



## Fallout Equestria: Operation Flankorage

### Chapter Ten: Many Faces

*"Secrets and lies. That's all it is with these ponies, secrets and lies."*

I trotted down one of the Flankorage Broadcast Station's pale green halls with a snuggly blue mare slung over my back. Scoop, quite obviously not a morning pony, was still half asleep and was absent minded nibbling on my ear. I had thank Celestia the reporter mare was so small; actually being able to carry my very special somepony without straining myself did wonders for my ego.

I was floating my own tuxedo and one of the cleaner outfits from Scoop's wardrobe; a fur lined, indigo dress with a matching, hooded cloak. Grinding pain in my horn had dulled to a mild ache that was barely perceptible through the remnants of my endorphin induced glow. While it would be freezing outside (especially for Scoop, since she lacked my fluffiness) there was no need for insulated clothing in the magically heated skyscraper, and besides, having her body pressed against me was more comforting than any outfit I had ever worn.

The reporter mare let out a squeaky yawn in my ear. "I need coffee," she announced, plopping her chin on top of my head. "Bring me breakfast in bed."

"I'm not taking you all the way back to your room," I replied, tapping the call button for one of the building's still functional elevators. "I'll pick something up for you on the way to our meeting with Ron."

"I don't want you to take me back to my room," the news pony snickered. "You're my bed, silly. Now... To the cafeteria my noble steed!"

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Three dozen round, metal tables were scattered around the broadcast station's dirty, white lunchroom. A stainless steel counter ran along one wall with a pink, unicorn mare serving snacks. A series of large windows overlooking the city opened on the opposite wall. Over a dozen ponies sat in ones and twos, nibbling on pieces of bread smeared in various preserves and taking notes in little books; it was actually rather comical watching the earth ponies try to write with their pens held in their mouths.

A little, blue security mare sat in a bright green beanbag chair at the table farthest away from the windows. Her snout was buried in the book we found in the potions shop: the one with the stylized flower on the cover. She had a half finished bottle of Sparkle Cola and a slightly nibbled bowl of freeze-dried veggies and noodles. It was kind of odd to see her out of uniform after so long; her compact yet powerful body practically rippling every time she turned the page or reached for her breakfast.

No! No! Bad libido! There is a beautiful, loving mare on your back, you don't need to lust over the one who has no interest in you. Calm down.

*"She may have no interest in you,"* Icy snickered in the back of my mind. *"But she might be interested in joining your little snuggle toy. Princess sized beds are easily big enough for three."*

"Now you shush," I quietly chastised myself. Thankfully Scoop was still asleep enough not to notice my personal argument.

Maple looked up from her book and greeted us with a big wave and a bright smile.

*"Don't tell me you've never thought of it,"* the frigid voice chortled. I wasn't sure how he did it, but he managed to make laughter feel uninviting. *"I'm in in your head. You can't really lie to me."*

"Why did I miss you again?" I asked through gritted teeth, waving back at the security mare. I stumbled a bit as the reporter mare on my back shifted and made me lose my balance. "Because I can't seem to remember at the moment."

*"Because I'm honest. I, ahem,"* Icy distorted his voice into a nearly perfect match of DJ-PON3's. *"Bring you the truth, no matter how bad it hurts."*

I winced as Scoop bit down on my ear. "Feed me," she mumbled through a mouthful of my fur.

I trotted over to Maple's table and dumped my mare saddle into the lap of a very surprised Maple. The two earth ponies flailed and sank into the cushy seat as a single, tangled, blue mass of mare.

*"Now that is more like it,"* the chilly voice said with an audible grin. *"Why aren't you wearing your eye? I want a picture of this."*

"What the hell?!" Scoop cried, suddenly jolted awake. "Oh, uh, hi Maple." the security pony wiggled out from under the reporter mare's (slightly scratched) haunches, blushing a bit and looking rather guilty. "Good morning."

"Morning," the white maned mare replied, averting her eyes from the wiggling pony on top of her.

"I'll get us some breakfast," I said, smirking and floating out a little bag of bottle caps; I still thought bottle caps were a silly form of legal tender. I placed our clothes next to the beanbag chair and trotted off to the cafeteria counter, leaving the two mares to untangle themselves from each other.

"What can I do for you, hun?" the pink, unicorn mare behind the counter asked, magically tucking a lock of blond hair behind her ear.

"Well," I responded, absent mindedly scratching my chin. "I need a pot of coffee and, um... What else is on your menu?"

