over the decayed amusement park. One moved freely. The other two were anchored, one apiece, to the two tallest buildings still standing within the curtain of The Wall. The first was leashed to an old hotel, beaten but unbroken, which towered just a few blocks beyond the eastern edge of the Fillydelphia FunFarm. The huge lettering on the twentieth-floor balcony was nearly rusted away and had long ago lost its lighting; but even without it, I would have recognized the Alpha-Omega Hotel from its small picture in that old news article I'd seen a couple days ago.

The second Pinkie Pie Balloon was bound to a building rising out of the FunFarm itself. It was clearly stylized as a barn, looking like nothing so much as a colossal version of the old building on Sweet Apple Acres. The first floors were covered in gaily-colored murals and fairytale characters, most of which had slid from the Precipice of Childlike Frivolity into the Valley of Disturbing Imagery. The roller coaster that looped all about the amusement park actually passed through the building on the sixth floor. A huge radio tower jutted up from the top, modified to look like a comically oversized weathervane.

I realized that I was looking at the Fillydelphia Hub of the Ministry of Morale.

I should have known. Pinkie Pie and her Ministry had created the sprite-bots. The source of the sprite-bots' broadcast had to be a Ministry Hub somewhere. It wasn't powerful enough to reach all the way to Manehattan, but with each sprite-bot re-broadcasting the signal, the Ministry of Morale's reach had been effectively infinite. When Red Eye had taken the Hub, he had simply added his sermons to the playlist. The music itself was the same songs that the Ministry of Morale had been broadcasting since before the war.

As if mocking me for my revelation, the plucky harpsichord number playing over the speakers suffered a sudden influx of lyrics:

"You gotta share. You gotta care. It's the right thing to do!"

I really, really wanted a gun.

"Oh look," called out a blood-red mare whose dark green mane was done up in spikes. She was lounging on the spectator railing of the Bumper-Plow arena. "Fresh meat!"

The slave master ponies walking with us took their leave. Gnash gave me a parting look that I couldn't interpret. Then we were alone with the other slaves. Many paid us no mind. Most that even spared us a glance did so with sad, resigned expressions.

I felt sickened at the sight of several of them -- many were shedding their manes and coats, revealing boils or discolored flesh beneath, or suffered from withered limbs or sloughing facial features -- the slowly dying victims of radiation poisoning.

And then there were the bullies.

The blood-red mare slid from the railing and stalked towards us. "Listen up, my little grubworms," she barked. Her cutie mark looked like an eyeball on a pike. I shuddered, wondering just how you end up getting *that* as a cutie mark. Blueberry Sabre had warned that I might have more to fear from the inmates than the guards.

Another pony joined her: a hulking, piss-colored male pony with an ugly scar and the cutie mark of a very angry yellow flower. (I got the absurd feeling that the flower wanted to kill me.)

The school in Stable Two had bullies, and these ponies reminded me of them. No matter how powerless we all were, they could find power by making the rest of us even more miserable. It was contemptible at best. With everypony suffering, I felt it was vile that some of the slaves themselves would go out of their way to make it worse for others. I had learned that best way to gain strength was through friendship. Shouldn't we all be working together? But... this was faster and easier for the selfish.

"I'm Blood," the appropriately-colored mare with the spiked mane announced. Then, introducing the over-muscled buck, "And this is Daff." The lug stared at us, his eyes lingering on the mares.

"I know y'all just heard Stern's big spiel 'bout how Fillydelphia is *her* town," Blood said. (Which I bet she wouldn't have dared if the griffin was anywhere nearby.) "Well the Bumper-Plow Pit is *our* domain!"

"What a glorious empire you have there," I snarked under my breath before I could stop myself.

Blood looked like she'd been slapped. "Ex-cuuuuse me?" She trotted up, eyes narrowing. "Did you just talk? Because it sounded like you talked, but I don't remember telling you to."

Why couldn't I keep my mouth shut? Well, at least maybe if she kicked the crap outta me, she'd manage to crush all the biting bugs in my coat while she was at it.

Then again... maybe it was a good thing that I'd gotten her attention. If I became the bullies' new chew-toy, then that would spare the other slaves at least some of their attentions. I'd faced a dragon; I could take the crap these two could dish.

Okay, I ran away from a dragon. But that's just getting nitpicky.

"Well, did you just talk?" Blood demanded sticking her snout against mine. She had to lower her head a little to do so, something I could see she enjoyed. My small stature made me a particularly appealing target.

"I... I just said... what a glorious empire you have. You know... with the crumbling amusement park ride," I stammered, cringing back. "You must be s-so proud!"

Her eyes widened. "Oh... you. Are. *Begging*. Me to mess you up." She lifted up a hoof and brought it down on the chain of my manacles, driving my face into the dirt. "Okay, filly, this is life from now on. You speak when I tell you to speak. You lick where I tell you to lick. And you give me half of your food rations every night. And maybe, just maybe, I'll keep you for myself rather than letting Daff here have you every Luna-damned night until he splits you in two!"

I looked up at her, putting on a pitiful expression.

"Daff," she called back to the piss-colored brute. "Fuck her up bad!"

The lumbering buck approached me with a nasty grin. "With pleasure!" He spun and kicked. HARD!

Pain exploded through my breast. I found myself flying back through the air. I crashed through the rotted remains of what had once been a hot dog stand (with a picture of Pinkie Pie slathering on the mustard).

I was struggling to get onto my feet when he slammed into me at full gallop, sending me sprawling. I thought I heard a rib crack. Breathing was becoming painful.

The buck trotted up to me as I fought to catch my breath and reared up. Without armor, I was afraid he'd break my back, so I twisted. He compensated, his hooves coming down in my stomach, knocking any wind I had out of me. I coughed, tasting blood.

The huge buck positioned himself over me.

My horn glowed softly as I wrapped a very tender part of him in a telekinetic sheath and gave him a warning squeeze.

Daff stopped abruptly.

"Here's the deal," I whispered, half moaning in pain. "You decide I'm not worthy of your... attentions. That way, you get to save face. And in return, I don't show you just how good I am at this particular trick." I squeezed a little harder and the buck jolted with pain, sweating now. "And you keep... yourself... to yourself and away from all the other slaves, or the deal's off." A slight bit tighter and Daff nodded fervently, tears spilling from his eyes as he tried not to scream.

"Deal?" I asked, even though I knew he had already agreed as I gave the telekinetic field a slight twist. His reaction was utterly worth it.

"Good," I growled, my mouth tasting of warm copper. I released him, dropping my head back as my vision swam. I needed a medical pony. I needed Velvet Remedy.

Shaking himself, Daff made a show of staring me up and down, then dismissing me with a huff. "Fuck that!" he said too loudly. "She's so

tiny it would be like fucking a kid!” He turned around. Blood was looking at him with one eye narrowed in disbelief.

Daff glanced back over his shoulder at me, snorted, apparently deciding what he could and couldn’t get away with. He drove his right hindhoof back with a gruesomely hard half-buck that landed directly between my hindlegs. Then trotted away, basking in the blood-colored mare’s obvious approval.

I’d never screamed so hard in my life.



“I have walked through the streets of Fillydelphia, cleared of rubble, and seen the steel mill producing steel, the textiles mill producing cloth, the power plant producing power.” Red Eye’s voice sounded proud through the tinny speakers on steel poles that jutted into the ruddy evening air. *“It is a start, but such a glorious start. And we owe it all... to each other.”*

“What is this?” I asked, half whimpering, as a bowl of indescribable mushy stuff was shoved in front of my nose. The smell made my deeply bruised stomach convulse in revulsion.

“Oatmeal,” the slave pony claimed flatly, scooping up a bowl full of the same discolored glop for the next pony.

“Oatmeal? Are you crazy?” I stared in disbelief. “This doesn’t look anything like oatmeal! Or smell. Or...” I added as another portion of the muck sloughed from ladle to bowl, “...sound.”

I gave half of the “oatmeal” to Blood, feeling like I was the one being cruel. Then I limped around until I found another pony who had been bullied out of his share and gave him the rest. I was in too much pain in tender places, including my stomach, to attempt eating anyway.

In turn, he gave me very depressing advice on continued existence as a “worker” in Fillydelphia. Don’t choose the Crater. Most ponies who go there don’t live even three months, much less four. Don’t choose the Pit. You’ll have to survive as many as thirty-six battles against other slaves to make it, and the battles were always to the death. I moaned at

that. I couldn't see myself taking the life of another slave. Well, maybe Blood and Daff. But not the innocent ones.

He himself worked in the scrapyards, using a tool he called an auto-axe to cut apart chariots and other large hunks of metal for melting down in the steel mill. It was dangerous work, and they were kept under supervision by guards in high places, but there weren't any whips. No slave master was going to get into a scrapyard with a slave wielding a spinning blade magically enchanted to slash easily through metal.

He regaled me with the many ways to die in Fillydelphia. One of the least pleasant was the work pits I had seen on the way in. "But fortunately," he said, "Those are reserved fer ponies who try t' escape, or worse, sabotage Red Eye's work."

"What are they?"

"Fillydelphia has a bit o' a parasprite problem," the pony told me as he ate the remainder of my glop. "Apparently, there was a massive infestation maybe three or four decades before the megaspells. S'posedly, they wiped it out, but parasprites are really persistent."

He licked the bowl while I tried not to gag.

"Couple years back, Red Eye's bucks were blasting their way into one of the Stables that was pretty close t' the crater and cleared open a pocket full of the damn things, all irradiated t' hell and nastier than ever."

"Bloatsprites?" I asked, but he shook his head.

"Naw, bloatsprites is what happena t' the parasprites that get themselves tainted. Big an' mean, but don't tend t' reproduce. An' that's a blessin', y' trust me on that." I looked at me gravely. "These little buggers are irradiated. Big difference."

"So... what do they do?"

"Same thing they've always done. Eat an' spit out more," the pony fixed me with a stare. "Only now they're carnivorous."

They eat... ponies? Oh Celestia!

“And those chimneys?”

The buck cocked his head. “Well, that’s where we incinerate the nests they find. Only way t’ make sure they stop reproducin’ is to kill ‘em with fire.” He scowled, “Problem is, sometimes there are ones deep in the nests that don’t get properly cooked by the exterminators. They wake up from the heat, fly out... the mesh over the work pits makes sure they don’t get too far, an’ one o’ the guards always has a flamethrower. Especially after that one mare had one o’ them buggies fly into her throat. They ate her from the inside out.”

Pure nightmare fuel. I really wished I could unhear that.

But as bad as that was, on the top of his list of ways to die was Unity.

“Ah know what that bastard Red Eye says, but Ah’ve known plenty o’ ponies who volunteered fer Unity, and not one of ‘em ever came back,” he confided in me. “Accordin’ t’ some ponies, the Goddess, whatever that’s s’posed t’ be, is turnin’ them into those big alicorn critters we sometimes see hereabouts. But if that was true, then Ah figure there would be a lot more o’ them. And you’d think one would bother t’ come back an’ say hello t’ old friends, bein’ as they c’n fly an’ all.”

I didn’t think it helpful to tell him that there were probably more of them than he thought. My mind was already processing the other information. The pseudo-goddesses had no cutie marks and were at least guided through a telepathic source. My mind reeled at the possibility that transformation removed their individuality and sense of self completely. Doing that to a pony would be... worse than murder!



Night was chilly, and I had no blanket. I lay on the rat-chewed old mat which had been bed to slaves before me, most of whom were probably dead now. The mat was so worn it felt harder than the cement beneath it, and so stained that I didn’t really want to touch it. But it was all I had.

My body was badly bruised, and it still ached to breathe. My rib had been cracked but thankfully not broken. I tried wholeheartedly to ignore the worst of the lower pain. Part of me wanted to kill Daff as painfully and bloodily as possible. Part of me wanted to curl up and cry. I fought down both. Considering what I did and threatened to do to the piss-colored bastard, I think part of me wanted to show that I could take what I was willing to dish out. Mostly, though, I had told him he could save face; and as much as I hated it, I had to acknowledge that is exactly what he did.

The sky above was black with reflected tinges of orange and red. With the fall of night, all the forges and fires and other glowing things were more pronounced, giving the Fillydelphia Ruins an infernal cast. The worst was the subtle red tinge to the air that became a luminescent glow within the massive pit where the megaspell-carrying missile had struck, missing the massive industrial sectors of the city to find the heart of the civilian housing. Darkness never truly fell in the core of the Fillydelphia Crater.

A gust of wind brought a deeper chill and a choking, acrid smell with it from somewhere deeper in Fillydelphia. A few of the other slaves coughed in their sleep. I shivered and tried to breathe without inhaling.

I missed my friends. I wondered if they were okay. In my mind, I had begun playing through all the mistakes I had made, all the ways my plan could have gone wrong...

Somewhere not far away, I caught sight of a small burst of green flame.

Getting up, I slipped quietly out, bringing up my Eyes-Forward Sparkle to help me find the balefire phoenix. My heart felt thankful for the company as I spotted her perched on a sign shaped like a smiling Pinkie Pie holding up a hoof. ("You must be this tall to ride the FunFarm Wheel.") Behind her, the massive iron structure of the wheel rose above the park like a mechanical eye, watching us balefully.

Pyrelight hooted musically at me.

"Thank you," I told her earnestly. I didn't think I could make it through this trial alone.

I considered asking her questions, or requesting that she ferry a message to Velvet Remedy, or half a dozen other things that I dismissed in turn. Instead, I chose to just sit there, resting my head against the two-dimensional Pinkie Pie, and enjoying her company.



“Well, let’s put you to work,” Mister Shiny said, looking me over. Mister Shiny was the slave master pony in charge of assigning work to new slaves, and I thought he had a deceptively kindly voice. “I see you’ve got a PipBuck, and you should be tagged for a visit to Doctor Slaughter, but I figure we can hold off on that.” He gave me a smile that seemed personable but had no real warmth. “What do you say we put that thing to use instead?”

I was still terribly sore and walked with a slight limp, but he didn’t seem to notice, or at least not care. I was sure he’d put ponies to work who were in much worse shape. “What do I have to do?”

“Well, there’s a building in town that’s been infested with parasprites. But this time, we can’t just go in with flamethrowers. So we could use a pony with a PipBuck,” Mister Shiny explained. “That thing can spot targets for you, right? We’ll send you in there in environmental barding and with a low-powered magical energy gun. Shoot the damn things until they’re piles of ash.”

“How... how many are there?” The fretful nightmares of the night before replayed themselves in my mind.

“Shouldn’t be more than fifty. They haven’t had anything to snack on since the infestation was discovered, poor Whitetail.”

Within half an hour, he had me equipped and ready to go. Except for ammo. I’d get that after I entered the building. They’d shove it through a mail slot.



Beams of bright magenta magical energy lanced through the air at me from the security turret in the hallway ceiling. One of the blasts struck my environmental suit, melting a hole in it the size of a hoof just below my cutie mark and burning my flesh underneath. As I threw myself behind a desk, I hoped it wouldn't scar like the slash on my neck.

The terminal on the desk glowed softly, that same sickly pale green that almost all of them did. I hid myself behind it as I began to hack the system. It only took me a moment; the terminal's security was pathetic. And I was in luck! The terminal could shut down the turrets.

The turret let loose another barrage of pink energy. Several lancing bolts struck the backside of the terminal. It exploded in my face with a blast of sparks.

I would have been permanently blinded, if not outright killed, had the environmental suit not included a gas mask and heavy goggles. I cringed back behind the desk and considered my options.

Until now, the bug hunt was more frustrating than dangerous. The barding had made me effectively immune to the parasprites, and I had become so practiced in the art of stealth that I could sneak up right behind one before the half-blind things spotted me. Which was good, since I had almost no skill with magical energy weapons. Even at close range, even with S.A.T.S., I missed as often as I hit.

As the turret spewed out another barrage, a little yellow parasprite flew towards me, drawn by the smell of my burned flesh. I slipped into S.A.T.S. as it drew close, aiming the laser and firing. I hit it with the third shot, and it disintegrated in a flash of turquoise ash. I dropped the targeting spell and then kicked it back up a second later to help me take down two more parasprites (one of which was approximately the color of dead flesh).

"I think I'm in trouble."

I checked the magical spark pack. Those second two had taken me five shots to vaporize. Better, but still not good. According to my PipBuck's initial scan, there were fifty-two parasprites in the building that I had to wipe out, and I had just killed parasprites numbered nineteen through

twenty-one. That left thirty-one more to go, most of which I knew were swarming around the building's factory floor -- an area I had been avoiding, choosing to clear out the rest of the building first. Only now they smelled flesh.

I had seven shots left.

"Really in trouble."

The turret poured out even more magical energy, trying to strike me down, not smart enough to realize there was a whole big metal desk in the way. The desk was getting warm to the touch.

If I didn't find more ammo in this place... or, even better, another weapon...

I opened the desk, just to check.

Bottle caps. Three of them. I let out a scream of frustration.

I looked around, spotting a door marked "maintenance" nearby. Wrapping the desk in a field of levitation, I carried it alongside me as shield while I dashed for the door. It was locked.

I still didn't have a screwdriver. Looking towards the heavens, "If either of you two are actually up there, I'm really sorry for doubting. Really sorry. I apologize! Now... could you please send me a break?"

The turret fired again. The desk was no longer just warm. It was beginning to radiate heat. Three more parasprites flew into the room, drawn to my smell.

"Well then fuck you too. Both of you!" I shouted upwards. "Go lick each other's..." I slid into S.A.T.S. and sent a flurry of targeting spell-guided shots at the parasprites. Two turned to ash. The third was struck, falling to the floor but not dying. The other shots missed. And now I was out. I panted, my rib injury burning and making it hurt to breathe.

Dammit!

The turret fired again. The desk was now glowing. In frustration, I snapped, "You want this so much? Here! Take it!" Keeping the desk between me and the turret, I floated it up to the offending machine and slammed at it over and over until it stopped working with a crunch.

I then floated it past me the other way, flipping it over and dropping the glowing metal surface on the wounded blue bug.



I managed to close myself in an office above the building's main floor. The hallway that the turret had been protecting had lead to this room -- the equivalent of an Overmare's office. There was a small door on one side that probably lead to a closet and massive plate-glass windows that looked out over the main work area. I stared out one of the windows at the mass of cute, colorful predators swarming between the catwalks above and the printing presses below.

Same aesthetic, I noted dourly. It was like the world before had a hard-on for industrial accidents.

I also now understood why going in with flamethrowers was not so much an option. This building was a printing house. And a lot of it was full of books, posters... a veritable cornucopia of fuel for an out-of-control fire. Such a fire would probably destroy the very things I was sure Red Eye was after: the presses.

I had to applaud the stallion. He had power, steel, textiles... and now he was working on bringing back mass publication. As far as I could tell, the only book that had been written and distributed on any significant scale since the apocalypse was *The Wasteland Survival Guide*. Getting this place running would be a major step forward.

Those schools he was promising suddenly began to look real.

I spotted several more automated turrets covering the main work floor. Damn things ignored the bugs, but I knew that they'd attack if I so much as stepped a hoof into that room. I was in no shape to deal with that many parasprites, much less the damn turrets.

The room had a desk with a still-functioning terminal. I sat down and began to hack, hoping that I could turn off any other turrets from here. The password, interestingly, was “Generous Souls”.

Welcome to the *Ministry of Image*, Fillydelphia Hub, Miss Periwinkle!

How are you this fine morning?

It has been 202 Years, 37 Days, 1 Hour and 13 Minutes since your last log-in. Would you like to check your messages?

Wait... this was a Hub? But... there wasn't anything here! It was a small building, little more than a print shop. There was nothing here.

That... made no sense. This wasn't a tower; it was two stories tall. And I'd seen enough of the building to be pretty sure it didn't have secret sublevels. There weren't many offices, nothing more than what would be expected from a small publishing house.

I got up and started looking around. There were posters on the walls of the office, and many more visible down on the printing floor below. I had seen most of them before. Everything from the “PROGRESS” posters of the Ministry of Wartime Technology to the image of Twilight Sparkle above the words “Reading is Magic” (the poster I had seen in the Ponyville Library, only without the disfiguring graffiti).

I glanced back to the terminal and noticed something else. On the desk was an old album. I opened it and began magically flipping through the pages, all full of collected scraps: old newspaper articles, flyers, public notifications. Most were decayed beyond readability. Of those that weren't, many were familiar. The clinic warning about Wartime Stress Disorder, for example.

One of the barely-readable newspaper articles caught my eye:

Dragon Over Hoofington

The Shadowbolts, lead by Rainbow Dash, engaged the dragon Brimstone over the skies of Hoofington last weekend as zebra forces managed their deepest strike into Equestria in the War's thirteen year history. All rumors that the zebras have enlisted the aid of the dragons native to their homeland have

been confirmed. Princess Luna vows to expand Equestria's pegasus...

The rest was supposedly continued on another page. The rest of this one was a picture of Rainbow Dash standing proudly on the head of the fallen monster.

It was the sort of image that would have branded Rainbow Dash as a national hero in the minds of ponies for generations.

I closed the book and looked back at the screen. And I began to understand.

I thought back to the Pinkie Pie poster that first alerted me to the existence of the Ministries. If I had been asked, I would have said that the Ministry of Morale had been the first one I had seen.

I would have been wrong.

The *Ministry of Image* was the first one I had seen. Only it hadn't gone by that name. It almost never went by that name, at least not externally. In fact, I suspected that *Principles of Proper Pony Speech* was supposed to be an internal document.

The Ministry of Image didn't seem to do projects of its own. It worked in service to the *other* Ministries. It created their materials, their books, their posters, their flyers... and in one case even their *armor*. Every poster associated with one of the other Ministries... hell, probably every time I had seen or heard anything from any of them, I was seeing the Ministry of Image.

The invisible Ministry... that was everywhere.



I downloaded Miss Periwinkle's messages into my PipBuck for later perusal, then moved on to the more pressing task of dealing with the turrets. I had hoped I could turn off the turrets through the terminal in what I considered the Overmare's office. But the terminal had allowed me to do one better. It allowed me to reprogram the turrets to wipe out the parasprites!

I crouched behind the desk, listening to the barrage of turret-fire fill the main floor of the M.I. Hub. The parasprite kill-count on my PipBuck had shot up to thirty-nine and was only now beginning to slow. I realized I would have to hunt down the last ones, the ones in rooms and spaces the turrets didn't cover. But suddenly my job was a lot easier.

My luck just kept improving. There was a bathroom off to the side of this office. The toilet water made my PipBuck freak, and the sink was completely non-functional... a plumber pony had been working on it when the megaspell hit. Her skeleton was still in the room; she had been killed by a chunk that fell from the ceiling.

There wasn't much left of her maintenance uniform, but it was enough to patch the hole in my environmental suit with the aid of wonderglue. And there had been several bottles of the latter in the pony's toolbox. Along with a wrench and (squee!) a screwdriver!

There had also been a feebly locked medical box with a few healing bandages and a couple extra bobby pins. And a tin of Mint-als.

I stared at the tin for the longest time, fighting the urge to just go ahead and take one. Just one.

It took effort to shut the box, leaving them inside. I relocked it. Never again.

I was finally out of those damn shackles! I'd noticed that most of the other slaves weren't wearing them, so I was fairly certain that I could get away with not wearing them. But if I hadn't gotten them off myself, I suspected there wasn't anypony here with both the know-how and kindness to have helped me out.

I really hated Fillydelphia.

The turret fire stopped. To be on the safe side, I shut them down completely before stepping out of the office. My PipBuck said I had five to go. And I was still out of ammo. I needed a plan.

Moving back the way I had arrived, I tried unlocking the maintenance room I had been kept out of earlier. With any luck, there would be more magical spark packs inside.

The door clicked open, but my streak of luck had ended. There were no magical spark packs. No weapons or ammo of any kind. Instead, there was the skeleton of a pegasus pony who had locked himself inside, alone with a now-empty bottle of buck and a case of painkillers. From the position of the skeleton and the disarray of the room, I suspected he died in severe convulsions... but hopefully unable to feel them.

There were a few posters, well preserved, on the wall of this room that I had never seen before. A rather fantastic poster for a pegasi aerial acrobatics team called the "Wonderbolts" whose bright blue uniforms were clearly copied from the darker, militaristic Shadowbolts design.

Or was it the other way around? A framed newspaper article on the wall read:

**Wonderbolts' Heroic Attempt to Free Zebra Captives Leaves
Four Dead**

This morning, Princess Celestia announced the successful rescue of the seventeen ponies held captive for two weeks by Zebra gem pirates. The Wonderbolts, Equestria's greatest fliers, volunteered for the secret mission that sent them into Zebra waters. However, success came at a grave cost as four members of the elite pegasi team were killed in the ensuing battle. Thankfully, none of the captives were killed and only one received serious injury.

Throughout this two-week crisis, the Zebra Caesar repeatedly denounced the actions of the pirates and offered support to Princess Celestia; but He denied permission for Equestrian ponies to enter Zebra territories, claiming it would "increase existing tensions" and insisting that His army's intelligence indicated that the pirates were operating in international seas.

The Zebra Caesar continues to disavow any knowledge of where the pirates' ship had anchored.

Princess Celestia claims that the Wonderbolts' operation in Zebra territory was the result of a "happy miscommunication" and apologized personally to the Caesar...

The article clearly pre-dated the beginning of the war. One more thing to think about later, when I wasn't trying to find a way to disintegrate

parasprites without a magical energy weapon, or incinerate them without fire.

The maintenance room included a workbench, and a variety of odds and ends, including the buck's "Wonderbolts" lunchbox and a sack filled with somepony's badly-decayed porn collection. Mostly, old copies of *Wingboner Magazine*. I managed not to look. No, really.

Okay, maybe just a little. Pegasus mares are kinda... exotic, after all.

Inspiration struck. I dumped out the magazines and set the sack aside. Then I emptied the lunchbox of the muck that the food inside had rotted into. I brought up the schematic that Ditzzy Doo had given me as a gift. I didn't really expect a homemade mine would be any good against parasprites, but that didn't mean I wouldn't find a use for one later.

I was about to put my new mine into the sack when I had another idea. I couldn't set the damn pony-eating bugs on fire inside the building, but...

Half an hour later, I trotted out of the printing house, a sack full of angry parasprites floating next to me.

"Oh, Pyrelight!" I sing-songed with a smile.



Mister Shiny was most impressed, and I felt myself flush with pride. Only for the pride to be swiftly followed by shame and anger that I was letting myself feel happy about slave work. And worse, thankful to one of the slavers for praising me.

The reward for my efforts was to have the magical energy gun taken from me, but in return he offered me a set of ragged slave barding. It offered little protection, but little was better than none, and it would help against the chilly nights. The former wearer, according to Mister Shiny, was no longer able to use it due to decapitation.

Working swiftly did not lead to rest but to more work. I was assigned to the scrap yard for the rest of the day. I spent all of ten minutes

getting instructions on the use of a gruesome-looking auto axe before the yard foreman, a slave himself, decided he just didn't want such a dangerous tool in the hooves of such a small and weak-looking mare. I pointed out that, as a unicorn, I was more than capable of wielding the metal-cutting saw regardless of my physical size or strength. In response, he put me to work gathering the bits of scrap that the other workers (slaves, dammit!) were slicing off of old passenger wagons and other sizable metal artifacts of the past.

I trudged into the ear-splitting din of the scrap yard. Dozens of ponies were pitting those spinning, magically-edged blades against metal. At least a dozen more were on scrap collection duty. I looked up to see the slaver guards staring down at us, armed with battle saddles or assault carbines, keeping well out of range of the auto-axes. A daring unicorn could try to float one up at them, but she would be gunned down before she could kill more than one. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the gorgeous yellow and green plumage of Pyrelight as she circled, a Wonderbolts lunchbox clutched in her talons, before soaring out of sight.

Smiling to myself a little, despite my dreary situation, I got to work.

Enslaved ponies, crying out under the whips of the slavers, pulled wagons piled with scavenged metal into the steel yard for slicing. I was shocked when several ponies trudged wearily into the scrapyards, pulling a wagon laden with the massive gear-shaped steel door from a Stable.

My work was much easier than theirs thanks to my magic. And it afforded me the chance to speak with the other slaves. They were not a chatty bunch, quick to remind me that too much talk made the slavers nervous and was a quick way to get your tongue cut out. But I was still able to glean a few tidbits which convinced me that the only places likely to find either the schematics of the Rad-Engine or Red Eye's research into Bypass Spells were the Alpha-Omega Hotel or the Ministry of Morale hub.

The Alpha-Omega was being used to for "special housing". For the lower floors, this meant housing for Pit fighters. Being on the fast track

to brutal death at the hooves of other slaves didn't come without compensations: a much nicer place to bed down, shorter work hours, and (if rumors were true) access to a still. Who, or what, was housed in the upper floors was apparently a closely guarded secret.

"Ta only other place t' get booze in alla Fillydelphia," one of the slaves claimed as she let her auto-axe cool down before going again at a three-yard long section of what had once been a Stable wall, "Iz the Roamer Bar. Uh slaver hangout on ta other side of ta Wall." A shame, as I decided that I could definitely use some apple whiskey. "Stern hates ta stuff. Sayz booze makes slavers stupid an' she ain't got uh use fo' stupid."

The slave mare with the really strange accent chomped down on the bit of the auto-axe, kicking it on again, and started cutting. I hung around long enough to bundle the first chunks cut from the wall, and floated them back to the waiting bins. Then I moved on.

From the ponies willing to talk, everything about the comically barn-shaped MoM building was a mystery save that there was always a Pinkie Pie Balloon anchored there, that Stern roosted in the upper tower and that Red Eye himself had private chambers somewhere within.

I found myself speaking with another of the slaves, this time a unicorn buck with a cancerous eye and only three legs (the result not of an accident or cruelty but a birth defect from having been born to a tribe who had lived too close to the Fillydelphia Crater before The Wall). Our conversation was interrupted when, one by one, the slaves paused their work to look up into the sky of black clouds. Several pointed. Many whispered.

I turned my own head upward, trying to spot the cause of the commotion. It wasn't hard to spot. A sky chariot was flying overhead, pulled by two griffins. Surrounding it was a wing of alicorns.

"Whelp..." the deformed buck muttered, "Looks like Red Eye's here."



I stood in the same lot where I had stood yesterday. The blood of the slaver executed by Stern still stained the ground. All around me, other slaves had gathered, pressing close. The rooftops around us were lined with griffins in Talon armor. Stern took her favorite spot and stared out over us. Her anti-machine rifle was slung to her back, but I remembered the speed of her draw.

The speakers fell silent, *March of the Parasprites* cutting off in mid-song.

A couple of the ponies beside me whinnied nervously. I spotted Blood and Daff in the crowd. Blood looked bored, inspecting her hoof. Daff looked grim.

And then I finally saw him. Red Eye.

Flanked by an escort of Alicorns, the pony whom I had come to blame for a great deal of the Equestrian Wasteland's wrongness walked up from a ramp on the right side of the building where Stern was perched.

Red Eye was a strong, able-bodied earth pony stallion with a crimson coat and a few light scars around a blank flank where his cutie mark should have been. He had a jet black mane and tail which were practically groomed, and he wore a black cape that was slung to droop off his right side. I could only see the left side of his body clearly as he strode towards the center of the roof, but his left eye was distinctly blue.

I wasn't sure what I had been expecting. Hell, I think I had been expecting an alicorn monster the size of a Pinkie Pie Balloon, twisted and evil, radiating explosions of power. Or something equally as absurd.

Red Eye was... just a pony.

I could end this all now! I just needed something big and heavy. I could float it over his head and drop it. Even if the griffins spotted me, even if Stern gunned me down, I could accept that just so long as I could take him with me.

One of the alicorns looked out over the crowd, her eyes quickly finding me. She spread her wings and took to the air, keeping a protective watch. Dammit. They remembered, and they weren't going to let me pull the same trick twice.

I realized with a chill that the alicorns knew I was here. And so did their Goddess. Which, I suspected, meant Red Eye did too.

This was a *stupid* plan.

In the middle of the roof was a strip of railing which had once held a sign. Red Eye trod up to it, the other two alicorns taking positions on either side of him. He turned towards us, putting his forehooves up spread out on the railing as he stared down. I gasped, my world suddenly lurching out from under my hooves.

“Workers! Welcome, and thank you for joining me.” Red Eye was even more charismatic in person, his words oily smooth and devilishly persuasive. But I was barely hearing them, my gaze transfixed on the red glow that came out of the metal sheath around what should have been his right eye socket.

A cyberpony?

Red Eye was a cyberpony!? I was staring in the face of a level of technological advancement that soared way beyond terminals and sprite-bots. Red Eye had cybernetic implants! How? Where did he get them? When did that sort of technology even become possible?

My gaze traveled down his body, searching for other signs of augmentation, and locked on his right foreleg. Red Eye was wearing a PipBuck!

Red Eye was a Stable Dweller.

“I have demanded a lot from you in the name of the future,” Red Eye was saying as I shook myself out of my utter stupor. The crimson cyber-augmented stallion even wore his PipBuck on his right foreleg, which was uncommon. Just like me.

“But I would not call for anything from you that I would not demand from myself,” Red Eye claimed, looking over us. The red beam of that targeting eye flashed as it swept over me.

“As you can see, I was gifted, through no merit of my own, with a privileged upbringing that the good ponies of our Equestrian

Wasteland could only dream of. I lived in a Stable where such luxuries as safety, food and clean water were taken for granted. Our water talisman alone could have given life-sustaining nourishment to thousands, but was instead being used for frivolous joys like our atrium's fountain."

He frowned, shaking his head. "Observe my eye. My Stable offered medical and technological advancements far in excess of even pre-war civilization. Ponies in the highest ranks of Stable-Tec conspired to make my Stable an experiment in rulership through the earth pony way..."

Celestia suckle me!

Stable Two had always known a unicorn Overmare. I tried to imagine a Stable under earth pony rule and driven by the same push for progress and industry that had dominated the thinking of Ministry of Technology. What could they accomplish over two hundred years of isolation?

Well, cybernetic implants, for one.

I realized I had lost track of Red Eye's speech, and chided myself for not paying closer attention now that he was actually right in front of me. But I couldn't help the oozing sense that I was looking into a dark and supremely fucked-up mirror.

"...saw the Equestrian Wasteland for what it is. But more than that, I saw what it should be. And what it could be again! That night, for the first time, the Goddess whispered to me..."

I found myself resisting a facehoof. The idea that the alicorn's Goddess was speaking to Red Eye, or at least that he could be under that impression, made a lot more sense. I knew a pony in Stable Two who would sometimes pick up the Stable broadcast through metal-work in his jaw. Celestia only knew what all that wetware in Red Eye's head was capable of receiving, by intentional design or otherwise. The Goddess communicated telepathically with the alicorns. Was she communicating with him too? Or was he just picking up stray signals?

Preacher had suggested to Velvet Remedy that Red Eye was getting garbled messages.

“...And the first thing that She showed me was how wrong my Stable’s teachings were. How actually repulsive our beliefs in earth pony supremacy. No breed of pony is greater than another. We are all slaves to the Equestrian Wasteland. And it is only through our work that we can be free.”

As Red Eye talked, I remembered the twisted versions of stories and history that I had seen in Stable Twenty-Four. Even the tale of The Mare in the Moon -- the tale of Princess Luna’s thousand year fall to madness as Nightmare Moon, a madness she had been rescued from by the group of friends who Luna had subsequently chosen to be the Mares of her Ministries -- had been altered into the tale of a fallen *prince*. I could only guess, if this is what Stable-Tec had done to ensure a male-dominated experiment in that Stable, what the teachings in Red Eye’s Stable would have been.

“But that work is worthless unless it is *shared*! Until we are all free, none of us are truly free. Nor do we deserve to be!” Red Eye glanced away, looking strangely ashamed. Then, with a fierceness I hadn’t expected, he told us, “And that is why my Stable was the first to be dismantled. Its doors and supports torn out and melted down, its concrete walls and floors cut apart to make the foundation stones of the Cathedral, the fortress we are building on the site of my former home, to be the new capital of our New Equestria, and the new home of our living Goddess.”

I reeled.

“The ponies of my home were the first to join the army of the Children of Unity. Or, in the cases of many, they became the first workers in these very yards where you work today. I saw the bounty of our Stable shared, the water talisman given to a struggling town which now knows the joy of clean and pure water. I focused the great minds of our best science ponies towards the task of the coming new age.”

"The only thing that remains of my home is the cloak I wear as a reminder," Red Eye claimed, smiling down at us. "Everything I have ever had, I have given. As you do today..." His eyes, both mechanical and natural, looked over the ponies in the crowd. His voice was paternal. "And I could not be prouder of all of you."

He glanced back to Stern. The black-colored griffin nodded her white-feathered head, but her beak twisted in a scowl of dislike the moment he turned away. The alicorn in the air continued to circle, keeping her eyes out for unidentified floating objects.

Looking to us again, bathing us in his smile beneath the slate-colored clouds, Red Eye announced, "And so I come bringing the gift of respite. Tomorrow shall be a day of rest. None shall labor. Furthermore, the bounty of the Roamer Bar stills will be made freely available to you, for those who wish to taste the finest horse whisky Fillydelphia has to offer!"

The words of the leader of our slavers was met with clapping applause and shouts of joy. It was insanity. The gratitude of the crowd made as much sense as our oatmeal. I looked around and found a few ponies who were not celebrating. One of them was Daff, although Blood seemed to be cheering for the both of them.

Red Eye grinned kindly, and then waved his hoof for quiet. The roars and stomping died away uneasily, as if strangled. "And I have also arranged for entertainment. Two full Events in The Pit, with seating for everypony to enjoy!" He looked down over us. "That is, of course, if I can get some volunteers."

The quiet became a hard silence. The slave ponies looked to each other.

"And we have one!" Red Eye announced as he looked into the crowd. "Any more?"

I looked around to see which pony had volunteered for the blood sport. Daff was holding up a hoof. Blood was staring at him in shock.

Then, slowly, in a show of companionship that I thought beyond the vicious ex-raider mare, Blood stood next to the piss-colored stallion and raised her own hoof, lowering her head to sigh.

“Fuck you, Daffodil,” she muttered. “I hate you so much.”

Red Eye’s voice counted out, “That’s two!...”



Everything went to hell about an hour after Red Eye’s speech.

I was making my way back towards the Bumper-Plow structure when a mare’s scream jolted me into a run. The scream was coming from inside a building whose decaying paint job proclaimed “Fillydelphia FunFarm Mirror Maze and House of Wacky Reflections!” The mare screamed again, and I charged inside.

The interior of the building was dark and dusty, the air filled with motes, the floor covered in shattered glass. I levitated myself a little as I moved, not wanting to cut my hooves. The place was a maze, just as advertised, but very few of the mirror frames held anything more than a few nasty shards jutting against their backboards. Old graffiti suggested that a raider band had once used the place for “fun” of their own design.

“No! Get off me!” the mare cried out, and I skidded to a stop as I recognized the voice. It was Blood.

I heard laughter. And a buck’s voice, husky and cruel, ask, “Now why shouldn’t you have some fun tonight? It’s only right, seeing that you’re going to die in The Pit tomorrow!”

I heard a grunt that sounded like Daff. And then the sound of wood impacting pony flesh.

I trotted forward until I caught the scene reflected in the remaining third of a shattered mirror. Two slave master ponies had Blood pressed back against a wall. I could see blood flowing from her back where the jagged fragments of the mirror behind her were cutting into her tail and flanks. One of the slavers was a unicorn, and he was floating a lever-

action shotgun at Blood's face as he pressed lewdly against her. The buck next to him covered her with a sawed-off shotgun almost identical to the first firearm I had ever seen.

Three more slavers were piled on Daff. One, a mare, was trying to beat him into submission with the butt of her rifle.

My heart flared with rage. I felt my nerves ignite. A pony in my head tried to remind me that I couldn't start killing slavers. That my only chance to get at Red Eye required keeping a low profile until I could get close. That I still had a lot of work to do...

...that I really didn't want to save that sadistic bitch and her rapist buckfriend anyway. What the hell was I doing risking my life, risking everything, for *them*?

And absolutely none of that mattered, as the slavers learned when the glare from my horn was matched by the light that flooded over hundreds of deadly-sharp shards of mirrored glass.

The slaver pony with the sawed-off shotgun managed to get a shot off before the room became a cuisinart. He missed.



The particularly bloody murder of five slavers was *not* going unnoticed. The one shot fired had drawn attention, and now I was running through the maze, trying desperately to figure my way out while slaver guards in heavy barding and battle saddles gave chase.

I'd left Blood and Daff alive and in shock, the corridor decorated with a scene so bloody it would have made raiders envious. I had snatched up the lever-action shotgun and the mare's rifle, but I hadn't had time to search the remains. I had only the ammo currently in the firearms. According to my Eyes-Forward Sparkle, that wasn't much: two shots in the shotgun, twelve in the rifle.

Red marks on my EFS compass told me that two more guards were ahead of me. They undoubtedly had the building surrounded outside. My only hope was to get out of here and change terrain before there

was enough time for more than the closest slavers' forces to be brought to bear.

I wished I'd chosen to bring the StealthBuck after all.

The red marks moved, weaving through the maze, drawing closer. I crouched down, hiding, shotgun ready. The moment the first guard's head appeared in the corridor, I slid into S.A.T.S. and opened fire. The slaver guard went down hard, bleeding from a hole torn in her throat. The second was right behind her. I put the only other shot I had into her face, centered on her left eye. Then I discarded the lever-action shotgun and galloped ahead.

I heard shouts and the galloping sounds of armor-shod hooves on shattered glass behind me.

Ahead, I spotted an open doorway, twilight pouring in around the slaver pony positioned there. She was a unicorn, and was floating a riot shield in front of her as she finished setting up a chain gun in the entrance. Fuck!

I dove into another passage and backed towards a dead end as I weighed my options. The slavers behind me were getting closer.

I bumped into the mirror behind me, a splash of cold washing over my body from the touch. I turned, looking into the only fully intact mirror in the House of Wacky Reflections and froze.

Staring back at me was me... but not me. The Littlepip staring back at me was wearing cobbled-together raider armor. She was shot to hell, dying, her body giving out as she glared at me in a swiftly deteriorating battle stance, her gaze daring me to make another move.

I shrank back in horror, turned, and ran.

Right into the path of the chain gun.

I would have been bloody giblets if my sudden appearance hadn't completely surprised the unicorn mare. The moment it took her to recover was just enough for me to telekinetically grab the gun and spin

it around, opening fire. The riot shield was sorely insufficient to its rather awesome firepower.

I paused a moment in a futile attempt to pull the chaingun off its mounting and take it with me. Then dashed out the door.

A sniper in one of the Pinkie Pie Balloons took a shot. The bullet whizzed past me, tearing into a ruined popcorn cart. I started weaving, making myself as difficult a target as possible. I needed someplace safe, preferably someplace high. It was time to call Calamity. This whole plan was a bust.

A griffin swooped overhead, strafing at me with a submachine gun. I changed course, hoping I wasn't being corralled.

I was. The path in front of me dead-ended at the wrought iron fence that surrounded the amusement park. They had maneuvered me into a trap.

At least, that was their intention. As I galloped past an overturned confectionary stand ("Pinkie Pie's Pink Pies!") I magically scooped up a dozen scattered pie tins, floating them ahead of me. I levitated them each higher than the last, forming stepping stairs. Wrapping myself with a levitation field to virtually negate my own weight, I ran up the stairway of pie tins and leapt over the fence.

The Pinkie Pie Balloon sniper fired again, putting a hole through the last tin just as my hoof left it. The griffin turned and continued the chase. But at least for the moment, I had reduced my opponents to two.

I dove, rolling, and brought up my targeting spell, unleashing half the bullets from the rifle into the griffin's armored underbelly as she flew over me. Talon armor turned out to be very good. She was not dead, not even bloodied, but the impacts knocked the wind from her, driving her to land roughly.

I rolled back to my hooves as another sniper shot struck the ground right where my head had been. I needed to get out from under this sniper pony! She was no Calamity, but she was a frighteningly good shot. And it would only take one hit.

I ran for the nearest intact building, firing the last of my bullets into the two guard ponies standing watch in front of it. I tossed the rifle, telekinetically swooping up one of the guards' automatic pistols as a replacement, and burst through the front doors of the Alpha-Omega Hotel.



