

Fallout Equestria: Rolling Bones Leaving Home

"I am no Hero... Heroes never come home."

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

The high pitched screeching was like a scalpel digging into the side of my brain. My ears instinctively folded back as I threw my left fore-hoof over my ears and hugged it tight against my head.

BEEEP!

Screaming, I recoiled from the blaring sound inches from my ear and almost fell out of the cot. The PipBuck's EFS activated with the opening of my eyes, bringing up the numerous bits of information that I had learned to ignore.

BEEP!

Lifting the offending device to my face, I tried to recall how to turn off the insanity inducing noise emanating from it. I mashed at the top mounted buttons with my feathers and right hoof in frustration and was rewarded moments later with sweet, sweet silence. I blinked and rubbed the sleep from my eyes, staring at the glowing blue screen as my vision slowly recovered.

'If you're reading this you're already late, Love.'

I blinked a few more times at the words printed across the screen as my sleep addled brain slowly began to pick up speed. "Aww... Pony feathers!"

Jumping out of bed, I managed to land on three of four hooves, the fourth, being numb, collapsed under my weight.

Dirt still tastes bad. Laying on my side I glared at the offending leg and began beating it against the ground in a vain attempt to get the blood flow to return quicker. The numb limb proved more stubborn than myself. Giving up, I forced myself to stand, balancing on three hooves.

I hobbled across the tent, intending on throwing my saddlebags together and leaving with all due haste. Nosing the flap open, I was surprised to find them fully packed and ready to go. A smile crept across my face. I wasn't sure just what I'd done in life to deserve somepony like Gray, but it must've been something good. When this was all over I was going to have to do something special to make up for everything.

Snagging the strap, I tossed the saddlebags over my shoulder and began struggling to work the buckle. Even with the added utility of wings it was a pain to put the thing on; I really don't know how earth ponies manage.

With my saddlebags strapped to my sides containing little more than the pistol, holster, and gem packs given to me by Tracker, what caps I had to my name, and a few personal medical supplies, I was ready to go. I launched myself out of the tent and took off towards the awaiting wagon train.

'Launched' may be too strong of a word; fluttered lazily might be more accurate. I barely moved at a walking pace, my hooves almost dragging along the ground. My eyes kept trying to close and I had to put most of my concentration to keeping my eyes open at all. It wasn't until I almost slammed into somepony that enough adrenaline shot through my system to really wake me up and convince me that it would be a good idea to fly above the tents.

The nearer I got to the large clearing at the front of the compound the more ponies I saw. The activity level was staggering by the time I landed at the edge of the clearing. Ponies were cantering all over the place, dodging around each other as they went about their duties.

The activity was centered around the three converted train cars that acted as wagons for the caravan. Each of these steel behemoths were mounted on a four axle undercarriage to support the tonnage that they would be carrying. All three doors were open on each, two large, sliding side doors and the smaller back door, with ponies carrying in crates of supplies.

Cargo, a unicorn, stood in the epicenter of a large collection of containers at varying stages of fullness. Four different clipboards floated around her orange and purple ponytail as she ordered the ponies around her. The flustered unicorn spoke in short clipped phrases, sending the other ponies scurrying to see that her orders were carried out.

Once a box was filled, Cargo removed a piece of paper from one of the clipboards, attaching it to the box. Sealed and marked, they were picked up by a group of earth ponies and loaded onto one of the three wagons being prepped for departure. At the back of each of these wagons was another unicorn with her own clipboard marking down which boxes were being loaded on to their wagon. The Watchers were nothing if not organized.

Nearer the gates were the two massive pump wagons. Unlike the three standard wagons, these were custom built by The Watchers. Made almost entirely from copper, these wagons were half-again as tall as the other wagons while being about a third shorter. They sat on four steel axles to support the heavy load of copper and water. The giant, copper water tanks took up almost the entire length of the wagon, with the back section being comprised of a complicated pumping mechanism and hose that allowed the tanks to be refilled and drained with ease.

Though we would be dragging three wagons full of supplies with us, these pump wagons were the main purpose of the caravan. Unlike most of the Wasteland Dwe had access to an ample supply of fresh, clean water. The Watchers felt that the most important thing they could do was get this water out to any settlement that lacked such access. A pump wagon left almost every other week to one settlement or another.

I slid back into the shadows between the tents to avoid Cargo's eye. I had no desire to be drafted into manual labor this early in the morning... or anytime for that matter. My eyes scanned the cluttered clearing, looking for a better place to hide until it was time to leave.

To my surprise I spotted Hurdles in the process of hitching himself up to the first water wagon in the train. That he was up this early, much less active, annoyed me somewhat considering how drunk he had been the night before. If there had been a lantern above my head, it would have lit up with the thought that popped into my head. My eyes narrowed, watching him attach himself to the wagon, soon he would be stuck and I would be able to talk to him without having to worry about losing another tooth.