"Let me see," the cashier mare said, sticking her head under the counter and rummaging around. "I've got tatters, pine nuts, rye bread, mixed berries, Apple Bombs, freeze-dried noodles, BronCo Mac & Cheese, canned fruit cocktail, I even have some jerky for griffin customers, but if you want my advice," She popped her head back above the counter and beckoned me closer. "If you give me a few minutes I can make one of Scoop's favorite meals for you."

"Oh, thank you..." I replied hesitantly. "Forgive me, but what's the catch?" Nothing is free.

"No catch," the pink caster assured me, waving her hoof dismissively and chuckling. "I like you. You're one of the nicer bucks our little Scoop has brought home."

"One of?" I asked a bit dejectedly, letting my ears droop. I was fairly certain there had been others; nopony could get that good without practice. But it was rather disheartening to hear

it put so bluntly.

"What?" she asked, digging out a jar of preserved cherries and a cocoa thermos with 'coffee' written on the side with a black marker from under the counter. "You thought you were the first? She's nineteen for Luna's sake."

"I know, I know," I assured her, forcing a smile. "How much do I owe you?"

"Fifteen caps for the coffee and the meal is a thank you for bringing our favorite reporter back home. I'll bring it to your table when it's ready," the pink pony said pouring some nutty smelling oil in a skillet and placing it on a hot plate. I dropped the caps on the counter without complaint; I couldn't really bring myself to haggle with her after she offered a gift.

I turned to walk back to my friends, floating the coffee pot and a trio of mugs behind me. "Hay," the cashier mare called, waving me back over. "If it makes you feel any better you are the only one she has ever invited to spend the night in her room." She winked at me before returning to her pan.

"You're not big on privacy around here are you?" I asked, mildly amused.

"Secrets don't last very long in a tower full of journalists," the bubblegum unicorn replied, doling out the cherries into pieces of flat bread. "Besides, Scoops favorite contact is far from subtle." She had me there; I wouldn't be surprised if his smell alone could wake the entire building.

"Thanks again... I don't believe I got your name."

"Darla," she replied, not looking up from her work. "and you?"

"Ocher, a pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise."

Scoop had pulled up two more of the plush seats and was lounging in one with her hind legs propped up on the table. Maple had placed her book on the table and was finishing off the last of her noodles. I trotted over and threw myself onto the empty chair, cracking open the thermos (oh, clever, the talisman still worked) and pouring out three mugs.

The reporter mare took a big gulp of her drink and snuggled deeper into her chair with a contented sigh. "Oh, that is nice," she said, a rosy glow spreading across her face. "Every morning should start with a cup of joe." She sat up in her chair and placed her elbows on the table, nearly folding herself in half. "So no food?"

"Darla offered to make something special for you," I replied, taking a sip of the bitter beverage. "It should be done soon."

"Oh boy!" the blue pony exclaimed, clapping her forehooves together. "Darla makes the best treats in the wasteland."

"Ocher," Maple piped up from my blind side.

"Yeah?" I replied, swiveling my ear to face her and turning just enough to see her out of the corner of my good eye. She was smirking and still a bit flushed from her encounter with Scoop's flanks.

The security pony wrapped her front leg around my shoulders and pulled me in close. "Next time you throw a mare at me," she whispered breathily, her lips lightly brushing against my ear and making me quiver. "I'm keeping her."

I turned beet red and stared out into space, unable to think of anything other than a writhing mass of blue mare. "I-er-ah-hum," I managed to mumble out as a thin line of drool ran down my chin.

"*Very dignified,*" Icy snickered. "*Truly the behavior of a wasteland hero.*"

I let my shoulders slump and I swirled my drink around in my cup. I was hardly a hero. Heroes were brave and never left anypony behind; I lost three.

"Ocher?" Maple asked caringly, running her hoof through the back of my mane. Scoop had rolled upright and was looking at me nervously. "Are you okay? I was just teasing, I wouldn't really do that."

"Yeah," I responded with a forced grin. There was no sense in making my friends shoulder my own mistakes and guilt; that was a burden I deserved to bear. "Just processing a mental image of that scene and lamenting that it will never happen."

The security mare chuckled and flicked my nose with her hoof.

"What will never happen?" the little, azure mare asked excitedly. "Tell me, tell me, tell me."

"Nothing at all," I said dismissively, avoiding her piercing, ice blue eyes. "Just an idle fancy. Nothing you need to worry about."

She snorted and smushed her nose against mine. "Tell me," she commanded firmly, her eyes narrowing.