The hotel which had once hosted the Summer Sun Celebration had seen better centuries. The aura of ruined opulence clung to the interior like its faded and peeling wallpaper. The air was dingy and filled with little motes of dust and decay. Small rains of plaster occasionally fell from the cracks in the ceiling.

The hotel was home to ponies who knew they were on a glorified death row.

Ponies sat along the bar, drinking their night away, knowing that tomorrow most of them would be slaughtered in bloody spectacle for the amusement of the crowds. Crowds full of fellow slaves who could somehow look into The Pit and not see themselves. Who could look... and actually cheer.

My heart felt sick as I walked quickly through the small throng of silent slave ponies. They glanced my way briefly, if at all. They didn't care. Why should they? We were, apparently, incapable of caring about each other.

I brushed dampness from my eyes and looked for the stairs. If I could make it to the roof, I could call Calamity and get the hell out of here.

I made my way up the Alpha-Omega, hooves plodding on rotting carpet. My EFS was picking up a host of friendly marks, but no sign of anypony (or griffin) who was hostile. I passed a painting of Celestia standing gracefully in what looked like a grand ballroom, a kind smile on her face, surrounded by colorful ponies in the fever of a party. The Summer Sun Celebration in full swing.

The painting was graying from age and dust.

“Goddesses, this is a depressing place,” I muttered, almost wishing for more guards to come charging up behind me, if only so the adrenaline would shield me from the blanket of despair that was beginning to smother me.

Why weren’t they? I should have all of Stern’s armies on my tail by now. It’s not like that sniper didn’t see where I went.

Maybe they considered me trapped? But even then, I can’t imagine they would just sit back and let me make a home in here. Why weren’t they coming in?

I found the next flight of stairs and started up.

I was just clearing the top when all the friendly lights on my EFS started turning red. I was picking up dozens of hostiles now. Far too many; the lights burred together, making it impossible to identify the positions of individual opponents.

I floated up the automatic pistol and crouched low, hoping I could sneak past most of them.

The door opened, not by my horn or hoof, but by the telekinetic pull of a unicorn pony on the other side. I immediately slid into S.A.T.S., targeting the colt before he even saw me. And froze again.

A colt!

The child, who was floating a single-shot shotgun next to him inexpertly, wasn’t even old enough to have a cutie mark.

Beyond him I saw other children, young fillies and colts all looking well-nourished, well cared for... and annoyingly well-armed. The room itself was brightly lit and recently painted in cheery colors. The worst of the cracks had been repaired (I suspected by magic), and the air was considerably cleaner. Unlike every other building used by either slavers or slaves, this floor had been restored to a fair reflection of its former glory. My eyes widened further as I spotted what was clearly a school room through the doorway opposite this one.

Red Eye’s words echoed through my head:

Our nation's young ones are, and have always been, my highest priority. All that we sacrifice, we do for them, to give them a better place.

The scene before my eyes was simultaneously wonderful and horrifying.

Young children, ripped from the homes of their families and given to the care of “loving, approved mares and stallions.” Their real families were dying in the city below, trapped and enslaved behind The Wall. While they themselves were being given the best possible care... probably the best possible *life* in the Equestrian Wasteland.

And they were being taught. Education. Indoctrination. Of course they loved him. They would be ready to kill for him.

Red Eye was building schools. And he was about to have the ability to print his own textbooks.

This scene was going to be repeated *everywhere*.

I couldn't do it. I killed S.A.T.S.

I couldn't sneak past all of them. And I couldn't, just couldn't, fight them.

“Hey!” the colt called down the stairs. “She's up here!”

I turned to flee, only to see a midnight blue alicorn moving silently up the stairs towards me.

I would have facehoofed if I had been given the chance. I had actually wondered why no one was coming in after me. By the Goddesses, how could I have forgotten some of these monsters can turn invisible?

The alicorn's horn was glowing. A metal apple floated towards me, the pin pulled. The alicorn would survive, but even if I did, the colt next to me would not. If there was time, I might have stopped to wonder why the alicorn would threaten a child if they were so clearly precious to Red Eye. But there was no time. Instinctively, I lashed out with my magic, trying to knock the grenade away.

I realized my mistake as the world started to slip away from me. The last thing I saw in this world was the alicorn drop the illusion that surrounded the memory orb.

They remembered. They learned. And I had been bested by my own trick.



Everything shot into almost brutal sharpness. Colors were more colorful. The lines around objects almost vibrant. The sunlight was sunnier than I had ever imagined it could be. Bright and warm and glorious beyond belief. I could smell the bush I was standing behind, the flowers nearby, the grass. I could smell the two ponies I was watching. The sweat on Applejack would have made me stir in recently wounded places if this had been my own body.

It was not, however -- a fact to which I was hyper-aware. I could feel a slight burning on my left forehoof, as if I'd recently touched a hot stove. I had an itch on my cheek, an odd pain in my hindlegs that was barely noticeable, a tingle along my back. There was a familiar and delicious peppermint taste on my tongue.

Oh no...

With dawning horror, I realized that my pony host was high on Mint-als.

Oh please no! I can't take this!

The effects were nowhere near as pronounced. I was getting the heightened perceptions, but none of the other effects. Still, it was too comfortable, too alluring.

"Howdy, Fluttershy," Applejack said, greeting her friend with a smile as the yellow pegaus landed gently on the grass as if worried about hurting it.

"Hello, Applejack," the pegasus said meekly.

"So, what brings ya about these parts?"

"Well..." The shy pegasus looked down, crossing one leg over the other. "I... um... that is..."

Applejack rolled her eyes. "Good gravy, girl. Spit it out, already. Is something wrong?"

The pegasus took a deep breath and then said in a rush, "Are you looking for a close marefriend? Because, if you are, we could... um... you know?" She paused, all too obviously having no clue what good marefriends did in the privacy of their own beds.

My host stifled a giggle as Applejack's eyes went wide. Then she scowled, trotting past the deeply blushing pegasus to slam her head repeatedly against a tree.

When she finished, she turned on Fluttershy. "All right. That's enough. What is it with all muh friends hittin' on me, pretendin' Ah'm a fillyfooler? Y'all know better. *And* y'all are straight." She took a step forward. Fluttershy eeped and took one back. "Fluttershy, Ah know you. So be straight with me."

The pun was probably not intended.

"Well..."

"Did Rainbow Dash put ya up to this?" Applejack demanded.

"oh!" Fluttershy squeaked but shook her head. "No."

Applejack looked dubious. "So yer sayin' ya just thought this up all by yer lonesome?"

Fluttershy shook her head.

"So Rainbow Dash did put ya up t' it!"

"No," she insisted softly. My host began to move, silently creeping out from behind the bush.

“But... somepony did?” Applejack sussed out. Her yellow friend nodded. “Who?”

My host had moved up behind Applejack so quickly and stealthily even I hadn’t seen it happen. Still, it bewildered me how we could be standing this close and neither of the ponies seemed to notice us. Were we invisible? It certainly wouldn’t be the first time I had found myself in a magically hidden being who was spying on the Ministry Mares. But I was clearly in an earth pony...

Applejack turned around only to find herself nose-to-nose with my host. Spooked, she jumped away so fast she toppled onto her back. “Pinkie Pie!”

“Hiya.” I felt my muzzle say, hearing the words in a high-pitched but pretty voice. “Aww! Ya caught me!”

“What in tarnation are...” The blonde-maned orange pony stopped. Then facehoofed while still lying on her back in a most undignified position. “You! This has all been one of yer and Rainbow’s practical jokes, ain’t it?”

“Yep!” I heard myself say happily as I began to bounce. *Bounce!?*

Applejack pulled herself back onto her hooves, staring at me and my host crossly. “Care if Ah ask why?”

“Well, you’ve been totally a mopey-pony since the funeral...”

“Of course Ah have!” Applejack shot. “Ah buried muh brother!”

“...and you’ve been working really, really hard,” Pinkie Pie plowed on. “An’ ya haven’t been getting out, or going to parties, or seeing your friends. And you haven’t even talked to a buck in, like, for-ev-er!...”

Applejack huffed. “How would ya know if Ah’ve...” She stopped abruptly, realizing just how stupid a question that was considering who she was asking. Fluttershy had slipped back a ways, almost hiding.

“...and you’re all worked up and stressed and you’re gonna burn yourself out if you aren’t careful, and you really, really need to get *laid!*”

Applejack hung her head. Pinkie Pie was... incorrigible at best. "This ain't gonna end until Ah get myself a buckfriend, is it?"

"Nope!" Pinkie Pie announced bouncily. How the hell could she bounce on all hooves like that? I was *inside* her, and I still couldn't figure it out.

"Well, would it help if Ah said there is a buck Ah've had muh eye on?"

Pinkie Pie stopped bouncing and stared off into space. The itch on the side of her cheek migrated to her chin. She looked back to Applejack, "Yep, that's the truth. But itchy chin means you haven't *told* him yet. You gotta talk to him!"

Applejack sighed. "An' if Ah do, this nonsense stops?" I watched the world rock as Pinkie Pie nodded enthusiastically.

My host started chanting "Do it!" rambunctiously as she bounced in circles around Applejack.

"Fine." Applejack reached out a hoof and stopped Pinkie Pie. "On one condition!"

"What?"

"Y'all got ta swear..." Applejack turned to look at Fluttershy. "...Both o' ya, that Rainbow Dash don't hear a word o' this!"

"But..." Pinkie Pie started, "If Rainbow Dash doesn't know, how will she know that it's time t' stop the prank, silly?"

"Ah can deal with it from Rainbow," Applejack said sternly. "Least, now that Ah know where it's comin' from. But this possible buckfriend o' mine?... well, he's got a kinda funny name... an' Ah think Rainbow might not be able t' keep herself from messin' things up."

Wow, that came out badly. Applejack seemed to realize it too. "Look, Ah'll tell her muhself when Ah'm ready. Not b'fore." She looked at her two friends. "Now y'all Pinkie Pie Swear it!"

Pinkie Pie Swear?

My host's reaction was immediate. I struggled to keep track of the odd motions (which ended with sticking a hoof in my eye!) that accompanied the little singsong that Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy managed to do in perfect synchronicity.

"Cross my heart and hope to fly. Stick a cupcake in my eye!"

Applejack breathed a sigh of relief. The three friends began to walk, my host falling slowly behind.

"Oh... there it is again."

Applejack and Fluttershy both stopped, looking back. "There what is?"

"Burning hoof means Littlepip's watching me," Pinkie Pie blurted out impossibly. "Or will be watching me. I'm not sure yet." She bounced after her friends. "Who's Littlepip?"



"The furnace pits?" Stern suggested, glaring at me. I was bound and shackled to the floor. And, as if that was not enough, two green-coated alicorns stood frozen beside me, trapping me inside a shield.

Not only had I done most of the things that Stern considered a death sentence, I had done them with aggressive results. I had still failed, but she took the time to name each slaver I managed to kill before my inevitable capture.

"No," said Red Eye, eliciting a look of shock and displeasure from the griffin. The cybernetically-augmented stallion walked up to face me. "I'm feeling particularly generous today."

I doubted I would much care for his definition of generosity. But the horrific tale of a pony being devoured from inside by an ever-growing number of parasprites left me thankful all the same.

Addressing me directly, Red Eye asked, "Do you think I'm a monster?"

Bluntly, I answered, "Yes."

He shrugged. "Because, of course, I am. And you, Stable Dweller, can probably see it more clearly than most. Because you and I are a lot alike, are we not."

"Not even slightly," I hissed, lying through my teeth.

Red Eye chuckled. "I've heard of your exploits. I think we are more the same than you would like. You've just had it easy so far."

Enraged, I spat, "Easy!? You think what I've been through out here has been *easy*!?"

Red Eye gave me an almost fatherly smile. "The fact that you can still stand there and judge me tells me so. You have had hardships I am sure. But you've never been forced to give up your principles for the greater good. To sacrifice yourself and become a monster because it was the right thing to do."

Oh how I disagreed!

"You couldn't do it even to escape," he noted. "For which, by the way, I am very grateful. Had you harmed a hair on even one of those children..." He paused, then simply said, "Thank you."

Red Eye turned towards Stern. His cape fell into view, a rough rectangle made from Stable security barding. The number 101 was visible in yellow against the black cloth.

"Take her back downstairs and keep her under shield. Tomorrow, she fights in The Pit."



Lined up in the darkness with five other ponies, I spent an hour rummaging through the recorded messages of Miss Periwinkle. Most were worthless, but one was actually from a Ministry Mare... and not the one I had been expecting.

"Dear Miss Periwinkle," the voice began. I found it very odd to hear

an audio message addressed like it was a letter.

"It was a pleasure to hear from you again. The new posters for the libraries are absolutely perfect. I hope it will not be a burden to have two hundred produced by next week?

"I also have a... more delicate matter to ask you about.

"Let me preface this by saying that for decades now, ever since she taught me her gem-finding spell, Rarity and I have gotten together at irregular intervals to swap magical spells.

"I must admit, and please believe I do not say this to brag, it has been a long time since she brought anything that I hadn't already learned myself. That is, until three days ago.

"I was thrilled to see that she had learned a trick I had never seen before. She had enchanted a small mirror. To look in it, you would see your reflection, just as with any mirror. But if you touched it, or focused your magic on it, then a spell within the mirror took... well, the way she put it, the mirror took a picture of your soul. Then a second enchantment allowed the mirror to show that image. As Rarity told me, the mirror could show you what you looked like on the outside... or on the inside.

"I must admit... I wasn't ready for what I saw. And I'm still not sure about it. But that's... personal. Rather, I wanted to ask you if you could give me any clue as to where Rarity may have learned enchantments like that. I know Rarity would re-fashion any magical spell until it was customized to her wishes; but honestly, I've been scouring my books, but I've found nothing that even remotely resembles these spells. I know you have worked closely with her the last few months, so I hoped you would have an idea.

"Also, it's hardly worth mentioning, but the spell felt... cold. Not like Rarity's spells at all.

"Anyway, this is mostly just a matter of rampant curiosity, and I ask that you please not mention this to her. But if you have any idea, I really would appreciate it if you let me know.

"Your friend,

"Twilight Sparkle."

I deleted the messages from my PipBuck, but kept that one.

I sat in silent darkness with five other marked souls and waited.



The noise outside told me that the seating around the arena was quickly filling. I heard Stern, her voice magnified over the speakers, welcoming everypony to the bloody show. I heard hooves pounding bleachers in applause.

My face twisted in disgust. How could they? This was sick.

Earlier, a slave master pony had attached a sheet to my flank, covering my cutie mark. She had snarled and whispered to me her fondest desires that my suffering be deep and excruciating and very slow. She had known one of the rapist slavers. The only reason I survived being numbered was because Stern was watching, but she still got away with covering the bottom side of the sheet with some sort of stinging powder that was making it hard for me to concentrate.

I was number three.

Blood and Daff were numbers one and two, respectively. They sat closest to the gate, looking out at the arena -- a large plot of broken cement underneath a cage from which several barrels were suspended. I could see pressure plates set up like mines all over. Neither of them had spoken to me, going out of their way to ignore my existence. I couldn't decide whether to be hurt or relieved.

"Used to be an ice skating rink," the blue-colored buck with number four on his flank said conversationally. "Apparently, the owner of the FunFarm had a thing for ice skating. Just be thankful that Red Eye removed the water talisman and put it to better use. These fights are brutal enough without having to do them on ice."

I tried to imagine that and just couldn't. Outside the crowds began to chant for the first fight, their hoofstomps falling into a unity that would make the Goddess proud. Part of me wanted to hurt them. And these were the ponies I was trying to save.

“Hey, consider yourself lucky,” the blue buck joked. “Being number three ain’t bad. Has anypony told you how these things work?”

I shook my head. The roar outside rose to a crescendo. There was a loud buzz, then a clanging sound as the gate was levitated up by a unicorn nopony inside could see.

“Round one!” Stern’s voice boomed.

“From the Red Gate: all the way from the Rock Farms, we have Cinderblock! This is his second Event, so you know he’s got some hooves on him! And from the Black Gate: she’s tough, she’s mean, she’s a raider with a body count higher than the spikes in her hair... it’s Blood!”

Blood got up, looking dejectedly at the open gate for a moment, then held her head up and trotted out, putting on a brave face that I didn’t believe even a little bit.

“You see,” Number Four was telling me, “There are two gates. We’re Black Gate. Each gate has six fighters, randomly numbered. If you survive your first round, you will be pitted against the next opponent from the Red Gate. Event lasts until all the opponents from one gate are dead. The survivors from the other gate live fight in the next Event.”

I looked at Blood and winced. “So, basically, it sucks to be number one.” I couldn’t believe I was feeling sympathy for the vile raider mare.

“Well, it’s a give and take,” Number Four said. I looked at him quizzically. “I mean, true, if you’re a high enough number, it’s possible you won’t have to fight at all. And anypony who survives six Events is set free. Doesn’t matter if he actually *fought* or not.” I got the feeling that Number Four had made it through at least one Event just that way.

“You even get a spot in Red Eye’s army!” he added enthusiastically. I considered pointing out to him the sort of position Red Eye would likely appoint him to if he never won a fight. But I kept my muzzle shut.

The sudden roar of the crowd snapped my attention back to the arena.

Blood was down, soaking in a pool of her own... well, blood. Cinderblock, an athletic-looking light grey buck, was rearing his hooves in victory. The fight had lasted seconds.

My heart sank.

"What was the benefit of being first again?" I asked dully.

Number Four leaned close, apparently unable to comprehend personal space. "Well, you see those barrels? And you see those plates?" I nodded to each. "Step on a plate, the barrel above drops. Now the barrels are full of nasty stuff. Usually radioactive goo, but sometimes its something worse. I heard they once had one filled with tainted ooze."

I shuddered, looking up at the cage that had been constructed over the arena and the barrels hanging from it. A few griffins flew high above, watching the show with binoculars or through rifle scopes. My eyes caught a swinging door built into the cage, kept closed by a simple padlock.

"Round Two!" Stern cried out.

"From the Black Gate, we have Daffodil!" The crowd broke into snickers and chortles as Daff got up and stepped out into the arena. He took one look at the bloody corpse of his companion and then locked Cinderblock with a hard stare that I could almost feel from behind him.

Daffodil charged at the light grey pony. Cinderblock ran... not towards him, but towards one of the pressure plates. The barrel above didn't exactly drop. Rather, as the grey pony raced across the plate, the underside of the barrel swung open and a dozen mines rained down, hitting the ground and bouncing in all directions. Daff changed direction with a deftness I would not have expected.

The mines were rigged for fast detonation, only beeping once before exploding in a flash of smoke and shrapnel. Cinderblock had almost been fast enough, but his hind legs were peppered and torn as he was flung forward. He was still struggling to get back on his bleeding legs when Daff reached him.

I knew how hard those hooves hit. But seeing this, I suspected that Daff had held back when he bucked the living fuck out of me. Even with his last, low blow.

The crowd beat their hooves and cried out for more as Daff pummeled the other buck, breaking first his legs, then every other bone he could before killing him.

I tasted bile.

"Mines," Number Four mused. "Well, that was a new one." I shot him a dark look. "Hey, like I was saying, those barrels have nasty things. But they also always have a weapon or two in them. So if you're first, you get your pick of the prizes. And if you go last, well... you go up against an opponent with their choice of weapons, in an arena filled with ooze and Goddess knows what else, and all you have are your hooves. Fighting last sucks."

"Round Three!" Stern finally announced after Daff had stopped brutalizing Cinderblock and started just beating a dead pony.

"From the Black Gate, we still have Daffodil, after a surprising and entertaining first performance. I don't think any of you ponies are snickering at his name *now*, are you?"

The crowd applauded the crimson-splattered buck whose angry-flower cutie mark was now partially visible behind his number two patch, which was sagging and wet with Cinderblock's lifeblood.

"And now, the one I know you've all been waiting for!"

The crowd hushed with gleeful anticipation.

"From the Red Gate: she's demonic, she's exotic, and she has never lost a fight! Give it up for our Champion four-Events-running! Xenith!"

My first thought, struck in my brain at the word "exotic", was a pegasus mare. The idea of facing a flying opponent in this arena was terrifying. And, if she was as good as advertised, I would be facing her as soon as she finished killing Daff.

The Red Gate opened and Xenith stepped out into the arena to absolutely thunderous, overwhelming applause. From her grim expression, she wasn't enjoying it one bit. From the look she gave Daff, she was going to kill him, she knew it and it brought her no pleasure at all.

From her lack of wings, she wasn't a pegasus. From her stripes, she wasn't even a pony.

"She's a zebra!"

Footnote: Level Up.

**New Perk: Cooler Under Fire - You regenerate Action Points faster.
How much faster? You guessed it: 20% faster!**

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



XENITH

“The fate of Equestria does not rest on me making friends.”

Zebras.

Equestria’s enemies. The creatures who slaughtered us by the millions and destroyed our lands with poisoned clouds and balefire bombs.

The creatures which were constantly portrayed as demonic, nightmarish, virtually without souls. Creatures who, according to the propaganda of the Ministry of Image, embodied the antitheses of pony virtues.

“Yeah...” I thought, looking out into a caged arena where ponies murdered each other brutally for the sport of slaves. “...because we ponies are so noble.”

Was it fair to paint Xenith with all the wrongdoings of the members of her race centuries dead? No more so than to blame me for the things ponies must have done to them.

I had my own sins to bear the guilt for.

And now, assuming a raider buck named Daffodil didn't strike her down, I was expected to fight this zebra. And either kill her, or die by her hooves. Most likely the latter. I had been stripped of everything that I could use as a weapon. Even the screwdriver I had fought so hard for and felt I had earned had been taken. I had my horn, my hooves, my single spell, and S.A.T.S. My brawling skills were, to put it bluntly, pathetic. It would be a miracle if I survived.

I had managed miracles before. That was Red Eye's intention: that either I should die, or that I should be forced to kill other slaves, this zebra being only one of many, compromising the parts of me I held sacred just so that I might live long enough to kill him.

Either way would be a victory for him. Although the latter, if I did manage to kill him, would be a pyrrhic victory at best.

I thought of the image in the mirror. Littlepip as a raider, soaked in blood, dying. That was *not* my soul, of that I was certain! But... I knew that I could become that. I was already swimming in the slaughter of my enemies.

I realized that I was Monterey Jack, forced between destroying what allowed me to live with myself, or just dying.

I needed another option.



The heat of the sun pushed down through black clouds, baking the red-tinged hellscape of Fillydelphia. Daffodil stood firm, snorting heavily, the mangled corpse of Cinderblock oozing blood that soaked into the ground around Daff's hooves.

The body of Blood, Daff's raider companion, lay not far away, her own blood drying and caking.

Daff looked at her, and I could see hurt on his face. I realized that she was just going to lay there, baking in the heat, until all the fights were over. I wanted to scream. He wasn't even given time to mourn. The next fight had already begun.

Daff turned, locking his gaze on the zebra named Xenith. An extremely rare sight in the Equestrian Wasteland. Possibly even more so than a pegasus.

"Xenith's been in the slave pits for years," commented the blue-coated pony assigned to fight after I did. "We worked near each other in the alchemy huts up on the northside for about three months, mostly recycling flamethrower fuel. All that time, she never said a word. Way I heard it, the slavers who captured her cut out her tongue after she said something offensive to them."

Number Four paused, "Her being a zebra and all, it was probably something downright egregious. Like 'Hello'."

I watched as the zebra stepped forward, moving up to Daff and lowering her head in what struck me as a sign of respect for her mortal opponent.

Daff didn't see it that way. He saw an opportunity, and he took it. Spinning around, he delivered a brutal buck right into her neck. The zebra fell sprawling.

Daff turned, rearing up, lifting both hooves over the fallen zebra. Xenith rolled onto her back and kicked out with her hindhooves, planting them ferociously into the rearing earth pony's exposed stomach. Daff fell, clutching his belly, coughing bloody spittle.

The zebra somersaulted onto her hooves.

Daff grunted and pushed himself back up, only for the zebra to crouch and spin on one forehoof, her outstretched hindlegs sweeping Daff's legs out from under him. He went down again.

I stared, my jaw falling nearly to the ground. I watched the zebra's fluid motions. She wasn't brawling -- this was more of a fighting art form. I'd never seen anything like it.

"Heh. Looks like Fallen Caesar Style... not that I'm an expert," Number Four noted with casual awe. His eyebrows shot up at my blank look. "Don't tell me you've entered The Pit without having read at least a few *Martial Arts of the Zebra* books? How do you expect to win?"

“N-no,” I stammered. Of all the books I’d stumbled across in my wasteland trek, I’d somehow managed to miss that one. “Of c-course not!” I turned back to the fight.

Daff had gotten back on his hooves and was circling the zebra. The zebra watched him, waiting for his attack with an almost eerie calm. He lunged, and she tossed herself down, planting a hoof into his breast and using his own momentum to fling him over her. Daff hit the dirt, sprawling.

She was a far better fighter. This was unfair.

But Daff was stronger. And he fought dirtier.

Xenith trotted cautiously closer. I suspected she was looking to end the fight while the piss-colored buck was still face-down in the dirt. Daff was trembling as if in exhaustion, and he moaned as he tried to push himself up only to have his legs go out from under him.

His weakness was a ruse. The moment Xenith got close enough, Daff twisted about on the ground and kicked a cloud of dirt and grit into her eyes. She whinnied, backing up, blinded. Her body sunk into a defensive position, prepared for immediate attack.

But Daff had seen something she apparently had not. And instead of turning to fight her, he dashed forward. I heard the BEEP of the undetonated mine as he galloped over it, kicking the explosive back towards the zebra with a hindhoof.

Xenith had heard it too. She flung herself away as best she could, the mine exploding in the air with almost two pony-lengths between itself and the zebra. Not lethal or even crippling, but enough to send her tumbling, the wind knocked out of her.

I felt myself gasp.

“Oh, she can handle a lot more than that,” Number Four commented. “The slavers regularly did a number on her back in the huts. Seemed to take great delight in taking everything out on her. Made it a lot easier on the rest of us.”

I bristled, wincing both at the mental images his words conjured and at the stinging in my flank. The powder that the slaver had trapped against my cutie mark was sinking its nasty teeth into my flesh.

“Hell, I remember one time a unicorn slave messed up with the recycling and set herself on fire. The slavers shot her so she didn’t run around setting the whole place ablaze. Then, after the flames had gone out, just for fun, they chopped off the unicorn’s head and raped the zebra with it.” Number Four at least had the decency to cringe a little. I was staring in utter horror. “Come to think of it, that was just before she volunteered for The Pit.”

Xenith was pulling herself up. Daff had used the moment of reprieve not to attack but to run across another of the pressure plates. The latch on the barrel above clicked free and the bottom opened, releasing gallons of glowing green slosh. (“Yep, now that’s what most of them have,” Number Four commented.) Something large fell out in the goop, hitting the ground with a wet thud. Daff was out of the way of all but a few splashing drops, but those pulled a scream out of him. He danced, shaking the glowing crap off, then turned to see his prize.

An auto-axe lay in the spreading, luminescent green puddle, glistening wetly. Daff grimaced. Having just felt a few drops on his flanks, he didn’t seem inclined to put something bathed in that goop into his mouth.

Xenith was moving cautiously forward again. She’d gleaned enough of his tactics to know she didn’t wish to engage Daff anywhere near that glowing puddle. They began to circle the spill opposite of each other, each keeping their distance from the slosh, Xenith even more than Daff.

The ponies in the bleachers began to stomp in unison. “Fight! Fight! Fight!”

Daff made a move. He had managed to circle around so he was within range of Cinderblock’s corpse, with Xenith on the other side of the pool. Dashing over Cinderblock’s remains, he drew up his hindhooves...

BUCK! Cinderblock’s corpse flew behind him.

Splloosh! A wave of the green sludge surged towards Xenith. The zebra pinwheeled to the side in a maneuver I didn't even think possible.

She charged towards Daff.

The large buck saw her coming and crouched down, holding his ground. He drove both hindhooves towards her in a powerful strike the moment she got within hoof's reach.

But Xenith jumped. She leapt clean over Daffodil, striking the nape of his neck with a passing hoof. She landed in a graceful roll that ended with her back on her hooves, facing him.

Daff seemed frozen in place. He stared, unmoving.

"Paralyzing Hoof!" Number Four announced. "Now that's *definitely* Fallen Caesar Style."

She could paralyze a pony with a hoofstrike? How the hell was I supposed to fight against that?

Daff toppled over. Xenith trotted up to the fallen pony, her sad gaze looking into his wide and fearful eyes. The crowd began to chant and pound their hoofs. "Kill! Kill! Kill!"

Stern's voice called out, bizarrely magnified. "Finish it!"

The zebra planted one hoof on Daff's neck. She lowered her head, her muzzle lingering next to his ear a moment before she bit into his mane. She pulled her head back with a hard jerk. I heard Daff's neck crack.

Xenith's teeth let go of the dead pony's mane. She trotted towards the center of the arena and waited for her next opponent. Me.



The midday heat was becoming stifling under the thick, choking blanket of the Fillydelphia cloud cover. My cracked rib ached. My flank was stinging so badly I had to wipe tears from my eyes.

Xenith stood, watching me with those sad eyes, as I plodded into the arena.

Now that I was inside, rather than watching through a gate, I could see more of The Pit. But it was mostly just more of the same. There was a third entrance -- a set of double doors behind which I imagined slaver guards were waiting ready to gallop into what had once been an ice-skating rink at the first sign of real trouble. I could see Stern standing on a raised and barricaded platform above and behind the bleachers. She was wearing an odd pre-war headset that I suspected was responsible for amplifying her voice. She was also wearing her anti-machine rifle, slung back over her Talon armor.

And I could see the mob of ponies staring down into the arena with gleeful anticipation. I noticed a few were eating snacks. I felt a flare of anger. A pony wouldn't want to see me brutally murdered on an empty stomach after all.

"I'm trying to save all of you WHY?" I screamed out at them. For just a moment, I could understand how Red Eye morally justified putting these ponies through such suffering to build a better world. I didn't agree, but I could comprehend it.

You see, little pony? Mister Topaz had said. 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 remember my answer.

Xenith stepped closer to me. I could see that her body bore many scars under her striped coat. Her cutie mark (or whatever zebra's have on their flanks in place of one) was a squiggly jumble of lines, looking more like a complex glyph than a proper cutie mark icon. On her right flank, it looked like somepony had snuffed out cigars against it.

She lowered her head as she neared me. That same posture which I had taken before as a show of respect.

Then, very softly, so that only I could hear, Xenith whispered, "I'm sorry."

I froze, stunned. The zebra who hadn't even spoken out when slave-masters were raping her with a dead pony's horn broke her silence for me. A sign of respect indeed.

Of course, I realized, she had played the mute because doing anything else would have resulted in actually losing her tongue. She could break it to me because I was about to die.

I also realized, a moment too late, that her words had effectively dropped my guard.

Xenith struck me with her forehooves, driving them into my wounded side. I heard and felt as my cracked rib broke and punctured into one of my lungs. I collapsed, sliding backwards from the force of the blow. The world swam as I struggled for air.

It was like she'd known just where to strike to cause the most injury. (As opposed to Daff, who had just known where to cause the most pain.)

I looked into the sky, a red fog seeping into the edges of my vision. I saw the griffins flying above, their talons holding rifles. I could hear the pounding of over two hundred hooves as the ponies in the bleachers called for my death.

A shadow fell over me. I turned to see Xenith rearing up, her hooves raising above my face for a swift final blow.

I gasped, my horn flaring, and kicked against the ground. My levitation blanket wrapped around me, making me nearly weightless, and I surged up off the ground like a kicked balloon. The zebra's hooves slammed into dirt that still bore the imprint of my head.

"Wait!" I gasped again, feeling the strain of levitating myself while I was struggling for proper breath. "We... we don't have to do this..."

The zebra looked up to me with an expression of resignation and pity.

"Please... don't do what they want you to do!" I was sinking back towards the ground slowly. Xenith watched, waiting for me to come back within reach. "Join me. We can escape together."

Xenith snorted, giving me a look that made me wonder just how many ponies had made this offer before. But none, I suspected, who could actually succeed.

"FIGHT! FIGHT! FIGHT!" cried the crowd.

"I have a plan..." I offered, trying to sound more confident than I was. My success rate with plans in the last few days had not been self-inspiring. This entire plot had been amazingly ill-conceived.

In truth, I had been arrogant -- so prideful of my ability to improvise, so full of myself from past victories, that I actually thought I could walk into the enemy camp with nothing but my wits... and win. I let the Elder convince me this was the only way because it conveniently allowed me to protect my friends. Instead, I had become a slave, and now I was desperately attempting to float beyond the reach of a zebra's devastating hoofstrikes.

It was time to get out, regroup and hopefully come up with a strategy less mind-bogglingly stupid.

Xenith jumped, a forehoof striking me in the breast. Pain exploded through my body! I screamed, my magic imploding as I dropped to the ground with a thud.

The zebra landed a pony's length away.

Gasping wretchedly for air, I looked up as she took a step backwards, bringing her hindhooves into bucking range.

My horn glowed again. In desperation, I wrapped the telekinetic field around her throat and began to tighten.

As I began to choke her, Xenith bucked at my unbroken ribs. But my choking had thrown off her aim just enough, and I had learned to dodge.

The zebra staggered as I tightened my telekinetic grip. There wasn't much physical force behind my telekinesis, but I had enough to crush her throat. I didn't want to kill the zebra mare, but I had to take her out of the fight.

Xenith wobbled, eyes bulging, nostrils flaring. For a moment, she gave me the same terrified look that Daff had given her. Then that look melted into resignation and she stopped struggling, watching me with a gaze that told me she had accepted my victory.

Then she passed out. I released her, letting her drop like a sack of apples.

“What an upset!” Stern’s voice boomed.

All around me, the air roared with thunderous applause.

“Kill! Kill! Kill!”

I struggled upright, painfully catching my breath, and looked up at the crowd. I hated them. Every one of them.

I trotted over to Xenith’s fallen form. She was breathing slowly.

I looked up at the barrels. My horn flared again, wrapping one of them in a magical field. But the barrel was securely fastened to the cage ceiling, and my telekinesis was not strong enough to tear it free.

Stern seemed to glean that I was up to something because she unslung her anti-machine rifle. “Finish it!” the griffin demanded. Couldn’t Stern at least call Xenith *‘her’*?

My mind flashed to the memory of how the barrels opened. I didn’t need to pull them down, just flip the latches. Latches were easy.

My horn glowed brightly.

Stern pulled her anti-machine rifle forward and peered at me through its scope. “Finish it now!”

The latches on the barrels sprung open. All of them.

My PipBuck clickclick*clicked* urgently. True to Number Four’s predictions, most of the barrels held glowing green sludge. And weapons. The barrel’s released their contents, raining down implements of death. A magical-energy lance, a sword, a chainsaw (a *chainsaw!?*) and even a couple firearms. I let them fall where the barrels dropped them. It was the sludge I wanted.

The luminescent goop was barely translucent. I spun it around and over the inside of the cage, creating a glowing green curtain, thin as film but enough to obscure me inside. I didn't want any of those griffins or guard slavers to be able to take shots at me. Immediately, I galloped into a new position; as I predicted, Stern fired a shot at where I had just been standing.

I felt tears in my eyes. The pain in my chest was burning, my breathing becoming more ragged as I tried to maintain focus in so many places at once. Each breath felt a little like drowning.

I wrapped another telekinetic sheath around myself, canceling out my weight, then extended it to wrap about the zebra as well. There was never any question that I would be taking her with me. The thought of leaving her behind here had never entered my mind.

My vision blurred. I forced myself to keep focus. My horn flared brighter, a layer of overglow erupting from it. It occurred to me that a keen-eyed griffin might be able to spot the glow of my horn through the curtain of muck.

But I needed to keep enough focus and channel enough power for just one more trick. And I needed more time.

I telekinetically grabbed the magical energy lance and wedged it across the double-doors seconds before slavers started slamming against them, trying to get in.

The curtain weakened, holes appearing along the top of it. One of those tears was almost directly above me, revealing the door in top of the cage which I had spotted earlier, bound closed with a simple padlock. I kicked off, sending myself floating upwards, my eyes fixed on the padlock. I had no bobby pins. My screwdriver had been stolen from me.

I should not need them.

Manipulating multiple objects that were out of sight was tricky, but I had pulled pins from grenades hidden in a sack. And I knew locks. I

knew tumblers and internal mechanisms. I should be able to pick a lock with my magic alone.

Reaching out with my magic, I enveloped the padlock in a gentle glow. My own horn flared as a second layer of overglow burst around the first. Streams of light poured from my head.

I felt a bullet lash past me, followed by the sound of a gunshot. Below, the blows against the double doors were causing the magical energy lance to bend.

I was still floating upward, carrying the unconscious zebra. We were nearing the cage. But our ascent was slowing alarmingly. One of the griffins above fired down at me, but the shot sparked off one of the bars of the cage.

"I can *do* this!" I told myself repeatedly.

A second shot sparked against the gate itself, inches from the padlock.

Who was I fooling? I could barely breathe! My magic faltered, the swirling curtain slipping, wavering.

No! "*I can do this!*"

I shifted the tumblers into place. The padlock sprung open. My vision swam again. I nearly lost everything.

The magical energy lance cracked in two. The doors below swung open and slavers stumbled into the arena.

Frantically, I hovered the padlock away and pushed open the gate. A moment later, we were through and I was running along the top of the cage as fast as my surviving lung would allow me. I let everything fall except my grasp around myself and Xenith. My whole body screamed in pain and exertion.

Shots rang out, bullets striking the cage about me from above and below. I weaved erratically, again doing my best to make a hard target. I was reaching the edge of the cage.

The ice arena was at the far end of the Fillydelphia FunFarm. With luck, I could jump from it over the fence, again putting a barrier between me and at least the ground-bound slavers.

The end of the cage came faster than I would have wanted. I jumped, screaming from the agony in my chest. The two of us soared out over the amusement park. My heart sank as I realized I had run the wrong way and my jump was taking me into the FunFarm rather than away from it.

A tearing kick jerked my right foreleg with a metallic crunch! The sound of Stern's anti-machine rifle followed closely after as searing red agony shot through my leg. The bullet had missed, just barely catching my PipBuck, but the force of that alone felt like it had shattered my leg!

I fell, my magical field imploding, collapsing onto a set of tracks several stories above the amusement park below.



I moaned, feeling the world thump rhythmically though my body as if I was riding a washing machine, and not in the way young fillies do to enjoy themselves. The world seemed crazily tilted. I could only take shallow breaths. Bright pain pulsed in my right foreleg. I heard gunfire.

Memory flooded back to me and my eyes shot open. I looked around, almost falling off the back of the zebra who was carrying me up a steep slope on the Fillydelphia FunFarm's roller coaster track.

I had been out for a few minutes at most. Long enough for the zebra to come to. Having awoken on the elevated tracks, jumping hadn't been an option. There were only two ways for her to go. I felt thankful that Xenith had returned the favor and taken me with her.

My first worry was for my PipBuck. I lifted my foreleg, but only managed to raise it a few inches before I let out a tortured scream, hot pain bursting through my leg.

My PipBuck had taken an indirect hit; it was not itself damaged, but the bullet had torn through the peripheral. The broadcaster was destroyed. And with it, my plan for escape.

I brought up my Eyes-Forward Sparkle. My PipBuck was flashing alerts. I had taken more rads from being in the middle of all that green sludge than my PipBuck liked. My chest and right foreleg had taken crippling wounds, the latter having suffered a wrenching sprain and a small hairline fracture in the bone.

Looking down, I saw slaver ponies shooting at us from the ground. By experience these mares and bucks were not the best shots even at close range. If they hit us at this distance with the cover of the tracks, it would be by sheer dumb luck.

Behind us even more were charging up the track, but they were well behind. It was the griffins that were the biggest threat. I looked around, but couldn't spot them. Which meant little.

Xenith reached the apex of the track, stopping just shy of it. A set of three colorfully-painted, pony-shaped carriages sat on the top of the roller coaster's hill, rusting for two hundred years. There wasn't any room to go around them, leaving the zebra no apparent choice but to climb over them.

She cautiously put a hoof onto the orange rear carriage and pressed her weight down on it. The carriage gave a metallic groan. She looked back at me with a grimace that I was able to match.

I focused, wrapping us in a levitation field to reduce our weight. Perspiration broke across my head. Hot coals formed in my lungs, only one of which could catch breath. The effort sucked all the remaining strength out of me. My magical field popped as I nearly blacked out again.

No. Dammit, why did this have to be happening now? I'd overtaxed my magic once before, and it had taken days (and a magical statuette) before I could properly float objects again. This felt much the same. Perhaps not a true burnout, but a severe drop in power, the result of

having pushed so hard in such a weakened state. And true burnout could be imminent.

I steadied my breath and focused again. My horn glowed softly. The levitation field wrapped slowly around us. I was breathing quickly, nearly hyperventilating, but the field was holding. "Climb," I gasped, "Now."

The zebra cautiously mounted the carriage, then stepped down onto the bench of the first seat well. The old car rocked slightly, groaning again. Step by step she started walking across the trio of carriages.

We were halfway across the purple middle carriage when a hole punched through the nose of the carriage in front, followed by a distant report. I grunted as Xenith took an involuntary step backward and fell partially into the carriage seat. My magic imploded and the linked carriages let out a protesting whine.

I had been wrong. It wasn't the griffins I had to worry about. It was the snipers in the damn Pinkie Pie Balloons. Once we crested the top, we had put ourselves right in their crosshairs. And the carriages slowed us to a crawl, giving them easy shots.

Another shot punched clean through the seat and carriage frame behind us. Xenith dumped me off her back into the cover of the seat well, then scrambled to take cover in the seat well ahead of us. We were pinned.

The shadow of a griffin shot over us, dropping something that hit the rim of the stairwell and bounced over the edge of the track. A moment later, the grenade went off, the sound of splintering wood accenting the explosion. I felt a subtle and unpleasant shift in the carriage beneath us; the grenade had taken out some of the beams in the already precarious roller coaster's framework.

Another griffin soared past, spreading his wings and banking. With alarm, I saw the creature was holding a rocket launcher!

There was no time to think. We had to go.

Jumping out of the seat well, I swung around and bucked the link that held the front two carriages to the back one. Another gunshot ripped

the air above my left flank and punched into the back carriage. I noticed belatedly that the nose of each carriage was shaped and painted to look comically like the faces of Pinkie Pie's friends.

I flung my forehooves back into the seat well and bucked Applejack in the face. My body screamed in protest, my right foreleg flaring in pain and slipping.

The orange rear carriage squealed and began sliding backwards down the tracks, sparks spraying from rust-jammed wheels. The slaver ponies charging after us stopped abruptly, standing like pins before a bowling ball, then turned and tried to run the other way. One of them tried to leap onto a lower set of tracks and disappeared from sight.

Without the rearmost carriage as an anchor, the front two began to slowly slide down the forward slope. I swung myself, trying to hook my injured leg back around the seat well's edge. I succeeded, but the pain slammed into my head like a sledgehammer. I screamed, nearly slipping free entirely.

Xenith jumped back into my seat well, grabbing my mane in her teeth.

The rocket-launcher griffin fired. A streak of smoke shot towards us, tipped with violent death.

Xenith wrenched me into the carriage, pushing us both down as far as we could go. A moment later, the rocket struck into the track almost where the rear car had been. The explosion washed over the top of us, cutting our backs with shrapnel and kissing us with flame. The carriage lurched forward hard, bucking up from the track and slamming back down as bits of metal track and chunks of burning wood rained into the park below. What had been a slow crawl forward was abruptly transformed into a racing plummet.

The carriages bumped and rattled, squealing all the way down. The light blue carriage ahead bucked and skipped, threatening to jump the tracks. If it did, we were done for. There was no Calamity to catch me this time.

My stomach lurched violently as the downhill slide swept into an uphill thrust, tossing us against the seat well's bench.

The upward angle of the carriage now left our seat well exposed. A bullet punched into the bench, inches from Xenith's left shoulder, spraying rotted foam.