The thought caused my tongue to poke at the space in between my teeth and wince at the slight pain. I really needed to do something about that.

I crouched down, prepared to spring at my friend.

"Lucky Sevens?"

I cringed. 'Damn.'

A teal unicorn I didn't recognize trotted toward me, his lips a hard line under a grey streaked orange and yellow mane. "You're late."

I turned back to Hurdles. "Yeah, yeah, I'll be right there, I just need to talk to my friend over there," I motioned with my wing toward the wagons, "it'll only take a moment."

"I don't have time for your personal problems," he said, closing the distance. "We needed to get you outfitted and briefed, now."

I ignored him, springing toward Hurdles. To my great surprise I completely failed to move. A foreleg gripping my neck held me in place. My attempts at pulling away were useless, the unicorn was surprisingly strong and soon I was being dragged back.

Changing tactics, I decided that seeing his face dangling a few meters above the ground would be priceless.

I managed to get all of a hoof off the ground before everything backfired. Instead of rising into

the air, the world tilted and an odd angle. Pain erupted from the back of my head and everything went blurry for a second.

I blinked to clear my vision to find nothing but cloudy skies in sight.

“Are you done wasting my time?”

I had to fight the very persuasive voice in my head telling me to take a nap. “Uhm... yeah.”

I tried to stand, only for a hoof push me back to the dirt. The unicorn leaned forward bringing his face into my field of view, his short cut mane looked more like flames than hair despite the grey streaks. “You just earned a spot on my shit list, Flybuck. That means, until I tell you otherwise, you will only speak when spoken to and the last word out of your mouth had better be ‘Sir’. Do I make myself clear?”

I smirked at this and opened my mouth to make a snide comment. My smile wilted under his glare and the words died, unspoken on my tongue. “Y-yes, sir?”

The pressure lifted from my chest as he stepped back. “Now get to your hooves. We leave in less than an hour and I will not be late because of you.”

With nothing holding me down, I rolled straight to my hooves--which was rather stupid, all things considered. The sudden change in elevation and orientation compounded with the pounding at the back of my head. I think I blacked out for a moment.

The unicorn tapped my cheek with a hoof, bringing me back. A look of concern passed from his features as quickly as I noticed it, replaced by what I assumed to be a perpetual frown. He turned away and began walking toward the back of clearing, his magic tugging on my shoulders and urging me to follow.

I complied without protest, not that I didn’t have words I really wanted to say, but I was too busy trying to focus to say anything. Just to recap: missing tooth, little sleep, a possible concussion, my two best friends hating me, and now I was going to be working for, or with--I wasn’t sure which--this hard-flank for the next four months... I’ve always preferred firm to hard. Things just weren’t going my way.

I took the opportunity to size him up. Older than I preferred, he had a certain air of command that even I couldn’t deny was more than a little sexy. He was smaller than most stallions, though his muscles were clearly visible through his coat as he walked. The Cutie Mark on his flank looked like the radio tower that broadcast Mr. New Hayges’ radio show with curved lines radiating from the sphere at the top.

We cleared the last of the ponies working to load the wagons and stood in front of a tent that I

was almost positive hadn't been there the night before. It was large, not massive like the mess tent, but large nonetheless. From the outside it looked to be made out of rock instead of canvas. Viewed from a distance it could very easily be mistaken for a large boulder or just missed completely in the right environment.

The unicorn held the flap open and motioned me to enter. All activity stopped the moment I stepped inside and I became the center of attention. Boxes and lockers lined the canvas walls, all full to bursting with guns, armor, and ammunition. A few knee high, folding benches were being used to stage gear in the center. Five ponies in different stages of armed and armored watched me.

Never before had I ever been more aware of my status as a non predatory species.

Sitting on one of the benches directly in front of me was a red coated unicorn mare. Blue eyes traveled up and down my sides in the same way Tracker taught me to scrutinize a gecko for skinning.

My wings fluffed and resettled against my sides and I forced a smile to my lips. Having confidence wasn't as important as being able to fake it.

Hooves pressed into my flanks and shoved me out of the way. Stumbling forward I only managed to stop a scant inch away from the mare. Our eyes locked onto each other's. A breath caught in my throat at the myriad of scars crisscrossing under the fur of her face that I hadn't noticed before.

I tried to recover, holding out a hoof. "Hehe... hi, I'm Sevens."

She looked down at my proffered hoof, then back at me. The look in her icy blue eyes could've hammered nails into a coffin.

She snorted, the warm moist air from her nose washing over my face. A blue aura surrounded her horn and she went back to adjusting the red painted combat barding that covered most of her body.