"Leave him be," the security pony instructed, gently pushing Scoop away from me. "It was just an adolescent fancy involving a pile of mares."

"Oh. Well that might be fun," Scoop cooed with a mischievous smirk and half-mast eyes. "And something I can easily arrange by the way."

Hamina, Hamina, Hamina.

"Scoop!" a familiar, deep, male voice called out from the elevator. A bulky, red, earth pony stallion in an off-black, pinstripe vest strutted into the cafeteria with pleased grin on his square face. "It is good to see you home sweetheart!" Sweetheart? "*You thought you were the first? She's nineteen for Luna's sake.*" Oh please don't tell me.

"Ron!" the reporter mare squealed, hopping out of her chair and bounding over to the brick red buck, wrapping her hooves around his neck. So that was R.F.P. huh? From his voice I had kind of expected him to be more... proper; monocle, top hat, the whole gentleman look. "I missed you! How did you keep this place running without me, old man?"

"Same way I did before you got here," the announcer pony said warmly, patting Scoop on the head. "Quietly."

The little, blue mare nickered, blowing a lock of her tussled, deep blue mane out of her face. "Oh, I need to introduce you to my friends," she chirped, galloping back over to us. "This is Officer Maple Sugar." She leaped up onto the table and gestured to the white maned mare. "She's a Stable pony, tough as a scrapper and brave as a Chevalier." The security mare blushed uncomfortably and seemed to sink into her chair. I was getting the distinct impression that Maple was not a big fan of public accolades. I would do well to keep that in mind; the last thing I wanted to do was make her unhappy as a reward.

"And this," Scoop continued, hopping backwards and landing in my lap and nearly causing me to spill hot coffee all over her. "This is Ocher Bullion, the Merchant and my coltfrend." She nuzzled under my chin. There was something about affection that made a pony feel really low for being jealous.

"Huh, I didn't take you for the 'special somepony' type," the bulky buck said, trotting up and slumping down in Scoop's empty chair. Not the 'special somepony' type? I supposed I understood, after all Primrose was more family than marefriend and I had never really expected to ever find my own significant other. "What makes this guy so special to get both DJ-PON3 and your attention?"

"Not to sound ungrateful," the announcer stallion continued. "I am thrilled with what you have done for everypony, Scoop most of all, but you also need to understand my concern for my little girl."

"Your little girl?" I asked, readjusting the little mare in my lap into a more comfortable position. "You're her father?"

"He is the closest I have," Scoop replied. "He took me in as a foal and helped raise me." She turned to Ron with a smirk. "As for Ocher, he is smart, brave, kind," Aw gees, I was far from brave, every time I had to fight I was scared stiff or to blinded by rage to feel anything else. "and well, has a *silver tongue*." She practically purred the last part and nestled further into my lap.

"A silver tongue huh?" Ron asked, shooting me a sidelong glance. Aw crud, he was going to hit me; I had sold enough ice packs to know that father figures rarely reacted well to somepony sleeping with their daughters. "I guess I'll need to ask you to join me for a morning talk show sometime." Or not, I liked this not hitting me attitude far better.

A waft of hot, sweet and starchy air filled my oddly sensitive nostrils. I turned to the source of the intoxicating sent. "Here you are dear," the pink, culinary mare said, trotting up to our table and putting down a tray of crispy, golden brown rolls, coated with powdered sugar and oozing thick, pink syrup. Oh those looked lovely. "Enjoy."

"You got Darla to make Cherry Chingas?" the red buck exclaimed in pleasant surprise. "How did you manage that? I can't even get her to make me Cherry Chingas and I'm her employer."

"Simple," Darla said brightly, placing her hooves of either side of Scoops face. "She's a lot cuter than you are." The reporter mare played along, giving Ron her cutest puppy dog face and whimpering adorably.

"...fine," the announcer pony replied, drooping his ears. "She's cuter... Can I have one anyway? Please?"

"Jah sure," the news pony mumbled through a sticky mouthful of confection. "Thish ish reary good."

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I was back in my tuxedo and being led through the halls of Stable 116 by a pair of black armored council guards. Scoop was trotting along beside us in her indigo dress with her press pass tied around her neck like a medallion. Maple was following on my heels, in her freshly cleaned 114 security uniform. I had managed to convince the guards to allow Maple to join me in the session as all the other ambassadors were permitted escorts and I was the closest thing Stable 114 had to representation.