One of the griffins (I believe the one who had tossed the grenade) had unslung his lever-action rifle and was flying towards us, slowly pumping shots in our direction. Our impromptu ride had put distance between us and them, but we were already slowing. He would be in optimal firing range in moments.

The second griffin was reloading his rocket launcher. A third swept around behind him and banked, moving out of my line of sight beneath the wooden hills of the roller coaster.

Lever-action griffin fired again, and a line of blood spurted from the back of Xenith's neck. A grazing shot that I knew must burn. But she gritted her teeth and kept silent. The griffin moved closer, aiming, and fired again.

The rifle was empty. Cursing, the griffin drew up into a hover and began to reload.

Reloading meant he had less of a grip on his weapon. I focused and telekinetically wrenched the firearm away, closing it. The griffin's eyes widened as his own weapon twirled around to point at him. **BLAM!**

As he fell, another stream of smoke leapt from the other griffin's missile launcher and raced towards us. The missile streaked past us, and I heard it detonate somewhere ahead.

I urgently floated the lever-action rifle, checking the shots. The griffin had only loaded two bullets into the rifle before I had snatched it away, leaving me with one shot. I had to choose my next sh-

The third griffin suddenly swooped up right next to our carriage as we crested the smaller hill, aiming a scattergun point blank at our faces.

BLAM! The griffin spiraled downward, my barely-aimed shot having gone through her wing.

Xenith was cringing in the seat well. I dared to sit up and look ahead. At the base of this hill, the track took a sharp curve and shot into the tunnel that passed through the barn-like Ministry of Morale building. But that second rocket had torn a hole in the track.

Xenith muttered something in a strange tongue, appearing at my side. Then, in a low voice, “I hope this is still going according to plan.”

“Yes,” I lied.

I crawled forward, cringing as a balloonist sniper sent another shot into the track ahead of us, the bullet from the anti-machine rifle obliterating a track tie. I hooked my flanks against the forward seat well and slid over the face of Twilight Sparkle. The small horn protruding from the front gave me something to brace a shoulder against. Reaching down with my left forehoof, I kicked at the latch, freeing the light blue forward car.

Freed of the extra weight, the forward car began to separate, slipping ahead. It hit the turn, then the gap... and the Rainbow Dash carriage did what it really wanted to do. It flew from the tracks and caught air.

Focusing for all I was worth, I enveloped the Twilight Sparkle car in a magical field, negating our weight. I prayed to Luna that it would be enough to let us jump the gap. I prayed to Celestia that my strength wouldn't give out until we had.

If there had been any doubt in my mind that the Goddesses were watching us from above, it evaporated as both prayers were answered.



The purple Twilight Sparkle carriage swept into the darkness of the tunnel. A hard jolt slammed through us as our out-of-control ride finally skipped the track. I felt my body being flung from the car as it skidded and flipped. I hit the track roughly; new pain bit deeply into

my shoulder and arced like electricity along the nerves of my left foreleg as my left shoulder struck the metal rail.

Xenith remained huddled in the seat well as the carriage rolled once before crashing against a row of clown-pony-shaped pylons. I looked up, wheezing, to see the zebra's form crawl shakily out of the wreckage.

I struggled to my hooves. Both my forelegs protested with discordant pain. My head swam. I wondered if I was in shock.

Xenith trotted up to me. "So, my little pony savior," she said in her low, exotic voice, "This is still all part of the plan, yes?"

I turned on my PipBuck's lamp. "Somewhere in here, there has to be a way into the building."

"The plan to escape is to break into Red Eye's home?" I could hear the incredulity lurking behind her almost innocent tone.

I nodded. "We make it to the roof. There's always a Pinkie Pie Balloon anchored up there. We're going to take it. That's how we get past the moat and The Wall." I winced as I fought for breath. "I have friends waiting outside for us."

The zebra stared at me appraisingly. "Are all your friends as crazy as you?"

"You... don't have to follow me," I noted with a sigh. I had saved the zebra's life; but in doing so, I had kidnapped her. She couldn't go back to the slavers; we both knew that. Until she was past The Wall, I had pretty much trapped her with me. After that, however... "Although I really wish you would."

"You saved my life, little pony," she answered. "You are responsible for it now. It is up to you to get me to safety. Until then, I follow."

I nodded. "And after."

"You are still responsible," she said firmly. "Unless I take that responsibility from you."

I blinked. It was one thing to be thinking such thoughts. It was quite another to have them thrown back at me in some sort of insane zebra logic.

We trekked further into the tunnel, looking for a door into the old Ministry of Morale hub that Red Eye and Stern had made the center of their slave empire.

I was badly, badly hurt. But in my experience, I had a much easier time turning interiors to my advantage in a fight. I was feeling a touch of confidence returning.

The griffin with the missile launcher flew into the tunnel behind us. Both Xenith and I shrunk into the darkness around partial cover and held still. The griffin began to walk along the track, his eyes adjusting to the darkness.

I focused on the latch of his saddlebags where he was keeping his extra missiles.

Nothing happened.

I focused again. Harder.

Nothing. Not even a faint glow from my horn, much less a telekinetic field. I hung my head. Burnout. That save jumping the gap had taken what little I had left. I was defenseless. And useless.

Dammit... why did this have to happen *now*? I had been counting on my levitation to at least get us into the balloon. Now, we'd have to find another way to get into it. If there was another way. And if we survived to the roof. Which was now much more in doubt.

I looked back up in time to see a shadow move near the griffin. Xenith had slipped right up next to him, completely unnoticed. Only now did I spot her as she struck out with a hoof. The griffin made a choking sound as his body went rigid. She wasted no time snapping his neck with her forehooves.

I looked over the griffin as he fell dead beside the zebra. I wished he had been carrying a rifle. I did contemplate taking the missile launcher. But

then (not being SteelHooves) I decided against it. Clearly Xenith preferred a stealthy approach to combat similar to my own. Plus, with my lack of experience, teeth-wielding high-explosives inside a building seemed like a very bad idea.

I also wished his armor was more pony-shaped. I did, however, empty his saddlebags and take them for myself.



I peeked around the corner, staring down a decaying pink hallway. Two ponies wearing armor in Red Eye's colors were standing guard near a wall terminal, watching over a shallow alcove opposite them. I thought I saw the glow of a Sunrise Sarsaparilla machine coming out of it. These guards weren't actively hunting us; but as best I could tell, there was no way around them. The only other way up had collapsed decades ago.

Still, I felt a pang at the idea of attacking ponies who weren't even threatening us, slavers or not. This stretched the definition of self-defense. I wondered if it would be possible to sneak past them; but the hallway was far too narrow, and they were standing with their tails to the wall. We'd have to pass directly in front of them. And no matter how light-hooved we were, crouching didn't make us invisible.

Xenith slipped past me before I could motion to her. She had no moral hesitation about killing random members of Red Eye's forces. To my surprise, she managed to creep halfway down the hall before they spotted her. She crossed the remaining distance with a leap, landing on her forehooves and bucking one of the guards in the head hard enough to send his helmet clattering down the hallway.

The other guard was a unicorn, and she was already floating an automatic rifle towards the zebra.

I screamed out at the pain in my legs as I charged the guard, lowering my horn. The unicorn turned, surprised by the second attacker, giving Xenith a chance to kick the automatic rifle. The magical field around it imploded as the weapon flew out of it and bounced against a dingy

pink wall. My horn glanced off the guard's armor, hurting me more than her. Her horn was glowing.

Electricity burst around her, tearing at my nerves as I stumbled and fell to the floor. Between the guard's legs, I could see Xenith collapse as well. I groaned, remembering that (unlike me) other unicorns have more magic than mere telekinesis under their hats.

The unicorn wrapped her automatic rifle in a new sheath of magical energy and floated it over me, apparently considering a unicorn attacker to be the most dangerous threat. Fatal mistake.

The automatic rifle went off, peppering the ground next to me with bullets as Xenith swept the unicorn's legs out from under her. I was barely able to move, but the zebra seemed to have recovered most of her faculties. My striped companion rolled onto the guard pony and struck her repeatedly in the face with her forehooves. I cringed at the sound of the unicorn's horn shattering. The magic around the rifle evaporated and the firearm fell to the ground within biting distance.

By the time I had gotten up, rifle in mouth, Xenith had rendered both guards deceased.

I looked around. True to my suspicions, the alcove across from the guards held a couple of vending machines -- a Sunset Sarsaparilla machine and a functional-looking Ironshod's Ammo Emporium. Between them was the heavy metal door of a vault.



"What is this?" Xenith asked, staring into the room that had been sealed behind the vault door.

She had been understandably perturbed when I stopped to hack the terminal, but relented when I explained that I needed to catch my breath. A statement my shallow, harsh breathing had proven altogether true. The worst part of my injuries was the fact that I couldn't risk healing them -- not with a broken rib and punctured lung. Any poultice would cause those to heal wrong. I needed Velvet Remedy

before I could dare use anything more than a healing bandage. And in our situation, I didn't even dare use painkillers. I needed to be thinking straight.

"The Wasteland, taunting me," I answered as I stepped into the vault, looking around at the mostly-empty shelves with their scattering of memory orbs -- none of which I could look into without my magic -- and the line of passkey-coded wall safes along the back -- none of which I could open. The Equestrian Wasteland loved rubbing my face in my every moment of weakness.

"What are they?" she questioned, looking at the dozens of orbs littering the floor.

"Confessions."

I started collecting the orbs, picking them up in my teeth and dropping them into one of my pilfered saddlebags opposite the ammo and bottles of sarsaparilla. Moving through the shelves, I spotted the glow of another terminal. Perhaps there was a way into the safes after all.

Reaching it, I hooked my PipBuck into the terminal and began my hack. The terminal was exceptionally tough. The little pony in my head started crying out for Mint-als after the third time that I was forced to back out of the system before its security protocols could lock it up. I fought to silence that voice.

I was increasingly aware of how long this was taking. Stern had ponies scouring the building and surrounding grounds for us. They were spread out, but eventually one or more of them would stumble across us.

"One more try!" I insisted to Xenith after I backed out a fourth time. "If I can't get it, we go."

"Why are you trying to unlock Red Eye's safes anyway? What do you hope to find?" Xenith asked reasonably. "Balloon tickets, perhaps?"

I snorted. I was about to reply, probably with something snide, when I found the password: Sir Lints-a-lot. After staring at that for a moment, I no longer felt bad about not figuring it out sooner.

From the timestamps on the terminal, it became clear that nopony else had figured that out either. The terminal had not been used to access these safes in more than two hundred years. A security notice indicated that the far left safe had been accessed several times in the last few years through use of the passkey.

I opened them all.

The far right safe held a badly damaged memory orb case with a single orb inside. The other three were gone. There was also an audio log, a dingy cloak, a StealthBuck and half-a-dozen files. I caught Xenith's reaction as I pulled out the cloak, even though she recovered quickly.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing," she lied.

I took the audio recording and memory orb, keeping them separate from the mess of orbs I had collected from the floor. I offered Xenith the cloak. Its dingy color would provide better camouflage than her stark stripes, and it was too large for me. She nodded and put it on, but it slipped off. The neck clasp was broken.

I opened the second safe and jumped back in alarm at the pulsing, swirling lights that poured out. Inside were four egg-shaped objects that glowed with a hypnotic dance of dark colors. "W-what?"

Xenith trotted closer, studying the objects without looking directly into them. "Balefire eggs."

I stared dumbly for a moment as my brain deciphered this. That's right. Fluttershy didn't actually design city-destroying spells. She designed the magical framework that would take a normal spell and augment it beyond... well, beyond anything they really imagined. But like the healing spell, there had to be a magic to be amplified. These balefire eggs were the base magic for the mass-murdering balefire bombs.

“H-how big an explosion?” I asked my zebra companion.

“I don’t know. I was never alive two hundred years ago fighting in a war where these were used.”

Touché. I imagined the Ministry of Morale confiscated these on a raid of some sort. I could see why they would still be locked up.

The third safe held what looked like a Pegasus Enclave helmet with a built-in recollector, complete with black opal. It also held a whole lot of paperwork labeled “CZA”, including many photographs too warped by age to make out. I yanked the paperwork out, scattering it onto the floor as I tried to get at something that was hidden behind it.

“Citizen Zebra Activities,” Xenith said behind me, reading one of the folders I had knocked out of the safe. “Your government was paying close attention to every zebra living in Equestria.”

“Not my government,” I corrected swiftly. “And the Ministry of Morale was watching *everypony*.”

Behind the papers was what looked like a first-generation PipBuck. The PipBuck was still closed, and there were ancient bloodstains in the felt lining. It had been removed through amputation, hopefully post-mortem. I quickly plugged the PipBuck into my own and started looking through the files, but they were encrypted with that odd dual-encryption which I had discovered my first night out of Stable Two. The only thing I could get from it was an automapped floor plan for Stable Three. The Stable looked identical to Stable Two, except that the apple orchard was only two-thirds the size and there were two interlocking Overmare’s Offices. I shuddered inexplicably.

The final safe was the one Red Eye had been using. And it held the big prize.

The schematics for the Radiation-Powered Engine.



Xenith took an involuntary step back from the poster at the top of the stairwell. “Doombunny!” she whispered enigmatically.

I stared from my zebra companion to the poster and back. It was the same poster I had seen in the clinic, only this time in better repair: Fluttershy surrounded by animals, with the words “REMEMBER: We are all in this together! Care for one another.”

At first, I thought Xenith was referring to Fluttershy. It almost made sense; I could see Fluttershy being regarded as a bringer of doom and destruction, considering her connection to the megaspells. And she was abundantly cute.

Then my eyes caught the little white rabbit sitting on her head. My eyebrows went up and I turned to Xenith in disbelief. “*Doombunny?* Seriously?”

Xenith snorted. “You would not understand. You have not heard the tales of Fluttershy’s protector.”

My ears were tilted and I knew I was giving her the most astoundingly dubious look.

“Doombunny was a horror on the battlefield. Fluttershy came to heal, even the zebra soldiers, and her protection annihilated anyone foolish enough to try to attack her.”

“The... bunny.”

“ooh... Doombunny was more than just a rabbit. Doombunny was death with sharp, pointy teeth...”

She was messing with me. She *had* to be messing with me.

“...more powerful than a creature several times its size, thanks to the chemicals doombunny brewed in secret laboratories.”

“Chemicals?” This was insane.

Xenith lowered her face to mine, speaking in that odd accent. “Oh yes. Doombunny was a master in the laboratory. I also hear it could cook and toss a mean salad.” She smiled just a little. She *was* messing with me.

Although, from the look in her eyes, not entirely.

We moved on, finding ourselves, all too appropriately, in what seemed to be a research laboratory floor. Beyond the stairwell was a single door with a small window set into it. Through the window we could see a sprawling place dedicated to arcane and earth pony sciences. A huge picture window on the far end of the room glowed with the deepening red-tinted light of Fillydelphia. The day was ending. The sun would set soon.

We slipped through the door silently. The one pony trotting around inside had not noticed our entry. Xenith made quick work of him.

I put down the automatic rifle and started tugging off his lab coat. Xenith raised an eyebrow as I shucked it on. "It's not much protection," I admitted. "But anything is better than nothing..." I could have taken the armor from Red Eye's guards; but after nearly being killed by a pegasus, I wasn't going to make that mistake again. "...besides, it makes me feel more science-y."

Xenith rolled her eyes then trotted towards the apothecary cabinets in the trot-in closet towards the back of the room. She put a hoof through the lock of the first one and pulled it open.

I pulled out the audio recording, downloading it into my PipBuck, intending to play it while we gave the room a look-over. My eyes fell to the schematics for Party-Time Mint-als. This research lab certainly would have everything I needed to make some, and I was feeling increasingly desperate.

It took a severe force of will to scroll away from the recipe. I forced myself to think of Calamity. Velvet Remedy. Homage...

I remembered Homage's sweet voice. And something she said floated back to me:

...Oh, a mixture of Rage and painkillers. A friend and I found the recipe in the ruins of a M.O.P. clinic when we were younger...

I blinked. Then called out to Xenith.

"Wait... you mean to tell me that *Fluttershy's pet rabbit* invented Stampede?"



"Hello?"

Rarity's voice asked in my earbloom as I started looking through the terminals and notes that filled the lab. It swiftly became clear that I was getting only one side of a conversation.

"Oh, hello, Your Majesty! How delightful of you to call!

"Oh, same as always. So much to do, so many projects, and so little time! Honestly, half the time I feel the same about running a Ministry as Fluttershy felt about being a model! But the other half, I absolutely love it! Of course, I still find the time to create new dresses. And to get my beauty sleep. I think I'd go insane if I didn't... Oh, no no no. A few missed meals never hurt anypony. And it helps me keep my figure.

"Yes. Yes I did hear what happened to Zecora, and I'm as enraged by it as anypony. I've already promised Pinkie Pie any resources my Ministry has to offer to help hers hunt down the brutes responsible and bring them to justice. ...On the plus side, you have to admit, the new poster line is really effective."

Rarity sounded legitimately upset about Zecora, and only thinly pleased about the effectiveness of her propaganda. The name was familiar. Oh yes, the zebra who was Applejack's friend, possibly a friend of all of them. I could see why Rarity would draw the connection.

"...Pinkie Pie? She's always eccentric darling! ...No, not any more than usual... No, Princess Luna, I don't think you have anything to worry about. Strange and Pinkie Pie go hoof-in-hoof. You just learn to accept that about her and love her all the more for it."

I recalled how Twilight Sparkle, in the Vinyl Scratch orb, had commented on everyone covering for Pinkie Pie and her addiction. I was immediately thankful I'd resisted the urge to make more Party-Time Mint-als.

"I will admit, however, that I am getting a bit worried about a few of my other friends. ...Well, I've heard a rumor, just a

rumor mind you, that Applejack is having some... trouble within her own Ministry. ...No, I really couldn't say.

"...And Twilight... Have you seen her recently? She's just exhausted! And terribly stressed out. The poor dear has taken on so much responsibility and so much work... Well, you have to admit, other than me of course, Twilight Sparkle is the only one who has really tried to run her Ministry, rather than just tossing ideas at them like horseshoes... And the less said about Rainbow Dash's 'Ministry', the better. ...and with the big move underway; and Spike's started his draconic adolescence, so you just know he's a real saddle-full right now... No, no. But Princess Luna, I really think Twilight Sparkle needs a vacation...

"No, everypony else is fine. At least, they were the last time I saw them. Fluttershy's doing brilliantly. I see her every week... I do wish I could see the others more often. They were my first real friends... my only ones, to be honest. And I miss them all terribly. But there's just always so much to do. I can't remember the last time we were all together... Oh, wait, I can. It was Pinkie Pie's birthday party. No, not this year's. Last year, I think. ...Or was it the year before?

For the first time in the conversation Rarity's voice faltered. I could feel the sadness she was trying to hide. It resonated deeply. Maybe because my heart held a similar ache.

"Oh no, I'm fine. It's just... sometimes it feels like we're pulling apart. And I can't stand to see that happen. I really must do something about it."

I needed my friends. I was trembling from more than just pain as the audio recording drew to a close.

"No, Princess Luna, the pleasure was all mine! Thank you so much for calling!"



I re-read the entries that had been concealed within the terminal at the lead researcher's desk. (A desk which had held an ashtray, a box of cigars and nearly two dozen bottle caps.)

Bypass spells. According to the research I was seeing, the *Ministry of Arcane Sciences* had cracked it already, about a month before the end of

their world. They had even begun limited use, not for weapons but to create shield screens that would only allow specific materials to pass through.

Red Eye's research in here had been two-fold. First, his scientists had been working to apply a bypass to some sort of weapon effect. The full details had been redacted after the research had been successful. From what little I could read, that was less than a week before I had arrived. I was willing to extend the Steel Ranger's Elder the benefit of the doubt and assume she didn't know. The second line of research was ongoing, and had met with considerably less promising results -- Red Eye was trying to figure out how to trick a Bypass into ignoring something it wasn't designed to ignore.

Xenith had filled a bag full of herbs and chemicals from the supply closet and was trotting back towards me when something outside the window made her freeze in her tracks.

I abandoned the terminal and moved to her side as quickly as my legs and breath would allow. I stared out the window as something huge came out of the red glow of the Fillydelphia Crater.

It was an armored black alicorn, easily three times the size of a normal one, the air about her rippling with power. She flew towards us, leaving swaths of energy in her wake.

"W-w-what is....?" I couldn't speak further. My mouth had gone dry.

"She's been basking in the radiation of the Fillydelphia Crater," Xenith commented. Then explained as if to a child, "The creatures of radiation do not merely heal in its presence. If they absorb enough of it, they grow stronger. More powerful."

Alicorns could become... massive, behemoth super-alicorns? I squeaked in impotent rage. "T-that's not fair!"

I looked up towards the sky, cursing Celestia and Luna in turn. Wasn't it enough that they were magically far more adept than I? That they were smart? Crafty? Fucking telepathic? With shields that only a small number of things could apparently get through? And they could fly?!

And go invisible? Or teleport?

I found enough voice to rasp at the heavens, “What do You want from me!? In Your names, what the fuck do You want!?”

A field of dark blue light wrapped around the enormous window. The glass began to vibrate. I had a sudden image of the abattoir that I had turned the maze of mirrors into.

“Run,” I whispered to Xenith.

We turned and fled.

As we dived through the door to the stairwell, I heard that window shatter. And I heard none of the shards hit the ground. I spun and shoved the door closed behind us an eyeblink before the super-alicorn sent hundreds of lethal shards of glass into the door.

When the barrage ended, I lifted myself up and dared a peek through the little window on the door. I watched as the huge black alicorn swept into the room and activated her shield, a bubble of scintillating force expanding around her with enough power to tear into the floor and ceiling, blasting apart desks and chemistry sets. The energy sloughing off the bubble caused nearby terminals to explode in sprays of sparks. I saw the automatic rifle which I’d left behind fall through the broken floor into the level below.

Well, at least I didn’t have to worry about destroying the research.

I turned away, terrified, and discovered that I could make myself gallop far faster than my body wanted to let me. It hurt, my chest raged as if I was breathing liquid fire, but I ran.



The alicorn blasted up through the floor into the hallway. Her size was too big to comfortably move through the space, but it hardly mattered. Her shield just ripped away the walls as she passed near them, chewing up parts of the offices on either side.

The thought flashed through my mind that she might just bring this whole building down on top of the three of us. Her horn blazed with an almost black light. Her shield dropped briefly as she lashed out with dark energies that only crudely resembled black lightning.

I tore around a corner, my body feeling like it was about to explode and then explode again. Xenith was in front of me, moving far more gracefully. The hallway behind us was shredded with a smell of ozone and black licorice.

I followed her up another flight of stairs, screaming out in agony and hating the building for making us climb when the damn monster behind us didn't have to.

The super-alicorn tore through the ceiling, hovering in front of us as we made it to the top. I stumbled and crashed to a stop, realizing with utter loathing that we would have to go back down. Only my body didn't want to move anymore. My body wanted to just give up and die.

I felt Xenith bite into my mane and toss me onto her back.

The giant black alicorn spread her wings and pointed her horn. A point of light flickered in the front of her shield then spiraled to create an opening. I realized with dismay and amazement that even if I had my magic, it would be useless. This alicorn's shield was so powerful even *she* couldn't cast a spell through it.

Xenith went down, dropping me like a sack of pain. I saw her twitching.

Heart attack spell. She would be permanently damaged or dead within seconds.

I screamed! At the super-alicorn for being so ridiculously powerful and evil and totally unfair! At the Goddessess for allowing such a nightmare to exist and for making me face it and just after I had lost my magic too! At the Fillydelphia Crater for being so damn radioactive!

With a rage-fueled strength beyond what I could actually muster, I wrenched my suffering body off the floor and galloped at the creature which I suddenly realized looked an awful lot like those old pictures of

Nightmare Moon. I leapt, jumping partway into the opening of the super-alicorn's shield. The edge cut deeply into my chest, like I was hanging on a curved razor blade. I struggled, cutting my self even worse, my blood poured down both the inside and outside of the shield.

The alicorn at least had the grace to look shocked. I had successfully caused her to drop the spell attacking Xenith's heart.

I couldn't get inside with her. But with a mortally wounded cry, I tossed my head back, pulled open one of my saddlebags, and dumped the contents inside the shield.

Dozens of memory orbs scattered along the bottom of the magical bubble. The alicorn glanced at them and was unimpressed. She turned her attention to me. In a panic, I realized what was about to happen and kicked myself away before the hole in the shield scythed closed. If I had been any slower, the super-alicorn's shield would have cut me in half.

I collapsed, bleeding heavily on the floor. That was it. I was done. Time to sleep now.

But as I passed out, there was a slight smile on my face, despite all the pain. I had saved Xenith. And I had proven that you could trick one of these fucking cunts the same way twice.

The last thing I saw before darkness overwhelmed me was the alicorn floating in her impervious bubble, cut off from every danger except for a few dozen memory orbs. And four balefire eggs.

I never heard the explosion. But Xenith later told me it was... loud, only louder.



When I awoke, we were in a buck's bathroom. I was propped up in a stall, looking out at a poster of Pinkie Pie (watching you piss forever?). I didn't hurt anywhere near as much as I should, assuming I wasn't simply dead (and really, who would put a Pinkie Pie poster in a

bathroom in heaven... or for that matter, in a bathroom anywhere?), which worried me considerably. I felt light-headed and... odd.

I looked down. I was wrapped in healing bandages. Probably three or four medical kit's worth. There were more on the floor next to me, blood-drenched and spent. I had been in here for some time. My mind grudgingly realized I was doped up on painkillers.

This escape plan was going well.

Xenith trotted back into view. "You are an insane pony."

"Thank you."

"I wish I could let you rest some more, but we must go. We are being hunted."

I nodded and tried to get up. My limbs didn't want to co-operate. A moment later, I once again found myself riding the zebra, slung over her back like an old carpet. I blushed with embarrassment and hoped I didn't bleed all over her. I wondered what riding like this would do to the wounds on my breast, and how well the magical bandages had healed my other injuries. My left shoulder no longer hurt, and my right leg felt only mildly sprained.

Xenith picked up my saddlebags with her teeth and then added them across her flanks along with her sack of apothecary supplies. I helped tie it to her securely.

My striped companion crept through the floors swiftly yet cautiously, clearly trying to keep ahead of something. I knew we were being hunted by Stern's slavers. But something about this felt different. My thoughts turned dark. After the super-unicorn, I wasn't ready for another surprise opponent.

"What's after us?" I asked, dreading the answer.

"Winter," Xenith whispered in an ominous tone.

My painkiller-fogged mind fought to make sense of that. "It's summer," I responded blandly.

The zebra snorted. “Red Eye’s cyberdog. Winter is tracking our scent.”

My mind replayed part of a broadcast from Red Eye that I had found particularly striking: *I was lucky, fortunate beyond my deserving, to be blessed with safe places to roam, security from the fiends and horrors of the Equestrian Wasteland, and companionship in the form of my beloved dog, Winter. Oh, the adventures we had.*

If he was but a colt at that time, the dog should have passed away naturally from old age. But now I imagined that instead of letting that happen, he’d cybernetically enhanced it, replacing part after part as each failed. It was macabre.

I groaned. I really, really needed to get out of Fillydelphia.

We made it up two flights of stairs without trouble. Three times, Xenith managed to creep past slavers unnoticed even with me on her back. As we passed an open office, I could see the overhang of eaves out the window, shadowed in the light of a setting sun that turned the world outside the color of a bloody river. We were almost to the roof.

I heard a low, tinny growl.

I looked back. Behind us, I saw a half-robotic dog stalking towards us. Winter was more machine than animal. His brain was encased in a lightly glowing tank which looked so shockingly like that of a brain-bot that I began to assume it wasn’t ponies but pet dogs whose brains were used in those awful things. Winter’s forepaws ended in claws that looked like they were made from the clawtips of hellhounds.

Even Xenith didn’t want to fight that thing. The zebra bolted, galloping as fast as she could. Winter howled and gave chase, the glow of his brain-case shifting to crimson.

I wished I still had the automatic rifle. Or, for that matter, any weapon at all. Somehow, I didn’t think I could strike it down with baleful looks.

We made it to the stairwell marked “Roof Access”, the cyberdog nipping at Xenith’s hooves. I realized belatedly that the dog could have

jumped and started tearing me apart, but it chose not to. We were being corralled.

I turned to warn Xenith. Before I could, we burst out onto the roof. Xenith skidded to a stop, trapped between the Ministry of Morale roof and the cloudy, blood-red sky.

The anchored Pinkie Pie Balloon was still there. But so were two others, with a third closing in. Half a dozen anti-machine rifles were trained in our direction.

With a clear note of sarcasm, Xenith asked, "Still according to plan, right?"

Winter came out behind us and stopped as if guarding the door back.



I closed my eyes, waiting for the shot. But the sniper ponies were hesitating. Waiting for something. The growl behind us gave Xenith a clue. "Red Eye's coming."

So, the bastard was going to take care of us himself? Fuck that. "Oh, come on!" I yelled up at the giant, inflated Pinkie Pie heads. "Just do it already!"

I was exhausted. The painkillers were wearing off and the pain was beginning to flood back in.

A pillar of golden flame, tinged with balefire green, shot out of the Fillydelphia Crater. The bolt of light reached its apex and spread out wings that flared across the sky like a second sun.

Pyrelight dipped and swooped towards us, burning with an aura of emerald and gold nearly a hundred times her size.

The creatures of radiation do not merely heal in its presence. If they absorb enough, they grow stronger, more powerful.

Sorry, Celestia, Luna... for everything bad I thought!

The incoming Pinkie Pie Balloon erupted in flame just at Pyrelight's passing. The majestic harbinger opened her beak and bright green balefire blasted out, tearing across the roof above us. All three of the Pinkie Pie Balloons ignited, becoming infernos. Bits of burning balloon and slaver flesh rained down on us as the blazing zeppelins began to collapse, sinking towards the amusement park below. I hoped nastily that it was full of slavers surrounding the building.

"Pyrelight!" I cheered, clapping my hooves in applause!

Xenith stared upwards, having lost the very notion of speech.

The cyberdog panicked and fled down the stairwell.

Pyrelight swooped around. I could see the energy she had absorbed was already bleeding off of her, like the scintillating waves that came off the black alicorn. The bird dived, and I thought I could hear the crackling of fire and the sound of slaver screams below.

I was so overjoyed at the turn of events that it took me several minutes to realize that Pyrelight had incinerated what I had hoped to be our ride.

We were still trapped in Fillydelphia.



Our capture was as ignominious as it was inevitable.

I found myself staring through a haze of red. Not a fault of my own vision, but a property of the room we had been marched into. The air was filled with some sort of odd steam. My already strained lungs pitched a fit as I attempted to breathe it. Red lamps lined the room, diffusing their light to make the air take a sickening scarlet tint.

There was a line on the floor that the well-armed griffins beside us had warned us not to cross. Winter crouched nearby, ready to launch himself at the first to run. With Xenith's skills, I thought it might still be possible to fight our way out of the situation. But the very idea made me want to drop from weariness.

Red Eye trotted in through a door on the opposite wall next to a large, dark screen. He raised a hoof and the griffins flanking us took their leave. I heard them lock and bar the door behind us.

“Littlepip,” he said graciously. “Sit, relax. I mean you no harm.”

Obviously, the same couldn’t be said for us. I was still processing the mere notion that Red Eye would lock himself in a room with us when Xenith charged at him, murder in her eyes.

She slammed against an invisible wall hard enough that she was lucky she didn’t break her neck. I stared around and realized suddenly the reason for the odd atmosphere. “You’re using the reddened mist to conceal an alicorn shield,” I surmised aloud. I was actually slightly impressed. “You must have at least two of the green ones doing their statue thing just behind the walls.”

Red Eye beamed at me. (Literally -- in the mist, the line of red light shooting from his cybernetic eye was clearly visible.) “I wanted us to be able to talk freely. Without anypony attacking anypony else.” He shot a wry look at the recovering zebra.

“What do you want?” I asked dourly. There was only one reason I could think of for him to spare us. And I didn’t like it.

“All I want you to do is something you were going to do anyway,” Red Eye said in a tone both casual and infuriatingly confident. “I just want you to do it on my timescale.”

Great. My mortal enemy had a quest for me. My life sucked.

“I want you to kill the Goddess.”

My jaw hit the floor.

Okay, I did *not* see that coming. “B... but you serve the Goddess! You... you’re Her high-fucking-priest!”

Red Eye scowled slightly, sitting back. “I like to think of us more like... partners. And sadly, the partnership is no longer beneficial to my goals.” He looked me over, ignoring Xenith completely. “And after

your handling of the Crater Alicorn, I really do think you have what it takes to succeed.”

“Do tell.” I glowered.

“As I’m sure you’ve noticed, the Goddess controls Her children. Telepathically. They are not so much individuals as they are extensions of Her will. And they will remain so until She is finally put to rest.”

I nodded solemnly.

“There is no point working towards the freedom of all ponies if Unity comes with chains,” Red Eye pontificated. “There is no room in the New Equestria for slave masters, and no room for slaves.”

Xenith nickered, “Not much room for *you* then.” I smiled, my own sentiment echoing hers.

Red Eye regarded us calmly. “No. No there is not.”

Okay, second time he caught me by surprise. “What do you intend to do then? Kill yourself?”

He laughed. Red Eye had a charismatic, likeable laugh. I hated him for that. “No, no. I plan to ascend. Once you have taken care of the Goddess, it will finally be time for me to join Unity myself. But not as one of the rest of you. Somepony will have to take up the tasks that the Princesses and pegasi left to run wild, after all. Somepony will have to regulate the weather, to raise the sun and the moon.”

I blinked. “Okay, I’ve got a new theory. You’re a loony.” Seriously, the Goddess couldn’t manage these things, much less an alicorned earth pony.

Again he laughed, setting my nerves on edge. “Well, then I will fail. But either way, I will be out of your mane. You won’t have to worry about me further. And won’t that be nice? Crushing two eggs under one hoof?”

I really hated this stallion. “And what about all your work,” I argued. Dammit, the one reason I was at all hesitant to take down this monster was because even I could see the good his efforts would eventually bring

about. I could... admire what he was building, even if I hated how he was doing it. "What about the schools? The hospitals? Rebuilding an infrastructure that will allow Equestria to pull itself out of this post-apocalyptic pit?!"

Red Eye feigned contemplation. "Oh, dear. Well then, I suppose you'll just have to take my place and see it through."

My jaw was on the floor again. Once more, he had blindsided me. How did he keep doing that?

"You want me to... what?"

Red Eye smiled. "Want you to? Or just expect that you won't let all this just fall apart. Of course, I'm sure you'll try to find a way to accomplish all this without the regrettable horrors of slavery. And, with at least the foundation I've managed in place, you might even succeed." He gave me a gracious bow. "I certainly hope so." Then added in a businesslike tone, "The Goddess is still in Her... home in Maripony."

I realized there was another horseshoe waiting to drop.

"And... so you'll let me go?"

The black-maned cyberpony nodded. "Somewhat implicit in the request." Without even looking at Xenith, he added, "And you can take your new zebra friend with you. The two of you seem to be... effective together. Agree, and she has her freedom."

Xenith stared at me with an unfathomable expression. I knew she wanted her freedom enough to risk her life for it, to kill other slaves for it. Was she asking me to accept? Or was she warning me about deals with devils?

"And if I refuse to kill the Goddess?"

Red Eye frowned. "Well, I would prefer not to resort to threats. But let's just say that by succeeding, you will save the lives of your friends in the tower."

No! I should never have sent them into that place alone! Oh Goddesses, what had I done?

“W-what have you done with Calamity, Velvet Remedy and SteelHooves?” I demanded in a frightened voice. “Are they okay?”

Red Eye’s one real eye blinked. “Oh, you mean your assault team at the Fillydelphia Tower station? I sent Stern on ahead with a full squad of her best to give them a warm greeting. I’m sure at least one of them survived.”

I swallowed hard, feeling all of Equestria fall out from under me. “I... I want to see them.”

Red Eye nodded graciously. He trotted to a button on the wall beneath the large screen. “Stern, report. I have somepony here who wants to see the captives.”

The monitor screen lit up. For a moment, all it showed was ruins and blood.

Then a hoof rose up, tapping on the screen. “Hey!” Calamity’s smiling face and orange mane came into view. “Ah think this here just turned on!”

I could hear the low grumble of SteelHooves voice, “Calamity, don’t mess with it.”

“Oh, hold on,” Calamity said, looking slightly up. “Hey, Ah can see Li’lpip through this thing now. Heya, kid!”

This was obviously not the response Red Eye had been expecting. I felt a crippling surge of relief and collapsed to the floor.

“oh, an’ y’all must be Red Eye. Can’t say it’s ah pleasure t’... whoa! Y’all are a cyberpony! Ah didn’t think those were even real!”

Red Eye finally found his voice. “Calamity, is it? I take it you have killed...”

“Yer welcomin’ party? That who ya was expectin’? Sorry, but they all can’t make it on account of them bein’ mostly blown up.”

“Mostly?”

"We kept yer griffin gal all safe an' cozy. Trust me, she ain't hardly hurt, and she ain't feelin' a bit o' pain," Calamity said with a mock friendliness that didn't touch the steel glint in his eyes. "Figured things mighta gone a bit south fer our friend Li'lpip, so Ah decided we oughta keep someone fer trade."



I watched as the drawbridge lowered over the moat. On the other side, through the electrified gate, I could see Velvet Remedy and SteelHooves flanking a thoroughly trussed-up and glowering Stern. Calamity was sitting sniper in an undisclosed location.

I could almost feel the air grow colder when SteelHooves' gaze fell on my striped companion.

Red Eye stood next to me, protected inside an alicorn shield -- the projecting alicorns were hidden in a sewer passage right beneath us yet safely out of Calamity's field of view. "Remember my offer, Littlepip. Kill the Goddess..." he whispered to me, clearly unconcerned that the Goddess' children might hear. (Judging from my experience on the roof of Horseshoe Tower, I strongly suspected they couldn't hear anything at all.) "...and you not only get rid of her, but you get rid of me. And save your friends in the tower."

I blinked then turned to him with a cross stare. "I think we've already established that threat is pretty stupid." I pointed a hoof at my friends waiting for me on the other side of the gate.

Red Eye cocked his head, and for a moment I think he was actually confused.

"Ah. I apologize for the misunderstanding. I don't mean *these* friends in *that* tower..." he said, nodding towards the rising white needle of the Fillydelphia Tower. "I mean your friends in Tenpony Tower."

I felt my blood go cold.

"Now, I know that the damn building has already survived one balefire bomb, but do you really think it could survive another?"

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Gladiator Pony - The action point cost for all unarmed attacks performed in S.A.T.S. is reduced by 10%

Quest Perk added: Fillydelphia Survivor Your vicious fights behind The Wall in the Fillydelphia ruins have left you stronger. Your damage threshold is increased by two and your radiation resistance increases by +3%

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



DISTRESS SIGNALS

“When the walls come tumbling down, when you lose everything you have, you always have family. And your family always has tribe.”

Family.

It wasn't a word I'd had much use for, nor a concept I'd felt any connection to.

I had never known my father (a quite uncommon situation for a filly growing up in Stable Two). When my mother had been my age, she had spent a large portion of her time being... well, there were other words I would use if describing other ponies. But this was my mother. And for her, I chose the words “promiscuous” and “inebriated”.

Growing up, I did have my mother. But my memories of her were largely of the “sit quietly while the grown ups are talking” variety. However, she did teach me games. And even though I came to realize (even as a blankflank) that she did so more to alleviate her boredom than my own, I cherished each happy memory of playing with her --

every game of boards and strategies and brightly-colored pieces that the Stable had to offer.

But even then, I never really thought of us as “family” in a way that attached special meaning to the word.

Now, through a haze of pain, I realized this was changing. Had changed already, in fact, without my knowing it.

With the painkillers worn off and adrenaline no longer propping up my body, I could feel just how much pain I was in. The bandages had helped and probably spared me from bleeding out through the deep slashes in my chest. However, continuing to push myself while injured had harmed more than just my magic.

But I was with my friends now. There was a feeling of completeness and safety. My body could finally relax and just hurt.

Velvet Remedy had slipped into mother-doctor mode almost at the sight of me. Now that I wasn’t mentally sniffing between her hindlegs anymore, I found myself comforted by her fretful ministrations, particularly considering that she did a much better job of mothering me than my actual mother ever had.

In truth, these ponies had become my family. Family in that deeper sense of the word that means finding “home” not from the location you are at but through the people you are with.

...And my family was having an argument.



“She’s a zebra!” SteelHooves exclaimed. He had kept his silence until we were well away from The Wall. But as we had approached the crumbled ruins of Java’s Cup, SteelHooves had finally questioned the presence of my new companion. I made the mistake of simply saying she was a friend.

“Yes, she is.” I was weary and hurting. My breathing was shallow, and I felt like I was constantly drowning. I wanted a bath to wash off the blood caking my coat, the stinging powder still chewing into my flank

and the last of the nasty little biting insects that somehow survived along with me. And I wanted a bed that was at least softer than cement. What I did not want was this argument.

“Who has clearly manipulated you into trusting her,” SteelHooves surmised. “You can’t trust them.”

Xenith had wisely remained silent, simply choosing to follow as we moved away from The Wall and the slave pits of Stern’s Fillydelphia. But now, nettled and perhaps feeling bolstered by my assertion of friendship, the zebra retorted:

“The war is long over, and I had no part in it. Just because I have stripes does not make me an enemy combatant any more than that armor makes you a soldier in Nightmare Moon’s army.”

Brilliant.

“*Princess Luna’s* army,” snapped the Steel Ranger who had indeed served in the war two-hundred years over. “Not that your kind has any right to even speak the name!”

He turned to me, “Littlepip, what are your intentions regarding the zebra? Please tell me you don’t actually expect her to travel with us.”

“Oh heavens no,” Velvet Remedy chimed in. “I’m sure she doesn’t. After all, it would just be foolish to travel with the sort of creature known for degenerating into mindless, flesh-eating...”

Xenith drew up, staring at the charcoal-coated unicorn with a look of bewilderment bordering on resentment.

“...oh wait, those aren’t zebras.” Velvet casually finished. “Those are *ghouls*.”

SteelHooves stopped now too, and I was sure that behind his visor he was glaring. Xenith huffed, still confused. In her exotic accent, she slowly asked Velvet, “Are you saying... I look like a ghoul?”

I hung my head. This was going downhill fast.

Velvet Remedy's eyes widened as she realized how Xenith had taken the statement. "No, of course not," she assured the newcomer. Then cryptically mused, "But somepony here sure smells like one."

Xenith sniffed at her own coat. I rolled my eyes. Then, just to be sure, sniffed at my own. And gagged a little. I was *rank*.

Calamity swooped up to us. He had been waiting for us in front of Java's, Spitfire's Thunder held in his mouth. (Java had apparently been -- based on the large sign collapsed over the door -- a milk-colored stallion whose mane was a wavy light brown with dark brown streaks and whose cutie mark was a steaming cup of what I hoped were coffee beans.) But when we stopped moving forward, he decided to close the gap himself.

He landed next to me, slipping the magically-enhanced anti-machine rifle into a newly-fashioned holster on his battle saddle, and offered Xenith a hoof and a smile. "Well howdy!"

I wanted to kiss him. (Which was not a desire I normally associated with bucks.)

Xenith looked hesitant. She reached out a hoof tentatively, and then shrank back, wide-eyed, as Calamity took it in both his forehooves and shook vigorously. "Pleased t' meetcha. Ah'm Calamity." Her foreleg was still shaking after he let go. "Welcome t' the team."

"That is it?" she asked cautiously, still looking at Calamity as if she'd never seen a pegasus before. (Which, I realized suddenly, was probably the case.)

"Aw shucks," Calamity said, still grinning. "Ah saw y'all through the scope. Clearly, Li'l pip here trusts ya. An' if she trusts ya, that's good 'nuff fer me."

"Yes," Velvet said in a drawling yet lady-like sigh. "Because Littlepip's judgment has been Celestia Tier recently." She was looking over my injuries with growing dismay.

"Okay, okay! Yes, it was a stupid plan! I'm sorry." I looked to my friends desperately. "I knew it was going to be bad in there, and I didn't

want to put any of you through that. I *know* I should have trusted you to handle yourselves, and that we should have stayed together. We're stronger together..." I'm pathetic without you.