Freed from her gaze I decided that this was not a place I wanted to be and took a step back, turning to the entrance. Unfortunately, my escape route was blocked by the teal unicorn. Standing opposite of him was an unarmored earth pony that stood almost as tall as Hurdles, making him tower over the unicorn. Brown described him completely, his coat, mane, tail, and eyes were all varying shades of the color. His flank was the only place with color, a large, green grenade missing the pin and spoon.

With one escape path blocked I began looking for a second, only for my eyes to land on Her. She looked... odd, in a way that I couldn't place at first. My curiosity overwhelmed my sense of

self preservation, and without really thinking, I stepped around the red mare and the benches. Everypony ignored me as I passed, too busy with their own tasks and preparations. I was standing right beside her before I realized what was wrong with her, my eyes growing three sizes.

I faltered. All my questions tried to come out at the same time resulting in an unintelligible grunt.

The unicorn mare looked up from the disassembled rifle at her hooves. "I'm sorry, I didn't quite catch that."

I tried again. "T-t-t?"

"Heeheehee. Come on, you can say it."

"Two? Two heads... you have two heads."

"Goddesses, Oracle, where do you find these mental rejects?" a deeper male voice asked from ground level.

"Don't mind him, he's always grumpy in the mornings, well all the time really. Heehee, hi, my name's Locke and that lump on my other shoulder there is Stock. It's nice to meet you..." her voice trailed off expectantly.

"Uhm..." I fumble still trying to process the two tone pony, "Se- Sevens, L- Lucky Sevens."

She smiled warmly for a moment until Stock looked up from the bolt he was wiping down with a wing. "In most places it's considered rude to stare." His glare did nothing to improve my ability to speak and my mouth began to move up and down with no words making it out.

The mare cocked her head to the side. "Is there something we can help you with?"

I managed to find a piece of my voice. "H- how..."

"Oh, of course. Stock, I had the last one, so it's your turn now."

Her horn flared to life and pulled the bolt and rag away from the other in a green glow and continued wiping it down. Stock grumbled as he looked over his sister's neck to glare at me. "We are twins. Yes, we were born this way. No, it wasn't radiation. Yes, life is difficult with two heads. The answers to any other questions you may have is 'No'."

I continued to stare, trying to take in everything I could. Having lived with the Watchers most of my life I was taught a great deal about pony anatomy. I could name every bone, muscle group, and, had I the slightest artistic ability, I could draw the entire circulatory system. This was

beyond anything I had ever seen. Two ponies literally joined together in a single body. And they were different genders! And one was a pegasus and the other a unicorn!

Taking a deep breath, I rallied. With bended knee and a flourish of wings I bowed to the mare, "I, Ms. Locke, am Lucky Sevens, medical pony extraordinaire. And in the name of science and medicine, I humbly ask that you allow me to perform a cursory physical examination of yourself." Head still bowed, I looked up through my eyelashes.

Taken slightly aback, Locke blinked at me a few times while Stock's confusion broke through his grimace. They turned to each other, and for the life of me I swear they held an entire conversation with just that look. Turning back, Locke gave me a small smile with a hint of a blush. "Um... yes, I think that would be... okay"

"But no funny business!" grumbled the the stallion.

With consent obtained, my uncertainty was replaced by eager curiosity. I stepped closer and began to examine the ponies. With hoof and wing, I poked and prodded at them while unconsciously muttering out loud as though to a note taking assistant. Locke giggled as I lifted her foreleg and ran my wing across her chest, "... rib cage is complete... two sternums, separated by four centimeters of partially formed ribs. Aligned improperly, almost forms third sternum..." I felt the odd ridges where the bones came together, "that is less than ideal."

Ducking under her leg I placed my ear to her chest. Listening intently, I found exactly what I had hoped.

THUMPthumpTHUMPthumpTHUMPthump

"Two heart beats!" I exclaim and reach a wing under her and press it against Stock's side of their shared chest, "Beating a counter rhythm?" I pause listening to the soothing bass line.

THUMPthumpTHUMPthumpTHUMPthump

"Can you take a deep breath for me?" Locke obliged and inhaled deeply causing her chest to expand. Stock's chest, however, continued its steady, if agitated, breathing. "Two lungs controlled individually... able to provide constant flow of oxygen, possibility of greater stamina dependent on size."

I moved out from under them and around her side. Lifting into the air I hovered just high enough to examine their shared spine. Placing a hoof at the base of her neck, I traced it to the point of convergence. "Spinal column intersects at the the last rib." I took a moment to admire their coat. The transition between light and dark blue was blurred until halfway down their body. From there the light blue pushed past the spine only stopping on her side of the rear leg.

I set down reached a hoof under her midsection poking at her stomach. "How are your teeth?" The mention of teeth brought my mind back to my own dental problem. My tongue poked the sore spot causing me to wince.

"My teeth?" she asked, shooting me a surprised and slightly offended look.

I nodded. "You had issues with overeating when you were younger, yes?" Her look was all the confirmation I needed. "You only have one stomach with two mouths. If the convergence were nearer to your neck it might not have been problem, but as it is you could both be eating at the same time and not realize you were full until it is too late." I think she made a reply, but I was too busy staring at the binoculars on her flank. I quickly made my way to the other flank to find what looked like a rifle scope. "You have two?"

"Are you daft?" Stock barked, without looking up from his weapon.

I was about to reply when I noticed Locke giving him a look. He shook his head a few times and ground his teeth. Locke smiled. "We ARE two separate ponies, of course we have different Cutie Marks."

I shrugged and went back to what I was doing. Very carefully I lifted the pink and purple tail. I couldn't stop myself, I had to know.

My mouth, as it is want to do, worked faster than my brain. "It's good to know who wears the reins in the family."

For future reference, never insult a pony while standing directly behind them within bucking distance.

++FoE:RB++

I didn't blame Stock, not really; it was my own stupid fault. Poking at the lump on my chest and wincing, I reminded myself that I still needed to talk to one of the doctors about my tooth. For something so obvious it had been slipping my mind constantly for the past few days. I didn't have time for that now, not because I was busy but because I was stuck sitting in the back corner of the Merces' impromptu armory until Oracle, the teal unicorn, got back.

As I waited, feeling not unlike a foal in time out, I took the time to study the ponies who were to be my new traveling companions for the next few months. Other than the twins and the *unsettling* red mare, there was the brown stallion that Oracle had spoken to and a zebra who hadn't given me a second glance.

I'll admit it, I ogled the zebra. I'd never seen one before and after that kick I was doing everything I could to avoid looking at Locke and Stock. There was an exoticness about him that I found oddly enchanting. His mane was split down the middle and splayed into two rows of spines running down his neck. His dock was far longer than a normal ponies, almost two hooves. He also seemed to have a strange glyph where his Cutie Mark should have been, three overlapping crescents. I wanted to ask him about it, but the words 'Sit Down and Shut Up' were still echoing in my head.

I watched in complete fascination as he dressed himself. He didn't wear armored barding like the others. Instead he was carefully wrapping himself in an odd looking gray, white, and black cloth. It looked more like a long rug than clothing to me. It wrapped around his flank in such a way as to leave his tail free while still appearing to be a dress. He pulled it around his midsection a few times before it reached his shoulders. There it split into two strips. With great care he tied each one at his shoulders before twisting the rest around his forelegs where it looped under his hoof.

The only other mare in the room, besides Locke, was the red unicorn. Her mane and tail were tied into tight blond braids that seemed to pull at her scalp and dock. An odd looking metal collar clasped around her neck was visible just over the plated barding she wore. A shiver traveled down my spine as I spied her Cutie Mark just before it was covered by the stiff armored plating. A large silver ring connected to winding golden chain that ended in a smaller silver ring. She saw me looking and gave me a smile that turned my stomach.

The brown earth stallion that had been talking to Oracle was strapping on the last of his metal barding. Thick plates covered his entire body, hiding everything from neck to flank. The entire set up must have weighed a ton. Then he picked up the battle saddle that had been on the floor in front of him. The simple contraption held a barrel and little else on one side, with a feed system that crossed his back to an ammo box on the other. I've seen bloatsprites that could fit down the barrel of that gun. With a flick of his neck and head it sailed through the air had landed heavily across his withers and flank. He bit down on a bolt on his chest and began twisting it.

A loud click sounded with each turn and pulled the saddle tighter until it locked into place over the barding. He began high stepping with each leg, rolling his shoulders, and twisting his back until he seemed satisfied with the fit. His right hind leg kicked the stirrup hanging behind it, bringing the ammo belt across his back and feeding it into the firing chamber of his weapon. I was amazed that he could stand, much less walk under all that weight.

The entrance flap swung open as Oracle and another unicorn stepped into the tent. Everyponys' attention shifted to the front, the brown pony even saluted. With a nod in my direction from Oracle the new pony made his way to me.

"Okay you bunch of layabouts, it's time to pack your shit and get situated. Let's go."
Saddlebags were thrown across backs and weapon lockers lofted into the air encased in the

magic of the unicorns present. The Mercs formed a surprisingly organized line as they exited the tent toward the waiting wagons.

“So you’re our new scout?” the mint green unicorn asked as he opened one of the few remaining hooflockers. He turned an appraising eye on me as his magic tugged my wing out to its full span. “Hmmm... what are you, about a six?”

I stared at him a little perplexed, folding my wing back to my side. “What do you mean ‘new scout’?”

“Hmm? Oh, our old scout, a griffin, got taken out during our last job. Incinerator, terrible way to go. Lasted three days too, almost thought he was going to pull through. We haven’t had time to find a suitable replacement. So, as part of the contract the Watchers signed, you’ll be working as our scout until our business is complete. Do you prefer light or heavy armor?” I tried to give him an incredulous look, but he didn’t notice or stop talking. “No, don’t answer that, stupid question for a pegasus.