I collapsed to my knees, suddenly overcome with fatigue.

Velvet Remedy's horn began to glow as she waved everyone else to be quiet and stand back. A moment later, my unicorn friend gasped. "By the Goddesses! Littlepip... what happened to you in there?"



Velvet Remedy knelt next to me as I stretched out on a mattress in what had once been a child's bedroom. We had invaded a small apartment building that had once shared a Fillydelphia city block with Java and his cups. I could see the others in the next room. Calamity was sorting through the small items he had scavenged from the apartment. Xenith was cooking. SteelHooves was glowering.

"Ah gotta wonder why they even bothered?" Calamity mused as he stared at the boards which he had pried from across the door an hour ago. They now served as wood for a cookfire. "Ain't like anypony who's determined and capable 'nuff t' brave inner-city ruins is gonna be stopped by a couple planks o' wood. Why bother boardin' up the door in the first place?

Xenith had found some cooking pots and was brewing something sweet-smelling over the fire. Several other pots sat around her, each waiting for a turn under the flames. I marveled at our good fortune. Ever since I'd left Homage, I had bemoaned our lack of a skilled chef.

I winced. What I wouldn't give to see her right now. Instead, she was in mortal peril, and I... I felt myself flush with angry guilt that I wasn't doing something to help her right that instant. I cursed Red Eye. "Why did he have to go after Homage?"

"Ah don't figure he did," Calamity suggested from the other room. "I reckon he's aimin' at DJ Pon3. Buck's been broadcastin' good things

'bout ya fer a while now, so's that prob'ly gets him chalked up as a friend that Red Eye figures you'd want t' keep from harm."

"Assuming he hasn't simply surmised that you want to keep *every* soul from harm," SteelHooves added grimly. "And that you will go to absurd and dangerous lengths to do so."

I felt the urge to remind him that it was a Steel Ranger Elder who pitched the plan, but I bit it back. SteelHooves had never suggested or pressured me to go along with the solo mission, merely supported me when I made the decision to. Considering the tones of his previous conversation with Elder Blueberry Sabre, I suspected SteelHooves would have just as swiftly backed me if my decision had involved telling her to sit on my horn and spin.

I looked from SteelHooves to Calamity, again struck by the difference between them when it came to support. Calamity was loyal. SteelHooves was... obedient. Not necessarily to me, but to whomever he accepted as in charge. He was a soldier buck even now.

Velvet Remedy's glowing horn passed over me once more. She was making sure she had found every injury. As I had expected, my broken rib and punctured lung had drawn the most reaction from her (including a whole host of dark looks at Xenith that SteelHooves couldn't match). But she commended the zebra on not feeding me any healing potions, voicing confidence in her mending spells.

She gasped as she started to pass her horn over my tail. "Littlepip!" She leaned close, her voice scandalized and sympathetic. "How did you get wounded *there*?"

"That wasn't me," Xenith's voice sounded from the other room.

"What?" Calamity looked up tensely. "Who hurt Li'lpip where now?" I buried my face in my forehooves, feeling my cheeks redden with embarrassment.

"Never you mind," Velvet told the pegasus sternly as she opened her saddleboxes and floated out an array of medical supplies. Calamity's scavenging had restocked us well in that regard.

It didn't help that my worry over Homage had brought with it half-formed daydreams of the wonderful grey unicorn kissing that very wound to make it better.

Gracefully returning us to the earlier conversation, Velvet Remedy suggested, "I know you are worried about Homage, but please try not to let it eat at you. Remember, so long as Red Eye doesn't act on his threat, he has something to threaten you with. Once he does, all he has is an angry Littlepip. And if he's half as smart as you make him out to be, then he's plenty bright enough to know he doesn't want that."

I bit my lower lip.

Calamity stood up, shaking his head. "Ah hate t' be the voice o' worry, but..." The pegasus paused uncomfortably, brushing a hoof over his orange mane. "Well, Ah figure if he put that megaspell at Tenpony Tower, he musta done so b'fore he hatched his plan t' use ya. So the only thing keepin' him from using it is that deal o' ya."

I frowned. "So... do you think he'll set it off the moment he knows the Goddess is dead?" I hadn't even considered that. "That is, if I do that?"

Calamity nudged his hat. "Ah... don't rightly know. But DJ Pon3 is a dissentin' voice with a huge audience." Calamity's frown deepened. "Most dictatorships Ah know of tend t' go hell-an'-highwater t' either discredit or destroy opposin' voices like that."

I almost asked how many dictatorships Calamity knew of. But the words died on my lips as a memory floated to the surface of my mind:

Don'tcha believe 'em, Calamity had once told me. The Enclave has a vested interest in makin' anypony who bucks their ideals into a monster.

Instead I nodded, trying to give him a supportive look.

"Stern cuts out the tongues of any who speak ill of Red Eye," Xenith reminded me, putting a little extra loathing into the griffin's name. "I spent several years speaking nothing so that I might keep mine." She added, "It is good to finally use it freely again."

SteelHooves grunted. “Now that we’re all together, I don’t see why we don’t just call his bluff. Fly in and level his operation. Take him out.”

I sighed deeply. “First, because taking him out wouldn’t be that easy. Elder Blueberry Sabre was right about that. He’s always protected, and he can get out faster than we can get to him...”

What I didn’t say was that I wasn’t sure I wanted to flatten his operation. In fact, I was sure that I didn’t want to destroy the work he was doing. I wanted to free all the slaves. But that wasn’t the same thing. Was it?

Dammit! It was easier to know my moral stance before I discovered that the evil fucker was also, as best I could see, *right*. He *was* building a better future... or, at least, parts of one. And he was sacrificing everything for it, from his own home to your freedom.

I recalled a conversation with Watcher regarding how, without what he called “the spark”, the virtues he valued could become twisted, lost parodies of themselves. I had found another in Red Eye: Generosity. Even generosity could wander down twisted, dark paths... especially when what you are giving away shouldn’t be yours to give.

SteelHooves nickered. “You don’t actually believe Red Eye has a megaspell, do you?”

I grimaced.

“An undetonated balefire bomb? When would he have acquired something like that?” SteelHooves questioned. “Where? It’s not like you can stumble over something like that just laying around.”

Velvet Remedy, Calamity and I all exchanged looks.

“Oh no...” SteelHooves groaned. “What did you three do?”

The building was silent, save for the crackling of the fire and the bubbling of the cookpot, for several long minutes in the wake of our explanation.

“You gave a *balefire bomb* over to New Appleloosa?” SteelHooves exploded, pacing in his heavy armor, his metal-sheathed tail flicking in

emphasis with each word. "A town notorious for trading with Red Eye's slavers?"

"Ayep."

"Which one of you *idiots* came up with that idea?" SteelHooves demanded.

I silently tore through my memories. I remembered being concerned about sending the freed slaves back to New Appleloosa. Stunningly, I couldn't recall having the same concerns about giving them a megaspell.

Calamity raised his hoof, a chagrined expression on his face.

"This is..." Xenith asked, "...why they call you 'Calamity', yes?"

Velvet Remedy moved to sit by Calamity's side.

SteelHooves was fuming. "You do realize that Red Eye is the only reason there even is a New Appleloosa, right?" His visor turned towards us and found only blank expressions. "That place was a small town dying in the dust before Red Eye pranced in and gave them a water talisman. You've got to figure they *owe* him!"

Calamity shook his head, genuinely surprised. "Sorry, pardner, but that's a new one on me." I, however, merely groaned, putting my hooves over my eyes.

I saw the bounty of our Stable shared, the water talisman given to a struggling town which now knows the joy of clean and pure water.

Homage was going to die, and it was my fault.



My PipBuck was clicking at me, not letting me ignore that the water I was bathing in was radioactive. Velvet Remedy had a dose of RadAway sitting nearby for me to consume as soon as I got out of the grossly-stained tub. Pure water was a rare treat in the wasteland; even those who had it would not think to squander it on baths. Not unless they

lived someplace with a water talisman like Tenpony Tower. And in the Fillydelphia Ruins, *all* the water to be found was irradiated.

The clicking of my PipBuck reminded me that my weeks in the Equestrian Wasteland had been, in many ways, blessed. I had avoided some of the more repulsive hardships that many ponies faced every day. I had never been reduced to drinking radioactive water from the bowl of a toilet.

There wasn't much of a wall left between this apartment's bathroom and the living room, so I was effectively bathing in front of them. Xenith was still tending her boiling pots. Velvet Remedy moved between helping me scrub places that I normally called on my magic to reach and watching Calamity as he tinkered with broken radios he had found in the other apartments, rebuilding one with parts cannibalized from the others. SteelHooves stood guard near the door.

The radio Calamity had been rebuilding flared to life.

"Yea-haw! Welcome, ponies of Fillydelphia! This is DJ Pon3 beaming a light into even the darkest parts of the Equestrian Wasteland! You can't stop the signal, baby! And thanks to that kid from Stable Two, the message is reaching even the souls trapped in that Celestia-forsaken hellhole. Looks like our plucky Stable-Dweller galloped into the heart of Red Eye's slavery operation and gave the old bastard a big black eye... in the form of losing nearly half his dirigibles and a small army's worth of his slavers. Not t' mention annihilating the Crater Boss. And she even took Red Eye's right hoof griffin, Stern, down a peg. Aaaaand that's not all! Our little Wasteland Heroine, our Bringer of Light, bucked right through the wall that Red Eye had built around Fillydelphia's airwaves, bringing my humble message into the one place I could never reach before! Thank you, Stable Dweller!"

I sunk deeper into the bath and moaned. The elation I felt at hearing Homage's voice (disguised as it was) in this horrible place battled the humiliation and dismay at hearing my royal fuck-up described as a brilliant victory. I did not earn this.

“If you should happen to see our Light Bringer, give her a big thanks! She’ll be easy to recognize, should she keep in the company of the zebra slave she rescued as icing on the cupcake in her latest escapade. And for the rest of you still toiling away in Fillydelphia, our hearts go out to you, and your plight has *not* been forgotten. Plus, I offer these small words of hope: knowing our Light Bringer, I don’t think she’s done with Red Eye yet!”

Xenith stared at the little radio, blinking slowly. “How does he know so much?” We had walked across the moat and outside The Wall less than three hours ago.

The zebra looked at my companions, “And why does he not give you the credit you deserve? Much of the victory was yours. As was our escape, for which I am most thankful.”

Calamity chuckled. “Aw, shucks. T’weren’t nothin’.”

Velvet Remedy purred, “Because we asked... DJ Pon3 not to mention us. Littlepip here should get all the credit.”

I groaned. It was a conspiracy.

I started to get up and say something, but Velvet Remedy put a hoof to my muzzle, then whispered into my ear, “Oh, and don’t think I’ve forgotten about that ‘barn door’ comment.” She smiled as I collapsed with a splash under the weight of my embarrassment.

DJ Pon3’s voice continued bringing news and advice to the ponies of the Equestrian Wasteland. I felt a chill as DJ Pon3 talked openly with us, having no idea she was in mortal danger.

“Warning to all those traveling central Equestria. Keep your hooves away from the areas surrounding Ponyville. I’m getting reports of fires along the back end of the Everfree Forest. They seem to be spreading slowly, but the advancing flames and smoke are pushing many of the forest’s unpleasant inhabitants towards the Ponyville side of that nightmare zone, and at least a couple monsters have actually wandered their way into the old town itself. Fortunately, the only ponies living in that area are raiders. So, to the monsters, I say bon appetite!”

“Well, if it ain’t one thing, ‘tis another,” Calamity neighed, pointing out that Splendid Valley was beyond Ponyville in the opposite direction. Fortunately, we would be crossing the area well above ground level, so we should be able to fly clear of any trouble.

“Unless, o’ course, the critters wanderin’ out o’ that place include manticores or the like.”

Knowing my luck, and the Equestrian Wasteland’s maliciousness, they would be angry dragons.

“Well, it’s another hard day in this Equestrian Wasteland, but I’ve got the news and the music to get you through. So say bye-bye to stupid static, and hello to magnificent music! This has been your host, DJ Pon3...”

The voice of Homage’s broadcast persona gave way to one of the newer songs on DJ Pon3’s playlist. Something from a record I had rescued out of Stable Twenty-Nine.

“Do you dream...?”



I felt immensely better after the bath. As Velvet Remedy wove her horn about my broken body, mending my rib and lung with her beautiful magic, I began to drift to sleep.

SteelHooves walked in. “Littlepip, can we talk? About the zebra.”

I released a long-suffering sigh. This again? Lamely pretending to mishear, I replied. “Candy Hawk? Sorry, don’t think I’ve heard of her.”

“Funny,” SteelHooves said dryly. “Littlepip, I need to talk to you.”

“You need to go to the zoo? Fine. Need the four of us to come with you?” I put a little emphasis on the number four, only to realize that, with Pyrelight, it should have been five. Where was that magnificent bird anyway?

Snickering softly, Velvet Remedy stood up and trotted over to the Steel Ranger, head down. She pressed against him, wrapping him with a

telekinetic field of her own, reducing the massive weight of his armor so that she could shove him out the door. "Sorry, SteelHooves. Too busy saving Equestria today. All prejudice has to be rescheduled. Is next month good for you?"

SteelHooves nickered with a stomp. "You might accept having one of those traveling with you, but even if I did, there is no way the Steel Rangers will let her trot into their citadel and live." He looked at me over Velvet's scarlet-and-gold streaked white mane. "Or am I wrong that you have further business there?"

I buried my face as I realized the ghoul stallion had a point. Stable-Tec's old headquarters was my first intended stop. I had some things to... discuss with Elder Blueberry Sabre. But that wasn't someplace I could take Xenith. I'd have more luck walking into the Steel Ranger's citadel with an alicorn in tow and trying to convince them she was friendly.

Velvet Remedy had him all the way through the doorway when I finally said, "SteelHooves, I have welcomed Xenith to join us. She's here as long as she wants to be. If that's a problem for you, then you are free to be elsewhere." I stared at him with what I hoped was a gentle expression. "Remember, Applejack herself offered her hooves in friendship to a zebra..."

The response I got back was an unexpected growl. "Yes. And if you only knew how that ended, you wouldn't speak of it!"

Wow. Minefield. "Okay... but somehow I've become the leader of this merry band of ponies, and I've decided to give her the chance. If you want to stay with us, you will too. I won't have Xenith *mysteriously disappearing* when my back is turned..."

Velvet Remedy gasped sharply at my insinuation. She didn't know the patterns of behavior I had seen in Applesnack's memories and looked appalled that I could suggest one of us capable of such things. I envied her innocence. SteelHooves himself was silenced.

"...So long as you are with us, you *will* love and tolerate the shit out of her. Consider that an order." I stared at him, giving him one chance.

"That said," I added reluctantly, "You are absolutely right about the Steel Rangers. I won't be bringing her with us into the Stable-Tec building. Which... ugh... means we'll have to split up again. If only briefly."

SteelHooves stood there for a moment, then gave a rigid nod. As he turned to trot away, he nearly ran into Xenith, who was trotting up with a small, covered cookpot hanging from her mouth. They stared at each other awkwardly, then danced about each other. Velvet Remedy backed up, letting Xenith through the doorway, then closed it behind her.

Xenith lowered her neck, placing the pot on the floor. "Once again, it would seem that I am the subject of an argument."

"You *were* the subject of an argument," Velvet Remedy corrected gently.

"Is that not what I said?" the zebra asked, perplexed. I covered a snicker with a hoof.

Velvet Remedy gave up with a roll of her eyes. "And what is that?" she asked, pointing at the cookpot with a hoof. Her ears tilted back. "Please tell me there is no meat in that."

Xenith looked quite surprised. "Of course not. Zebras are vegetarians... as I thought were ponies. Are you not?"

I could see the relief wash over Velvet Remedy as a look of joy broke over her face. "Yes! Yes we are! Thank Celestia... finally!" She slid up to Xenith, wrapping a foreleg around her neck, seemingly oblivious to the way Xenith suddenly tensed. "Oh, we are going to be the best of friends, you and I."

Velvet Remedy backed up, looking over Xenith. "And Littlepip isn't the only one in need of medical attention." The mother-doctor side of Velvet was instantly back in control as she pulled the top mattress off a set of bunk beds and insistently guided Xenith onto it.

But the nudge to lie down was the final straw. Xenith jumped away, spinning and knocking back Velvet Remedy's nudging hoof with

enough force to send Velvet stumbling back with a tear in her eye. “I do not like to be touched!” the zebra spat.

Velvet Remedy blinked, falling onto her haunches, holding her bruised forehoof against her breast. I felt like I was frozen. Part of me needed to jump between them, to do something. But the situation had changed so rapidly my brain was still catching up.

“Oh.” Velvet blinked. Her eyes widened. “OH!” She stared back at the tense zebra mare with an expression flooding with compassion. “oh, Xenith... I’m so sorry!”

I had not told anypony what Number Four had told me about Xenith’s abuse; I did not feel I had the right. Velvet Remedy didn’t need me to; she had figured it out for herself. Not the details, thank the Goddesses, but enough.

Gingerly putting her sore hoof down and standing, Velvet Remedy apologized again. But with that apology came insistence, “I will not touch you casually without permission. That was wrong of me. But I am a medical pony, and I will need to touch you to treat your physical wounds.”

“I can do that well enough on my own,” Xenith nickered.

Velvet nodded. “I am sure you can. But I can do it better.” There was no boast. And after Velvet had been able to treat my rib and lung, there was no question that she was right.

“You deserve a lot better treatment than you’ve been getting. From others in the extreme, but also from yourself. Let me give you the level of care you need” Velvet whinnied. “At least, to the best of my ability.”

Xenith neighed. “I came in here to deliver a gift for the little one, not to be prodded and treated by a medical pony.”

They both turned to look at me. I was half tempted to pretend I couldn’t hear them again. Ugh. Our family had clearly grown big enough that somepony needed to lay ground rules. But why should it fall to me? Considering my whole lack-of-family experience, wasn’t I the *least* qualified?

“Xenith,” I said gently, “In this group, we have to trust each other with our lives every day. We care for each other, and each one of us uses our talents to help all of us.” I stopped as I recognized my line of thought was wandering. Re-adjusted. “You are very welcome here, and I do hope you stay with us. But being a part of this group will call for some sacrifices. You told me that I was responsible for you now. That includes making sure you are properly cared for, and this is how I choose to do that -- by having Velvet Remedy care for you like she cares for the rest of us.” I looked at the zebra, adding, “Unless you choose to release me from my responsibilities.”

Xenith’s eyes narrowed. But slowly, she laid down on the mattress. “No, I do not, little pony.”

I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding.

Velvet Remedy moved carefully towards the zebra. She stopped as she passed the small cookpot still resting on the floor. She sniffed at it. “Xenith, what is this gift?”

“It is a restorative brew,” Xenith told us. “It will replenish and heal your horn of the magics you overtaxed in our rescue.”

I blinked. On one hoof, this was extremely welcome news. The last time I had burned out, it had taken days to recover. With Red Eye’s threat hanging over Homage, I couldn’t afford to be ineffective that long. On the other hoof, I couldn’t help but question what a zebra could know of unicorn magics, much less remedies for uniquely unicorn ailments.

“I know many of the ancient mystical recipes. Ones to cure, to enhance and to harm,” Xenith told us. “If I have the right ingredients, I can brew potions that will permanently alter and strengthen you, making you better fit for the fight ahead.”

Alter? I didn’t think I wanted to be altered.

“This is not such a potion, but I have what is necessary to craft one of these elixirs -- one which will strengthen your bones such that they will be much harder to break. I will brew this for you... if you allow me to.”

Velvet Remedy looked skeptical. "I'm not sure that's such a good idea. Nor this gift, for that matter." Before either of us could protest, Velvet reminded me, "Littlepip has had some bad experiences with zebra 'medicine' before. She is particularly susceptible to their dangers."

Xenith looked between us. "I would not offer an addictive draught, nor give a cup too full." The zebra frowned at Velvet then turned to me, "You just said that here you allow each other to share their talents. Will you not let me share this one with you?"

Velvet nickered at the way Xenith used my own argument so swiftly. The zebra cocked her head. "You have seen Red Eye, have you not? That pony has augmented himself with machines and technology. If the little one truly chooses for him to be her mortal enemy, then should she not take advantage of the gifts I offer her? If Red Eye is also my enemy, should I not offer them?"

My answer was to get up, walk to the cookpot and lift away the lid. The brew inside smelled sweetly spicy, the steam that rushed out cleared my sinuses. With only the slightest hesitation, I began to drink.



My magic had been completely spent. After drinking Xenith's potion, and a night of rest, I still couldn't lift the now-empty cookpot. But I believed I could feel the stirrings of my magic. And I knew one test which called for only the tiniest spark of focus and power.

I laid one of the memory orbs on the apartment floor. I had sacrificed all save for the two I had taken from the safes in my battle with the super-unicorn. But those two had been put in the other saddlebag. I laid down, leaning forward and concentrating as I touched my horn to the orb...



Flashes of light burst across the night -- scores of cameras capturing the moment for a mob of news-ponies and paparazzi. They mixed with a

throng of ponies shouting protests and holding signs in their mouths. My host was standing on a set of marbled steps, looking down on them and watching a quartet of armored police ponies push their way through.

I was encased in armor, but unlike my experience in the mind of Applesnack, this armor did not feel heavy or claustrophobic. I could, in fact, barely feel it at all. The limited vision, the Eyes-Forward Sparkle that played behind the visor and the smell of trapped pony sweat were the swiftest indications of how I was clad. (A very *nice* scent of mare-sweat, I could not help myself from thinking.) With an unpleasant shock, I realized I could feel my wings. I was in a pegasus pony.

To each side of me stood more pegasi wearing the sleek, black carapace armor I had come to associate with the Enclave.

As the police ponies broke through the front of the crowd below and started up the steps, I could see they were escorting a zebra, bound in chains and encircled by the armored ponies.

One of them stepped forward, speaking to somepony just behind me. "We caught her in Ironshod Firearms, red-hoofed, trying to steal the schematics for the anti-machine rifle."

The zebra protested her mistreatment. "I haven't broken any rule; I was invited there you fool!" Her exotic accent was like Xenith's, and I recognized the odd rhyming that seemed to flow in all her speech. Lowering her voice loudly, Zecora asked the lead pony, "So are you always such a tool?"

"I knew it!" cried an equally familiar voice from behind me. The pink party pony advanced into view, glaring daggers at the zebra. "And to think I let you trick us into trusting you! You... you trickster!"

Zecora looked hurt. Pinkie Pie didn't relent, breaking into furious sing-song. "She's an evil enchantress and she does evil dances..."

"Pinkie Pie, you have me wrong. I am not like your foalish song."

"Don't even try to entrance me, Zecora. I... Never again." Pinkie Pie turned from her, scowling. It was the first time I had really seen the Mare of the Ministry of Morale angry, and it was terrifying.

In a low voice, she grumbled, "I hope you really like rocks!"

Pinkie Pie looked up at me, then jabbed a hoof towards two of the armored pegasi on my right. "You and you, help escort my *old friend*..." Pinkie Pie hissed the words between clenched teeth, "...to the convoy. Zecora will be spending the rest of her life as a guest of Shattered Hoof. Tell them that I want *all* of that zebra's memories. And don't. Be. Too. Gentle."

The two pegasi on my right rushed to obey. Pinkie Pie pointed her hoof at me. "You, with me."

The pink earth pony stomped back up the steps and into what I assumed was a Ministry building. My host turned and trotted after her, following behind Pinkie Pie as she crossed the darkened, spacious lobby towards the elevators. Under her breath, Pinkie Pie continued to sing venomously, "...she'll mix up an evil brew, and swallow you up in a big, tasty stew!..."

She stopped singing in the elevator. Which was good, since the song would have clashed unpleasantly with the lullaby version of *March of the Parasprites* that was playing inside the lift. Pinkie Pie turned and pushed all the buttons simultaneous with her rump.

The elevator took us directly to a large office with a huge plate-glass window that looked out over... Canterlot.

Pinkie Pie strode dangerously into the middle of the room, then turned, fixing me with the sort of malevolent expression that made me think she might carve me up and bake me into a cupcake. Then in a magical instant, she broke into a huge smile that seemed to light up the room. She waved a hoof in a sweeping bow, her voice bursting with joy: "*ACTING!*"

The aging pink earth pony collapsed onto the floor in a fit of giggles. "Best! Prank! Ever!"

My host humphed and trotted over to the window, looking down below. The Eyes-Forward Sparkle started identifying ponies and wagons in the street below. The convoy carrying Zecora to Shattered Hoof was already rolling out under a light guard supplemented by the two pegasi in magically-powered armor.

I felt myself lift the visor. In the window, my reflected face was blue, with magenta eyes and a shock of rainbow-colored hair matted between them. Pinkie Pie's reflection appeared on the window next to me. "Zecora's gonna be all right," she asked, a note of true concern in her voice. "Won't she Dashie?"

I saw and felt my host nod. "She's been with the best trainers the Ministry of Awesome has. I wouldn't let this move forward if it were otherwise."

Pinkie Pie nodded and turned her stare to the convoy below. It was already two blocks away. Pinkie Pie paused, lifting her left forehoof and wiggling it. "Huh."

Rainbow Dash ignored this, eyes narrowing. "Extraction by traitorous zebra sympathizers in three..."

"Two!" Pinkie Pie looked back down, excited. "Ooooh, Zecora's gonna make such a good spy!"

"One..."

There was a flash down below as the first wagon in the prisoner convoy exploded. Dark figures rushed in from all sides amidst flashes of muzzle-fire.

Rainbow Dash pushed down the visor. "And here. We. Go."



I sat in the apartment common room, trying to float small objects. I had made it up to levitating a pack of bubblegum. (Which, honestly,

was the only thing I imagined the package was good for anymore. Who would even try to eat two-hundred-year-old bubblegum?)

Over breakfast, a meal which in content was indistinguishable from dinner, the conversation had turned towards more open introductions and an attempt by the others to get to know Xenith a little better in return for regaling her with stories of our adventures over the past five weeks.

"I have never seen a bloodwing," Xenith admitted, "But I have seen the dessicated husks their preying leaves behind. Still... wouldn't a missile be a little excessive for killing one?"

"SteelHooves ain't never been one fer underkill."

The ghou! snorted. "You should talk. Tell her about your solution to the alicorns chasing us through Manehattan."

"Actually," Velvet Remedy interrupted, "I think it is Xenith's turn to share." She gave the zebra an encouraging look and suggested, "Why don't you tell us a little about where you learned those brewing skills of yours?" Velvet was purposefully suggesting tales of a time that must have been before Fillydelphia, steering the zebra's memories and our conversation away from more dangerous and hurtful paths.

Xenith hesitated, but relented as the silence stretched out. "I learned the brewing of potions and remedies both mundane and magical from my grandparents. In their youth, they had been adventurers of sorts, prying into all the forbidden places -- even delving into the Everfree Forest in search of the Hut of Zecora and braving Lookout Plateau that rises above the dark fumes of Froggy Bottom Bog along the vilest stretch of the Ponytomic -- searching out old recipes and lore of zebra-kind that had been over a century lost. It is from them that I learned the ways and tales of the zebra people... or as much as I know of them."

I looked up from my task of stacking bubblegum and bullets into a tiny fort. Somehow, the idea of the zebras as Equestrian scavengers not unlike myself was surprising. I don't know what I had expected. Something more military and uniquely zebra, I guessed.

“My great grandparents were amongst the survivors of Stable Three, as were most zebras in the Equestrian Wasteland. As is typical for youth, my grandparents rebelled against their parent’s ways and sought to learn more about the zebras beyond the tales passed down through oral tradition since The Sealing.”

I didn’t need clarification on what The Sealing was. No pony who lived in a Stable would. But I did wish to know more about the Stable whose floor plan I had in my PipBuck. “Stable Three?”

SteelHooves grunted. “The Let’s-Get-Along Stable,” he snorted derisively. I saw Velvet’s ears perk at that.

“It was clearly an experimental Stable,” SteelHooves rumbled. “Virtually all of the zebra citizens of Equestria were ‘randomly assigned’ to Stable Three. They would have made up half of the Stable’s population.”

Xenith frowned at the unpleasantness of the interruption but nodded at SteelHooves’ assessment. “It was long before even my grandparent’s time, but the stories passed down say that the Overmares told all in the Stable why they had been chosen. And why the Stable had no texts of history or posters of current events.”

Ah. Instead of altering things, Scootaloo and her friends had simply filtered out as much of the Ministry of Image’s influence as possible.

Velvet Remedy questioned, “Overmares? Plural?”

Xenith nodded. “One pony and one zebra.”

My experience with Stables was clawing at the back of my mind. Still, if there were survivors... “What went wrong?”

“Why would you assume something went wrong?” Xenith gave me a questioning look. “Zebras and ponies can live together quite harmoniously if each gives the other the opportunity.”

SteelHooves again provided the answer I was looking for. “Stable Three was built within the limits of the one city in Equestria with more than a hoof-full of zebras,” he informed us. “Canterlot.”

Oh no.

Xenith saw my expression and nodded glumly. “Not even the Stables could hold back the Pink Cloud forever. Stable Three lasted over a century before the Cloud ate its way inside. Within a generation more, those who still could were forced to unseal the door and flee. Many did not survive the exposure; my great grandparents were amongst those who did.”



“You... killed a dragon?!” Xenith stared between Calamity and me, her eyes wide. They narrowed as she asked me, “Is this true? Or is this revenge for Doombunny?”

“Doombunny?” Velvet Remedy asked curiously.

Calamity pulled a book from his saddlebags. “Ah’m guessin’ somethin’ t’ do wi’ this.”

I focused, trying to wrap the book in a field of magic. I broke a sweat, but the book dutifully floated over to me on a cushion of levitating energy. *Martial Arts of the Zebra* announced the title.

“Where did you find this?” I asked as I flipped the book open to the contents page.

“Filin’ cabinet at the station,” Calamity said matter-of-factly. “Strangely, it was under ‘P’.”

I shrugged that off. The prologue spoke of the zebra’s rich history of martial artistry, from the many fighting styles that had been perfected over centuries (such as *Fallen Caesar Style*) to newer ones. The newest of which had been only been in existence for a couple years at the time this pre-apocalyptic book had been written, and focused on drug-enhanced martial prowess: *Doombunny Style*. The book’s author spoke ill of it for having undefined “influences” from the lands of the ponies.

I closed the book, intending to read it later.

Xenith tapped a hoof in thought. "Littlepip, with your permission, there is someplace I would like us to go. I understand that there are other matters pressing, but this is important to me."

"Of course we... wait, how come this is my decision?" I looked to the others. "Why do you ponies keep acting like *I'm* the leader?"

"Littlepip's right," Calamity neighed. "Anyway, we do have more pressin' matters, so Ah think we should first hear that plan. What's next?"

I nodded thankfully and laid out the plan. "We need to go to Stable-Tec Headquarters first. I have something that Elder Blueberry Sabre wants, and I plan to use it to barter for access to the Stable-Tec maneframe."

SteelHooves whinnied questioningly.

"Red Eye is building a fortress called the Cathedral where Stable 101 used to be. I figure the Stable-Tec maneframe has record of the location of all the Stables, so that's the fastest way to find out where Red Eye's main base is located."

I looked to Calamity, "After that, I say we fly as fast as we can to Tenpony Tower and begin an evacuation."

Calamity smirked and turned to Xenith. "Ah'm sorry fer interruptin'. Jus' provin' a point. Now go on wi' what ya were askin'?"

I blinked, lost. "Huh? What point?"

Xenith gave her own smirk back, answering kindly. "I believe you just demonstrated to everyone but yourself why you are the leader."

I stared. What did she...? Oh *fuck*. I shot Calamity a dark look, but the buck just grinned. *Luna clop me with Her wings.*

"You could go yourself," SteelHooves suggested to Xenith as non-nastily as he could.

Xenith nodded. "Yes, but the journey would be long and dangerous alone. I would prefer to arrive later than not at all." She looked to me,

"Although should you refuse, then I will take my leave as soon as your travels bring us within a few days of my destination."

I nodded. I wanted to immediately agree, but it seemed wise to ask, "Where do you need to go?"

"I... need to return to my tribal home. The village that had been mine and my family's until Stern's slavers descended upon it."

"Your family?"

"My parents and husband were slain in the fight. My daughter..." the zebra choked before plowing on. "My daughter was too young for Stern's slave pits, and not a pony so she had no place in Red Eye's schools. So Stern left her there, along with the other children."

Velvet Remedy whimpered, shedding the tears that the zebra seemed unable or unwilling to. My own thoughts traveled back to the words of one of the raiders in Shattered Hoof, speaking about how her own town had been treated to the same, with the children left behind to fend for themselves. She had fled into the life of a raider to escape the horror her town had descended into under the rule of slaughter-scarred bullies and traumatized children.

"It was long ago. Years. I doubt my daughter would know me should she still survive." Xenith's face was sorrowful but her voice was steady. "Any claim I had as her guide and guardian I lost in the years since. I only wish to know."



"You really shouldn't be going anywhere," Velvet Remedy chided as we made our way towards the Stable-Tec building, itself walled off from the rest of Fillydelphia like Stern's city in miniature. "Except to a medical clinic for a week or two of recovery."

She was probably right, but we couldn't afford a week. I felt guilty for having selfishly stolen most of a day for resting. But once my magic had grown strong enough to lift Little Macintosh, I knew it was time to move.

A small family of scavengers spotted us on the street and scurried for cover. It hurt to think that ponies once greeted each other as they passed on the street. That cheer and open neighborliness had once been the social norm. In the Equestrian Wasteland, a stranger pony was met with guarded suspicion, assessed first for threat potential. I gave the scavengers a smile and a friendly hoofwave as we passed. It wasn't returned as they cringed, the adults hiding the younger ponies behind them, weapons ready should we attack like a band of raiders.

I hated the Equestrian Wasteland. Especially Fillydelphia.

"Oh my!" Velvet Remedy burst out, eyes wide with wonder. "Aren't you just *magnificent*!" She trotted quickly ahead of us.

Pyrelight was perched on the fountain statue of Sweetie Belle, glowing brilliantly. She had bled off most of the endowment from the Fillydelphia Crater, but her aura was still five times her size, lighting up the Steel Rangers' outer courtyard with golden radiance.

My heart went out to the balefire phoenix, immensely grateful for her companionship when I was behind The Wall. I too began to trot towards her, a tear in my eye.

My PipBuck started clicking, informing me that being in Pyrelight's vicinity was even less healthy than bathing in Fillydelphia water. I drew up short and watched as Velvet Remedy floated a bottle of RadSafe from a saddlebox. She downed more than the recommended dose before trotting right up to the radioactive bird and nuzzling her gently. Pyrelight cooed.

Well, at least Velvet Remedy wasn't spending nearly as much time inside the Fluttershy orb since Pyrelight joined us. I had mixed feelings about the trade.

"All the ponies in this crowd are crazy," Xenith muttered as she walked past me.

I moved up to Xenith. "Um... this building belongs to the Steel Rangers. I think maybe it's not so safe for you to come in with us.

Would you mind waiting outside? It won't be alone, and I hope it won't be for long."

Xenith considered me. "And whom did you intend to keep me company?"

I knew I needed Calamity's combat prowess backing me up, just in case my meeting with Blueberry Sabre went south. And not only did I want a Steel Ranger at my side for diplomatic reasons, I didn't trust him alone with Xenith quite yet. Velvet Remedy, on the other hoof, would enjoy having some time with Pyrelight... and I certainly wasn't taking the glowing ball of regal radiation in with me. I told Xenith my decision.

The zebra nodded. "As you wish. I will remain here with unicorn Fluttershy and her balefire Doombunny."

Okie dokey lokey.

"Perhaps... you could work on that brew you offered me?" I suggested, taking a plunge. I wanted to show the zebra my trust, and give her something to do while we were gone that she would find productive. I didn't really want to be altered. I had a hard enough time entering the memories of folk whose bodies were significantly different than my own. I didn't know how well I could handle living in one.

But...

Xenith was right. Red Eye had his own advantages. I had to at least seriously consider putting my squeamishness aside and taking those offered to me.

Xenith smiled. "As you wish."



"...those fires I reported yesterday appear to be the work of Red Eye's private army. Griffins sporting the slaver king's colors were spotted flying over the far side of the Everfree Forest carrying incinerators. But where any other woods would be consumed in flame by now, these fires

are spreading extremely slowly. Looks to me like the Everfree Forest is fighting back. “

DJ Pon3’s voice came out of the wall speakers in the Stable-Tec visitor’s lounge. We listened as I waited impatiently.

“And one last bit o’ news for all you faithful listeners. Looks like Red Eye’s set his sights on Tenpony Tower. Fortunately for the folks in that place, it’s built like a fortress. And the only entrance is both well-defended and tricky to access. The ponies of Tenpony Tower are barricaded inside, safe and sound for now. There’s plenty of stockpiled food and water, and the new constable chief is doing her best to organize rationing, so they should be able to hold out until help arrives.”

I jumped to my hooves at that. “No!” I shouted at the speaker. “They’re not trying to invade. They’re trying to seal you in!”

“And now for something a bit unusual. I don’t normally read mail on the air, but I have a personal message here from my assistant Homage to the Stable Dweller. Ahem. Dearest Littlepip... aww, now ain’t that sweet? I think somepony has a crush. Dearest Littlepip, I know things sound bad here, and I know it’s your nature to try to rush to our rescue; but we’re okay for now, and you have other more pressing matters closer to home. Do what you need to do, take care of them first. Then, later, we can meet where we met before, and I promise to give you so many orgas...Oh! Well now that’s not something I’m comfortable readin’ on the air. I think I’ll be having a little talk with my assistant.

“Meanwhile, here are the silky-smooth tones of Velvet Remedy singing about what gets her through life in this post-apocalyptic wasteland!”

I stared at the speaker, my body locked up, my jaw on the floor, heat rushing to my face and other places. Velvet Remedy’s beautiful voice poured through the speaker, replacing the voice of DJ Pon3, but I barely heard it.

What I meant to say was “I can’t believe she just did that!” What I actually said was closer to “*squeak!*”

Calamity snickered, tears in his eyes, then collapsed onto his back in laughter.



“What do you mean the Elder *isn’t here?*!”

“The Elder has been called away on an urgent crusade and is not available,” Knight Poppyseed claimed. “However, she said that in the case you should return, I may receive what you have recovered.”

I stomped. “I was under the impression that these things were important to you ponies! Or at least to her, considering I risked my life for them and all!”

“She wasn’t actually expecting you to survive,” SteelHooves deciphered. From his tone, he wanted a few words with the Elder himself.

I glowered at the mare in magically-powered armor. “Fine. I can report that Red Eye’s research into Bypass Spells has been destroyed.” I hadn’t scavenged any of it, and would have not given it to these ponies even if I had. But I did know that at least part of the research had been successfully completed. I could tell her that. But really, fuck these ponies.

“I have recovered the schematics to the Radiation-Powered Engine. And I’m ready to turn them over to you...” after having made copies, but I didn’t feel the need to tell her that. I had no problem giving the Steel Rangers this technology. I intended to give it out to any pony with a chance of implementing it. This was the sort of step forward that all Equestria could potentially benefit from, but not if it was being jealously guarded by only a few.

That said, I’d be damned if I wasn’t going to get something in return this time. “...in exchange for access to the Stable-Tec maneframe.”

Knight Poppyseed sputtered at that. “I’m sorry? No, there is no way...”

Calamity stepped up next to me, fixing her with a dangerous stare. “Ah reckon we ain’t exactly askin’. Y’all owe Li’lpip, an’ we’re takin’ payment. Now why don’t we do it all friendly-like?”

The knight mare looked to SteelHooves for support.

"I'm a *Star Paladin*," my armor-encased companion reminded her smoothly. "In the absence of the Elder, I am the ranking Ranger on this base. And I order you to take us to the Stable-Tec maneframe." He turned his stare to me. "I will personally make sure Littlepip doesn't access any information vital to the security of the Steel Rangers or the Ministry of Wartime Technology."

Knight Poppyseed nickered, but turned obediently and began to lead. "Permission to speak freely, sir?"

"No."



The room was cold and dark save for the blinking lights of the maneframe. From the locks on the door, the turrets outside and the hoofprints in the dust, I could tell this room was not only restricted but rarely entered.

I hoofed the light switch, but the room remained dark. I turned on my PipBuck lamp and looked around. The spotlight on SteelHooves' helmet hummed softly to life, cutting a beam of light through the darkness. He followed me in.

Instead of moving directly for the maneframe, I allowed my curiosity to drag me around the huge basement room. At the far end was the huge, gear-shaped door of a Stable. It rested against the open doorway, not attached. By removing my saddlebags, I was barely able shimmy through the entrance. According to the number, this was Stable 0.

Beyond stretched the rooms and hallways of a Stable maintenance wing. But the hallways dead-ended in shallow caverns of dirt. The rooms were unfinished. Toolboxes and construction equipment lay scattered everywhere. Several sections of the walls and ceilings had collapsed.

In one corner, I found the curled-up skeleton of an earth pony. The floor around the pony was littered with empty bottles. I shook my head

as I noticed the liquor had been applejack. There was a black opal laying on the floor next to the tattered remains of a recollector. The lower bone of the earth pony's left foreleg wore an early-model PipBuck.

I plugged my PipBuck into it and found a single audio recording. Sitting down, I let it begin to play. The voice on the recording was soft, almost overwhelmed the background noise of sirens and bombardment.

"Ah don't really know what ta say. Or, for that matter, whom Ah'm sayin' it to. The good news is that Sweetie Belle's got muh family safe an' sound in Stable Two. Ah dunno where Scootaloo's at, but Ah'm glad she's not..."

A particularly loud roar drowned out everything else, followed by the sounds of metal and concrete collapsing within the unfinished Stable as a maelstrom devoured the city above.

"...Fillydelphia was just hit. That's it then... it's all over. Everypony's dead... except for the ones we could save. Celestia dammit, Applejack, couldn't ya have stopped this from happening? Couldn't anypony have stopped this?"

I heard a furious clicking. I checked my PipBuck, but the radiation meter was safely in the green.

"No, no, no! Ah didn't mean that! Ain't Applejack's fault. Hay, it's more muh fault than hers. An' Ah know Ah ain't s'posed ta feel that way, but Ah do sometimes. An' Ah guess it don't really matter anymore. Everypony's dead now. Ah'm dead now. Ah didn't survive the megaspell just cuz Ah lived through the blast. We never even got the door on. Radiation will kill me."

The clicking was coming from the recording.

"Ah just wanted t' tell anypony listenin' that Ah'm sorry. Even if it's not muh fault all those kids are dead. Ah'm still sorry. Ah tried t' make up for it. Ah really did."



SteelHooves was calling for me.

"I'm fine!" I called back, wiping tears from my eyes. "I'll be out in just a minute."

Before worming my way back out, I knelt down and picked up the memory orb in my teeth. Once back in the basement proper, I put the orb in my saddlebags and proceeded to the Stable-Tec maneframe.

The maneframe was a tricky hack, but either I had grown more skilled or Pinkie Pie's had been easier. I downloaded all the information I could on the various Stables and began sifting through it for the one piece of information that interested me most. The location of Stable 101.

I found it and the answer surprised me.

Once I was reunited with all my friends outside of the Steel Ranger's citadel, having given Knight Poppyseed the schematics I had promised in return, I told everyone what I had learned.

"Stable 101 was built within the Everfree Forest itself." The looks and gasps were exactly what I expected. "Apparently, there used to be an old castle on a safe patch of land in the middle of the place. That's where Stable-Tec built their last completed Stable."

Xenith was the first to make a particular connection. "So Red Eye is building his fortress in the middle of the Everfree Forest... and is burning down the forest around it? Why?"

"Hard t' maintain a growin' army in a space where the wildlife wants t' disembowel ya an' suck the juices, Ah imagine," Calamity theorized.

"Agriculture," I answered with my own guess. "You said it yourself, Calamity. The Everfree Forest was never hit by a megaspell. As far as cropland goes, the Everfree Forest is one of the few places that isn't poisoned with radiation or taint."