“Hmmm... How about this one?” He pulled out an odd looking suit made out of a dark green, almost brown, scales. I’d never seen anything like it before. The different sections were held together with a large number of buckles and straps. “Let me just...” I felt a tug around my neck and looked down to see Rainbow Dash being lifted up in a light brown magic aura.

Everything else fell away as white hot rage boiled up behind my eyes. My ears folded back and a growl rumbled deep inside my throat. I glared at the unicorn, pulling my lips back to show my teeth. Wings flared out slicing the air and his eyes widened in equal parts shock and confusion. My legs compressed as I prepared to spring forward.

A metal circle pressed hard against my temple. My eyes caught sight of the shotgun with its barrel touching my head just at the edge of my vision. “Calm down there buck, we’re all friends here.” I didn’t move, rage screaming inside my head. Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew that this was wrong. I ignored it as I prepared to strike. The hammer clicked back. “You just simmer down now.” His voice was perfectly calm and steady, the moment of fear in his eyes all but gone. “I don’t want to have to clean your brains up today.” The voice of reason in my head managed to regain some control, my wings slowly sliding back to my sides. Ever so carefully, my legs straightened to a more relaxed position.

“Drop. Her,” I growled through grit teeth and barely contained rage.

There was a question in his unblinking eyes until they shifted to the figurine still held in his magic. The aura around her faded, dropping her back into place against my chest. All the anger and rage disappeared in a flash. My entire body slumped as my muscles went slack. A puff of dirt accompanied my haunches hitting the ground when my back legs gave out. I didn’t even care that the shotgun was still pressed against my head.

“Heheh... So, um, barding?” I tried with a nervous smile.

There is an awkward pause before he spoke. “Yeah...” he nodded slowly and moved the shotgun back to the rack it had been propped in, “barding.” The barding split apart in his magic and before I could protest it started flying around and attaching itself to me. I felt my saddlebags lifting off before a piece of the armor strapped itself across my back and flanks, the chest piece pressed up under my necklace and the two pieces were tied together. The rest were individual plates that attached around my legs but left my joints free and unhindered. The whole process took less than a minute and ended with the unicorn looking between the last shin guard and my pipbuck. With a shrug he tossed it back into the hooflocker.

“What is this?” I asked, moving around in a similar fashion to the other ponies I had been watching.

“It’s Radgator hide. Stops small arms fire.” Even in the short span that I had spent with this pony, I could tell that everything was not alright. “Gun?” I looked around expecting to see a weapon floating about. “Do you have a gun?” He asked again.

I nodded a little too enthusiastically given the recent event. It was as I reached into my saddlebags that were now on the ground that I noticed the shotgun still wrapped in his magic. Swallowing hard I moved slower and more deliberately.

I withdrew the magic pistol snug neatly in its holster. He forcibly removed it from between my teeth and slung it around my chest. I struggled for a minute to get Dash out from under it before he tightened the straps.

Now properly situated at my left shoulder he had me practice a half draw a few times, dropping it back into the holster each time. Satisfied with its placement and stability I turned my head back to the unicorn.

“Look I-,” but his tail disappeared outside the tent before I could finish.

++FoE:RB++

I exited the tent sporting my new armor. I had never been one to wear barding or saddles before, never saw the point. This felt right though. The fit was superb, almost as though it had been custom made just for me. Each section was separated just enough to prevent chafing while still providing as much coverage as possible. The chest and back seemed to be multiple individual scales, rather than slabs, and slid across each other without sound or resistance. It was more a second skin than a piece of clothing; the irony that it *had* been some creatures skin

was not lost on me.

Tightening the buckle of my saddlebags, I stepped out into the now mid morning overcast. With an experimental flap I lifted off the ground. I was happy, though at this point not surprised, to find that the weight didn't put any extra strain or restriction on my wings. I flitted about doing some low altitude maneuvers to test my weight balance, only to make myself dizzy and almost crash. After landing, and regaining my head, I moved a few things around in my bags to even out the weight better. Lifting off again I smiled in spite of everything. If you can't smile because you're happy then smile to confuse the other guy.

Oracle was standing behind the last wagon flanked by the red mare and zebra. The mare carried two long weapons strapped over her barding with the barrels poking out over her shoulders. Tied into the end of her tail was an odd looking black bar no more than a half hoof in length, but the way she kept flicking it prevented me from getting a good look.

The zebra, by contrast didn't seem to move in the slightest as he listened to Oracle. He was like a statue wrapped in cloth, and armed to the teeth. Two sword grips poked out of the cloth at the shoulder knots where he could easily draw them with hoof or teeth. It wasn't until I got closer that I noticed the myriad small 'T' shaped grips that poked out at every possible angle from his cloth wrapping, many of which he could never reach with his mouth. I barely noticed the two prong, white hook at the tip of his tail.

Oracle dismissed the two ponies at my approach. The unicorn simply left while the zebra responded with a bow of the head before moving off. Touching down next to Oracle, I noticed an odd lack of armor and armament on the teal unicorn. He wore no barding or battle saddle, the only weapon he carried seemed to be a pistol strapped to the side of his shoulder. Instead he wore an odd assortment of electronics across his flanks and back with wires running up through his mane and connected to a ring at the base of his horn.

"Come on, there are only a few more preparations to make before we depart." He turned and began walking and I was forced to either follow or be left behind. "Until we get clear of Dise there will be no need for you to take wing, so don't. I don't need to tell you how the Remnant react to unauthorized pegasi flying around their air space. For now I want you to stick with Spoon. As for the others..." he paused for a moment, "Locke is a good sort, but don't bother trying to make good with Stock, he'll come around in his own time. If you need anything fixed talk to Irons..."

I stopped listening, partially because I had no idea who he was talking about, but mostly because I saw something more interesting. Off to my right I spotted one of the few ponies needed to talk to before I left. Oracle continued blabbing on as I peeled off without so much as a 'hold on a sec'.

Nurse Gray had her back to me talking to some pony. I didn't exactly sneak up on her, but I also

didn't announce my presence. As I neared the pony she was talking to came into view: Echo. I groaned to myself and would have turned around, but he'd seen me and I wasn't about to give him the satisfaction.

He eyed me as I stopped just outside of Gray's field of view. Fortunately she didn't seem to notice and continued talking about the conservation of supplies and how to deal with ponies who hadn't heard of the Watchers. I blinked a few times as her words sank in.

"Oh, Tartarus no!" Echo smiled at my exclamation and Gray jolted in surprise, "it's bad enough that I have to go on this Celestia forsaken trip, but I am not putting up with this..." My hoof waved through the air as I failed to come up with a suitable adjective.

Gray recovered and shot me a frown. "Doctor Humors is sick and Echo is next on the list--"

"There has to be--"

"Lucky! I don't have time for this. Get your flank back over here!" The three of us turned to see Oracle stomping his way over.

Gray turned her glare back to me before shouting over my shoulder. "Five minutes!"

Without waiting for a response she bit down hard on my ear and pulled me away from the others.

"Ow ow ow ow ow ow ow ow ow..."

Once we were safely between some tents and out of earshot she let go and rounded on me. "What the hay is your problem?"

"Wha--"

"You think I don't know about your little spat with Echo?" She started pacing back and forth between the tents. "That I wouldn't try and get any other pony out there with you if I could?"

"But--"

"You really just don't think about other ponies do you? You just go do whatever you want and damn the rest of us. You aren't the only one with problems, Lucky! You aren't the only one with relationships that are falling apart!"

"I--"

"Do you think you're the only one here who isn't happy with this? Goddesses, I thought you

were smarter than that.” I dropped to my flanks and waited, I obviously wasn’t going to be getting a word in until she was done. “Do you realize how hard it has been for me these past few years? Waiting. Hoping. Then finally,” she neighed, tossing her mane in frustration, “now Aloe and Hurdles won’t talk to me, you’re leaving, and I am stuck here unable to do anything about... anything!”

I waited a few seconds to make sure she was done. “Can I talk now?”

Her lips pressed firmly against mine in answer. I almost fell back in shock at the sudden move, but her foreleg wrapped around the back of my head and held me in place. My mouth opened, in surprise as much as acceptance. Either the pressure on the back of my head or the sheer passion of the kiss, I’m not sure which, made my head spin. I was caught up in the moment and for as long as it lasted the rest of the world ceased to exist. I could feel the emotion driving it, making it mean so much more. We traded burdens there, I took up hers as she took up mine and somehow we both came out lighter than before.

“Y’all two need ta get a room.” And the moment shattered. We parted and she rested her head on my shoulder, both of us slightly out of breath. I looked around her mane at the old ghoul. I imagined that he was smirking, but it was hard to tell with the flesh hanging loosely from his face. “Don’ stop on my account.”

Gray stepped away, “I... I have to go...” She softly put a hoof to my cheek before lightly kissing my lips one more time. “Come back to me in one piece.”

I nodded slowly as she turned and walked away. I couldn’t take my eyes off of her until she turned the corner. I didn’t even notice Tracker stepping up next to me until he placed a hoof on my shoulder. “Yer one lucky stallion, Sevens.”

“Remind me to buck you between the legs next time I see you.”

“Ah don’ think i’d have the desired ‘ffect.”

“No, but it’d make me feel better.”