Xenith agreed with my line of thought. "And after the burning, the soil will be rich with nutrients from the ashes." She looked grim, slipping unconsciously into the sort of rhyming speech I was used to hearing from Zecora. "I worked for months recycling flamer fuel for Stern. Clearly he was stockpiling plenty for this burn."

“And when he’s done, he’ll put up a wall around the whole place and have complete control over the food,” SteelHooves agreed, glancing back towards The Wall that Red Eye had erected around two-thirds of the city. “It’s what he does.”



“Do ya think She’ll like it?” Apple Bloom asked, fretting over an exquisite model of an almost monastic walled village. The design looked familiar; I had seen the remains of this model on display outside of Elder Blueberry Sabre’s chambers.

“She’ll love it,” I felt and heard myself say. The voice was not immediately familiar, and completely lacked the country drawl of the younger mare. This Apple Bloom, dressed in the manner of formal attire that she had not yet grown comfortable with, was no older than me.

“Do you think She’ll like the crenulations?”

“She’ll love the crenulations,” my host assured her gently. “The crenulations are fine.”

“How about the moon in the center courtyard? Maybe I should have gone with a full moon rather than a crescent moon...”

“She’ll love the moon. The moon is fine.”

Apple Bloom trotted nervously around the table, eyeing the model from every angle. The room we stood in was a glowing white marble with flowing curtains and golden filigree in all the accents. If we weren’t in a palace, then somepony had gone to great lengths to give the impression of one.

“How about the tower? Is it too short? Or maybe it’s too tall?” Apple Bloom hoofed her ears in frustration. “Arrrugh! I don’t even know if Princess Luna *likes* towers! Why didn’t I ask that earlier?”

My host let out a long-suffering whinny. "She'll love the towers. The towers are very nice."

Apple Bloom reacted like she'd been struck. "Nice? But they need to be *perfect!*" Apple Bloom's agitation was strong enough that she nearly hovered. I thought the young mare could spontaneously combust from stress.

"Calm down, child. I'm sure Princess Luna will love all of it." I felt myself smile as soothing words came from my muzzle. "Princess Celestia wanted the greatest architect in all of Equestria for this project, and She made sure She got it."

Apple Bloom quaked a moment, then calmed with a breath. "Thank ya again, Uncle Orange, fer accompanying me t' meet with the Princess. Ah don't think Ah coulda done this on my own."

"You're doing a far sight better than your sister ever managed. But try to watch the country drawl. Remember, sound sophisticated and you show everypony that you are sophisticated."

"Yes, Uncle Orange. Ah'll... I'll remember." Apple Bloom returned to fretting, but a more subdued fretting.

"You should be proud," Uncle Orange said encouragingly. "This is the sort of project that will make you renowned across all of Equestria."

Apple Bloom simply nodded. The fame didn't seem to interest her. However, "With the bits I get from this, Ah'll... sorry, I'll be able to expand muh... my business. Hire more help. Maybe start looking into other sorts of designs." She looked up with a smile. "Scootaloo says she'd like to invest now that Red Racer is doin' so well. Maybe build a company together..."

Apple Bloom's voice fell away. Another presence entered the room. An exalted one. My host dropped gracefully into a bow. Apple Bloom swiftly followed his example.

I was in the company of a Goddess!

Not one of those blasphemous pseudo-goddess alicorn monsters. I found myself kneeling before the Goddess of the Sun whom I had prayed to since I was a little filly: Celestia Herself!

She was majestic beyond description: a tall, white, *proper* alicorn whose mane and tail flowed with color, Her flank emblazoned with the symbol of the sun itself. She was graceful, kind and altogether sovereign.

"Please," She addressed us graciously, "Rise, my little ponies. It is a joy to see you."

As my host stood, Princess Celestia (*squee! squee! squee!*) moved around the table, eyeing the model favorably. "So, this is to be Luna's new academy?"

Apple Bloom nodded nervously, unable to speak.

"It looks lovely."

Apple Bloom squeaked, "Thank you, Your Majesty!"

Celestia's ears perked. "Ah, and here she comes. If you would be so kind as to let me speak first?"

"Of course, Your Majesty," my host said quickly. Celestia turned and both Apple Bloom and her uncle followed the glorious Princess's gaze.

Princess Luna walked in between two curtains. Her dark blue colors looked striking yet starkly out-of-place in the rest of the palace. She was much smaller than Her regal older sister (or, for that matter, than the pseudo-goddesses)... almost the size of a normal pony. While Princess Celestia was resplendent, Princess Luna struck me as... cute.

The sort of cute that I would have impure thoughts about if the pony in my head wasn't already too busy bouncing around Pinkie Pie Style and letting off a barrage of squee-ing noises.

"Sister? You called for me?"

“Yes, Luna dear. I’d been thinking about that school of magic you have been proposing. And I’ve decided to send all your students to the moon.”

Luna froze. Her mouth hung open. Then closed slowly. “You wouldn’t...” I could see the gears in Her head start spinning again. “And you couldn’t. Without the Elements of Harmony, you don’t have anywhere near that kind of power, *dear sister*.”

What was going on here?

Apple Bloom, apparently either not quite in on the joke, or simply unable to see Luna made uncomfortable, quickly spoke up. “She means Crescent Moon Canyon.”

Princess Celestia smiled but tilted Her head towards Apple Bloom with a look that suggested the regal Princess hadn’t wanted the young architect to spill that quite yet.

Princess Luna shot her sister a Look then moved to the table, Her eyes going wide. “This...?” She looked up with tears in Her eyes. “This is going to be the Luna Academy for Young Unicorns? A magical school of my very own? Just like yours?”

Princess Celestia smiled and nuzzled Her younger sister. “Happy birthday, little sister.”

Apple Bloom’s mouth hung open until my host tapped his own with a hoof. Blushing, she waved a hoof over the model. “Princess Celestia has given...” She paused, looking up at the Princess to make sure it was okay to speak. Princess Celestia smiled with a nod and softness in her eyes. “...us Littlehorn Valley in the Crescent Moon Canyon t’ build on. It’s isolated, far away from any dangers...”

“Or any villages,” Princess Luna noted, giving Her sister a gentler look, but a look nonetheless. “And far away from Canterlot and your own school.”

Princess Celestia nodded. “I want you to have this fairly, without ponies making the comparisons they would if the schools were side-by-side, and without the students being distracted by rivalry.” The Princess

flicked Her gaze to Apple Bloom as she added, “And I know you were considering Ponyville, but I didn’t want young colts and fillies wandering off into the Everfree Forest.”

Luna rolled her eyes. “Come on, big sister. No filly is foalish enough to go wandering around that place. Have faith in my students...”

Apple Bloom was making the sort of face that suggested she really wanted to be someplace else.

“...the only thing within a day’s wagon ride of Littlehorn are some zebra jungles.”

“Yes,” Princess Celestia nodded. “There will be friendly zebras not far away if they need assistance. And soon several of your students will have baby dragons of their own; so if anypony needs to contact you, you will only be a sneeze away.”



We were airborne between Fillydelphia and Manehattan. As much as I wanted to go straight to Tenpony Tower, the warning that DJ Pon3 had sent me was at the front of my thoughts, so I had directed Calamity to take us to Junction R-7 first. If something nasty was brewing in Shattered Hoof, something that Homage thought I needed to take care of first, then I wasn’t going to waste any time.

That still left me a lot of time to think. And most of that time was spent thinking about the memory orb I had found beside poor Apple Bloom’s skeleton. My inner pony had taken over a day to stop dancing at having seen the Goddesses, and it was almost harder to prevent myself from reliving the memory over and over than it was fight the urge for Party-Time Mint-als. And at least with the latter I had the help of simply not carrying any to take. The cravings came without an easy way to sate them. But this... I couldn’t throw away a memory orb of the Goddesses! It deserved to be enshrined.

I momentarily played with the idea of taking the Cathedral for myself, wanting to transform it into a temple to Celestia and Luna with the memory orb as a sacred relic. It was a silly daydream, and it passed. I also caught myself revisiting the notion of Luna clopping me with Her wings, only this time as a fantasy rather than a swear. I caught myself before my imagination could get too far and punished myself by banging my head repeatedly against the side of the Sky Bandit until Calamity threatened to land.

It took a while before other implications of what I had seen started to sink in.

Littlehorn. It was a name I had heard before in several contexts. But Watcher's words stood out:

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 looked around. Velvet Remedy was lost inside the Fluttershy memory orb once more. Pyrelight, her aura merely twice her size, had cradled herself against Velvet's left shoulder and was snoring loftily. I shared the *Sky Bandit* with SteelHooves and Xenith. Calamity was ahead, pulling us.

Well, if there was any pony who would know, it was SteelHooves.

"What happened at Littlehorn?"

SteelHooves and Xenith both started at the question. They looked at each other before SteelHooves answered me simply, "Disaster."

I shivered, knowing I didn't really want to hear this. But part of me needed to. "Tell me."

"Littlehorn was a school. Unicorn fillies and colts, many of whom were too young to even have their cutie marks, lived there, being trained by some of the best of Equestria's magicians," SteelHooves started slowly. "One evening, around twilight, a little over nine years into the war, a zebra convoy rolled into Littlehorn Valley. Two dozen Zebra

legionnaires and three large covered wagons. When they didn't respond to peaceful overtures, the matron of the school activated the school's defenses..."

"They didn't know your language," Xenith abruptly interrupted. "They weren't front-line soldiers. It was a refugee convoy. Mares and small zebra children just trying to get out of the killing zone!"

"I know that!" SteelHooves shot back harshly. "They realized that when the first wagon was struck and they saw the dead! But by then it was too late." He turned to me. "It was too late. The zebra convoy had assassins wearing zebra stealth cloaks..."

"They had *one*," Xenith corrected. "A father whose family was killed in your school's surprise attack."

"They only needed one," SteelHooves growled. "The school was full of *children*. And the zebras set off a gas bomb inside. It was Canterlot in miniature. The striped bastards *killed... every... pony* in Littlehorn!"

I felt myself crying. "Okay... please... I don't want to hear anymore."



They weren't paying attention to me.

But then, I wasn't being very assertive. I was still numb with heartache. Littlehorn had been the turning point of the war, and the pony in my mind was realizing with tearful slowness how Littlehorn had rippled out to destroy everypony it touched. I began to understand. The architect Apple Bloom's sense of guilt and how it steered her choices. And that would have been nothing compared to the guilt and sorrow of then-Princess Celestia who had Herself chosen the location. Or the effects on Princess Luna, whose beloved students were the ones slaughtered to the last.

"It was after Littlehorn that the damn zebras went totally manicore-shit. Every fight became one to annihilation of one side or the other. We struck one wagon, and yes it was a mistake. They massacred hundreds of small children and then went completely insane over it!"

“That had nothing to do with Littlehorn,” Xenith said solemnly. “The war had changed. It wasn’t about coal or gemstones anymore...”

Coal and gemstones? But then that made a lot of sense. Zebras weren’t like unicorns. They couldn’t cast spells or use magic directly. They had to brew it into potions, infuse into fetishes or otherwise bind it into objects to get their magic to work. And with the possible exception of Soul Jars, gemstones were the ultimate receptacle for magical enchantment. Any society advancing through arcane sciences would require trains full of gems. That was easy for ponies. We had lands rich with them. Rock farms for growing them. But if the zebra lands didn’t have gems... but they did have coal...

I was pulled out of my mental distraction when SteelHooves advanced on Xenith. “Then you admit your whole damn species had a fucking mental break!”

“Not mine,” Xenith insisted. “We saw that you ponies had fallen under the influence of the stars. No quarter could be given and no mercy expected from a nation under the sway of cosmic evil.”

“What?!?” I mouthed what SteelHooves screamed.

“Did you or did you not choose to follow the champion of the evil stars, Nightmare Moon?”

“What? Are you... *what!?*” SteelHooves turned stomping and pacing until Calamity once again threatened to land the Sky Bandit and give us all a talking to.

“Wait...” I said slowly. “Are you saying... that the reason the war got so bad... is because zebras couldn’t tell the difference between Princess Luna and Nightmare Moon?”

From a struggle over resources to holy war in ten seconds flat.

“They’re not the same fucking pony!” SteelHooves screamed at Xenith, although more now because he couldn’t scream at the zebras of the past. “We... we weren’t following *Nightmare Moon* any more than Princess Celestia imprisoned *Luna* on the fucking moon for a thousand years.” The Steel Ranger was shaking. “They. Are. Not. The. Same!”

Velvet Remedy had come out of the Fluttershy orb and was looking on in confusion. SteelHooves turned to the two of us and barked, "Tell her."

"They are not the same," I said firmly. Then took note of the silence beside me. I turned a look towards Velvet Remedy.

"Honestly," she whispered, "I was never really clear on that myself. I always figured it was some kind of psychotic break."

"Arrugh!" SteelHooves sounded murderous. Which, considering this was SteelHooves, actually scared me. "Psychotic breaks don't come with physical transformations!"

I nodded in firm agreement. ...Unless you were Pinkie Pie's hair, I thought, remembering that weird change at the end of her argument with Twilight Sparkle.

SteelHooves visibly shook. His voice changed from an angered yell to a low, even blade. "Then there was never any real chance of diplomacy after that, was there?" I could tell that behind his visor, his eyes were locked on Xenith's. "The invitation to Shattered Hoof Ridge for peace talks... there were never going to be any peace talks, were there?"

Xenith's ears flattened. She tried to be reasonable, apparently realizing that this was no longer even an unfriendly argument. "I wasn't there. Please remember that these were other people, zebras and ponies alike. Not us."

"Answer the question."

Xenith looked away. "From the tales I have been told," she sighed sadly, "Peace was what was hoped, but there could only be peace if Nightmare Moon was removed. Unfortunately, the ponies sent the wrong Princess to Shattered Hoof Ridge."

The night turned infinitely colder. I waited, my nerves on edge, for what SteelHooves would do.

With a final growl, SteelHooves removed himself to the farthest end of the *Sky Bandit* and crouched down, pretending to sleep. Which I knew he didn't, but I thankfully played along.

"Y'all okay back there now?" Calamity called back.

My answer echoed SteelHooves' answer to Knight Poppyseed.

"No."



We picked up the signal near within an hour of setting down at Junction R-7. It wasn't from Shattered Hoof.

"...mated distress call from Stable-Tec Stable Two. Message begins:"

The mechanized voice gave way to one I had written off ever hearing again. The voice of our Overmare.

"Littlepip, Velvet Remedy, if either of you can hear this... I pray you're still alive, still out there to hear this. Please, if you... or if any friendly pony can hear this... Stable Two is under attack. We don't know who they are or where they came from. But they have somehow opened the front door and they are killing everypony inside! I've evacuated all the survivors into the Security and Overmare's wing. But now that we are cut off from the orchard, we are running out of food. The invaders seem content to wait us out. If you can hear this, please save us."

My blood turned to ice. I analyzed the signal. The broadcast was being piped through the same transmitter that the father of a dying colt had once tapped into from the cistern under the Big Macintosh Memorial. The mechanical voice returned.

Home!

"Message repeats. This is an automated distress call from Stable-Tec Stable Two. Message begins..."

Oh Goddesses...

"C-Calamity, turn now! We have to get to Stable Two! Fast!"

“Uh... Li’lpip? Ah’m ‘bout t’ collapse here. What’s the...”

I pulled out my earbloom and played the message aloud. Within ten words, Calamity was already banking and pulling us onto our new heading.

“No...” SteelHooves whispered. “Damn them, no!”

I swiveled towards my Steel Ranger friend. “No what?” And then I realized what crusade Elder Blueberry Sabre had rushed off to the moment I was out of the way.

“I’m sorry, Littlepip. I did everything I could to make them believe taking Stable Two was a mistake. I have been for decades. But after you two showed up, and they realized there was still a functional Stable down there...”

“This. Was. Your. Mission!?” I strode forward, my glare alone almost strong enough to disintegrate the earth pony ghoul. “Assess if Stable Two could be safely taken?!”

He cringed back from me. “I even tried giving them Stable Twenty-Nine instead.”

I rocked on my hooves, my mind teetering on the edge of a dark chasm as I struggled to remember if, in my own hack of Stable Twenty-Nine’s entrance, I might have left clues that the tech-savvy agents of the Ministry of Wartime Technology could have used to figure their way through my own Stable’s door.

Velvet Remedy wrapped a hoof about me, holding me back. “If the Steel Rangers are assaulting our home,” she said with steel in her voice, “We might need him.”

“Or maybe it’s best we just drop ya off here,” Calamity called back, fixing SteelHooves with an even stare. “Cuz Ah’m headin’ t’ Stable Two, an’ when Ah get there, Ah’m plannin’ t’ kill me a whole lot of Steel Rangers!”

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Bone-Strengthening Brew - With this perk, your limbs only receive 50% of the damage they normally would. (Note: *Bone-Strengthening Brew* and the cybernetic implant perk *Adamantium Bone Lacing* are mutually exclusive.)

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



THE HOUR OF THE WOLF

“This... is Steel Rangers level murder here.”

Rage.

Burning, explosive rage. In the moment I realized that the Steel Rangers had invaded my home, were *killing* the ponies inside, I saw red like I never had before. My nerves were hot, electric. I wanted to strike out. To slaughter the fuckers. To rip them apart from the inside out, and keep stomping until they were nothing but paste under my hooves.

But my enemies, the murderers who were defiling my home, were not here. It would be hours, even at Calamity’s best speed, before we would make it to Stable Two. I wanted to hurt somepony *now*. My whole body and mind and soul screamed for justice and retribution... and if I couldn’t have that, at least somepony to buck. But the only ponies around were my friends.

So I stood there and raged in silence.

And they were wise enough not to interfere.



"Do you think I wanted this?" SteelHooves snapped, pacing through the interior of the *Sky Bandit*. "Stable Two was home to Applejack's family. If anyone in the Apple family still lives, they live in there..."

"Ah ain't sayin' ya wanted this," Calamity shot back. "An' Ah ain't sayin' ya didn't do yer darned best t' stop it. Ah'm jus' sayin' yer best weren't good enough." The rust-colored pegasus was pouring on the speed despite being at the point of exhaustion. "An' now it's muh turn."

Xenith watched the argument, for once not being the focus of the shouting. She turned to Velvet Remedy, eyes large. "This... is your home? You and the little one? Why do the Steel Rangers attack it?"

Velvet Remedy shook her head. Each blink sent fresh tears down her charcoal cheeks. The wind whipped at her color-streaked white mane. "Resources. Nothing more. All they see is a functional Stable. In the very least, the water talisman is priceless. The apple orchard nearly so." She closed her eyes, shuddering with a soft sob. "At most, they want it as a base."

My rage was beginning to ebb, the fire and fury unable to maintain itself without a direction to strike. I could feel numbness, sorrow and horror lurking behind it, ready to overwhelm me once the inferno of anger burnt itself out.

"You can't just prance in and start killing Rangers," SteelHooves stomped.

"Ah don't see why not. Far as Ah can see, they're nothin' more'n a gang o' high-tech raiders preyin' on the innocent." Calamity kicked at his battle saddle, changing the ammo. "Ponies like that need t' die, an' Ah aim t' kill 'em. It's muh policy."

SteelHooves turned to Velvet Remedy. "You talk to him."

"And say what?" Velvet's voice was hard as steel.

SteelHooves grunted. "That it's suicide, for a start." He looked at us. "Do you ponies really think you can take on a few squads' worth of Knights and Paladins in magical armor?"

The ghoul's words hit home. The size of this was too much. Who knew how many Steel Rangers were down there, each with weapons and armor and combat experience far in excess of our own. How was I going to save Stable Two? How could I fight that?

I began to remember each and every pony I had grown up with. My teachers, my peers, each pony at my first and only slumber party... I felt myself being crushed under the weight of this responsibility. I couldn't breathe.

"Y'all gonna be surprised jus' what we c'n do."

The armor-encased ghoul rounded on the pegasus. "I'm on your side here."

"Are you?" I asked, finally breaking my silence.

The others all turned a collective gaze on SteelHooves. The Steel Ranger, the eternally obedient soldier buck, had been backed into a corner. Forced to choose between his loyalty to us and his Oath to them.

If that was all it was, then I knew we would lose. But I had seen into his head, into his memories. SteelHooves' Oath wasn't to the Ministry of Wartime Technology. It was to *her*. Applejack. And when it had come to defending her, there had never been a moral he considered sacred enough to let it stand in his way. If that still held true, then we stood a chance.

SteelHooves didn't answer. That was not a good sign. But such a decision was hard enough without being further forced. I didn't dare push him. I needed him. I needed all of them.

"Well, that's jus' perfect," Calamity grouched. "C'n ya 'least promise not t' shoot us in the back when ya do make up yer mind?"

I wanted to tell the pegasus to shut up. I knew Calamity had a right to say that. And right now, *he* was the one going beyond the pale just to get us there. But if I had any chance of not letting Stable Two down... not letting every pony I had ever known *die*... I needed my friends to

pull together. We needed to be strong. Instead, I was drowning. And all about me, they were splintering apart under the tension.

Velvet Remedy nickered deprecatingly, "Well, if we're making promises, maybe Littlepip can promise that, if we win, she won't adopt any of them?"

I stumbled, feeling sucker-punched even as I was fighting to breathe.

"Oh come on, Littlepip," Velvet said, rolling her eyes. "It has not passed my notice that you have a habit of collecting ponies (and now zebras) who have nearly killed you." She shook her mane. "I'll admit, I sometimes wonder if there isn't a part of you that is doing it to get back at me."

"What?!" What the hell?

"Well, aside from just being the one who patches you up every time you get yourself hurt, I'm also the one who is at least a little responsible for you getting trapped out here to begin with," Velvet pointed out. Her normally beautiful voice sounded frayed.

I could tell this was the return of nasty, bitchy Remedy who dealt with the horrors around her by thinking poorly of her friends. I had really hoped we'd left this Remedy behind. But there she was, buried under the surface, just waiting for enough stress on the fault-lines of Velvet's personality to set her free.

"Are you sure there isn't a part of you that isn't trying to punish me by surrounding us with reminders of all the times you've nearly died out here?"

"Whoa nelly!" Calamity looked back. "Is that how ya think o' me?"

Oh Goddesses. Please, I don't know if I can do this even with you. I *can't* do this *without* you.

"Stop it! All of you!" I stomped with all hooves, shaking. "We can't tear apart now. Our home... my home... they need us! What good are we to them if we're already bleeding to death when we get there?"

"Bits and shrews," Calamity exclaimed. "Yer right, Li'l pip. Ah'm sorry."

“As am I,” Velvet Remedy said. The good Velvet was, at least for now, back again. “I... don’t know what came over me. I guess I’m just not dealing with this well.”

“So,” SteelHooves inquired, his voice calm as if the arguments had never happened, “Do you have a plan?”

I felt the wind blow through my coat and mane, ruffling my utility barding under saddlepacks and armor plating. I looked at each of them, suddenly feeling very small. My eyes fell to Velvet. “This... can’t be just my decision. Velvet, this was your home too.” My eyes pleaded with her. Silently, I begged her to help me.

Please, Velvet, please don’t let this be all on me. This is *home*. These are our ponies. I can’t have whether they live or die be all on me. I just can’t.

Velvet returned my gaze. In her teary eyes, I saw a kindness that told me she understood, and that she would take as much of this burden from me as she could.

Velvet turned to the others. “SteelHooves is right. I doubt we have the firepower to take on the Steel Rangers. And even if we do, we couldn’t hope to without losses. So we look for an avenue of diplomacy first.”

I nodded, weeping thankfully. Suddenly, I could breathe again.



There was an odd orange glow on the horizon, like an angry dawn was approaching. But the glow was from the wrong direction, and there were many hours before the first hints of daylight. The sun and the moon had gone wild, raising and setting by their own whims, but even those whims seemed to have a clockwork precision.

“What are we looking at?”

“Fires,” Calamity answered. “That out there’s the Everfree Forest. Looks like Red Eye’s got the whole backside ablaze.”

Xenith queried, "Do you think Red Eye's troops might be near Stable Two?"

"Naw, not a chance," Calamity answered. "Those fires are over a day away. Wouldn't make no sense for 'em t' be anywhere near Ponyville."

I leaned against Velvet Remedy, using her soft body for physical support, drinking in the scent of her to calm myself. I was still trembling, trying to steady myself, fighting off waves of alternating rage and bleak sorrow. The stress was winding me up until I felt I would explode. Or shatter.

Velvet Remedy was allowing herself the distraction of staring at the fire-lit cloud cover in the distance. "I remember when I first left Stable Two. The cloud cover had breaks in it. I could see real sunlight. It was the most beautiful, warming thing. More beautiful than anything I had ever experienced in my life. I thought... if there is something as wonderful as this out here, then the Outside can't be bad." She chuckled sadly. "Haven't seen the sun like that again. Sometimes I wonder if that isn't why this world feels so dark and hopeless."

I remembered a similar break in the clouds, pouring the soft light of Luna's moon down upon Monterey Jack and me as we faced off on the Ponyville bridge. It seemed like a lifetime ago.

"Ayep," Calamity replied, missing the art and soul of Velvet's comment, "The Everfree Forest don't work properly. Pegasi have always had a tough time keeping the cloud cover over that place. It's like the clouds *want* to move. All on their own. Cloud curtain in the areas right up against it c'n get mighty patchwork-y sometimes."

SteelHooves was staring in the other direction, his visor gazing out into the darkness. Finally, he admitted with a low rumble, "I don't understand why Elder Blueberry Sabre is doing this."

I felt Velvet Remedy had covered that question fairly well earlier.

SteelHooves let out a breath. "This is far outside her territory. Elder Blueberry Sabre is the Elder for the Fillydelphia contingent of the Steel

Rangers. Stable Two technically falls under the purview of *my* Elder and the Manehattan contingent.”

Oh. “They can’t keep Fillydelphia,” I offered, feeling a fresh surge of fury as my thoughts touched on what must be happening every minute now. “Red Eye keeps growing stronger. The Steel Rangers’ position there is stagnant, if not weakening. I think Velvet’s right about them needing a new base.”

The ghoul nodded inside his armor. “Still, it should fall to Elder Cottage Cheese to take Stable Two. For him not to be there would be... a considerable divergence from protocol. And to have two Elders in the same place would be strategically unwise.”

In front, Calamity whinnied, letting all legs hang in the air and sticking out his tongue with an expression of disgust. “Seriously now? Yer commandin’ officer’s name is Cottage Cheese? Did his folks hate ‘im or sumthin’?”

SteelHooves chuckled despite our dark situation. “He does prefer to simply be called Cottage.”

“I like cottage cheese,” I said in a very small voice.

“Hey, maybe yer Cottage Cheese Elder is pullin’ the same thing on Blueberry Sabre that she pulled on Li’lpip,” Calamity suggested. “Sendin’ her into a situation that he feels is a giant deathtrap. After all, don’t he believe a buncha rubbish ‘bout the Ministry o’ Awesome havin’ black ops Stables and nonsense like that?”

“Well, maybe not complete nonsense,” I muttered under my breath.

“Whatcha mean by that, Li’lpip?” Crap. Calamity heard me.

“Well, I mean that I saw Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie setting up Zecora to be a double agent for Equestria. Rainbow Dash said Zecora trained under the Ministry of Awesome’s best trainers... which made it sound like MAw did that sort of thing a lot.”

I was met by stunned silence. From everyone. Except Pyrelight, who cooed curiously at Velvet.

I had been slightly worried that mentioning I had a memory orb of Rainbow Dash might lead to Calamity demanding a recollector. I didn't want my Dashite friend losing himself in the orb the way Velvet often did with the Fluttershy orb.

"Zecora" Xenith asked, her exotic voice slow and cautious. "Do you mean Zecora of Zecora's Hut in the Everfree Forest?"

Whoops. "Um.... Yes. Turns out she was a friend of the Ministry Mares. And chose to..." Was it really a good idea to tell Xenith that Zecora had gone undercover to betray the zebras?

"Zecora was a traitor!" SteelHooves growled dangerously. "She was selling weapons technology to the zebras." He took a step towards me. "She tried to give them the damn gun that would punch through Steel Ranger armor!"

oh boy... "Uh, no. Not really. That was part of her... cover?"

"No. That is not true," SteelHooves insisted adamantly.

"Fluttershy knew a zebra?" Velvet Remedy's voice asked. At least that revelation, thank the Goddesses, probably didn't lead down dangerous paths.

"Uh, Li'l pip... maybe ya oughta be explainin' some o' these memory orbs y'all been lookin' at?"

I groaned. Even staying away from personal memories, like SteelHooves' memory orbs, or dangerous ones like anything involving Fluttershy and the damn megaspells, this would take a while. But part of me was thankful for the distraction. We still had a few hours to go.



"Burnin' hoof means *what!*?"

"That's what she said!" I was still as overwhelmed by that as when I lived it.

"I'm still wrapping my mind around Fluttershy hitting on Applejack," Velvet chuckled with amusement. "Even if it was for a good cause."

Her eyes twinkled as she looked at me. I hung my head. I had some torment coming my way after the barn door slip-up, and I suddenly felt sure Velvet Remedy was drawing a whole new level of inspiration from the yellow pegasus.

As if to confirm my suspicion, Xenith leaned close and intoned, “You’re doomed.”

SteelHooves had remained abnormally silent, even for the taciturn ghoul, ever since I explained that first memory. At first, I thought that the revelation about Zecora had affected him, or perhaps the confirmation of his theories about the Ministry of Awesome. With time, I grew to suspect that neither was the case. Rather, I suspected that while we were distracting ourselves from the conflict that awaited us at Stable Two, SteelHooves was plunged deep into his own internal turmoil, and was working through it as best he could before the moment of choice arrived. In a way, he was stronger than we were. Or, at least, than I was.

The sound of rapid-fire pops floated up to us on the wind.

We were approaching Ponyville. Sweet Apple Acres was still a good bit away; but in the stillness of the wasteland, the night air carried the sounds of battle great distances.

Velvet Remedy whimpered. “That’s a lot of gunfire.”

“Grenade machine guns,” SteelHooves noted. “Like mine. Several of them.”

I felt myself trembling as my imagination insisted on conjuring images of what might be happening. They wouldn’t be using that sort of weaponry inside the Stable, would they? And, if not, what were they doing? Suddenly, I pictured all the ponies of Stable Two marched out into the nearest field of poisoned apple trees, lined up... and fired upon with grenades just for the cruel pleasure of seeing their bodies torn violently apart.

I let out a low moan, tears in my eyes. I tried to banish the image. Surely, even these monsters wouldn't be so vicious, so cruel. These were SteelHooves' brethren, not raiders, right?

"Monsters!" Velvet Remedy hissed next to me.

"Ah think yer right," Calamity agreed, making me cringe. Please no. This can't be what I'm thinking. It just can't!

"Red Eye's fires are drivin' a whole mess o' things towards Ponyville. Sounds t' me like a few 'ave wandered their way up t' Sweet Apple Acres."



It was the deepest part of the night. There was a name for it that I couldn't remember -- that mystical black hour where all is darkest and you can't sleep, when the weight of all your sorrows and bad decisions come weighing on you most heavily, and when the monsters scratch just outside your door.

Velvet Remedy got up and started rummaging through the supplies we had stored in the back of the *Sky Bandit* -- all those things we were keeping for trade, or had intended to stash back at Junction R-7, but didn't want to burden our saddlebags with. Including every weapon Calamity had been able to strip from the ponies Stern had brought with her to attack my friends at the Fillydelphia Tower.

I began to reload my weapons. My choices were limited. Little Macintosh was powerful enough to possibly punch through a Steel Ranger's armor if I could hit a weak spot, and I had a single clip of armor-piercing bullets for my sniper rifle. Only my zebra rifle had sufficient armor-piercing rounds, thanks both to the convoy Calamity and I had looted outside of Fillydelphia and some additional ammo he had liberated from Stern's slavers.

I floated the zebra rifle in front of me, looking at it. My rage was beginning to boil again, pushing away the numbing pain. For once tonight, I put up a wall against it, trying to remain at least partially

rational, not let this overwhelm me. Did I really want to use the zebra rifle against the Steel Rangers? On one hoof, these were my enemies and they deserved what they were going to get. And the rifle was the best weapon I had for putting a mess of them down. But the zebra rifle's enchantment... the bullets would do more than just punch through the armor. I'd seen what happens to a pony who is set on fire inside a suit of armor, and the memory still horrified me. Was I really ready to go Spike on these ponies?

"What is that you are wearing?" Xenith gasped.

Velvet Remedy responded gracefully, "We are going into battle against truly dangerous opponents. How foolish would I be to not go in wearing armor? And this is the best armor I possess."

Velvet Remedy was wearing the zebra legionnaire armor.

"Unless, of course, you wished to wear it," Velvet said kindly. "I think you have more claim to it than I do."

Xenith considered that a moment, glancing towards SteelHooves. "No. Equestria is my home."

"Oh horseapples," Calamity muttered to himself, wincing. Then, speaking up, "uh... Velvet? Li'l pip? Ah've got a request. An' feel free t' say no. Ah know it's askin' a lot Ah have no right t' ask." He paused a moment, then pushed forward. "But if we're gearin' up for a big fight, then Ah've got some stuff stashed not far from here that might help. Only add 'bout fifteen minutes t' our flight, Ah promise. But that's fifteen minutes them Rangers could be killin' yer kin."

I was already feeling each second drop away with blood. Fifteen minutes more, when we'd already taken so long... I couldn't bear the thought. "No," I said firmly. "We can't give them a minute more, much less fifteen." I took a deep breath, "But if you think it will help, then drop us off at the Stable door and go. You can meet us back..."

"No," Velvet interrupted. "Splitting up is a bad idea. I don't want Calamity wandering the Stable alone trying to find us. We all go in together." She was right. My suggestion was a bad one.

“Calamity, go ahead,” she continued. “We’ve taken hours to get here. If fifteen minutes more is going to make that much difference, we’ve already lost. I know you wouldn’t even bring this up if you didn’t really think it would help. And anything that helps us get through this alive is worth fifteen minutes.”

Calamity extended his wings, changing course.

Sweet Apple Acres was now looming into view -- the rolling hills of feeble trees bearing poisoned fruit, the old barn still standing, surprisingly intact.

You won’t be able to use the barn until next spring.

I suddenly imagined that Apple Bloom had torn the original barn down while they excavated for Stable Two. Then rebuilt it afterwards. When Stable-Tec builds something, they build it to last.

I could see sparkling lights in the air, like part of the night sky had descended through the clouds and landed in the middle of the farm. A swarm of evil stars. The pin-point lights of muzzle flashes danced across the ground all around it.

Xenith drew a sharp breath. “No!”

“What is it?”

The zebra’s eyes were wide with horror. “Star-spawn!”

What the Steel Rangers fought was a horror out of zebra legends -- a creature from beyond the moon, unleashed upon the world eons ago as a ‘gift’ from the stars.

The creature was massive and completely invisible save for the surging, living constellations of light that seemed to float around and inside of it. I brought up my Eyes-Forward Sparkle, but while the compass burst with lights for the ponies on the ground, most of which were a hostile red, my PipBuck couldn’t lock onto the entity they were fighting at all. As far as it was concerned, nothing was there.

Gunfire from the embattled Steel Rangers poured into thin air, and the starry air attacked back, crushing them or sending them flying. Rockets exploded, bathing parts of the creature in fire long enough to get glimpses of its shape – I felt only mildly reassured that its structure seemed at least vaguely pony-like, with a head, body and four legs. An eldritch roar blasted across the cloud-shrouded heavens. It sounded like the cosmos screaming in rage.

My first instinct was to try to help. I wanted to run to their aid. It actually took a moment for me to remember that the ponies down there were our enemies. But not all of them, at least according to my E.F.S., and wasn't that enough?

"We've got to help them," SteelHooves insisted, voicing my own thoughts. "You wanted diplomacy? This would be the first step."

"You cannot hope to fight a Star-spawn!" Xenith gasped. "What manner of fool are you? All you can hope do is run and hide."

"Have you met us?" SteelHooves asked. And with those words, I knew he had made his choice.

Detour abandoned, Calamity winged towards the barn and flew us into the storm.



*BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!
BOOM! BOOM!*

SteelHooves stood on top of the *Sky Bandit*, his grenade machine-gun tearing at the virtually invisible monster as Calamity circled us around again. The pegasus buck was doing his best to get us as close as possible while keeping us outside the Star-spawn's striking range -- not an easy trick being unable to properly see the creature.

The Steel Rangers on the ground had been nearly decimated. There were at least a dozen corpses in crushed and mangled armor. Nowhere near the forces that SteelHooves estimated had been sent to take the Stable. I could make out three remaining from the dim light of their

E.F.S. visors and the brilliant flashes from their weapons. One fired off a pair of missiles. They exploded against the transparent hide of the monster.

The Star-spawn retaliated, an unseen appendage connecting with the armored knight with a sickening crunch.

The pony flew through the air towards us. “Yeeeeow!” Calamity cried, dodging. I could see the pony was dead as it arced past us, internal organs pulverized inside gruesomely dented armor.

Pyrelight shot out past us, strafing the creature with balefire, washing part of its back with flames that quickly died away.

I focused, trying to wrap the entire entity in a magical field. I had no intention of moving it, but as the magical aura spread around it, the creature became clearly outlined. It was far bigger than I thought. But at least now we could properly dodge the alien behemoth.

Velvet Remedy cast her anesthetic spell at the cosmic beast. Her magic hit it square in the head. The creature stumbled, fazed for only a few seconds, then let out another unearthly roar.

“Dang it, she’s just too big! We ain’t doin’ more’n bee stings t’ her!”

“I told you,” Xenith warned, cringing. “You can’t slay a Star-spawn. You best be thankful this one is but a baby. A full-grown one would have devoured all of Ponyville without even noticing.”

“That’s just a baby?” I asked in shock as the monster stepped backward, colliding through the barn. The last building standing on Sweet Apple Acres, the barn which had weathered apocalypse and two-hundred years of the wasteland, came crashing down. I felt a pang as I watched the barn I’d witness Applejack and her friends together in during sunnier, happier times be obliterated by the uncaring misstep of the Star-spawn.

“Littlepip, keep that glow up!” SteelHooves ordered as my telekinetic field began to slip. “Calamity, bring us around in front of the thing and hover. Velvet, have that spell ready again when I say.”

“Ah sure hope ya know what yer doin’,” Calamity said as he brought the *Sky Bandit* directly in front of the monster’s snout.

“Now, Velvet.”

Velvet Remedy focused, unleashing a small bolt of magic that splashed against the head of the creature. Again, for just a moment, it was stunned by the same magic that would completely paralyze a hellhound for nearly an hour.

A streak of smoke shot out from the top of the *Sky Bandit* above me as SteelHooves fired off a single rocket. I watched as the missile shot through the glow of my magic and beyond where the hide of the creature should be, lodging *inside* the monster’s transparent, star-moted head.

The Star-spawn let out a howl that tore us from the sky. Calamity fought to regain control before we smashed into the poisoned orchard below. A moment later, the missile detonated, its explosion accompanied by a gut-wrenching, wet, splorchy sound.

We hit the ground seconds before the Star-spawn’s body did. I bounced around inside, banging heavily against the benches and metal walls, bursts of pain blossoming throughout my body. The sky bandit rolled, crashing through several trees before coming to a stop. Calamity hung limp from the harness. Velvet Remedy lay amongst the scattered supplies, moaning. I could not see where SteelHooves had been thrown to. Or Xenith.

My PipBuck was clicking madly. I felt the warm stickiness matting my mane. I reached up with a hoof. My lightest touch brought dizzying pain and shooting lights. And then darkness.



The bright spotlight from SteelHooves’ helmet found me.

Xenith trotted beside him, looking annoyingly unhurt. She had, I would learn, jumped out a window as we crashed, landing in a controlled roll that left her unmangled save for her mane.

"Is... everypony okay?" I asked weakly.

"Never better," SteelHooves said. The way my PipBuck was clicking, he may have been telling the truth.

"You flew through a tree," Xenith countered. "Your back should be broken."

"Hard to keep down a Canterlot ghoul," SteelHooves replied. I got the feeling he enjoyed the way she gasped in near horror, stepping quickly away from him.

"That's us," I smiled weakly. "Full of surprises." I looked to SteelHooves, "How did you kill the Star-spawn? That was amazing!"

"I'd seen an Ursa once before, back in the war," SteelHooves replied. "From your outline, looked like the monsters they turned into weren't too physically different. Just a bit nastier and a lot harder to see. So I fired where an Ursa's eye socket ought to have been and hoped for the best."

Calamity had come to with a weary groan. Finding himself hanging upside down in the *Sky Bandit's* harness, he waved his forelegs, as if hoping to flip the entire passenger wagon back over. It wasn't going to work.

"Here, let me help," I called out and magically unhooked the harness. Calamity fell onto his back with a thump.

"Oof!"

Velvet Remedy hobbled out of the passenger wagon, dragging our medical supplies with her. I realized that we had probably scattered our belongings across a hundred yards of irradiated cropland. But that would be a task for morning. First we had to get through the night. At least I hadn't lost my weapons.

"Everypony (and zebra) gather around," Velvet said politely, dropping her saddleboxes to the ground. "Your medical pony is going to patch you all up before we proceed further, while simultaneously managing to

not take it as a bad omen that she's having to heal your wounds before you even get inside the Stable door."

"Hold up right there, ponies!" a voice ordered from the darkness. Two helmet spotlights pinned the group of us.

The two Steel Rangers who had survived the Star-spawn battle were moving towards us, weapons pointed, the light from their E.F.S. visors letting me know they had their targeting spells locked onto us.

"Oh wow," came a sweet mare's voice from the second suit. "Look, it's Elder SteelHooves."

"*Star Paladin* SteelHooves," the other corrected swiftly. "And keep your weapon locked on him, Knight Strawberry Lemonade." That one turned to face our ghoul companion. "We have specific orders to send you on your way. You will not interfere with this operation."

"That was awesome, SteelHooves, sir!" the younger knight gushed, turning off her E.F.S. "How'd you kill that thing?"

"Knight Lemonade!" The older Steel Ranger turned with a growl. "You will bring your E.F.S. back up and lock it onto your targets."

"Do you even realize which Stable you are attacking?" SteelHooves asked evenly. "This is Stable Two, the Stable built to preserve the Apple family and the ponies of Ponyville. This is the Apple family's farm. That barn had been the barn that the Mare of the Ministry of Wartime Technology, Applejack herself, had grown up in. That Stable holds her kin. You are attacking the family of the Ministry Mare of Wartime Technology. It is you who should leave. In utter shame."

"We have our orders. As do you."

"You are not my commanding officer, Paladin. Nor is Elder Blueberry Sabre." SteelHooves stood his ground. "And even if you were, these orders are wrong. This operation is a disgrace. And any pony involved in it does not deserve the title of Steel Ranger."

"The orders I'm giving you come from Elder Cottage Cheese himself. You are to leave at once, and take your tribal friends with you." The

paladin turned to the knight once. “And you, bring up your Eyes-Forward Sparkle and lock on target. That is an order.”

“Sir?” Knight Strawberry Lemonade faltered, “Eld... Star Paladin SteelHooves is right. This operation is wrong.”

The paladin turned to face the knight, a back-mounted light machine gun swiveling to lock on her now. “You will bring up your Sparkle and lock on target or you will be facing a court marshal for disloyalty before the sun next sets!” the paladin growled. “Do I make my-“

Blam!

The paladin fell, twin bullet holes forming black zeroes on his armored helmet.

Knight Strawberry Lemonade backed up in shock. The rest of us turned to Calamity.

“What? Ah gave diplomacy a chance. He obviously wasn’t ‘bout t’ join the good guys.”



Velvet Remedy’s horn glowed softly as she did her best to heal the gash on the back of my head without binding my whole face with bandages. Fortunately, she said it looked and felt far worse than it actually was.

“Elder Cottage Cheese is dying,” Knight Strawberry Lemonade said, filling SteelHooves in as best she could. “I mean, I know he’s been dying forever. But just this last month, not even the medical bed seems to be helping anymore. He’s focused on taking Stable Twenty-Nine before he dies. That’s where he is, with Star Paladin Crossroads. He invited Elder Blueberry Sabre to lead the acquisition of Stable Two, along with Star Paladin Nova Rage.”