“Ha, that it would, that it would.” I was going to miss the old corpse. But as we sat there staring at the spot where Nurse Gray disappeared, neither of us said a word. I like to think that words simply weren’t necessary, but it’s more likely that neither of us knew what to say. I had no experience with goodbyes and, though he never talked about it, I knew that he had far too many.

The silence between us grew as it filled with all the unspoken words and emotions. I’d never really thought about it before, but the two of us made quite the pair. The two hundred year old ghoul who’d seen more and done more than most could dream of in their worst nightmares, with the scars of that life etched across his body for all to see, and the young stallion leaving home

for the first time, healthy and fit as the Wasteland allowed yet no less broken for the lack of scars. It was almost poetic in its own way. Fortunately, my inner poet never got the chance.

Oracle turned the corner. "Okay you two, time to break it up. We have- What the..." A look of nausea twisted his face.

Tracker smiled his admittedly disturbing, smile, "Ah guess its time for ya'll to be goin'. It won' be the same wi't out ya."

I pulled him into an embrace. "Take care of yourself you old corpse."

++FoE:RB++

The Watchers were a fairly welcoming bunch; half of what they did was helping the ponies that had been cast aside by the rest of society. I grew up surrounded by the idea that everypony deserved a chance, that anypony could change for the better. Hating another based solely on their appearance was anathema to me. So following Oracle as he spouted slur after slur against ghouls left me with the deep desire to kick his horn out his ass.

"I can't believe you touched that thing."

"HE is not a thing and HE has a name... sir."

"Does IT have a pulse?" I grit my teeth and tried to bore a hole through the back of his head with my eyes, "like I said, it." I bit my tongue and let it drop. If I was going to be working for this prick, I wouldn't be served by pissing him off.

We neared the back wagon that contained all the weapons, armor, and ammo that was being brought along. Once we reached the appropriate distance, Irons and the brown stallion both stood at attention and saluted. The zebra and blond unicorn seemed almost disinterested, paying more attention to everything else around them. Oracle ignored the gesture. "Irons, are we loaded and ready for departure?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Let the Watchers know we're ready."

"Yes, sir." Irons saluted once again before turning and marching off towards the front of the wagons.

"Cross," the commanding tone left his voice, " would you kindly head up front with Locke and

Stock?"

"Master." Cross replied uneasily before heading in the same direction as Irons.

"Spoon, you pulled the short straw."

The large stallion's face dropped. "But sir!"

"I don't want to hear it! I want the two of you on the left flank. Get to it."

"Yes, sir," he moaned before turning his attention to me. "Well, let's go, Colt. No point in hanging around back here." The large pony stepped up beside me and wrapped his hoof around my neck. "It's up to me to keep you alive for the rest of today. Do me a favor and don't make that difficult."

Spoon began pushing me along and I looked up at his face, hoping to see an indication that he was joking. I suddenly felt even less sure of my future. Craning my neck I saw Oracle speaking quietly with the zebra, a small object floating in the air in front of them.

"So what's your name, Colt?" I opened my mouth to answer. "Forget it. You'll get a nickname soon enough." I felt my cheeks heat up in anger, but he kept talking. "Has anypony told you what you will be doing? I thought not. Well, Colt, you'll be working as our new scout for the duration of this little expedition. Do you know what happened to our last scout?" I waited for him to continue, "I asked you a question, Colt."

I blinked up in surprise, "I... but..."

"He speaks. Does he also answer questions?"

I ground my teeth in frustration, "Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes. Sir." I said through grit teeth.

"But you still haven't answered my first question."

"Irons told me about it." He looked at me expectantly. "Sir."

"And he learns too, how wonderful." We neared the front pump wagon and he wrapped a hoof around my shoulder, pulling me to a stop. "That was our third griffin in as many years. Good scouts are hard to come by and, believe it or not, the raiders are getting smarter." My heart dropped to the pit of my stomach. I looked up at the stallion. He met me with a blank stare.

'Dear Celestia, I am going to die!'

The world began to quake. I heard a great rumble coming from my side. The hoof on my neck dropped away as Spoon tried to contain the laugh building in his chest. My eyes widened in confusion and he lost it. His great laughter pulled the attention of all the ponies around to us.

"Oh, you should see your face! Hahaha! Priceless!" His hoof pushed my shoulder, causing me to stumble a step. "Come on, Colt, it was a joke."

"Wh-what?"

"It's not THAT bad out there. Besides, if we were doing that poorly we'd *never* be able to find a replacement."

My fear became confusion before ending with a sigh of relief. "Not funny... sir."

"Oh lighten up, Colt. You only live once and Celestia forbid the alternative." It took me a moment to figure out what he meant. Are all of these ponies anti-ghoul? "Don't get me wrong, I've known a few decent ghouls. Major Lucky is a right good commander. Still... when they go bad..." His voice trailed off and his eyes seemed to lose focus.