“Of course he did,” SteelHooves commented. “Star Paladin Crossroads had pushed for me to become an Elder. She has the same sentiments that I do. Cottage must have known there was no way Cross would agree to the taking of Stable Two.” He stomped. “Star Paladin Nova

Rage, on the other hoof, is a M.W.T. traditionalist just like Elder Blueberry Sabre.”

Calamity wiggled his left wing. It had suffered injury in the crash and now Velvet had it mummified in bandages. “Reckon this Cottage feller wants the Crusader in Stable Twenty-Nine? Live forever inside a machine?”

“But that’s insane,” I asserted. “The Crusader can take an imprint, a copy of a pony’s mind, but it’s not like the pony actually becomes part of the machine. Cottage Cheese would still be just as dead when he died.”

“Unless,” Velvet Remedy suggested, “He thought he could really put himself into it, mind and soul.” It took me a moment to realize what she was thinking: a soul jar. Blackwing’s Talon group had been hunting for information on The Black Book for somepony. Now I suspected I knew who. If a soul jar could be made out of anything, why not a Crusader? I suddenly imagined the Elder who ordered the attack on my home living forever in an indestructible computer. There was no way I could let that happen! He didn’t get eternal life as a reward for this murder.

SteelHooves continued to speak to Knight Strawberry Lemonade. In the end, she told him, “Look, I believe you’re right. And I’m willing to stand aside. But I can’t follow you in. I can’t attack other Rangers.” Her visor turned towards Calamity, “Or cooperate with tribals who do.”

SteelHooves nodded, putting an armored hoof on her shoulder. “I respect your decision. You are doing the right thing.”

He turned to us. “Are we ready?”

I stood, floating the zebra rifle to my right and Little Macintosh to my left. From what the knight had told us, Elder Blueberry Sabre had left a fifth of their force guarding the way in, a precaution against us as much as the horrors slowly emptying into Ponyville from the Everfree Forest. Truth was, I was not ready. But every moment we spent talking and healing was one more for the four dozen Steel Rangers inside to tear their way into the Security and Overmare’s wing and slaughter

everypony they hadn't killed in their initial strike. They couldn't wait for me to be ready.

"We go."



Calamity brought up the rear. His sharpshooting would be critical should we be flanked. I kept glancing back at him, watching his reactions as we passed through the tunnel beyond the apple cellar. It was not like the sanitized little tour he had seen in Stable-Tec Headquarters.

"This is Velvet Remedy's home," he muttered. "Li'lpip's home." I'm pretty sure he didn't know I could hear him. Before the Pinkie Pie statuette, I probably wouldn't have been able to.

"Ah gotta be strong fer them. Not go crazy. Ah can't jus' charge in an' kill every armored bitch Ah see. Ah need t' be strong. Need t' watch fer them. Need t' protect 'em. Ah c'n do this."

The skeletons which littered the floor had been crushed and broken, trampled by an army of metal hooves. I felt a twisted sickness welling up within the reservoir of rage that was filling my head. No pony knew who they were, but they deserved better than this. I felt part of my anger turn in on myself. Why had I not returned to bury them? They died at the door to my Stable.

But then, the Equestrian Wasteland was filled with skeletons. I hadn't treated any of the others any better. Not even the skeletons of Apple Bloom or Pinkie Pie. But at least I hadn't defiled them. I hadn't smashed them under hoof without even caring.

The door to Stable Two was wide open.

Velvet Remedy and SteelHooves were our diplomats, so they were in the lead. I wanted our Steel Ranger to have a shot at wooing any other Rangers before we had to shoot. So Velvet was the first to step back into the place that had once been our home. She stopped with a painful gasp. I galloped up to meet her.

The entrance room was as grey as the maintenance areas of Stable Two had always been, but now there was a cacophony of color splashed all over it. The pretty colors of pastel-coated ponies lay in pools and sprays of darkening crimson.

The Overmare had sent half a dozen ponies to greet whomever was coming in. Only two of them, Stable security guards, were armed. The others had come bearing only hopes of friendship. Scattered near the open muzzle of a magenta-coated young mare was a bouquet of flowers, a welcoming gift. The white flower petals were stained red. And the Steel Rangers had gunned them down.

The pony in my head stood teetering on the edge of a great, dark spiral. A bath covered with bones that lead forever downward into blackness. The currents of my rage pulled her towards it, a tidal force of crimson pouring into the abyss.

I pulled her back, and my rage shattered. The horror and sorrow and hurt that had been building just behind flooded in. I collapsed to my knees, sobbing openly.

“That’s it,” I heard Calamity say. He sounded so very far away. “Fuck diplomacy. Any pony who was part o’ this, who even stood by an’ watched, is a dead pony.”

I realized I recognized the yellow-coated mare who lay disembowled in the corner... but I couldn’t remember when I had met her. Or what her name was. And that made it so much worse. Why couldn’t I remember her name? She deserved to have her name remembered. She deserved to be alive!

Velvet Remedy, her own face wet with tears, trotted up and wrapped her forelegs about me, pulling me into an embrace as I heaved and sputtered and wept wretchedly against her armor and coat.

“Littlepip has been strong long enough,” I heard her say. “This is my home too. I’ll take it from here.”



Calamity, Xenith and I formed our stealth team. As soon as I could quiet myself and move again, Velvet Remedy sent the three of us ahead. We were no longer looking to negotiate unless they offered the white flag first. Instead, we would strike first, fast, and with finality.

The first Steel Ranger whom I pumped full of bullets from the zebra rifle died in agony, screaming as his internal organs burst into flame, cooking him from the inside out. I didn't feel any remorse. No sympathy. Nor did I feel glee or even a grim satisfaction. My emotional deluge had left me fiercely numb and focused. The act was necessary and right, and beyond that had no more emotional impact than brushing my teeth.

I no longer felt even a twinge of revulsion for what Spike had done defending his own home.

We passed more dead ponies in every hallway. The Steel Ranger's attack had been brutal. But there were not nearly the number of dead that I would have expected. The friendship committee had been a well-calculated play on the Overmare's part. And when the Steel Rangers showed their true intentions right there in the entrance, they gave her enough forewarning for a rushed evacuation into the Security and Overmare's wing.

I both loved and hated her for that.

So far, the Maintenance wing had been hit the worst. The Steel Rangers had moved to secure it first, probably to prevent anypony from sabotaging the technology they were most interested in. The ponies down there had no time to get out before the Rangers had cut them off.

I turned the familiar corner and found myself face-to-face with the PipBuck Technician's stall. A fresh surge of emotion hit me as I saw the black scorchmarks on the walls I had once cleaned. A red trail of blood ran along one wall, dipping at the end until it met the corpse of my mentor. If I ignored the missing leg, I could almost pretend that he was asleep on the job again.

This was not the mural I had once hoped for.

I was crying once more, my vision blurring, making the lights of my E.F.S. swim.

The door into my mentor's office lay open. There was movement inside. A red splotch on my compass. I waved the others back and started to creep forward.

The Steel Ranger never saw me coming. I floated Little Macintosh up right behind her head, just to the left of the fins.

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!

I unloaded the full cylinder into her brain. She was probably dead after the first, but I didn't care.

I turned to walk out and froze as I spotted my mentor's hammock. There was an empty Sparkle-Cola bottle and a maintenance book (*TLC Squared: "Tender Loving Care for Totally Lost Causes"*) laying on the floor beneath it. I remembered how my mentor would skim that book while talking in a direction vaguely connected to where I was sitting in rapt attention. Shedding tears of painful nostalgia, I floated the book into one of my saddlebags.

I heard the distinct sound of Calamity's battle saddle. A moment later, Xenith and Calamity dove into the PipBuck Technician's stall. The hallway outside erupted in flame.

"Little Macintosh ain't stealthy, Li'lpip!"

Xenith pulled a jar out of the small saddlebag she'd been using to carry her herbs and mixtures. She tossed it to the floor, where it shattered, spreading a licorice-scented goop. The zebra clopped her forehooves in the goop, then her hindhooves.

The rush of flames down the hallway stopped. A moment later, a grenade bounced into the room. I grabbed it with a telekinetic shroud and floated it back out the way it came. I heard a shout of alarm just before the explosion.

"Dammit. I hate unicorns!" the Steel Ranger said, letting us know he had survived largely unscathed.

I turned to Calamity and... where was Xenith? I looked around. Then up. She was crawling along the ceiling, the goop on her hooves providing a magical adhesion similar to the spell that the slavers on the train had used against us weeks ago.

She crept up to the doorway of the stall and peeked out, looking both ways before slipping back and mouthing “two”. With small nods of her head, she indicated where, giving Calamity the same information my E.F.S. was giving me. I reloaded Little Macintosh.

Then she snuck out, keeping flat to the ceiling, silent as a ghost. Calamity waited until the moment she dropped onto one of the Steel Rangers, then rolled out, facing the other and fired a single double-shot.

I charged out, swinging Little Macintosh around as I kicked on my targeting spell. But Xenith had already crippled the other pony, her hoofstrikes resonating through armor to pulverize internal organs. I let my jaw drop a little as she finished him off.

Fallen Caesar Style scared the crap out of me.



As we swept further into Maintenance, we started seeing glowing piles of green residue or pink ash -- all that remained of ponies killed with magical energy weapons -- scattered amongst the massacred ponies of Stable Two. Calamity found that disturbing.

My E.F.S. told me there were four Steel Rangers around the next corner, near the door to the generator room. I relayed this to the others.

“Ah’ll take ‘em,” Calamity said, starting to move forward, but I put a hoof on his shoulder and shook my head. Calamity frowned. He didn’t want to back off, but he did so anyway. The pegasus and the zebra held position as I galloped silently back to where Velvet Remedy and SteelHooves were waiting.

A moment later, SteelHooves trotted past Xenith and Calamity, and rounded the corner. His missile rack was open, his weapons primed.

“I am Star Paladin SteelHooves. I am declaring an end to this travesty of an operation. We do not assault the Stable of the Mare of our own Ministry. And we do not slaughter innocents when She was dedicated to protecting ponies.” His voice rumbled with command. “You have two options. Side with me and stand by your Oath to the principles of our Ministry’s Mare, or side with Elder Blueberry Sabre and Star Paladin Nova Rage and be gunned down.”

“Then you admit you’re a traitor!” one of them called back. “You stand down, and submit to arrest.”

Wrong answer. SteelHooves fired everything he had into the hallway, which was torn apart in a blaze of light, heat and shrapnel.

“I don’t think I’m going to be able to wear this armor anymore,” he said, stepping back around to where we were waiting, his armor smoking and peppered with red-hot shrapnel. “Which is a problem, since I cannot take it off.”

“Honestly,” Calamity said with a grin, “Ya ain’t never looked finer.”



Xenith slipped through the back door of the Stable Two Saloon. I followed close behind, getting a surprisingly pleasant eyeful of the zebra mare’s hindquarters. I found myself cursing the slavers who had scarred it so.

The back of the Saloon was a darkened kitchen. Well, darkened until Pyrelight flew in and landed on one of the pots sitting on a stove. The balefire phoenix had almost returned to normal, but was still shedding off enough energy to glow like a torch.

Mr. and Mrs. Sparkle Cider were dumped in a far corner, their bodies bleeding into each other. Mr. Sparkle Cider had always given me free ice cream when I was younger. (Well, until he caught me lockpicking his wine cabinet.) His wife had been one of my mother’s friends.

Mrs. Sparkle Cider's hindhoof was caught on the door of the walk-in freezer, propping it open. All the ice cream inside was slowly melting, swirling in pools with the sherbet on the floor.

I felt an uncontrollable rage sweep over the numbness. My heart was pounding in my breast.

"It's clear," Xenith whispered, looking out into the Saloon itself. I passed the message back.

A minute later, I crouched in position at the door, loading the last of my bullets for Little Macintosh. The magical bullets. Calamity and Xenith remained in the kitchen, taking their turn as rear guard.

SteelHooves stood in the Saloon, looking out-of-place amongst the rich pseudo-wood décor. Velvet Remedy however moved with purpose, almost gliding up to the raised stage, the magic of her horn playing against the terminal and soundboards. Velvet Remedy had a plan. A moment later, she strode to the edge of the stage, looking down at SteelHooves.

My mind flashed back to sneaking into the Saloon, an underaged blankflank, hiding in the back of the crowd and watching as nearly adult Velvet Remedy performed. Her music moved my soul, and often it was agony not to dance.

"Ready," she said and her horn flared.

"Attention, Steel Rangers," SteelHooves began. His voice boomed throughout all of Stable Two. Velvet Remedy had commandeered the public address system.

"This is SteelHooves, founding member and eldest living of the Steel Rangers. Star Paladin of the Manehattan Contingent. I call on you to stop and consider your Oath. Consider where you are and what you are doing. Do your loyalties lie with Applejack, the Mare of the Ministry of Wartime Technology, the creator of the Steel Ranger armor and the mare who by Her own hooves, the sweat of Her brow and the honesty of Her heart forged the Steel Rangers? Or is your oath to the fearful, greedy ponies who abandon all that She stood for, turning us into little

more than technology raiders, hoarding toys from the past because they have forgotten that it is virtue, not trinkets, that make a pony great? Ponies who now turn their eyes on Applejack's own home, commanding that you slaughter Her family for their greed? These orders, this operation, would be an *abomination* in the eyes of our Ministry's Mare!

"Applejack was put in charge of the Ministry of Wartime Technology because She was the Bearer of one of the Elements of Harmony, and the ruler of Equestria recognized the caliber of that. Do you think it was the Virtue in Her soul or the jewelry on Her neck that made Applejack a Bearer?

"Today, you must choose with whom your Oath lies. Surrender this ignominious goal and join by my side, reaffirming your Oath to the protection of the citizens of Equestria, just as Applejack dedicated Her life to. Or continue in this disgraceful act and face the wrath of those of us who choose to stand true!"



The glow around Velvet Remedy's horn faded. SteelHooves looked up at her. "Well... how was that?" She smiled brightly in response.

Three Steel Rangers charged into the Saloon, battle saddles filling the room with flames and machinegun fire. SteelHooves fell in the first volley.

I stared at the Steel Ranger, collapsed in spreading pool of the ichor that ghouls called blood.

I slid into S.A.T.S. and fired the last of Little Macintosh's rounds into them, felling one and crippling the second. I dropped Applejack's gun and swung about the zebra rifle as three more poured in. Behind me, I could hear the explosive blast of Spitfire's Thunder as Calamity decapitated the first Steel Ranger to try to get in through the back.

One of the five remaining Steel Rangers fired a pair of missiles up at Velvet Remedy. The unicorn singer threw up her shield as the rockets

detonated against the underside of the stage, spraying the air with jagged chunks of pseudo-wood.

Another turned towards me, leveling what looked like an anti-material rifle at my head.

“No!” bellowed Velvet Remedy, her horn glowing and her voice magnified. **“This is my stage!”**

The room blazed with light conjured from Velvet Remedy’s horn as she made herself the center of attention. The Steel Ranger in front of me sidestepped as Velvet Remedy’s lightshow blinded her. The distraction gave me enough time to fire a burst from the zebra rifle, one bullet tearing through the visor of my opponent.

One of the Steel Rangers responded to Velvet with a roar from her twin miniguns. Velvet’s shield held. I fired three more armor-piercing shots from the zebra rifle into the minigunner’s head, seeing the flash of fire through the bullet holes. I could smell the pony’s brain roasting.

Velvet whipped out her combat shotgun, firing it at the invaders, but their armor proved more than sufficient. It did not, however, protect them from her anesthetic spell. The Steel Ranger I had crippled went down.

Another Steel Ranger fired up at her with a back-mounted sniper rifle. The bullet tore through her shield and armor. I saw the look of shock and hurt in her eyes.

Pyrelight swooped in for the kill, blasting the downed ranger and the two still standing with radioactive flame. Their suits protected them against that as well, but the flames obscured their vision. I slid in and out of S.A.T.S., spraying each Steel Ranger until I was out of armor-piercing ammo.

Spitfire’s Thunder sounded again. A moment later, Calamity and Xenith galloped into the room, knocking me over.

I realized I could smell gas.

Somewhere deep in the Stable, I heard a deep explosion that didn't sound like firearm or grenade. Alarm shot up my spine as I wondered if the Steel Rangers had managed to blow the security doors that the bulk of my home's population was hiding behind.

Xenith turned, grabbed me in her mouth and pulled me from the doorway.

WRRRRRRRRHHHHHHOSSH!!

The kitchen erupted, an inferno pouring out into the Saloon and setting fire to many of the pseudo-wood tables and chairs.

"Not one word 'bout muh name," Calamity panted, looking at Xenith. Then he saw SteelHooves and froze. A moment later, "Where's Velvet?"

I pointed upwards at the stage. I could see her fallen form. In the eerie silence that followed the battle, I could make out the sound of drops of blood falling from the stage to the floor below.

Blop. Blop. Blop.

"No," he whispered. His wings propelled him up to the stage far faster than either Xenith or I could have made it by hoof. The orange-maned pegasus landed and pulled Velvet Remedy into an embrace with a gasp.

"ow" whispered Velvet.

"Shush now, ya silly pony," Calamity said, holding her. "Ya dun got yerself shot. But ya gonna be right as rain, soon 'nuff. We got ourselves the best medical pony in alla the Equestrian Wasteland."

I started up the stage stairs towards them. Xenith was right behind me.

"ow!" Velvet said again. Then added, "Who's a silly pony?"

"Ya is, Velvet Remedy," Calamity insisted gently, "Ya beautiful, wonderful mare. Now shush it."

I reached the stage just in time.

I don't know what Velvet had started to say, but this time Calamity cut her off with a kiss.

“Aww,” Xenith whispered in my ear. “I’ve been waiting to see those two do that since I first met them.”

I was stunned at first. But then I realized that the little pony in my head wasn’t feeling the slightest bit envious or jealous. She wasn’t happy exactly, but that had more to do with the situation we were in and the fact that Velvet Remedy was bleeding all over Calamity from a bullet wound.

The air filled with an odd, unholy sound from down below. A chill filled the air.

SteelHooves stood back up.

My jaw hit the floor. I had sorely underestimated what it meant to be a Canterlot ghoul.

I didn’t have time to marvel. “Oh fuck!” I moaned as two Steel Rangers took up positions outside, aiming grenade machineguns at the front windows of the Saloon. “Everypony, we’ve got to go!”



The Steel Ranger mare stepped through the door on the far end of the bathroom and opened up with a grenade machinegun of her own, blowing up the stalls and toilets between me and her. Heat washed over me, searing my lungs. Shrapnel cut at my armor and flesh, leaving me bleeding from dozens of small wounds. Outside, Calamity and Xenith crouched behind a row of lockers which I had floated into a barricade. We were getting close to the school where I had once taken my Cutie Aptitude Test, and the place was swarming with Steel Rangers.

I was out of ammo for Little Macintosh, and was actually beginning to fear for the zebra rifle.

We had been lucky taking them on one or two at a time, the element of surprise on our side. But now they were alert and moving against us in force. Only the narrow hallways prevented us from being surrounded or utterly overwhelmed.

A missile flew over the lockers, exploding against the wall behind Xenith and Calamity, the explosion blew them both hard into the barricade. Calamity rose up, dazed and bleeding. Xenith didn't get up at all.

"SteelHooves, Velvet!" I cried out. "We need your help!" The two of them were guarding our rear, Velvet considerably worse for wear even after downing both of our remaining extra-strength restoration potions. She needed to stay out of the heavy fighting, but we couldn't spare her entirely. The farther in we got into the Stable, the more ways to flank us opened up.

Another thunderous explosion sounded from somewhere deep in the Stable. Followed by more.

Water sprayed from all the destroyed toilets. The Steel Ranger's hoofsteps splashed as she approached closer. "Give it up, Littlepip." Crap. "Surrender now, and Elder Blueberry Sabre might just spare you and most of your friends. You won't get that offer from Nova Rage."

Yeah. That was going to happen.

"I don't suppose I can talk you into surrendering to us?" I called back. "Is mass murder really the Earth Pony Way?"

"Fuck you!" she retorted and opened up with another barrage of grenades. I wrapped all the debris around me in telekinetics and pulled them together, creating a shield. It didn't work very well. The first explosion blew the debris out of my magic's grasp, pummeling me with it. I felt bones break as pain surged throughout my body.

More grenades detonated around me. My PipBuck screamed as every limb registered as crippled. My PipBuck politely told me I was dying from internal injuries. I couldn't feel them. My body was in shock. All I could feel was cold.

Two missiles streaked through the air overhead, entering the room from behind me. They hit the Steel Ranger, blowing her off her hooves. She slid across the wet floor and collapsed in the corner, unmoving.

“Littlepip!” Velvet Remedy cried from forever away. I lost consciousness.



My eyes blinked open. I couldn't feel my body, but somehow I was still alive. My E.F.S. was reading my condition as bad, but stable. I was looking up. I could see lights of Stable Two overhead. Heard their ever-present buzz.

“Where am I?”

“Really, Littlepip,” Velvet Remedy chided kindly. “With your habits of gross injury, you can't tell me you don't recognize Stable Two's clinic?”

“Calamity? Xenith?”

Velvet Remedy's face leaned into view. “The good news is that all three of you are going to survive reclaiming this floor. The bad news is that I've used up all our medical supplies and an unhealthy portion of the Stable's to save you.” She glanced away. “A few of Xenith's brews too.”

“Elder Blueberry Sabre had pulled most of her ponies back into the apple orchard,” SteelHooves said. “She's worried now, and with good cause.”

She's worried? They nearly killed us, and we were nowhere near the Security and Overmare's wing yet. I didn't understand why they weren't just swarming us and wiping us out. I said as much.

“Because there are less of them and possibly more of us,” SteelHooves said bluntly. “About a fifth of the Rangers she was leading didn't take too well to what was going on down here. Star Paladin Nova Rage killed one of them for disloyalty and Elder Blueberry Sabre locked away the rest of the dissenters behind a welded door...”

Explained why diplomacy hadn't been working. All the ponies that diplomacy might have worked with the Elder had locked up.

“They’re trapped in the school,” Velvet interrupted. “SteelHooves has been speaking with them. If we can get them out, we’ll have nearly a dozen Steel Rangers on our side.”

“Unfortunately, we’re having a bit of trouble with that. But Elder Blueberry Sabre doesn’t know that. As far as she knows, the moment we took this section, we got a whole lot stronger.”

I tried to get up only to realize that not only could I not feel pain, I couldn’t feel *anything*.

Velvet Remedy had used her anesthetic spell on me. I tried to get up again, fervently sending the signals from my brain to a body I couldn’t sense that ought to make it move. My body heaved and I fell to the floor with a thud, bloodying my nose. I couldn’t feel that either.

“Now look who’s a silly pony,” Velvet Remedy giggled. “Stop that, or I’ll tell Homage that you’re into bondage and spankings.” I couldn’t feel myself blushing, but I’m sure I was.

As extra punishment, Velvet let me lay there on the floor as she turned her attention to Xenith. The zebra was still unconscious.

Calamity trotted in a short time later. “Ah’m afraid there ain’t an easy way t’ get that door open. Best bet its t’ cut through it with a blowtorch, and that’ll take hours.” He whinnied. “On the plus side, seems like that’s what the enemy is tryin’ t’ do with the S an’ O wing. Only those doors are a helluva lot thicker, an’ there’s more than one o’ them. Best bet, we’ve still got a couple hours b’fore they’re through.”

I forced my body to roll over, feeling an uneasy sense of accomplishment when I managed it on the third try. I found myself staring up at the ceiling rather than at my friends, which significantly diminished the victory.

“Y’know, magical energy weapons would melt through these doors a whole heap ova lot quicker.”

“Steel Rangers’ battle saddles aren’t equipped with magical energy weapons,” SteelHooves replied. “That is an Enclave design.”

“Yeah,” said Calamity in an odd tone. “Tha’s what Ah figured.”

My gaze fell on the grate to the air ducts. Unfortunately, while I was small, I was no chimera. I couldn’t fit through them. But...

“Pyrelight!”

“Wha’s that, Li’lpip?” Calamity asked.

“Pyrelight can get through the air ducts. She can carry a blowtorch to the good guy Steel Rangers trapped inside the classroom. Let them cut their way out,” I suggested. “Plus, she can carry in food and water to them while they work.”

“Ah like it,” Calamity said, the grin I couldn’t see evident in his voice. “Frees us up t’ continue the mission, while we’re still providin’ diplomatic relief.”

We had a plan.



So did Elder Blueberry Sabre. While we were busy, the bitch had welded shut every entrance into the Atrium except for the passage through the apple orchard.

The orchard was a huge, open space with only thin trees for nearly useless cover. She could amass her forces inside, creating a kill zone while a few of her soldiers worked on cutting through the security doors.

The best plan I could come up with was to float more lockers in front of us, forming a wedge two lockers deep and two lockers high. SteelHooves and Calamity were going to join me. Velvet had clearly taken far better care of us than of herself, unwilling to use up more than the minimal medical supplies on herself that we might have (and did) need later. She was still partially crippled from the gunshot wound, and I insisted that she stay behind as a “liaison” with Pyrelight. Xenith promised Calamity that she would stand guard over our wounded medical pony.

To claim that I was in good shape would have been an outright lie. But the pain I was in when the spell wore off was not the worst I had felt (definitely better than being set on fire by a dragon or bucked between the thighs by a scarily strong raider); I could work through it. My legs, fore and hind, all seemed to work, if stiffly. And could breathe without too much effort and feel my heart beat. Plus, I had my magic and my PipBuck. I was not in optimal fighting shape, but I really didn't need more. And there were ponies counting on me.

I'd already seen too many ponies whom I recognized lying dead on the Stable floor. I wouldn't allow Elder Blueberry Sabre or Star Paladin Nova Rage to add to that number.

SteelHooves trotted up behind me as I floated the lockers into formation. A moment later, another Steel Ranger trotted up... only it wasn't a Steel Ranger. It was Calamity, wearing a Steel Ranger's armor from the neck back. His black desperado hat was still firmly on his orange mane and he held Spitfire's Thunder in his mouth.

"What are you doing wearing that armor?" SteelHooves demanded. Calamity just gave him a look. "Okay, then how do you expect to fight in that? Magically-powered armor requires months of training to perform even adequately in."

"Whaf mef," Calamity mouthed through his grip on the unique anti-machine rifle.

I shook my head, sending up a prayer to Luna for our coming battle and a prayer to Celestia to keep Xenith and Velvet Remedy safe.

I telekinetically triggered the door.



My brilliant battle strategy lasted about two minutes. Like with the debris before, my magic couldn't hold the lockers against the explosive force of their missiles and grenades. I was forced to plant our barricade in the ground, creating a makeshift pillbox about twenty yards into the

orchard. The Steel Rangers quickly surrounded us, firing into the lockers, slowly tearing away at our shielding.

Our line of sight was limited to small cracks between the lockers, purposefully not large enough to allow a grenade. Even so, I had focused my magic on flinging all grenades back at our attackers until they stopped trying that.

The gaps were too small for SteelHooves to fire through. Calamity was using Spitfire's Thunder to great effect, downing a Steel Ranger every time one was foolish enough to make herself or himself visible. The noise was deafening in our metal cage. My ears were ringing so badly I felt I would vomit, but I stayed on task.

But the pegasus was down to less than half a dozen rounds of the rare ammo (even after having pilfered some from the battle saddle of the anti-machine rifle Ranger in the Saloon). And the twin-minigun battle saddle integrated into his armor couldn't be aimed through the tiny cracks.

The zebra rifle was out of armor-piercing bullets, and the normal sort didn't have the penetrating power to take down a Steel Ranger. I was using my sniper rifle now. It too was out of armor-piercing ammo, but a well-placed shot to a weaker part of their armor would still go through. Part of me felt chagrin that I was becoming so practiced at defeating Applejack's creation.

Calamity and I kept firing.

"Sonuva..." Calamity mouthed as he fired a final shot. He motioned to me that he was out of ammo.

My hope had been that we could take out enough of them to make moving again an option. From all the red lights on my Eyes-Forward Sparkle, we had done admirably... but we were still doomed. I had walked us into a trap with yet another stupid plan. And this time I had probably gotten all of us killed.

I wasn't ready to give up just yet. It was about time to try a rush and gallop. SteelHooves and Calamity still had their battle saddles; and for

the first time, the one pony not in any danger of running out of ammo was our ghoul. Finally being willing to scavenge ammo helped immensely.

I focused, floating the lockers, and hurled them in all directions, aiming at the red marks on my E.F.S. compass. There wasn't a lot of force behind the throw, but I released them just before they hit and suddenly they went from flying weightless lockers to flying damn heavy lockers. A chorus of *THUDs* rang out as several Steel Rangers were clobbered and trapped underneath.

Unfortunately, Steel Ranger armor made them strong. They began to buck the metal weights off faster than I expected. We took off at a gallop, running across the orchard for the opposite door.

Gunfire and explosions erupted all around us. Dirt and wood filled the air. A missile roared past me, disappearing into the foliage of an apple tree before exploding. I felt applesauce splatter my face.

SteelHooves fired forward clearing a way ahead. Calamity, bemoaning the magically-powered armor's lack of wings, spun and poured out suppressive fire behind us. Several Steel Rangers fired back with light machineguns and miniguns, but their shots glanced off the power armor he was wearing.

Calamity swiftly turned, racing to catch up before one of them returned his fire with a missile or sniper round. He was doing far better in the suit than SteelHooves had anticipated, but nowhere near as well as Calamity himself had expected.

Still, it looked like we would make it. I pushed as far as my battle-weakened and overstrained body would take me... and I was the first to reach the door.

It was locked. And trapped.

Of course.

But this was not a problem for me. Well, not one of skill or tools. It was a problem of time.

Calamity and SteelHooves reached me as I attempted to disarm the explosive. SteelHooves began to guide me through it, his skills far surpassing my own, while Calamity turned to face the approaching Rangers.

“Give it up,” called out Elder Blueberry Sabre as the Steel Rangers advanced, encircling us. I heard a click as the bomb disarmed. Now for the door.

I heard more clicks as every enemy Steel Ranger in the apple orchard reloaded. Elder Blueberry Sabre called out again, “Last chance. Give it up.”

I sighed. Dammit. This was the damn Ministry of Morale rooftop all over again. “Why don’t you just kill us?”

“Because now she needs to make an example of me,” SteelHooves guessed. “And she knows that will go a lot smoother if she has hostages I care about.”

“Or maybe I just need a good lockpicker,” Blueberry Sabre answered. “Somepony who can get me past a security door.”

Oh hell no.

A deep explosion rang out. One of the Steel Rangers fell, her midsection torn through. Several friendly lights suddenly danced across my E.F.S. compass.

But that was impossible, I thought. The Steel Rangers upstairs were still hours away from being freed. We wouldn’t be getting reinforcements for...

A magical energy pistol appeared pointed at Elder Blueberry Sabre’s head. It was held by a familiar-looking griffin, the hood of her cloak falling back to reveal her head.

Blackwing?

Elder Blueberry Sabre’s eyes went wide as she realized the situation had dramatically changed. “Wh-where did you come from?”

Blackwing smirked as she pulled the trigger, the green beam from her pistol striking the pony between her eyes, turning her into a pony-shaped glow of luminescent green.

“Gawd sent me.”

Elder Blueberry Sabre collapsed into a luminescent puddle.



The battle had changed. Arcs of magical energy from the small group of griffins were exchanged with the artillery fire of the Steel Rangers. Calamity and SteelHooves waded into the fight while I struggled to unlock the door with my telekinesis.

The door unlocked with a satisfying click and slid open. Beyond I could see the Atrium. But even before I could see it, I could smell it. The cloying stench of burnt pony hair and the reek of spilled blood, pooling and drying by the gallons, smashed into me like a speeding wall. This room had become a slaughterhouse.

Colorful, innocent ponies lay dead everywhere. In many cases, the same ponies could be seen in multiple places -- one of the Steel Rangers had unleashed a grenade machinegun in the room. I stepped into the Atrium over a pink leg blown off at the knee.

I saw a yellowish clump of matter sliding down a wall, mixed with blood. It took me a moment to realize it wasn't part of a pony's brains.

It was cake.

I looked up and saw the colorful banner. The Steel Rangers had interrupted a Cutie Mark Party.

I felt rage. Pure, unadulterated rage.

I met three Steel Rangers on the Atrium balcony at the top of the stairs. Two of them were wielding auto-axes and were working their way through the third and final security door. They had about half an hour's work left to go.

I wrapped each of them in magic, floating them up and turning them towards each other before they could react and turn the auto-axes off. The magically-enhanced blades did exactly what they were designed to do -- cut through metal. The flesh beneath offered no resistance at all. It was gruesomely messy.

I dropped them, but kept the auto-axes, turning to face the last of the Steel Rangers. "Star Paladin Nova Rage, I presume?" I noted her battle saddle had a grenade machinegun.

The Star Paladin stared at me. "Yes, and you are?"

"Run."



The adrenaline had once again left my body, and I *hurt*. Physically and emotionally. It was literally all I could do to stand up.

I had exorcised my rage, but that left only despair and a deep sadness.

The hour was long over -- that blackest hour whose name I couldn't remember where the darkness of the world is echoed most heavily by the darkness in the soul. But I was still trapped there.

Blackwing joined me as I waited for Velvet Remedy and Xenith. The Overmare had surely been watching everything through the Stable's "Friendly Pie" observation system. But she had not yet opened the door.

"Gawd knows you've flown to our aid without contract, content to negotiate compensation after the fact," the griffin explained. "When we heard the distress signal, she decided to give you the benefit of the doubt and asked if my Talons would be willing to help."

"I'm thankful you said yes," I replied with a grim smile. My gaze kept drifting up to the gaily-colored Happy Cute-ceañera banner.

Calamity trotted about, flexing his wings, thankful to be out of the Steel Ranger armor. "Ah do not envy SteelHooves!" He looked up,

“How the hell didja appear right next t’ the Elder like that? StealthBuck?”

Xenith trotted up the steps to the Atrium balcony. She stopped abruptly upon seeing Blackwing. Velvet Remedy collided with her backside and stumbled with a moan. She was crying again. Calamity flew to her, wrapping her in one of his wings as she moved onto the balcony

“My girls had to make do with StealthBucks, yes. But I...”

“Where did you get that cloak?” Xenith interrupted.

Blackwing gave the zebra a tolerant smirk. “Yes, as I was saying, zebra stealth cloak.” She fixed me with a serious look. “You have more friends than I thought, kid. We’d barely made it past New Appleloosa when this pegasus ghoul and her kid flagged us down. Turns out, they’d heard the distress signal too and wanted to pitch in. Practically gave us enough SteathBucks to get in while all you ponies were busy with the Star-spawn and wage a war of our own. Not to mention the cloak. Which, I would note, I insisted on paying her for.”

I looked over the railing at the other griffins in Blackwing’s Talons. The deep explosions I had heard before were now obviously from Butcher’s *Little Gilda*.

“I think she wanted to come in herself, but... well, she has a kid.” A frown passed across Blackwing’s beak. “Whom I’m really hoping she adopted. Because if not... ew.”

“Sorry we didn’t get to you sooner,” Butcher called up to us. “Managed to get ourselves trapped in the generator room for the longest time. But then you ponies come along and not only take out the guards sealing us in, but most of the door too.”

I was standing in an abattoir that had once been my home, and yet I found myself laughing. It was not a good laugh. It was a hurting, horrified, emotionally wrung out laugh. The laugh of a pony that can’t scream or cry.

I forced myself to stop as the security door slid open. The Overmare stood there, gazing at us. Behind her was a throng of terrified ponies.

"Is it safe?" one of them asked. I found that I couldn't find my voice. I was petrified.

"Ayep," Calamity answered for us. "Rooted out the last of 'em. The ones in the school are good ponies who just got wrapped up in something really horribly bad. They'll be leaving soon with us." The auto-axes were making cutting through the welded door a much quicker task.

"Thank you," the Overmare said to all of us. Then she shooed the other ponies back inside. They did not need to see any more of what had become of the Atrium.

"Littlepip, Velvet Remedy, would you please come in?"

The Overmare motioned for us to enter the formerly sealed wing. Calamity slid his wing from Velvet and poked her towards the Overmare with his nose. She moved slowly, but with lady-like grace. I followed, feeling clumsy and small and horrible.



"...and then there was blood everywhere! Sparkling Cider did a wave of his hoof like this, and fell down..."

As the Overmare slowly guided us through the crowd towards her office, a familiar voice froze me in place.

"Mother?"

I looked up, and there she was. Standing in a small clique of friends (notably absent Mrs. Sparkle Cider). She turned and looked at me with a vaguely scandalized expression. "Is that Littlepip?" she asked one of her friends.

The other mare answered in the affirmative.

"I don't even recognize her," mother said. Not with awe or maliciousness, but as a casual statement of truth.

I felt all the life drain from me as she looked me over. My blood had turned to ice water. My stomach knotted up, then sank to the lowest part of my body it could find. The world seemed to stretch away from me.

She turned away from me, delving back into her conversation, my presence barely augmenting her tale. “I was *traumatized*. I mean, I’m going to have nightmares of this forever. I’m going to need *therapy*. And as horrible as this sounds, my first thought was ‘that will never come out of his apron!’ (Because he was wearing that lovely yellow one with the...”

I spotted the glow from her horn, so very soft. And the bottle floating nearby, surrounded in the same light. She was drunk. Of course she was drunk... that’s how she had always protected herself from whatever crisis she thought she was going through, and this had been a real one.

Still... She was alive. Alive and exactly the same. I was right here. Again.

“Mom?”

Suddenly, Velvet Remedy was between us, and her hoof was striking my mother across the face so hard it knocked her down.

I stared. Velvet Remedy had just hit my mother.

Velvet’s voice sounded like she was throwing all the hurt and rage in her behind it. It wasn’t a scream, but it was somehow much louder than that.

“You. Have suffered. Nothing.”

She turned from my wide-eyed mother and lowered her head, pushing me away.



“There are no thanks which are enough for your bravery and heroism,” the Overmare told us, thanking us yet again for coming to Stable Two’s rescue.

"And Littlepip, I owe you such an apology. You are always welcome here. This is your home."

I looked up at the Overmare. Then down at my body. I was caked in blood. Maybe half of it mine. "No."

"No?" the Overmare asked.

"I have no place here. Not anymore." I looked up at Velvet Remedy who was laying on a couch in the Overmare's office across from me. "I've been outside for five weeks, and look at me. As much as I try, I'm not the same pony I was when I left, and I never can be. The wasteland has changed me, bloodied me... maybe even poisoned me like it has everything else outside. I can't come back. I can't bring that poison in here."

"I think it's already gotten in," the Overmare said sadly.

I nodded. "I know. But these ponies are good ponies. Innocent ponies. They need to treasure that, and hold it as long as they can. You need to wash away the blood, clean away the bodies. Try to make Stable Two right again. Tonight will be enough of a nightmare already."

The Overmare nodded. "Then... is there anything I can do for you in return for all you've done for us?"

I thought about it. Then looked into her eyes. "Yes. First, we need to arrange for some sort of payment for the griffins."

"Payment?" the Overmare blinked. "Ah. I see. They are mercenaries."

"Mercenaries who came to Stable Two's aid without contract or promise of payment," Velvet Remedy swiftly added. "Because they trust us to do right by them in return."

"Then I will not sully your reputation, Velvet darling." The Overmare turned to me. "And there was something else?"

"Yes. I want access to the Overmare records." *That* she did balk at. "I want to look at the population records, nothing more." Somehow, she liked that even *less*.

“I do as well,” Velvet Remedy said, getting up and moving to my side. I was still conflicted, wanting to simultaneously hug her and buck her for striking my mother.

“You know,” the Overmare said slowly, addressing Velvet, “When I gave you Sweetie Belle’s possessions to look through, it was with the hopes that her rich history as a musician would persuade you to accept your career. I hadn’t expected you to use the opportunity to find a way to escape.” She frowned. “CMC3BFF. Clearly, I needed to give the recordings of a previous Overmare a much closer inspection before allowing them into anypony else’s hooves.”

Velvet Remedy shook her head. “You had to have known.”

“I... may have suspected. But I thought you would make the better choice.”

“I did make the better choice,” Velvet Remedy said firmly.



I found what I was looking for in the population records within the first few minutes.

She made it!

Applejack made it into Stable Two. She was *here* when the Stable door sealed. According to the records, she lived peacefully for another twenty-five years. Happy... or at least as happy as somepony could be, living in a Stable and knowing the world above had been obliterated.

Still, she had survived. According to the records, she spent ten years down here bucking the Stable’s apple orchard until a hip injury forced her to retire. (The doctor’s addendum suggested that weakening hips might have been a genetic ailment common to her family.) Even after that, she spent another ten cooking for the Stable’s inhabitants from the kitchen of what was now the Stable Two Saloon.

She passed away peacefully, and unlike other Stable residents who were incinerated, the Overmare insisted that she be buried in the apple orchard. She was...

I paused in my reading.



I walked into Palette's stall. The always messy, paint-splotched artist of Stable Two had survived the slaughter and already was diving into a new project.

The Steel Ranger stood very still in front of her, obediently at attention, as she painted over the symbol of magical sparks and gears with three candy-red apples.

SteelHooves plodded up to me. "I'm no longer fit to wear Steel Rangers' armor, but I can't take it off," he said as I took in his new look. Like the Ranger being painted, he too had the Steel Rangers' symbol painted over with the likeness of Applejack's cutie mark. The red paint continued from there, accenting the ridges and edges all over the rest of his armor. "So I thought this would be appropriate."

I was a little surprised he didn't go with orange, but I could see sticking with the cutie mark's color. "They're all doing it?" I asked, looking at the Steel Ranger being painted and then at the line down the hall.

"Everypony who has decided to return to the true meaning of The Oath. That is, the Oath as Applejack would have wanted it." He whinnied. "We won't be able to call ourselves Steel Rangers anymore. I won't be able to." He grumped, "That's going to take some getting used to."

"What will you call yourselves then?" I suggested, "Applejack's Rangers?"

"Hmph. I am hardly worthy of that. But... maybe. We will see. For now, we're simply outcasts." He looked away, his metal-sheathed tail swinging. "I have to go for just a little bit. I'm taking the others up to Stable Twenty-Nine. I've been in contact with Star Paladin Crossroads,

and she immediately joined the cause. She's already planning to make Stable Twenty-Nine into someplace we can operate out of. All it needs is a functioning water talisman. But there's another problem..."

"Elder Cottage Cheese?"

"As Calamity would say: ayep," SteelHooves nickered. "Looks like you were right about him. Cross says he's sent a squad of Steel Rangers to the Canterlot Ruins to retrieve that 'Black Book' for him. But they haven't returned yet. If we can get to Stable Twenty-Nine before they do..."

"You have a ride."

"Do you really think Calamity can haul ten more Steel Rang... er Outcasts all the way to Fetlock?"

"It is a passenger wagon," I commented. "Besides, have you met us?"

SteelHooves laughed. "All right. But after you drop us off, you need to head on to Tenpony Tower. No more delays. I'll catch up to you later. I promise."

I nodded solemnly. I was going to hold him to that.

I started to walk away, and then remembered what had caused me to seek him out. "SteelHooves? We need to talk somewhere private."



"Applejack didn't leave you."

SteelHooves shook his head. "Yes she did. She chose to be with her family. And I don't blame her for that. I never have." He paced a little. "We... weren't exactly... our relationship was in a bad place. We were trying to put it back together, but... it really wasn't going to work, and we both knew it. I loved her, and I let her go."

I whimpered inside, but stood firm. "No, Applesnack," I said, using his real name. "She loved you. She tried to come back to you. But the Overmare wouldn't let her."

He stopped pacing and looked at me. "Wouldn't let her?"

"She helped her family into the Stable, and the Overmare closed the door. Applejack didn't know that the Stable Two Overmare was under strict orders not to open the door for anyone. Under any circumstances. Not until the atmospheric and soil monitors read that the world above was clean and safe again."

"It's been two hundred years..."

"I know. Stable-Tec grossly miscalculated how long it would take. But that didn't matter because there was no way Sweetie Belle was going to let Applejack out. Applejack wanted to leave. She wanted to find you. The record for Applejack is full of annotations about her arguments with Sweetie Belle over this. But of course, with her condition, and with the readings outside, there was no way Sweetie Belle was going to let her back out."

SteelHooves stomped. "Wait, her condition? Was she hurt? If those zebras..."

I could feel my heart sink. Oh Goddesses, he didn't know.

"SteelHooves," I said, my voice sounding tender and small in my own ears. "Applejack was pregnant."



"I swear," the Overmare huffed. "This is why I didn't want you becoming a medical pony."

Velvet Remedy glared at her crossly.

"You just can't help yourself. You dig and pry. You and Littlepip are a match, you know."

Velvet took a deep breath. "You have a serious problem here. Have you even looked at the population reports? Do you have any idea how many of the original inhabitants of this Stable were extended members of the Apple family? By Celestia, even Littlepip and I have a common Apple ancestor six generations back!"

I had stopped just inside the Overmare's office, watching the two mares argue. Neither had noticed me.

"That's not a big deal. Six generations is a lot..."

"This entire Stable is in danger of becoming completely inbred," Velvet Remedy shot back. "I'd say that's a big deal. Littlepip was wrong. You can't stay locked up in here for much longer."

"Hello?" I finally said. The two mares turned to look at me with matching shocked expressions.

"Maybe there's another way?"



One last detour. It was a small one. Fast. Fifteen minutes tops. We'd be back to pick up the Steel Ranger "outcasts" and ferry them to Fetlock before they knew it. And then, it was on to Tenpony Tower.

I needed Homage. I needed to just fall to pieces in her embrace.

"I found one." Velvet Remedy read the words scrawled in foal-like letters on the side of the metal monster rusting in front of us.

It was a cannon. And it had probably been rusting here for years even before the war. The Goddesses only knew what it had been doing this secluded portion of Sweet Apple Acres. The trees here grew close. The cannon would only have been visible to a pegasus flying almost directly overhead. And it certainly didn't seem pointed anywhere strategic.

Small patches of the old metal muzzle were still polished enough to reflect the orange light of the rising sun. The base was partially sunken into the ground amongst several large rocks, making the weapon cant strangely. Nearby was a crumbling picnic table. There were a few planks of wood nailed to a dead tree behind me.

"How would this have helped?" Xenith asked Calamity. I had to admit I was asking the same question. This old metal monster couldn't possibly fire.

Calamity chuckled. “Not the cannon.” He trotted around the pile of large stones that the base was partially leaning against. He tapped his hoof on one, then another. “This one.”

“A rock?” I asked.

“The Rock of Destiny,” our pegasus friend says, grinning cryptically.

I was tired, physically and mentally exhausted. I couldn’t keep up. “Destiny is a rock?” Even Velvet Remedy was looking confused.

Calamity sighed. “Hollowed out rock,” he explained. “This rock has been used by every Dashite since the first pegasus was hunted down by the Enclave and branded fer leavin’. It’s enchanted to open only fer somepony who done know the proper pass-phase.” He looked down at the apparently special rock. “Every Dashite has put somethin’ in here. Some token of the life they left behind.”

“How did a pegasus enchant a rock?” Velvet Remedy asked.

Calamity shrugged. “Well, Ah assume she had somepony else do it fer her.”

“Or perhaps a zebra helped her,” Xenith offered.

Calamity took a deep breath, tapped at the rock again with his hoof, and said loudly and clearly:

“Cutie Marks don’t matter.”

Footnote: Level Up.

Skills Note: Firearms has reached 100%

New Perk: Zebra-Augmented Pony - You have allowed your body to be permanently enhanced through zebra alchemy. You gain +10% to your Poison, Fire and Radiation Resistances and +3 to your damage threshold. (Note: *Zebra-Augmented Pony* and the cybernetic implant perk *Cyberpony* are mutually exclusive.)

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



RACING APOTHEOSIS

"Once upon a time, in the magical land of Equestria, there were two regal sisters who ruled together and created harmony for all the land. To do this, the eldest used her unicorn powers to raise the sun at dawn. The younger brought out the moon to begin the night..."

"Fuck.

"You know what irony is?"

I recognized the voice of Scootaloo. Even though it was raspy. Even through all her coughing, and the mad clicking, and the roar of the wind all around her.

"Irony is that it feels I spent my whole damned childhood trying to get my cutie mark, and I don't have it anymore.

"Irony is that I spent most of the last decade working to save Equestria from a megaspell end-of-the-world..." Scootaloo's voice cracked, followed by a barrage of wet, raspy coughs. "...and then it happened and I wasn't even fucking here. Broke my damn wing in a stupid damn accident while practicing a new routine for the damn GALLOPS. By the time I got out of the Hanovaerian pegasus clinic, it was all over.

"Irony is that I'm the one who made Sweetie Belle the Overmare of Stable Two. I was beginning to worry about her. Now, she's probably the only one of us who has survived. I..."

The recording was interrupted by another fit of coughing.

"...Apple Bloom was s'posed to be in Fillydelphia. Can't even get near that place. A pony would die from the radiation in minutes. I actually considered banging a hoof on Stable Two's door... but then I saw all the bodies. Sweetie Belle did right. Didn't open the door for anypony. Can't let this poison in. Contaminate that whole Stable. If I knocked, Sweetie Belle just might open the door for me. And I can't let that happen.

"Fuck.

"I'm giving up my PipBuck. Leaving it here with this message. I figure, if Apple Bloom survived, she'll come looking here. If not, somepony else will. Besides, I'm sick of it clicking. I don't need it yelling at me that the snow is radioactive and that I'm breathing poison. The air is fucking green..." More coughing. "'Cept for those weird pink swirls comin' off of Canterlot. When you can see the air, you know it's bad..."

This time, the coughing fit lasted minutes.

"Fuck. That's blood. That's so not good.

"They kept telling us the cloud curtain was for our own protection. Keeping the radiation and megaspell pollution from getting into pegasi cities. Who knew that they were telling the truth? Fuckers said the brand is to mark me as somepony who's been below. Contaminated. Now I know that's horseapples. Told them... heh. Told them I was proud of what Rainbow Dash did. Called myself a Dash-ite. Boy, that got their feathers in a bunch.

"Irony is... I worked really hard to find a better way. Some kinda society or government or something that would be better. Wouldn't make the same damn mistakes that killed everypony. And I get trapped up there with a whole slew of ponies who seem dedicated to finding the worst way ever. Even I wouldn't have tried an experiment like the 'Enclave'... the Stables aren't set up to fail. Hell, I give the Enclave a few months at most."

Scotaloo's voice stopped. But no cough this time. Just harsh breathing. After a moment, she continued.

"If you find this... before I'm gone..."

She was cut off by an explosive cough, followed by several moments of silence. Then a groan.

"If you find this... there's a shack marked on it. I traced Rainbow Dash to there. I think she's living there... or was recently. Wasn't there when I looked. But I'm headed back. Going to wait there... hope she returns."

"I should be there for her. Like she's with me. Somepony should be there..."

Scootaloo coughed one final time.

"Just want Dash to know... we didn't all..."

"She's not alone."



I reverently placed the battered old PipBuck back into the Rock of Destiny where it had rested for nearly two centuries. The PipBuck of the first Dashite lay once again with the discarded treasures of Dashites to follow. All except for Calamity, whose relinquished possession of his old life we had come to reclaim.

At Calamity's hooves lay the black carapace of Enclave armor. The tips of the built-in magical-energy rifles flickered with a wicked light.

"She don't rightly belong t' me, Ah reckon," Calamity said. "They belong t' Captain Deadshot Calamity o' the Grand Pegasus Enclave. An' he ain't 'round no more. But after seein' Velvet put on that zebra suit, Ah figure it's a might stubborn an' foalish o' me t' not at least drag 'er out an' carry 'er round with us. In case things get bad 'nuff t' call fer puttin' 'er back on."

Calamity looked up at us, face reddened under his rust-colored coat. "Y'know, since we 'ave t' repack everything anyway."

I nodded, remembering the overturned *Sky Bandit* and the swath of scattered possessions.

“So, my buck was a captain?” Velvet Remedy purred, wrapping the Enclave armor with her magic and floating it off the ground.

My buck? I felt the stirrings of a chuckle. I’d been sure that Calamity would end up being Velvet Remedy’s Calamity, not the other way around. But the mare certainly wasted no time.

I smiled at the both of them. This was good.

The whole world was filled with so much bad. My friends needed some good, and I was glad they could find it in each other. I thought of Homage and was thankful to her. Without Homage, I’m not sure my heart could have been so generous.

Calamity stammered, blushing harder.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Velvet asked gently, rubbing her head soothingly yet coaxingly against Calamity’s neck as she floated the creepy black carapace to their side.

“uh... well, she’s got quad Novasurge rifles... muh own design...”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Calamity stared away. “Ah know.” He turned back to her. “Really, there ain’t much t’ tell. They made me Captain. An’ with the promotion came new duties. Ah was assigned t’ lead a wing o’ scouts down below the cloud curtain.”

He saw my surprise and explained, “The Enclave ain’t stupid. They been sendin’ scouts down here jus’ ‘bout twice a year t’ get the lay o’ things fer ages. Then they put out reports tellin’ the civilian ponies that the world down here ain’t ready fer us yet, or the air ain’t breathable. Keeps everypony happy t’ just fritter away their lives above.

“Only that ain’t how it actually is down here. Ain’t been fer a long time. An’ when Ah saw that... well, Ah kinda made waves. Then, on muh third patrol, Ah saw a buncha raiders hittin’ a caravan...”

I knew what was coming. “Your policy?”

“Ayep. Ordered muh wing t’ take the raiders out. They refused. So afterwards, Ah had ‘em locked up fer een-subordination. Higher-ups took unkindly t’ that. Told me they was givin’ me one chance t’ correct the path Ah was on, or there’d be hell t’ pay.”

Calamity snorted and dug at the ground with a hoof. “They put me in front o’ an assembly t’ address everypony an’ tell ‘em how there ain’t nothin’ down here t’ save yet. Show ‘em all just how much Ah was hitched t’ the party wagon.”

Velvet Remedy backed up and looked Calamity over. “Well, *that* was foolish of them.”

“Ayep.” Calamity’s muzzle broke into a grin. “Ah reckon it had been so long since somepony had bucked the Enclave that they forgot it could happen. Ah stood right up there an’ told everypony that we needed t’ get down here now.” He paused, “...Well, then. Y’know what Ah mean. Anyways, Ah told ‘em I was leavin’ and that they were free t’ follow.”

Calamity lifted a hoof to scratch his mane under his hat. “Didn’t hear ‘bout how Ah s’posedly killed muh own wing ‘till ‘bout six months later.”

I remembered what Calamity had said back in Fillydelphia: *Most dictatorships Ah know of tend t’ go hell-an’-highwater t’ either discredit or destroy opposin’ voices like that.*

I trotted over and wrapped a foreleg around Calamity in a hug. (Which, I note, was a little tricky since he was a fair bit taller than me.)

“Thanks, Li’lpip.”

Something occurred to me. “So...” I asked Calamity as I dropped back to all four hooves, “Most of the pegasi don’t realize what’s going on down here?”

“They ain’t bad ponies, Li’lpip,” Calamity whinnied. “They’re just bein’ bamboozled by their leaders. Even in the best governments, the ponies at the top don’t tell the rank-n-file what’s actually goin’ on.” He

trotted in place. “Y’think the better folk o’ New Appleloosa ‘ave any idea jus’ how connected they are t’ Red Eye?”

I remembered the way the ponies in Turnpike Tavern laughed at the notion of “that buck on the spritebots” being anypony’s leader. On the other side of the bottle cap, I was willing to bet Sweetie Belle didn’t tell anypony in Stable Two about the friends and relatives dying just outside the Stable door, breaking their hooves against it as they begged to be let in.

Hell, I was supposedly the leader of these ponies, and I was keeping secrets of my own. (The truth about the Ministry of Peace and the megaspells came swiftly to mind.) So I supposed that Calamity’s assertion was true.

“Li’lpip, if most o’ the ponies up there saw fer themselves what’s goin’ on down here, they’d buck the damn Enclave and pony up t’ help.” Calamity’s confidence faltered. “Well, most being at least more’n half, Ah reckon.”

I felt an odd tug at one of my saddlebags. I turned to see Velvet Remedy’s PipBuck float out, enveloped by Velvet Remedy’s magic. I watched the polished PipBuck (with its custom engraving of Velvet Remedy’s singing nightingale) glide across the air and gently set itself down in the Rock of Destiny next to Scootaloo’s.

“I hope it’s not presumptuous,” she said to Calamity, sounding slightly apprehensive. “I’m not a Dashite, but I am leaving an old life behind. And it feels wrong to be taking something out without putting something in its place.”

“Thank ya kindly,” Calamity responded, approving.

I brought up the inventory sorter on my PipBuck, scrolling through it until I realized with a pang that I didn’t have anything from my life in the Stable to give up.

I stared forlornly at the Rock of Destiny, feeling like I was failing somehow. I’d already left everything in Stable Two behind. I probably

would have sealed a picture of my mother up inside the rock, but I didn't even have that.

No... but I did have something.

Biting my lower lip, I pulled up the recipe for Party-Time Mint-als. I would give this up, but I didn't want anyone else to suffer from them as I had. The first night Outside, I had discovered a message from Apple Bloom to Sweetie Belle which used a very special encryption. I used that now as I sent the recipe to Velvet Remedy's PipBuck. No pony would be able to read the recipe without downloading it from both her PipBuck and mine.

I erased the recipe from my PipBuck.

Somehow, it was both liberating and frightening.



Stable Two. I was leaving it again. This time it hurt worse. Probably because I knew that I would never return *even though I could*.

I felt weary beyond simple exhaustion. The mental toll of the night before was compounding the physical expense of the battle, and of nearly dying once again. I stared at Calamity, who somehow managed to seem almost normal despite not only having gone through much the same, but having been up for a full day, much of which was spent dragging the *Sky Bandit*.

Almost normal. He had been ruthless, I was told, in hunting down the last of the Steel Rangers. I did not begrudge him that. But this had been more than his code, more than his "policy". We were his closest friends, and he'd take the assault on our former home personally.

Then again, with the exception of Xenith and Pyrelight, we all did. For our own reasons.

"Calamity?" I asked as I floated the *Sky Bandit* up off the ground. "When we first met, and you told me you didn't live in New Appleloosa, you said you had a little shack?" I had a suspicion.

Calamity landed on it and trotted in place. Now weightless, the passenger wagon rolled easily under his hooves until he had it upright.

"Ayep," he replied. "An' t' answer the next question, ayep t' that too. Got the marker off the first Dashite's PipBuck by linkin' t' it wi' muh amor. Jus' b'fore givin' it up."

"Did Rainbow Dash ever return to the shack? I mean, do you know?"

"Ah don't reckon she did," Calamity stated, his words sending a wave of bitter sadness through my heart. "When Ah got there, Ah found a pegasus skeleton curled up in a corner which Ah buried out back. Figure if Rainbow Dash had come back, there woulda' been two."

Another pang shot through my heart. Calamity had done better for Scootaloo than I had for... anypony who had passed on. I felt a steely resolve build within my sorrow.

"Before we go, we should bury the skeletons in the apple cellar tunnel," I said firmly. "I know we're on the clock, but dammit if I'm gonna leave here again without doing that."

Calamity nodded just like I knew he would. Velvet Remedy trotted closer, levitating another pile of scavenged goods. "This would be so much easier if I had a Find Our Stuff spell."

"Y'know, if we're takin' all these detours, maybe we oughta swing by muh ol' place," Calamity suggested. "Ah could gather up a few tools. An' Li'lpip could have a crack at the floor safe no pony's been able t' open." There was a twinkle in his eye when he said that. I heard Velvet stifle a snicker.

I facehoofed. Oh now that's just not playing fair.

The clean-up and the Rock of Destiny had already eaten the first hour of daylight, and the burials would take up more. We'd be lucky to make Fetlock by sundown. But then: floor safe! A floor safe in a shack that both Rainbow Dash and Scootaloo had once called home... if extremely briefly... no less. The curious little pony in my head was prancing around eagerly, suggesting all sorts of possibly important or interesting things that might be inside.

I shot Calamity a look. "You think you can use my weakness against me that easily?"

"Ayep."

I hoofstomped. "Okay, yes you can. But just this once."

"Ayep. Sure."



Ultimately, the burials added less than an hour to our departure time. SteelHooves' Outcasts weren't all painted and ready to leave until halfway through the effort.

"I'm glad you're finally with us," a paladin buck named Bitter Bright told SteelHooves as they finally began to march into the *Sky Bandit*.

"It should have been sooner," SteelHooves stated grimly. "I should have done this when there was a chance for a peaceful break. This will be a civil war. And a bloody one."

Paladin Bitter Bright nodded. "Star Paladin Crossroads has already locked Elder Cottage Cheese's communications down, and sent out warnings to those in the other contingents who would follow us. With any luck, they'll be able to slip away before word of what happened here reaches the other Elders."

I swallowed. "What happens then?"

Paladin Bitter Bright neighed. "If we had done this years ago, with an Elder taking the lead, then those who believe the Steel Rangers should be following the Ministry Mare and helping the ponies of Equestria could simply have transferred to the new Elder's contingent. We would have been... looked upon poorly, but the voice of an Elder is law. Now..."

The Steel Ranger Outcast took a moment of silence before continuing. "Now we are seceding. We are traitors and mutineers. Once the Elders learn of this, any within their ranks who empathize with us will be exterminated."

Oh. Celestia grant mercy.

“Hopefully,” SteelHooves added, “Those who would join us can make it out before then. They will be galloping towards Stable Twenty-Nine. We will need to have it secured by then, or they will be galloping into a trap.”

“Well, except for Trottingham,” Knight Strawberry Lemonade piped up, joining the conversation as she moved to stand uncomfortably close to SteelHooves. My friend looked around as if searching for some trivial task to give her. “In Trottingham, there are more of us than there are of them. In Trottingham, I bet the Elder will be the one abandoning ship.”

The pony in my head whimpered, watching my actions ripple out into war and bloodshed. “I’m so sorry...”

“For what?” Paladin Bitter Bright asked. “None of this is your fault or your doing. Except that because of you and your friends, this squad isn’t dead at Nova Rage’s hoof or still trapped in that Stable school waiting to die of thirst and starvation.” He nickered, “This battle started the moment Nova Rage killed one of us and locked the others away. And that happened hours before any of you showed up. This is on her. And on us. Hell, *we* should be apologizing to *you* for not saying enough until *after* the others started slaughtering the poor ponyfolk in the Ministry Mare’s Stable.”

“It’s on me,” SteelHooves said with finality. “This has always been on me.”

As he plodded past me, he lowered his helmet and whispered into my ear, “It’s better that my child never knew me.”



Blackwing and her Talons flew with us part of the way, delivering news of their victory back to Gawd, along with the details of a five-year plan that the Overmare and Blackwing had sketched out upon my suggestion

“Y’all sure we shouldn’t stand there with ya at Stable Twenty-Nine?”

“No,” SteelHooves told Calamity. “This is an internal matter now.”

I listened to DJ Pon3’s broadcast in my earbloom, but there had been no news yet of Stable Two. Nothing that could forewarn the Elders that their ranks were breaking. I prayed that the silence would last until I reached Homage.

It was another stroke of luck that Calamity’s Shack was only a little bit out of our way towards Fetlock and Manehattan. It was, however, completely in the opposite direction of Splendid Valley. I began to worry what Red Eye might do if we delayed too long. I was hoping that his twisted generosity would extend to giving me time to rest after everything I had gone through.

“What will we do once we reach Tenpony Tower?” Xenith questioned.

“Will Red Eye even let you get there?” Knight Strawberry Lemonade asked, moving to a bench near me. SteelHooves had managed to successfully maneuver behind several other Steel Rangers, preventing her from reaching him. I found the little dance amusing, partially because her voice was so cute. (Even more so coming from inside that fearsome armor.) Partially because it was finally somepony else’s turn to feel a little uncomfortable.

“Red Eye has the place surrounded,” I said, frowning. “Shooting our way in would be a bad move. But we could try sneaking our way in...”

I recalled what Homage said in her fake letter to me: *Then, later, we can meet where we met before, and I promise...* Well, ahem, no need to dwell on what she promised. The important part was, “I know of a roof access that Red Eye’s troops probably don’t. And I believe Homage is watching for us to land there.”

The others nodded. Xenith looked concerned. “Will they even allow a zebra inside?”

“Homage will,” I assured her. Xenith may not get the run of the tower, but there was no way we were leaving her out in the cold.

As we approached the turning-point for Calamity's shack, Blackwing swooped close, flying alongside the *Sky Bandit*. The griffin signaled me.

"Do you think Gawdyna will be satisfied with the payment?" I called out over the rush of wind.

Blackwing barked a laugh. "I think she'll be surprised. Disturbed, maybe. She was hoping for rights to draw from Stable Two's water talisman. Instead, she's getting an offer to move the entire damn population of Stable Two, as well as its most valuable assets, to her domain."

As Velvet Remedy had determined, Stable Two could not afford to remain isolated for much longer. The population needed to genetically spread, to introduce new breeding stock from the Outside. But they couldn't just open the Stable door. Not with Stable Two near the edge of the Everfree Forest and an hour's trot from raider territory. They needed to move. Shattered Hoof provided additional population and safety.

With this plan, the water talisman would be moved to Junction R-7, and the entire subterranean apple orchard would be relocated to the mines underneath Shattered Hoof. The ponies of Stable Two would start building homes in the land between Junction R-7 and the old prison. It would be a massive undertaking, but then Old Appleloosa had been built by earth ponies in a single year.

It felt odd knowing that my new home was going to become my old home. Within five years, Junction R-7 was going to be the center of a *town*.

"I'm more worried about the delay," I called out. "It's going to be a few months, at best, before the ponies in Stable Two can actually start the move. Right now, the area outside the Stable is just too dangerous." The Everfree Forest exodus, however, was just a part of the problem. I was even more worried about retaliation from the Steel Rangers.

So for now, the Stable was sealing itself up again. The ponies of Stable Two needed time to process and cope with the trauma. They needed time to clean the Stable and rebuild their lives. They wouldn't be able

to forget; and part of me thought that was good, as it would prevent them from losing sight of what they owed and the changes that needed to be made.

“Gawd’s patient,” Blackwing commented. “But you’ve got other problems. Only way to ferry the orchard to Shattered Hoof is by rail. And those tracks pass through New Appleloosa.”

Crap. That’s right.

“We’ll work something out,” I assured her. “But I’ve got to deal with Red Eye first.”

I sounded more confident than I felt. But Calamity’s words had reminded me that while there might be questionable or even downright villainous ponies in high places at New Appleloosa, the bulk of the townsfolk were good ponies. Hell, Ditzzy Doo lived there.

The thought of the ghoul pegasus brought up another responsibility. I had to find a way to thank her. We all owed her our lives. Without those StealthBucks, which she had given freely to aid Blackwing in saving the ponies of my home...

I moved away from edge of the *Sky Bandit* as Blackwing veered off, the other griffins following closely. Butcher blew a kiss in our direction. I think it was for SteelHooves, but I had no idea why. Maybe just the camaraderie that comes with a mutual love of excessive firepower.

Calamity winged us in the other direction. “This won’t take long,” I assured SteelHooves and the Outcasts.



“That’s one giant cloud o’ scary black smoke,” Calamity commented as we approached his shack.

The smoke from the Everfree Forest fires had tinted the air an angry salmon hue. Calamity’s shack, nestled halfway up a rugged plateau, was slightly closer to New Appleloosa than it was to the closest border of the Everfree Forest. But while it was nowhere near the fires, the prevailing winds were blowing the smoke for miles.

I'd grown accustomed to the strange, sickly quality of the air Outside, but Scootaloo's PipBuck message brought back memories. That first morning in the Equestrian Wasteland -- how the sheer oddness of it struck me. This was altogether different. I could smell unnatural odors riding in the smoke. I could taste something pungently bittersweet with each breath.

"Should we be breathing this?" I asked Velvet Remedy. I was reminded of the dangers of working in the parasprite incinerator pits. Did anypony know what nastiness the smoke from the Everfree Forest might carry with it? I suddenly envied the Steel Rangers (Outcasts and otherwise) for the rebreathers built into their armored suits.

"Probably not," Velvet Remedy said, doing absolutely nothing to assuage my fears.

The cliffs around the shack were precarious with no safe path to ascend and no outcropping to land the passenger wagon. It was, after all, a home for a pegasus. Calamity was forced to land at the base of the cliffs. After brief discussion, it was suggested that Calamity and I would head up alone.

"Oh no," Velvet Remedy put her hoof down. "You did not bring us all the way here, Calamity, to your old home, only to not let me see it."

Calamity nickered, looking apprehensive and a bit embarrassed.

"Come on now," Velvet purred. "I showed you mine; now you show me yours."

I tried very hard to think of other things. "Tell you what: I'll levitate myself up there while you two fly up."

"Can ya do that, Li'l pip? Levitate yerself that far?"

To be honest, I wasn't sure. Self-levitation had always been the hardest trick. I wanted to give it a try. But I didn't want to suffer the fall if I failed. "Be ready to catch me?" I asked meekly. Calamity nodded, stretching out his wings confidently.

(Somewhere behind me, I heard Xenith ask somepony, “Why do they not just make two trips?”)

I looked up, pointing my horn towards the shack. And swallowed nervously. It was... very high.

My horn began to glow. Focusing, I enveloped my body with a magical envelope and pushed off from the ground. I had done this much before; but just as in the Pit, my ascent had begun to slow rapidly. I focused harder and tried to pull myself upwards.

I was still slowing.

I concentrated, sweat beading on my forehead and running down my neck. An overflow flared around my horn, casting reflections on the cliff rocks.

I stopped slowing. I was doing it! I was pulling myself through the air!

I was... pushing exhaustion. The effort was almost painful. But I was doing it.

I was flying!



I lay on the little strip of wood that amounted to Calamity's front porch, panting heavily. My legs didn't want to hold me up. Oh, they could if I asked, but they didn't want to.

It was worth it. For just a little bit, I was actually flying.

It had not been a graceful act of freedom; as I was neither a pegasus nor a bird. It had been work, like galloping uphill against the wind. But I had done it. And for a moment, all the horrors and pain of the last few days was forgotten in the rush and exertion.

I wondered how long it would take Calamity to fly up here with Velvet Remedy. Not long, my mind answered swiftly. In fact, I was surprised they weren't already here.

I remembered that I still had a memory orb from one of the safes in the Fillydelphia Ministry of Magic vault -- the orb from the safe which had also held a cloak. (Judging from Xenith's reaction and recent griffin-related experience, I deduced that it had been a zebra stealth cloak.) I decided abruptly that I didn't want to spend the wait laying sweaty and wiped on Calamity's porch. So I floated out the memory orb and focused on it.

And immediately knew it was a mistake, remembering that the orb had come from a ruined box and was likely damaged itself, but it was too late.

My body exploded, every nerve being flayed as I was burned over and over without dying. I knew my real body must be screaming and thrashing, but the pain was too intense to even fear for my safety. In fact, falling from the cliff side and being dashed on the ground below would be a mercy.

A thousand white-hot knives sliced through my brain.

An eyeblink or an eternity later, the pain stopped as abruptly as it started. And I was no longer myself...



I wasn't even a pony. This was a familiar strangeness. And I could feel the cloak draped about me, the hood over my mane and ears (as well as a saddle-pouch and something strapped to my side). This too was familiar. I was invisible again. A fact all too easy to glean as I watched a stallion admiring himself in a mirror -- a mirror which should also reflect my host from this angle, but did not. My host was a zebra in a stealth cloak. Possibly the same one as before.

"If you won't accept my offer, then you should at least consider availing yourself of your good fortune that I am willing to pose for your new publication," the stallion suggested as he preened himself. He was a regal, haughty white unicorn, quite handsome in his elder years. "I am, after all, the best pony."

“Hardly,” intoned an elegant voice which could only belong to Rarity. If the stallion had noticed the slightly disparaging tone, he showed no indication of comprehending it. “There is no place for grandstanding or glory-hounds in the Ministry of Image. Our purpose here is to help the *client* shine all across Equestria, not ourselves. And our client is *all of Equestria* itself. *We* should remain invisible.”

With a politely sweet tone, she encouraged, “Perhaps you should try the Ministry of Awesome.”

We were in an office. A rather nice one at that, with elegant curtains and golden trim on the wainscoting. It certainly lacked the humbleness I had come to expect from a Ministry of Image building, which told me this was no M.I. hub, but the Ministry’s headquarters on Ministry Walk in Canterlot -- the one place where even the Ministry of Image would have to maintain an image.

“That’s easy for you to say,” the stallion frowned. “You’re already in charge of one of the most important branches of Princess Luna’s new government. You’re already in a position far beyond your wildest peasant dreams.”

Wow. I was quickly forming a rather strong dislike for this buck.

Rarity’s riposte was controlled, calm, even charming. “Humility was a lesson hard learned, in fact. It’s called maturing. Something which, sadly, you seem to have little acquaintance.”

“This is some sort of revenge, isn’t it?” Amazingly, the stallion still hadn’t bothered to glance at the beautiful mare he was talking to. If he was the subject of my host’s surveillance, then the magical cloak seemed superfluous.

“A lady is not vengeful,” Rarity informed him with a refined tone.

“But you are not a lady,” the stallion replied thoughtlessly. “You are a government official.”

I wanted to deck him.

"You are quite fortunate that I *am* a lady," Rarity responded, her voice lowering. "And that I do not have a nearby cake."

I had no idea what cake had to do with the conversation. But at least my host finally turned her attention to the gorgeous white unicorn. Again, she looked younger than I would have expected, and there was no grey in her hair.

She really knows how to take good care of herself, I thought admiringly. I bet she dyes her mane.

"And I am a prince," the stallion informed her, finally deigning to turn his gaze away from himself and towards the mare he was addressing.

Proposal?

"Really?" Rarity rolled her eyes. "I have long operated under the assumption that your lineage was a joke perpetrated by Princess Celestia on..." She paused thoughtfully before concluding, "...anypony who ever met you."

Rarity's horn glowed.

"If you were to accept my proposal, then you would be a princess," the prince continued obliviously.

Oh Goddesses fuck me in a three-way, this jerk actually *proposed* to Rarity? That's what he meant by accepting his *offer*? A proposal isn't an offer, it's a *request*.

Rarity glanced around, then sighed. "Yes, and you would gain a hoof in one of the most powerful Ministries in Equestria. Or, at least, that would be what you seem to think." She looked askance. "I cannot imagine any world where that would be worth it."

The prince huffed. "You speak as if I am not sacrificing greatly myself in this arrangement. As your husband, I would almost certainly be expected to have relations with you."

Un. Be. Liable!

I focused, trying to make my host run over and buck him through sheer force of will.

Rarity stared silently. Her eyes slowly narrowed. Her horn glowed briefly again. "This conversation is over. Prince Blueblood, it is time for you to leave. If you have any further business, please address it to anypony other than me. Your presence causes me physical pain."

"I am a prince, and a member in high standing in the courts of Canterlot. You would do well to..."

"But I don't want to," Rarity interrupted. "I don't like you. In fact, I find you quite horrid. I despise that my position requires me to acknowledge your existence, and much worse, give you the occasional time of day. But that time had come to a close. Goodbye."

Prince Blueblood huffed, standing tall. "You have no place to complain. It is *I* who should..."

"Oh, I'm not complaining," Rarity's eyes narrowed dangerously. "I'm whining. If I was *complaining*, it would suggest there is a higher authority to complain to. But there is not; I am the highest authority within this Ministry. Observe."

Rarity trotted to her desk and pushed a button with her hoof. "Oooh guards!"

She turned to smile at the unicorn stallion as the double doors at the end of the room swung open and two guard ponies appeared. Prince Blueblood backpedaled, startled. "Please escort the prince off the property. If he resists, arrest him."

I would have enjoyed the show had my host not backed away, heart beating slightly faster. She turned our head and I felt my teeth biting down on the object strapped to her side. It was the hilt of a sheathed blade, and the zebra silently drew it.

The guards did as the Ministry Mare requested. Prince Blueblood showed enough intelligence to not resist. I had hoped that once they were gone, my host would re-sheath her blade, but the zebra clearly had other plans.

We were alone with Rarity in her office. And she couldn't see us.

"Unbelievable!" she nickered, echoing my previous thought. The elder unicorn had her back to us, her head lowered as she focused on something on her desk as my host began to creep closer.

No! I tried to shout a warning.

The zebra turned her head, aiming the blade for the back of Rarity's neck, right in the lush of her mane. I could feel my host tense for the strike. Rarity shifted slightly, her horn glowing as one of the gems on the front of her desk slid aside, revealing a secret lock that demanded her attention.

Please no!

I felt something shift in the zebra's saddle-pouch. A new weight. Suddenly, frantically, my host backed up. I heard the detonation, felt a brutal pressure and a searing pain, then nothing. My host fell. Unmoving save for a twitching she could barely feel. It was as if her entire body had gone numb.

"Simply unbelievable," reiterated Rarity as she elegantly turned, staring at where we had collapsed invisibly on the floor.

I heard more than felt the cloak being pulled off of my host, glowing in a blue magical field that mirrored the soft light tracing the spirals around Rarity's horn. The moment it was removed, both the cloak and my host became visible. Rarity paid us no attention, floating the cloak to her and flipping the rough fabric about until she found the gemstone clasp.

"There you are, my pretty," she said, telekinetically ripping the gemstone free, breaking the clasp in the process. "Oh don't you have some interesting magic," she said as she appraised the gem, tossing the rest of the cloak aside. "Twi will love taking a closer look at you!"

I realized I was seeing the inception of StealthBucks.

I recalled a message I had found in a recruitment center: *Intelligence suggested that the zebras had developed invisibility spell fetishes, but **this***

looks like something designed by the Ministry of Magic. In the pervading paranoia of late wartime Equestria, somepony had feared the worst, not knowing what Twilight Sparkle knew. But the zebra's hadn't gotten this magic from us; we had gotten it from them.

The long, wicked blade lay on the carpet where it had fallen, close yet impossibly out of reach. My host tried to move towards it, but her body wouldn't respond.

"I slipped a stun grenade into your saddle-pouch," Rarity informed us, moving the gemstone out of sight. "I like to think I'm rather expert at manipulating cloth. Even if I can't see it."

The zebra shuffled closer to the blade.

"Really?" Rarity said with a lady-like scoff. She floated the blade away, turning a disdainful gaze on us. "A zebra assassin attempted to infiltrate my office and murder me concealed under a cloak with an enchanted gemstone?"

She leaned closer, "I'd explain how I got my cutie mark, but it wouldn't do you any good where you're going."

Another cocoon of blue light wrapped around a headset on her desk and floated it over her head, gently sliding it into place around her ears and muzzle.

"Although I do have to wonder, were you trying to assassinate one of 'Nightmare Moon's' cabinet?" she asked, turning her tail to us as she slid open the hidden compartment in her desk. "Or were you after *this*?"

Rarity cantered to face us. Floating in front of her was a powerful, dark tome bound in twisted black hide.

The moment I saw the book, I knew it held so many secrets. So many things just waiting for me to unlock if I could only look at the pages.

"Well, I suppose we'll find out, won't we?" Rarity promised.

She lifted a hoof to the headset, her expression instantly changing to one of barely-bridled joy. “Oooh Piiiinkie Pie! This is Rarity. I’ve got a present for you!” She smiled. “You’ll love this one.”



I came to on a worn, musty cot in Calamity’s shack. Velvet Remedy was laying on the floor, panting and soaked in sweat. Calamity himself stood towering over me, shadowed from the light coming through the window over the workbench behind him.

“What happened, Li’lpip?”

“Where?” I blinked, looking around. “What...?”

“Ya made it all the way up,” Calamity asserted. “Ah saw ya do it. But we were most o’ the way up when ya screamed, thrashin’ like ya were on fire, and flung yerself from the porch!”

“I fell?” My eyes went wide. I turned, looking around. The door to the shack was open. I blinked as the image of The Black Book swam in front of me -- much like having turned away after staring at a bright light and seeing the shape of the light dance before your eyes. But nothing in a visited memory had ever left such an imprint *outside* of the experience.

I blinked, clearing my vision. I could see the porch were I had been laying. The memory orb was nowhere in sight.

“Darn tootin’ ya fell!” Calamity retorted. “We had a helluva time getting’ ya up here, even after ya went limp. Been worried sick. What the hell happened?”

“I...” I looked towards the empty porch again. My instinct was to lie. But there wasn’t a lie that wouldn’t end up worrying my friends needlessly. “I made a mistake. While I was waiting, I touched a memory orb. Only it was damaged...”

“Ya did *what*?” Calamity snapped. “On the porch? Li’lpip, Ah barely caught ya!”

I cringed back, staring up at my pegasus friend, my hooves pushing at the cloth on his cot as my back thumped softly against the wall.

“Y’know, it’s hard ‘nuff flyin’ while carryin’ one pony. Ah can’t do it wi’ two when the second one is buckin’ an’ screamin’ like she’s bein’ eaten from the inside out!” Calamity lashed out. Unpleasant nightmares about parasprites washed through my mind. “Ya nearly brought us all down! Velvet Remedy had t’ use her magic t’ carry ya. And Ah’ll remind ya that she ain’t nearly as good at that spell as y’all are!”

I turned a nervous look to Velvet. She was so exhausted that she could barely return my gaze.

“An’ don’tcha think after all she’s been through last night, tha maybe she didn’t deserve for ya to make us all scared t’ death that yer dyin’ from somethin’ in the smoke?”

Oh Goddess. The weight of what I’d thoughtlessly done to them crushed down on me. I started to shake. The hurt from my shame and Calamity’s righteous anger broke the floodgates, and suddenly the emotional deluge of the last half a week consumed me. The horrors of Fillydelphia slavery, The Pit, the threat to Homage, the slaughter at Stable Two, my mother...

“I’m sorry!” I yelled back, bursting into tears. “I fucked up! It was horrible! I’m sorry!”

“Galdangit, Li’lpip!” Calamity growled back angrily, “Yer curiosity is gonna get ya killed one o’ these days. An’ t’day ya nearly took alla us with ya!”

“I’m sorry!”

Calamity snorted, glowering, as I broke into sobs. Velvet Remedy, trembled, huffing as she got to her feet, and moved closer to me, pulling herself onto the cot with a painful effort.

“Okay,” Calamity insisted. “Ground rules. From now on, ya don’t play with one o’ those things unless yer on the ground, out of combat, somewhere’s safe. *And* ya have one o’ us watchin’ over ya.”

Having laid the law, Calamity allowed his expression to soften. His own utter exhaustion finally showed through his eyes. He gently wrapped me with a wing.

The two of them stayed with me until the tempest passed.

“Now buck up, Li’lpip,” Calamity finally said, prodding me with his wing. “Ya gonna have a look at that floor safe or not?”

I nodded, although for the first time I really didn’t feel right allowing my curiosity to be sated. I slid slowly from the cot and looked at the floor beneath it.

It was, at most, an average lock. Even in my distress, I could open it easily, with or without tools. The safe clicked open.

Amongst the saddlebag’s worth of decayed personal effects, one item sat gleaming and unblemished by time. A statuette of Rainbow Dash. Her pose was powerful, wings spread and a huge grin on her face...

“Go ahead,” Calamity said softly. “Take it. Ah know ya collect those things.”

“But... don’t you want it?” I asked, surprised.

“Ah already got her cutie mark burned into muh flanks. Ah figure she’s already close ‘nuff t’ me.”

I nodded, then carefully reached out with my magic, experiencing a sudden surge as my magic touched the statuette. I was... better. I felt like I could *be* better than I had been before. Do anything. Nimbler, more graceful... but much more than that. I was, in a word, *cooler*.

The inscription was what Rainbow Dash’s inscription had to be:

“Be Awesome!”



Calamity stepped out of his shack and into the oddly reddish-orange air. He was encased in the terrifying black carapace of his old Enclave

armor. The tips of his four Novasurge rifles glistened wickedly. He tested his wings and the scorpion tail.

Then he lowered his head and hoofed off the helmet. He looked back up, letting the smoky wind catch in his orange mane. He looked weird without his hat on.

“Forget it,” he huffed with a stomp. “Ah’m not goin’ ‘round like this.” He turned and trotted back into the shack. “Ah’d rather be shot.”

It took him less than a minute to shuck the armor. Velvet Remedy wrapped it in her magic, making sure to also collect his helmet from the porch. “Well, at least take it with us. You may change your mind when you see whatever forces Red Eye has around Tenpony Tower.”

“Fine,” he grumped. “Ah’ve grabbed everythin’ Ah want. Let’s just go.”

I paused. “Calamity? I know you are hoping to sell a bunch of those slavers’ weapons up at Tenpony, but I really think we should give them to Ditzzy Doo. You know, as a thank you for what she did for Stable Two.”

Velvet Remedy neighed. “That would be a rather impersonal gift, Littlepip. And possibly a painful one, considering what slavers have done to her.” I frowned, wincing. “Besides, do you really want to give New Appleloosa more weapons right now?” I had to admit that I did not.

Instead, Velvet Remedy looked to Calamity, “Do you know anything that Ditzzy Doo likes? I agree with Littlepip: we do need to give her a gift, something to show our thanks for her help.”

“Well,” Calamity thought. “She likes muffins...”

Velvet looked shocked. “Can ghouls even eat?” Apparently, they didn’t have to, but they could.

I smiled. Between Homage and Xenith, we had the best cooks in the Equestrian Wasteland.



I spent most of the ride trying not to think about anything that had happened recently. I knew that if I did, I'd start crying again.

Instead, I tried to focus on the discussions between the Outcasts, but they delved into internal Steel Ranger politics, and I felt my attention drifting. Knight Strawberry Lemonade sat next to me, chiming into the older members' conversations at every opportunity.

Strawberry Lemonade, I thought, sounds delicious.

I groaned, catching myself before my imagination went too far south. I needed Homage. I looked over the side of the passenger wagon. Twilight was spreading across the wasteland as we approached Fetlock. Below I spotted the mostly-collapsed ruins of that first cottage, but the wandering merchant and his mechanical owl had moved on.

As we approached Fetlock, I spotted the faint column of smoke raising up from the ponyhole that lead to Stable Twenty-Nine. More curled up from nearby drainage grates. There were no sounds of fighting.

"This is either very good," SteelHooves commented, "Or very bad."

As we drew closer, a Steel Ranger moved out of the shadows. There was a flash of light. I ducked, expecting impact.

But it hadn't been a weapon. It was a flare.

"Thank Applejack," I thought I heard SteelHooves mutter. It was good news.

I let out a breath. It was about time the Equestrian Wasteland threw us a break.



Our luck continued to hold as we glided through the night over the Manehattan ruins. As we approached the top of Tenpony Tower, I could see the firelights from Red Eye's camps below, ringing the tower on the ground and lighting up the Celestia Line. They had taken the exterior of the Four Stars station.

Griffins flew in patterns around the tower, but they flew low, looking for targets on the ground. I realized with a start that Red Eye didn't know about the *Sky Bandit*. He knew we had a pegasus, so he could suspect we had faster transport. But he had to allow for the possibility that we were walking. And if that were true, we'd barely be making Manehattan now if we traveled here straight from Fillydelphia.

We had time.

We had a problem. There was an alicorn perched on the roof of Tenpony Tower. Her shield was down, all the better to spot incoming Littlepips. I could shoot her. The silenced zebra rifle would more than do the trick. But the moment she went down, every alicorn in the area would know. And there was a good chance Red Eye would too.

The passenger wagon lurched hard. "Aww crap," Calamity grunted as we began to sink out of the sky. The spark batteries were drained. And our poor pegasus was too exhausted to handle the sudden change in weight. He nearly fainted from the strain. We began to plummet.

Frantically, I concentrated on wrapping the *Sky Bandit* with my magic. If I could pull myself through the air, maybe I could slow or even reverse our fall.

My horn flared brightly. The strain hit me like a shock, buckling my legs, reminding me that I hadn't slept in over a day.

We were still falling.

I pushed harder, gasping, my body trembling. A layer of overglow burst from my horn. Sparks started to shoot from its tip.