With Spoon lost in his thoughts my attention drifted to my surroundings. We were standing next to one of the pump wagons. I felt a smile stretch across my face as Hurdles did his best to act like I wasn't there. I stepped towards my old friend and he unconsciously tried to step away. Unfortunately, for him, he was strapped into his harness and unable to go far. Perfect.

I stopped far enough away that he couldn't reach me. I didn't need a repeat of last time. "So, buddy, it's been awhile." He looked straight ahead, trying to ignore me. "And you even tied yourself down for me, how thoughtful." I could see the muscles in his cheeks tighten as he struggled to control himself. "Now if only I had my whip..." The pony next to him nickered into his hoof earning an angry glare from Hurdles. "Unfortunately, I don't have time for any hanky panky right now." I let the smile drop from my face as I tried to be serious. "We need to talk. I don't know what's come over you and Aloe, but it needs to stop. We are friends, we've known each other for as long as I can remember." His eyes remained locked on the wagon in front of him. "Talk to me damn it!" A smile twisted the corner of his mouth. "I-"

"Colt!" I cringed and Hurdles smiled in relief. "Get your flank back over here."

"This isn't over. We have months and at some point we are going to have this conversation, even if I have to tie you down myself." Dismay etched across his face as the realization set in. I turned and headed back to Spoon. "Coming, sir."

"What were you doing?"

“Trying to take care of some unfinished business, sir.”

He looked at me, then Hurdles, then back to me. “Uh huh... is he the one who gave you that fat lip?”

Fat lip? I touched the side of jaw and recoiled. ‘When the hay did that swell up like that? I really needed to talk to one of the doctors.’

++FoE:RB++

There was no loud call, no trumpet blast to signal the beginning of the journey. A sudden lurch was the only warning we had. The creak of the axles and the grunts from the pull teams were the only sounds to be heard. The wagons began to move and we followed. For what was supposed to be such an important event there was no fanfare. Some few ponies watched from the sidelines. A hoof waved through the air here, a tear fell to the ground there; all had a loved one leaving and knew that it would likely be months before they were seen again.

I remember being told once that the first step of a journey is the most difficult, but I barely noticed it. The pony before me started moving and I simply followed suit, too busy looking at everypony gathered around the departing wagons to notice.

There was only one face that I was hoping to see in the crowd. The one face that would give me solace, that would tell me that I was forgiven or at least that I had a chance to be. As I searched I realized that I knew almost everypony I saw. Faces I had seen just about everyday for the past decade, part time friends and longtime acquaintances. I looked between the wagons to the other side. More familiar faces rolled past as we continued on. A blur of yellow brought me to a halt and sent my heart up into my throat. As I opened my mouth to call out she pushed her orange mane out of her eyes and the wagon moved between us.

I felt Spoon shove me from behind and force my hooves to begin moving again. I put up no resistance to the forward momentum, my hooves stepping to keep pace with the caravan. The open gates to the compound loomed before us. We walked on and I searched until I stepped through the threshold.

Once outside the compound my hooves stopped. I felt myself turn to face the now closing gate. The rest of the ponies in the caravan walked around me as I stood still watching it slowly slide back to the ground. I did nothing but watch as the opening shrunk before me. The finality of this crashed down on me at the gate hit the ground. I knew that this would only last a few months and then I would be back with a saddlebag full of stories. And yet there was a sense that I was never coming back, that I would never see the inside of those walls again.

This should have been a profound moment. I should have uncovered some truth that had been hiding just beyond my sight, but if there was some epiphany to be had it was lost on me. All I felt was a sense of loss. I didn't want to leave. This was my home; everything I knew was inside those steel walls. I'd never wanted anything more from my life.

I wasn't some colt bursting at the seams to have an adventure; only idiots want to be heroes. I wasn't a wimp who needed to prove his worth; my worth was written in the flesh of the ponies I'd saved. I wasn't some egghead looking to 'find myself'; I knew who I was. I was Lucky Sevens: part time doctor, full time lay about. I was a confirmed bachelor and mare's stallion all wrapped into one. I didn't belong anywhere else. This is where I was meant to be, to live, to eat, to work, and, eventually, to die.

I'd had a home before this one. I could barely remember that run down old shack, but I did remember. I had a mother once upon a time, too. That was all stolen from me, taken by a faceless stallion. And it was happening again. Just like before it was all being taken away. I was powerless standing outside my second home, the only home I could truly remember. I couldn't shake the feeling of a leash wrapped around my neck, pulling me away.

Footnote: Level Up!

Skills:

Medicine: Journeyman (50+)

Perks:

Tracker's Colt: You spent way too much time around that old ghoul. Fortunately, you managed to learn something useful. (+5 Energy Weapons / +5 Survival)

Special Equipment:

RadGator Hide: This light armor was fashioned from the armored scales of a Radgator. Hopefully it will protect you better than the gator!

(Special thanks to Doomande and Fillyosopher for their help.)

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