The glow around the *Sky Bandit* became brilliant. It attracted the attention of one of the griffins below as we plummeted towards their patrol line. The griffin turned towards us, lifting her sniper rifle, and fired.

Now everyone would know we are here. But I couldn't focus on that. I was pouring everything I had into trying to slow our descent. A second overglow wrapped my horn. Beams of light shot out of it.

We began to slow.

“Aw hell,” Calamity moaned weakly, all but collapsed in the harness, as the alicorn took off from the roof, diving towards us as she put up her shield.

I screamed, somehow tapping into strength I didn’t have (Be Strong! Be Unwavering! Be Awesome!). A third layer of overglow erupted from my horn. The *Sky Bandit* stopped abruptly, hovering in the air.

Then we began to ascend.

The alicorn’s eyes widened and she stopped her descent. Her glowing horn began to crackle with electricity as she prepared to cast a bolt of lightning at us.

The griffin shot again. This time, the bullet hit the wagon, leaving a small hole in the roof. The griffin began to reload, and was engulfed in green flame. Pyrelight hooted happily and swooped back up after us.

Velvet Remedy tossed her shield around the *Sky Bandit*. The first bolt of lightning struck it and the shield imploded, but it kept us from being hit. Part of my mind realized that the shock from a strike would obliterate my concentration and we would fall to our deaths.

The alicorn was flying upwards, back towards the roof, keeping a distance between herself and us as her horn crackled again with electricity.

Pyrelight landed next to Velvet Remedy, looking proud.

Xenith had shattered another flask on the floor and was stomping in it. As the second bolt lashed out, the zebra grabbed my mane in her teeth and pulled me onto her back. The powerful electrical bolt hit the *Sky Bandit*, arcing all about the metal frame. Velvet let out a lady-like squeal and collapsed. Pyrelight squawked and tumbled to the floor of the passenger wagon.

Xenith and I remained unharmed, protected by her insulating potion. We continued to rise. There was nothing else we could do.

The alicorn landed back on the edge of the roof. Motes of magic began to form in a ring about her, forming into eldritch darts.

From somewhere on the rooftop, a lashing beam of cosmic energy struck the alicorn, rippling the shield where it pushed through to strike the monster directly. The shield imploded as the alicorn was reduced to luminescent, moon-colored ash.

I floated the *Sky Bandit* onto the rooftop. Homage was waiting there for us, the alien weapon floating by her side. As soon as she saw me, she galloped into the passenger wagon and wrapped me in a hug.

Homage!

I could smell her, feel her soft coat and the warmth of her body. My own relaxed in her embrace, and once more, I began to cry.



“A zebra!” Homage squealed happily. Xenith cringed back as Homage offered her hoof.

“She... doesn’t like being touched,” I told the sexy grey unicorn. Homage lowered her hoof and nodded.

“And who might you be?” Xenith asked, prompting introductions.

Inspiration hit me. “Homage, would you allow...” I paused. “Could you ask DJ Pon3 if Xenith could spend some time in the M.A.S.E.B.S.?”

Homage and Xenith both looked at me curiously. “Please?” I asked Homage.

“I-I’m sure it could be arranged,” Homage said trustingly.

I turned to my zebra friend. “DJ Pon3 has cameras all over the Equestrian Wasteland. Maybe one of them has seen your daughter or her tribe?

The zebra’s eyes widened. I saw a glimmer of hope.

Homage smiled. "Yes, please. And I'm sure I can get DJ Pon3 to let you peek at some of the archived footage. I'll show you how to do so, then leave you in private." She blushed a little, "Littlepip and I are going to be busy, but we won't be far away."

"She likes spankings and bondage," Velvet told Homage in a conspiratorial, overly-loud whisper.

I stared at her, wide-eyed, blushing hotly. "That's not true!"

Homage raised an eyebrow. "Did you two talk about liking bondage and spankings?" she asked innocently.

"No. I mean yes, but..."

"Oh," Homage feigned understanding, "So you talked about Velvet liking bondage?"

"No, me. But..." Aw crap.

"So you do like it!" Homage was grinning way too much. I gave up, hanging my head and accepting my doomed-ness.

I narrowed my eyes, whispering to the charcoal-coated mare, "All those times I fantasized about you? That was before I learned you were evil."

"Don't worry," Homage said, wrapping a foreleg about me as she smiled, her eyes twinkling as she glanced to Velvet. "Last time, I learned you were multi-orgasmic. Tonight I'm going to find out just how many you can have before you pass out." She nibbled one of my ears. "Then I'm going to find out if I can wake you up with one. So... some bondage might be required."

I felt myself flooding with heat and embarrassment. I simultaneously wanted to both let her tie me up and do whatever she desired... and to run away and hide under a rock forever. I swayed, feeling faint and nearly fell over. Delicately, Homage maneuvered me towards the rooftop door.

"Wow," Xenith said, standing with the others as we walked away, her exotic voice gaining a touch of melancholy. "With all your teasing, I was beginning to feel sorry for the little one. Now I just feel jealous."

“Yes,” Velvet Remedy agreed, sounding a touch stunned. “So do I.” She turned to Calamity. “No offense.”

“Offense? Hell, *Ah* feel jealous.”

Homage snickered. Then turned to the others. “Are you coming?”

I stopped, at first thinking that she was inviting them to watch. That... I couldn't possibly... no!

But Homage had less cruel plans. “I've arranged for the rest of you to have the same suite as before. It's all taken care of.”



Velvet Remedy and Calamity had taken their leave, Velvet mentioning something about dragging the poor pegasus buck to the spa. Homage, Xenith and I were left alone in the room with the huge alicorn water fountain.

As physically exhausted, emotionally gutted, and achingly horny as I was, I could not seek attention for my needs until others had been met. First came getting Xenith set up in the Emergency Broadcast Station. Xenith's eyes went even wider as she took in the walls of monitor screens. Many still flickered and suffered distorted images, but I saw all of them were working.

“This is... amazing,” the zebra breathed. “What is this place?”

Homage told her, adding, “The images you see are from the spire towers like the one in Fillydelphia. Until just over three days ago, the ones from Fillydelphia were dark. Red Eye is using that tower for something and it was keeping me from getting a signal. But thanks to Littlepip, DJ Pon3 now has eyes in the heart of slaver territory too.” Homage gave Xenith a sympathetic and hopeful smile. “We'll finally be able to start doing some real good out there.”

The zebra nodded. For the next hour, Homage instructed the zebra in the camera controls and accessing the archives. Xenith took to it with difficulty. In the meantime, I mostly just watched. In Homage's home,

I finally felt safe. I was no longer on edge, no longer running or fighting, and my body kept trying to fall asleep.

I did however, manage to get a promise of muffins from both of them. Ditzzy Doo would soon be getting the biggest and best muffin delivery in the history of the Equestrian Wasteland.

Then, finally, Homage and I were alone together in the foyer, standing next to the fountain.

"And what shall I do with you, my Wasteland Heroine?" Homage purred. "First, I mean."

"Homage," I said reluctantly. "We need to talk."

"Oh my. Sounds serious."

I nodded. Falling to my haunches, I began to talk. I started with the truth about SteelHooves and Chief Grim Star, apologizing profusely for having not told her sooner. Homage's expression was troubled but forgiving.

Then I told her of Red Eye and the megaspell.

"We have to evacuate the tower," I said finally. "Quickly, and stealthily."

"We can't leave Tenpony Tower," Homage said, shaking her head.

"I know they have you surrounded. But maybe with the *Sky Bandit*... or though the tunnels?" I fretted. "It can't be impossible."

Homage shook her head again. "No. Some of the population, maybe. But even then, I can't leave here. We can't let Red Eye take this place."

"I know DJ Pon3 is important, but he's not as important as your life." She couldn't understand that, of course. But I had seen the *Gardens of Equestria*. I *knew*.

"Then you seriously underestimate the need for a voice of truth and hope in this ruined world," Homage told me. "DJ Pon3 gives the ponies of the Equestrian Wasteland the warnings and advice they need

to survive. But more than that, he gives them comfort and the hope they need to make surviving worthwhile.”

I looked away and nodded, feeling ashamed. She was right.

“And while I would say DJ Pon3 is the most vital thing we need to preserve and protect here, he is not the only treasure in this tower.”

I looked up in surprise. This was new.

Homage brushed my hair tenderly even as her own blue mane fell into her eyes. “Littlepip, love,” she said, that word shooting thrills through me, igniting desires and dreams. “Tenpony Tower was a prominent hub for the Ministry of Arcane Sciences. It’s not a hotel or a mall. There are secrets here.”

“Secrets?” I asked, that damnably curious pony in my head perking at the mere idea. “What sort of secrets?” I could tell Homage was debating whether or not to tell me. But only for a moment.

“Littlepip, did you ever wonder how I could stay here, DJ Pon3’s public assistant, when the stuffy lot in this place despise him so?” I had to admit the question had never occurred to me.

“There is a secret society within Tenpony Tower. They are the ones who, I dare say, are really in charge.” She backed up and looked around. “There are places in this building that are sealed off from the general public. Places where the Ministry’s secrets played out. All manner of magical research and development.”

She looked at me, tossing her hair out of her eyes. “You know that annoying shield spell the alicorns all have? It was developed *here*.”

I found myself looking up at the age-darkened bronze statue. The alicorn in the room.

“And you haven’t seen how powerful that spell can get if you pump enough power into it,” Homage told me. “The only reason the alicorn shields can be punched through with the right firepower is because they can’t manifest it at anywhere near full power.”

“Actually,” I said, remembering the super-charged alicorn from the Fillydelphia Crater flying through the building, her shield tearing apart walls and supports, “I think I have.”

Homage bade me to tell her about it. Once I was done, she nodded, visibly shaken. “I think you’re right,” she admitted.

Homage continued, “In the weeks before the end, one of the other hubs in the Ministry of Arcane Science cracked some sort of sub-spell that they used to enhance the shield spell,” she continued. “Not make it more powerful, but make it so that specially designated ponies could pass through a shield as if it wasn’t there. They started creating enchanted shield generators, placing them inside rooms or sections of buildings that they wanted secure.”

With that, Homage hopped up onto the fountain’s rim and tapped her right forehoof rhythmically on the alicorn statue. I gasped as the horn flared with magic and the glowing aura of a magical shield swept over the walls. “The M.A.S.E.B.S. and Twilight’s Athenaeum are amongst Tenpony Tower’s sealed areas,” she said with a smile. “To the population below, DJ Pon3 has always been a strange hermit living in part of the tower that no pony can get to, always dealing with the outside world through intermediaries.”

My jaw dropped.

“Once started, the only way to turn off the shield was from inside, and the only ponies who could get inside were those designated by the sub-spell...”

“Bypass Spells,” I said, slowly re-closing my jaw. Homage gave me a quizzical look. “The sub-spell, it’s called a Bypass. Twilight Sparkle reverse-engineered it from a zebra enchantment.” Like the StealthBucks, I thought. *Shield screens that let specific materials through my flank.*

Dammit.

I was going to have to kill the Goddess for Red Eye after all. Not only was it the only way to protect Homage and the ponies of Tenpony

Tower, it was the only way to keep him from taking too close a look at this place.

"Could we move all the ponies of the tower into the shielded areas?" I asked.

"Not for long," Homage answered. "And I don't think it would do much good. If that Balefire bomb goes off, it will take out the foundation and everything not protected. All the shielding in Equestria won't save us from the fall."

Glumly, she admitted, "The shields that were used to protect the whole building haven't worked since the first one."

"I know," I told her, recounting how a wrong turn in the basement had brought me to the room full of generators. I didn't mention the maintenance pony who had died from shrapnel when the megaspell overloaded them and they all exploded.

Another realization struck me. "Red Eye is researching a way to trick a Bypass," I warned her. If these shields were being used to house the most vital research of at least one of the Ministries... what could he be after? Was it here? "He hadn't had much success yet, but he's got ponies working on it."

Homage frowned. "Not good." She hopped down from the fountain. "Thank you for the warning, Littlepip." She approached me, "Problem is, there already is a way to trick a... Bypass, right?"

I nodded.

"The Bypass works on genetics. And it's not as accurate as the Ministry of Arcane Sciences thought. Close family members of the designated ponies, or even a direct descendant of them, can get through a Bypass. That's how I can get in here even if the shields are up." Homage looked back at the alicorn and then to me.

"The shields in Tenpony Tower were set to allow only Twilight Sparkle and the three highest ranking unicorns in the Manehattan M.A.S. hub to pass through. Turns out, I'm a direct descendant of one of those high-ranking unicorns," she revealed to me. "Just like the ponies who

actually control Tenpony Tower. That's why they want me here." Homage added cautiously, "As long as I don't make *too* many waves."

Oh. Oh wow.

"I'll admit, I've been talking you up a lot. And I think I'm finally getting the others to come around. It won't be long before I can put the special resources of this tower at your hooves." Homage smiled sweetly. "Let me give you the *extended* tour."



Shield spells had only been the start. Homage guided me through one concealed hallway and shielded chamber after another, turning off the shields for me and restoring them in our wake.

We walked into a large, multi-cornered ritual chamber, bleached brightest white. The floor was an intricate mosaic of white-on-white tiles in exquisite and arcane patterns. There was a mirrored chimney leading up to a skylight, looking up into the darkness of the clouds above.

"What is this?"

"This," Homage revealed, "Is a megaspell chamber."

I stumbled. "Wait... you can cast megaspells here?"

Homage giggled. "Yes and no. You can cast a specific megaspell in here. If you had enough unicorns who all knew the spell. Each megaspell chamber is keyed to a specific spell, apparently."

I nodded, my mouth suddenly dry. "How many... megaspell chambers... does Tenpony Tower have?"

"Just this one," Homage admitted sadly. "And it's useless."

"Useless?"

Homage moved over to one of the chamber's thirty-two corners. She floated up an audio machine. "I found this in the recording studio. Apparently, it never got around to editing."

Homage started the machine, and hauntingly peaceful music flowed out, plucked and strummed from a deep-sounding harp. I closed my eyes and found myself swaying to the music. It was mysterious, unlike anything I had heard before.

"I try to pull this out once a year for a late night broadcast. I love it, but it's totally not DJ Pon3."

I nodded, wanting her to shut up. I was enjoying the music. It was speaking to me, touching on the sorrows of the last week, but without making me hurt.

The music ended in a rippling wave of sound that slowly reverberated away.

I heard a voice from the recording, sounding like somepony speaking through the recording studio's intercom. "That was beautiful, Lyra. Next, let's try..."

But an argument in the background, at first almost too quiet to hear, was quickly growing louder. From inside the recording chamber, the voice of a mare whom I assumed to be Lyra, spoke up.

"What's going on?"

"um... You didn't hear this from me, but Twilight Sparkle's gone the last three days without sleep, trying to prepare for the Princess's inspection, and has been in supreme bitchy mode all day today. I suggest steering clear. Don't worry. I don't think she'll come in here."

The arguing voices outside the recording studio were getting loud enough and close enough to make out the words.

"...Well that's just great, Twilight. Now she's in the bathroom sobbing her eyes out."

"Well, I'm sorry. But those results are just unacceptable. I can't go to the Princess and tell her that we've put her name on a megaspell that's... that's useless!"

The ponies in the recording studio had fallen completely silent. The argument was just outside their door. Twilight Sparkle and a male voice that sounded vaguely familiar.

"There's better ways of handling it than grabbing a pony, pointing and saying 'Look, there are all the thousands and thousands of bodies of ponies who are dead because your spell sucks. Explain it to them.' Just how the hell was that supposed to help?"

"Don't you get it, Spike? The zebras have megaspell-tipped missiles. Hundreds of them. If they launch them, those missiles will reach Equestria from the zebra homeland within minutes. And this Celestia One, or Celestia Prime, or whatever they're calling it can't even be cast unless it's sunny. I can't tell the Princess that the only defense we have against those missiles can be defeated by a cloudy day. What if the zebras decide to attack us at night?"

"..."

"You know what? Forget it, Twilight. I'm going to take a nap. And frankly, you should too."

"You're always taking a nap. There's work to be done"

"Whatever. Wake me when the Twilight I know and love has decided to visit. Until then, I don't even want to speak to you."

"Urrgh. Fine."



"In here," Homage said, waving a hoof at a sprawling agricultural bay, "We discovered that the Ministry of Arcane Sciences had perfected spells that purified water, cleaned radiation, even purged taint." I boggled. If only that maddened ghoul doctor had known. What he killed so many to accomplish...

"Unfortunately," Homage informed me, "The spells only work on an extremely small scale. With a lot of effort, we could purge one tree, the fruit becoming ripe and succulent and perfect for consumption... but there's nothing to keep the poisons from just seeping back in, and the area affected is so small it would take an army of unicorns to clean enough of a field to grow a garden without having to worry about the soil going bad before harvest. But it makes for wonderful potted plants."

"But, if you could cast it everywhere, all at once. Purge everything..." I realized what I was seeing. These were components of the *Gardens of Equestria*.

"I'd say you were delusional, but I'm talking to my Littlepip. I know better."

It was time to tell her.

When I was done, Homage collapsed weakly. "Me?" She looked at me, as if pleading for me to renounce the truth. "The... salvation of all of Equestria... is on me?"

I nodded. "You. Ditzzy Doo. Four others. We don't know who yet."

"This spell... it will fix everything?"

"Pretty much," I nodded. "But there's things that need to be done first. I'm not the Wasteland Savior, Homage. You are. You and them." I gave her a bittersweet smile. "I'm just the one who clears the way."

Homage stared at me for a long time. Then pushed herself up. "I need a drink..."



Screw my mother and screw my vulnerability to addictions. We were back in the Athenaeum, and Homage was drowning herself in apple whiskey and I was right there beside her, soused to the... whatever it is that ponies get soused to.

"...And then," Homage slurred, continuing a tale that had blurred into another tale which had jumped off from the original story about four stories back, "Jokeblue says, 'pfft, big deal. You've got *one box* that's bigger inside than outside. Well, *Mister* Whooves, I've got four little saddle bags, and I can carry about thirty rifles in them and more ammo than you can shake a hoof at. Hell, you should see how many rakes I can cram into my toolbox back home.'" Homage thumped down the apple whiskey bottle on the table for emphasis.

I paused, waving my hooves as I tried to measure my imagination. I was drunk and probably missing something, because there was no way a rake could fit in a toolbox. I finally gave up, deciding it must be a joke.

“Jokeblue’s a funny name. How’d she get that?”

Homage became more somber, although no more sober. “Birth defect. Her mother was hit by killing joke while pregnant. Lucky either of them lived.”

“Ah,” I said, not really understanding, but reaching out a comforting hoof anyway. It seemed the right thing to do, even though I ended up knocking over several of the apple whiskey bottles. Fortunately, most of them were empty.

A memory struck me and I began to cry again.

“Lit... pip? What is it?”

With a shuddering breath, I recounted, “I shot one of the Steel Rangers. In the back of the head. I think it was the one who killed my old mentor, but... I’m not sure.”

“Well, sounds like the bitch deserved it. Sounds like all of the Steel Rangers did.”

“Yes, I know... but I just snuck up and shot her. And kept shooting. Even after she was dead. Until I’d emptied Little Macintosh into her corpse.” My breast heaved with a shudder. “I... I don’t like the pony I’m becoming. I think I’m losing myself.” My voice hitched. “Monterey Jack was right. I’m running out of me left to save.”

Homage was by my side. I didn’t remember her leaving her chair. For the second time that night, she held me as I began to cry.

She gently led me towards her bed. “Come here, Littlepip. Rest now.”



If Red Eye had any problem with me staying at Tenpony Tower, he did nothing to show it. Even the loss of the alicorn and griffin seemed to go

unnoticed. I knew that should worry me. Instead, I ignored it. Instead, I relaxed. I even went to the spa with Homage. Twice.

I didn't want to think of myself as a selfish pony; but fuck Red Eye, I needed this. And hadn't I earned at least a little of it? Maybe not, considering my mistakes -- the damaged memory orb, the really stupid battle plans, going behind The Wall alone. But if I didn't then my companions certainly did.

I had hoped Xenith and Homage would get along. But while Homage seemed to like the zebra, Xenith maintained a thankful but remote demeanor, even a touch frosty. It made the muffin-baking sessions in the kitchen awkward enough that I spent that time in the library, sitting at the table, researching and reading.

I had just finished a comparative reading of the library's unabridged version of *Applied Gemstones* with my own and was staring up at the huge painting of Splendid Valley when Xenith trotted in.

"Any luck finding your daughter?" I asked, trying to sound casual as I reminded her what an exceptional and unique tool Homage had put at the zebra's disposal.

"Yes and no," Xenith replied. "I have seen signs of her tribe. They have been living in the foothills beneath the Canterlot Ruins." She quickly added, "Safely outside the Cloud. But I have seen no sign of my daughter. Still, I thank you for this..."

"You should be thanking Homage."

"I have."

"Then why do you act so... cold around her?"

The zebra contemplated me. Judged me. Then finally said, "Did you not see the weapon she used? Your lover had been touched by the stars. She is cursed. No good can come of her."

Xenith walked out.

Well fuck. It would seem that even now there was no reasoning with a zebra when it came to that nonsense. I was probably lucky I didn't step in any Star-spawn blood or she might think I was cursed too.

"There's no such thing as curses!" I called out after her in frustration.

With a deep sigh, I buried my head in the scattering of books.

A few minutes later, Homage strode in, a puff of muffin batter on her nose. "Now then," she whispered huskily as she wrapped her forelegs around me. I flushed, feeling a pleasant, uncontrolled fluttering wash over my body like I'd fallen into a bed of butterflies. "Where was I?" That fluttering coalesced in my nether regions, becoming very warm and joyfully difficult to bear. "Twenty... three, wasn't it?"

Oh my Goddesses! She was actually counting!



The *Sky Bandit* cut through the air as we approached Splendid Valley. The sky was crisp and slightly stained with smoke. The valley below was a rocky wasteland completely barren of life.

Scattered small holes were the only warnings that the caves beneath were home to dozens, if not hundreds, of the most dangerous monsters in all of Equestria. Hellhounds.

I floated out my binoculars and stared towards the horizon. A sinkhole several miles across indicated where the balefire bomb had been detonated. The bomb had been snuck in underground and detonated. The surface above had collapsed into the toxin-filled tunnels below.

Over the last two hundred years, the sinkhole had weathered and eroded into a wide crater. It glowed faintly, even in the daylight. It was marked with hundreds of holes.

On the cusp of the crater, I saw the crumbled walls of the Maripony. Once a station for gem mining, the building had more in common with Shattered Hoof than any of the Ministry Hubs that I had seen. It could have passed for a fortress, but a devastated one. The explosion and sinkhole had torn away part of the foundation, and crumbled the rest.

About a third of the building had collapsed into the crater. The rest had suffered a mega-quake.

“Whoa nelly! If the Goddess done survived that, Ah reckon she prob’ly earned two-hundred years o’ livin’.”

“What is the plan, little one?” Xenith asked.

“Plan?” Velvet Remedy chuckled, “I think Littlepip’s just planning to go in there and shoot her.”

My friends had all spent the last couple days in much-needed recovery, as had I. Despite the mounting hopelessness of our mission, everyone was well rested and back in form. If I was going to fail and die, I was happy it would be like this. With these ponies.

No, wait. Zebras weren’t ponies. With these *people*.

“Well, then it’s a darn good thing Ah sold all those guns an’ bought us plenty o’ ammo. Even managed t’ get some enchanted ones for Li’l Macintosh. Don’t know if they’re enchanted wi’ Goddess-slayin’, but we c’n hope.”

I checked my PipBuck and brought up my Eyes-Forward Sparkle. I checked the date and time. “Ditzzy Doo should be getting her muffins about now.” I smiled to Xenith. “Thanks for your help with that. I’m sure she’ll love them.”

It struck me that when Xenith and I had walked across the moat and outside The Wall, I had been in the Equestrian Wasteland for just over five weeks. Now it was nearly six. Six weeks from apprentice PipBuck Technician to would-be deity-slayer.

“My life is surreal.”

Velvet Remedy leaned close. “So, how high did you get to?”

I blushed hotly and buried my face in my forearms.

“Look sharp,” Calamity called out. “Incoming at high eight!”

My head shot up. I pulled up the binoculars again. Five glowing orbs, alicorn shields, were heading towards us from Maripony.

“Dammit, Ah shoulda worn that damn Enclave gear after all,” Calamity cursed. “Li’lpip, reassemble Spitfire’s Thunder. We’re in for a bumpy ride!”

I levitated the magically-augmented anti-machine rifle from Calamity’s holster and began putting it together.

Four midnight-blue alicorns suddenly appeared, flanking us.

“The stars curse me to a thousand rapes by the horn of Nightmare Moon,” Xenith whispered next to me, shocking me nearly as much as the alicorn’s arrival.

“You’ve been around Littlepip too long,” Velvet suggested, floating out her shotgun. The alicorns were already casting their shields.

{{WELCOME TO THE HOME OF THE GODDESS!}}

The voice boomed in my head, reverberating with its own echoes.

“Oh...” Velvet moaned, wavering. “This is not good.”

{{PUT AWAY YOUR PUNY WEAPONS AND COME! YOU ARE MY GUESTS! FOR I, THE GODDESS, HAVE NOTHING TO FEAR FROM YOU!}}

Oh no. Nonononono!

“Iffin she ain’t got nothin’ t’ fear from us, why the show? Hell, why not jus’ send us packin’?”

Xenith looked between the three of us. “What are you speaking of?”

But I knew. Oh by the Goddesses -- the real ones -- I knew.

Heavily, I said, “Because she wants us to do something for her.”



We were guided into the crumbling building. As we landed, we saw at least three dozen more alicorns standing about the crumbling ruins. In a single movement, in perfect unity, they all turned their heads to look at us.

It was the unparalleled creepiest thing in the history of *ever*.

Escorted through the doors by the four midnight-blue alicorns. They had dropped their shields. Honestly, they didn't need them. We were totally outmatched.

I was surprised when the alicorns brought us to what looked like a security substation within the building. This room seemed largely undamaged, save by time. The rest of the rooms and hallways we had seen were broken and crumbling, fragmented by the subterranean blast and eroded by centuries and weather. This small room was almost... intact.

There was no Goddess here. There was nothing here but some chairs, a bank of four dusty monitors and a microphone, a filing cabinet and a few ridiculously pristine coffee cups. The area above the monitors was glass, but the long window looked out at nothing but a metal wall inches away. The opposite wall held a recessed door. There were odd grooves on the wall.

"Ah reckon this is our cell," Calamity said. If so, it would be stifling. And cramped, if any of the alicorns tried to stay in here with us.

{{WE WILL TALK! BUT FIRST, THE GODDESS WISHES YOU TO SEE! TO UNDERSTAND, AND MARVEL!}}

The voice of the Goddess didn't merely reverberate, I realized. It *pre*-reverberated. Like there were dozens of smaller, weaker voices inside that voice, all trying to say the same thing at the same time, and not quite succeeding. The voice of the Goddess was a chorus.

"Understand what?" Velvet Remedy asked. Xenith looked at her, confused.

{{THE GODDESS!!!}}

The security monitors flickered to life under the dust. One of them displayed colorful ponies in lab coats milling about a much bigger version of this room, full of monitors and maneframes and banks of blinking lights. "*Ready when you are,*" a chartreuse pony with a cutie

mark of a flask filled with bubbling green liquid said, glancing up at us through the monitor.

“These images are of the far past,” Xenith intoned.

The second monitor looked down on a vast factory floor. The factory was filled with six huge, interconnected vats full of churning luminescent stews that rippled with lavender and green beneath glass coverings, the light casting colored shadows over everything. Arcane apparati hung down from the ceiling. Catwalks ringed the vats and another hung suspended from the ceiling above and between them, stopping midway across the room with some manner of control panel at the end.

“Again with the catwalks-over-factory-floors aesthetic of wartime Equestria,” I grouched.

“Is that...?” Velvet Remedy began to ask as a single pony appeared on the third monitor. An elderly lavender pony with grey streaking her purple mane. The room behind her was about the size of this one, filled with identical monitoring equipment. But where we saw only a metal wall, her picture window looked out onto the factory floor in monitor two.

“Twilight Sparkle,” I nodded.

“uh, yer goddess-ness,” Calamity said to the air, tapping on the last monitor. “Ah hope yer aware this one is broken?” The monitor had a large crack running through it and was displaying only rainbow splotches.

{{BROKEN? WHAT? OF COURSE I AM! THE GODDESS KNOWS ALL!}}

The little sub-voices continued to telepathically echo the last two words for several seconds after the Goddess had “spoken”.

“Lovely,” Velvet Remedy said snidely.

“Ready to begin pony testing,” Twilight Sparkle said, sounding just a hint nervous. *“Send her in.”*

"Sending in Test Subject One," the pony on monitor one announced.

"Don't call her that!" Twilight warned. She trotted over to look out the window, floating a coffee cup filled with what looked like tea to her lips, sipping primly. She set the cup aside and leaned her muzzle over a microphone. On monitor two, a lovely blue unicorn with a mane that had aged to a luxurious silver slowly made her way out onto the suspended catwalk.

She turned and looked up to the window. *"Twilight Sparkle, I just wanted to thank you again for giving me this opportunity. It means so much to me."*

"You're welcome, Trixie," Twilight Sparkle said kindly. The name rang a bell, but it took a moment to place it. Trixie: the mare from the cottage outside Fetlock. She went to Manehattan for a meeting with Twilight Sparkle and never returned.

The lavender pony hit a button with her hoof and an ornate golden cup rose out of the console at the end of the walkway. Purple and green liquid rose through tubes running from the vats to the apparatus above. Then a thin stream poured into the cup.

Trixie walked across the platform and sniffed at the cup. *"Is that roses?"*

Twilight chuckled softly. *"Yes. I added the scent. Hopefully, it will taste like roses too."*

"Really?" Trixie looked up towards Twilight Sparkle with astonishment.

Twilight's ears drooped. *"Unfortunately, probably not."* She hesitated. *"Trixie, you know you don't have to do this..."*

"Oh, I want to," the blue unicorn insisted. *"I want to help. And... this will make me more powerful? Like Luna and Celestia?"*

"Well, not that powerful. But more powerful, yes."

"Like you then?"

Twilight Sparkle looked uncomfortable. *"We're hoping for more than that."*

“And... it’s safe, right?”

“Absolutely,” Twilight Sparkle assured the blue unicorn on the catwalk below her. *“All the tests have come back looking spectacular. The only variable is, well, dosage. And for that we need to do testing with pony volunteers like you. With luck, we’ll get it right the first time, and you’ll be the first new alicorn since Luna was born.”*

The unicorn at the end of the catwalk nodded. And mumbled something that sounded like “great and powerful smells like roses”, then looked up with wide eyes. *“You sure I shouldn’t start with a little more, then?”*

Twilight Sparkle stifled a chuckle. *“No, I-“*

On the monitors, everything happened at once.

From the broken one, I could hear a terrible roar and the rainbow sprays turned to a flaring light.

On the other three, the world shook.

On the first, chunks of ceiling came down, some killing ponies outright, one blocking the door. A maneframe toppled in a spray of sparks.

On monitor two, the entire factory floor shook. I could hear the loud twangs as several of the cables holding the suspended platform snapped out of the ceiling. Sections of catwalk fell. Two of the vats were ruptured as a third of the ceiling came down, spilling their glowing contents onto the factory floor. I could see automatic systems severing and sealing the connections with the other vats. Trixie cried out as half the cables holding up her section of the catwalk gave way, turning it into a freely-swinging platform.

On the third monitor, alarms were blaring: *“Radiation surge detected!” “Seismic activity detected!” “Toxic contamination warning!” “Safe rooms sealing!”*

"No!" shouted Twilight Sparkle as a huge armored plate slid down over the door to her room. She turned to the window as massive armored shutters swung down from above.

"TRIXIE!"

On monitor two, Trixie's platform tipped, swinging in a low arc. The unicorn slid down the inclined surface, trying to find purchase, as the lower end of the catwalk segment impacted the glass roof of one of the vats, shattering it. The blue unicorn plunged into the vat.

All the monitors flickered and went dead.

The four of us stood in the security room, shaken, our eyes peeling away from the monitors to look at each other.

Monitor three flickered back on.

"Dear anypony. This is the Mare of the Ministry of Magic, Twilight Sparkle," a weakened Twilight said. "It's been two days now since the megaspell strike on Maripony. I can only assume by the lack of rescue that this was not an isolated strike."

"I'm leaving this record in case somepony does come. I'm trapped in Safe Room Three on the Maripony Vats Level."

The elderly lavender pony addressed the camera.

"The safeguards that should allow me to open it aren't working; and unfortunately for me, I designed these rooms to withstand a nearby megaspell strike, so the room is more than a match for my own magic."

Calamity, Velvet Remedy, Xenith and I watched the monitor, realizing we were watching Twilight Sparkle's goodbye letter. My vision began to blur wetly. I tried to force myself not to cry. I'd cried too much this week already. But the tears rolled down my cheeks anyway.

"I'm out of food, and the safe room's water talisman seems to have been corrupted."

She gave a wry smile as she said,

"At least, I'm fairly confident that pure water isn't supposed to be that color. I'm also beginning to suffer hallucinations. I think that I'm hearing the screams of the ponies in Maripony, like something horrible is happening to them. But I know that's impossible. These walls are soundproof.

"I keep hearing Trixie's voice in my head, screaming. Sometimes, it gets so bad..."

The lavender pony waved it off.

"Not important. What's important is that we tried. We tried, and we came so very close. Another week, maybe even just a few more days, and the work we did here would have not only changed the war, I believe we could have forced a peaceful resolution.

"What's important now is that we still have one more chance. Find Spike. He's my most loyal assistant... my number one assistant. ...Find him..."

Twilight Sparkle seemed to fall to sleep. The Monitor flickered out again.

"Spike?" Xenith asked.

The monitor burst back to life. Twilight Sparkle's haggard face was pressed close to the camera. She looked atrophied, crazy.

"Something's going on here. I... I don't know what. But it's bad. If you're in Maripony, get out. Get out while you can and drop a zebra missile on this place..."

Suddenly, there was a loud, metallic grinding from the speaker below monitor two. On the monitor, we watched as the metal plate over the door lifted up, the metal shutters over the windows lifted.

Monitor two sprang to life. The vats room was a disaster. The floor was waist thick in mixed fluids. Something swam in the water. No, not swam... the body of a light red unicorn pony was being dragged through the liquid by a telekinetic tendril. We watched as the tendril hauled the body out of the pool and up the side of one of the vats. A moment later, the body disappeared over the lip and into the vat.

Streaks of blood rose up several of the vats.

On monitor three, Twilight Sparkle was crawling towards the door, too weak from hunger and dehydration to stand. Unable to stand, she couldn't see what was just outside her window.

Light flared in the room. A blue light that took the form of Trixie. The blue unicorn stood, shimmering, in front of Twilight Sparkle. From this angle, we could clearly make out her face as she spoke to the lavender unicorn who once bore the Element of Magic. The Trixie illusion spoke, but no words came out.

"I'm sorry, Trixie," Twilight Sparkle whimpered.

As the Trixie illusion's mouth continued to move, Xenith pushed past me and leaned close. Our zebra began to read the movement of the illusion's mouth.

"...to be sorry for. Your experiment worked, after all. It worked more wonderfully than we ever dreamed it would. Don't be sorry. Be happy. We're going to live forever, you in I."

I felt a deep, dark chill and prayed that Xenith had mistranslated that.

"What?" asked a startled Twilight.

"I'm sorry it took so long for me to be strong enough to save you, Twilight Sparkle."

Velvet Remedy gasped as light blue tendrils of telekinetic energy snaked into the room and wrapped around each of Twilight's hooves.

"No!" Twilight Sparkle struggled with more strength than should have been possible.

"It's time to save you now, Twilight Sparkle," Xenith continued to speak for illusion-Trixie. "We're going to be very close now, you and I."

"Oh Goddesses," Velvet moaned and buried her face in Calamity's mane as the tendrils slowly dragged Twilight Sparkle, kicking and screaming, towards one of the vats.

I was shaking. I wanted -- so desperately wanted -- to turn away. But I couldn't.

Twilight Sparkle let out a last cry as she was dragged over the lip of the farthest vat. One word, a name I think, but I couldn't make out what it was.

The two monitors went blank. And this time, they stayed that way.



Oh Goddesses! oh Goddesses! oh Goddesses!

I felt utterly numb with horror. Velvet Remedy was crying. Calamity looked grimmer than ever.

The whole room shook, the air filling with the squeal of grinding metal, as the shutters over our own window lifted up.

We stared out over the vats. This wasn't just a similar room. It was the *same* room.

Centuries had not been kind to the room beyond. Another third of the ceiling had collapsed, as had two of the vats. The pool on the floor had turned to sludge covered with a sickly layer of dust and floating debris.

Swirls of colored light seeped up from the two still-intact vats. They danced in the air, exploding like fireworks. In my head, I heard the echoes of half-remembered fanfare, but not from any memory of my own.

{{THE GREAT AND POWERFUL GODDESS WELCOMES YOU!}}

"Okay, how in tarnation do we kill *that*?"

"Calamity!" I hissed.

More swirls of light lifted from the vats. They shimmered, merging together, until the giant face of Trixie loomed above us. But not just Trixie, as little motes of other ponies' faces occasionally burst to the

surface like zits, crawling along the head and mane of Trixie before sinking back.

{{FEAR NOT! FOR I, THE GODDESS, ALREADY KNOW WHY YOU HAVE COME! RED EYE, THAT TREACHEROUS PONY, DESIRES MY END. BUT THE GODDESS IS NOT WORRIED, FOR THE GODDESS IS GREAT AND POWERFUL AND RED EYE IS NOT!...}}

Somehow, through the sheer soul-breaking horror of what I was seeing and what I had just witnessed, the little pony in my head stomped for me to pay attention. She did not like where this was heading.

“Fear not,” Xenith began, “For I, the goddess, already...”

“You can stop that now,” Velvet Remedy hissed.

{{...YET.}}

I squeaked. Then fought to find my voice. “Red Eye has seen these recordings, hasn’t he.”

{{IT MATTERS NOT THAT HE HAS SEEN THEM.}}

That would be a yes.

{{IT MATTERS THAT HE HAS DISOBEYED ME AND PLOTTED AGAINST ME! IT MATTERS THAT HE HAS BEEN WITHHOLDING FROM ME! RED EYE HAS NOT SENT ME A UNICORN IN OVER A YEAR AND THE GODDESS BELIEVES HE WILL SOON STAND IN THE WAY OF MY UNITY ALTOGETHER!}}

“And... let me guess,” I prodded. “You need us to kill Red Eye for you?” Please let it not be something as stupid as that. There wouldn’t be enough facehoofs in the world.

The illusionary fireworks changed. A spinning pinwheel of crimson flame swirled behind the floating glower of the Goddess, over-signaling her displeasure.

“Ugh,” Velvet Remedy whispered, cringing back. “Even for a real Goddess, this would be a bit much.” She neighed. “Honestly, if we

must have an eldritch-nightmare-of-arcane-science ‘Goddess’, does she have to be a freaky-carnival-sideshow goddess too?”

{{DO NOT BE ABSURD! THE GODDESS CAN SLAY HIM AT ANY TIME I CHOOSE! BUT...}}

And here it comes.

{{IT IS POSSIBLE THAT HE HAS DISCOVERED SOMETHING THAT MAY BE A THREAT TO THE NEW, GLORIOUS WORLD WE ARE BUILDING! AND BEFORE THE GODDESS DESTROYS HIM, WE... I... MUST KNOW WHAT THAT IS!}}

Well. Okay. That makes much more sense.

“Says the Goddess who claimed to ‘know all’ not twenty minutes ago,” Velvet Remedy muttered.

Calamity nudged her with a wing. “Wouldja kindly not go upsetting the telepathic psycho-gestalt?”

“And why us?”

{{BECAUSE THE SECRET THAT RED EYE SEEKS, THE SECRET HIDDEN EVEN FROM THE GREAT AND POWERFUL GODDESS, IS LOCKED AWAY INSIDE A WAREHOUSE ON MINISTRY WALK IN CANTERLOT!...}}

Oh! So that’s the place Red Eye is trying to get into. I remembered a conversation with Watcher:

Yes, one of Equestria’s heroes did decide that her Ministry would be the Ministry of Awesome. They even built a Ministry Headquarters for it on Ministry Walk... After a few years, Luna ordered it crated up, and they began using the M.Aw HQ for storage.

{{...WITH CONTROLS WHICH CAN ONLY BE OPERATED BY A PEGASUS...}}

Clever. So, the Goddess didn’t actually need me. She needed Calamity. I wondered how Red Eye was planning to get past that.

{{...AND BEYOND A SHIELD WHICH ONLY A MINISTRY MARE CAN STEP THROUGH!}}

And that would be the Bypass that Red Eye was trying to get through. But why did...?

Oh! Of course. *Close family or direct descendants thereof.* The Goddess needed Velvet Remedy as well. Once again, I was the one just clearing the way.

{{IN ADDITION, THERE IS ONE THING REMAINING THAT PREVENTS UNITY. A... FLAW IN THE PROCESS THAT MUST BE CORRECTED BEFORE IT CAN BE BROUGHT TO EVERY PONY IN THIS BLIGHTED LAND!}}

“Y’know, now that Ah’ve seen what this Unity is all about, Ah’m fine with that.”

{{THAT IS BECAUSE YOU ARE ONLY A PONY! YOUR KIND CANNOT THRIVE IN THIS WORLD ANY LONGER! YOU MERELY SURVIVE! AND BARELY AT THAT! BUT MY CHILDREN CAN THRIVE! MY CHILDREN ARE MORE POWERFUL! MORE CAPABLE OF FACING THE MUTATED DANGERS OF THIS WORLD! THE VERY POISONS WHICH KILL YOU MAKE MY CHILDREN STRONGER!}}

“Your children can’t even breed,” I pointed out. “Every single alicorn I have seen is a mare. You have no stallions. Now I’ll agree that can be *fun*; but when it comes to ‘thriving’, that’s a doozy of a problem!”

The main voice of the Goddess was silent a moment. Flares and fireworks continued to explode behind her glowing, faces-covered face. They whispered incoherently in my mind, giving me a headache.

{{LIKE THE GODDESS SAID, A FLAW! BUT ONE WHICH CAN BE CORRECTED WITH THE RIGHT MAGIC!}}

“Let me guess. You want Rarity’s little black book.” The Goddess did need me after all. She needed somepony who could pick a lock.



As our alicorn escorts marched us back to the *Sky Bandit*, all my friends were wondering the same thing I was: what now?

“Can you all read lips?” Xenith asked. Okay, so not all my friends were wondering the same thing.

Red Eye still had me over a barrel. But...

I stopped like I'd been hit in the face with a bale of hay. I lost all feeling in my hooves as one more horrid realization flooded through me.

“Li'l pip?” Calamity asked. Something in my expression was making him look very worried.

“She said... Red Eye hadn't sent her any unicorns in over a year.” My mind flashed back to experiences with slavers. And the little hints that Red Eye, or at least Stern, was particularly interested in unicorns.

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

If it wasn't a unicorn, I'd say toss it back in the lake.

“But if Red Eye wasn't sending unicorns to the Goddess...” I said darkly, “Then he's keeping them for himself.”

I turned and looked to the others in desperation. “Red Eye talked about controlling the weather, moving the sun and the moon. He couldn't do that if he just became an alicorn. But he's not aiming to become an alicorn. He's aiming to become one of... of...” I pointed a hoof back at Maripony. “*That!*”

The only way he could possibly hope to get that kind of power was to duplicate what happened to Trixie. And he could. He'd seen the videos. And based on his claim that the fortress in the Everfree Forest was designed as a new home for the Goddess, he was building a duplicate of the Maripony vats at the Cathedral.

He wasn't sending the Goddess any unicorns because unicorns have the strongest magic of all ponies and *he was keeping them to consume himself!*

Footnote: Level Up.

Maximum Level

Skills Note: Stealth has reached 100%

New Perk: Celestia Tier Telekinetics - The things you can do with your levitation magic are the feats of legend. You can effectively fly at the skill level of a novice pegasus. Who knows, maybe you could even move the sun?