The vaulted council chamber was as foreboding as ever. It struck me as a miracle that the ponies who worked down here didn't go insane; spending day and night in the same oppressive murk and harsh lights. Duke Morning Star, Racket, Lapis were in their seats, with the Preacher sitting opposite the empty chair I had to assume was meant for me. This would be a challenge to my patience; I was honestly glad that I wasn't allowed to bring a weapon into the room (or even own a working weapon for that matter) or I was bound to blast that Unity monster into a smoldering pile of dust.

I took my seat, staring daggers at the off white, slaver buck. Maple stood behind me, opposite the shadowed form of an alicorn while Scoop made herself comfortable on the waiting seats and pulled out her notebook.

We all just sat there in silence, the Preacher and I exchanging looks that could have curdled milk while the other three just studied us.

"Well then," Racket said, breaking the silence. "As everypony is here, shall we begin?" The aqua mare folded her forelegs over her chest, taking care not to wrinkle her burgundy business suit.

"Agreed," the pale duke whispered with his magically amplified voice. "The Unity has presented compelling evidence to support their claim, but have insisted that we not conclude our deliberations until you were present." That sounded far from promising.

"Indeed! It is only fitting that such a vial deceiver! " red robed, Unity priest orated, gesturing grandly in my general direction. "is forced to the power of the truth and glory of the Unity!"

It would be so easy to just magically reach inside this animal's body and oh so gently pinch his arteries shut. No pony would need to know either, I could just hide my spell with a little light; everypony would think his little, black heart gave out on him.

*"Stop it, Ocher," Icy commanded sharply. "You're better than this. You are no assassin. Besides, it's too risky. If you're caught this will have all been for nothing. Even if you do succeed they will just send another one to take his place and we will be right back where we started."*

"You know what?" I replied pleasantly, giving him the widest grin my face would allow and revealing my unnaturally sharp teeth. "You are absolutely right. The truth does tend to force manipulative scum to show their true colors. Care to save yourself the humiliation?"

Icy was right though, I wasn't an assassin; assassins killed ponies. Then again this thing across from me was far from a pony. He was a monster just like that giant bird on the highway. That vulture's blood was so delicious; I wondered how this monster would taste.

... AAAGGHH! What in the hell was I thinking?! That was just disgusting! Monster or

not, ponies are not meant to eat meat!

I failed to contain a shudder, destroying my confident façade.

The off white stallion smirked. "We will see," he sneered, pulling his hood off and revealing his horn tattoo. "Let us see who the light of truth will burn clean today." An interesting word choice, I may need to put that to a more literal test depending on how this meeting goes.

"Please," Lilac finally spoke up, shifting a sheet of raven hair from her face. "Bickering won't accomplish anything." She turned to the Preacher, gently waving her deep blue hoof in his direction. "Present your evidence so we may come to a decision."

"As you wish," the marked stallion replied, nodding to his alicorn companion. "Our glorious prophet has seen fit to grace you with his visage."

The alicorn, this one's coat was such a deep green that it seemed nearly black, sat statuesque, her eyes shining with an emerald glow. This was Harbinger. The possessed mare's horn lit up with a silver glow.

I jolted back in shock as the false goddess' eyes, horn nose and mouth began to leak what looked like mercury. She quivered and twitched, obviously in terrible pain, but stoically maintained her stance.

"What is going on?!" Maple demanded, attempting to interpose herself between me and the rapidly growing pool of silver liquid.

The alicorn dropped to her knees and coughed up a gout mercurial blood into the puddle.

"Radio signals have a hard time penetrating the valley," Racket replied calmly. I could almost swear she was enjoying this gruesome display. "As I'm sure you've noticed, we can only contact the outside world after a rain storm." Lilac was no where near as pleased as the merchant mare, flinching and grimacing at every muffled cry the demigoddess made. Morning Star on the other hoof, was completely expressionless, it was like trying to read marble.

The pool of liquid rippled and seemed to fall upwards nearly twenty hooves before plummeting back down into the pool, becoming a cyclical waterfall of liquid metal. The Unity mare struggled back to her seated position as the last few drops of magical mercury fell from her eyes. I almost felt sorry for the tortured monster, almost.

"The Unity developed this spell a few months ago," the Canterlot Caravans pony continued, only making a token effort to hide her glee. "It allows instantaneous communication with their base back in Fillydelphia, but it nearly kills its caster." That was some dark magic they developed there. It almost sounded like the sort of unnecessarily brutal spell the Lich Emperor from Sword Mares would use.

I put my hoof on Maple's shoulder. "It's okay," I assured, regaining my diplomatic front. "If they want to cripple their own agents just so we can tell their leader to take a long walk off a short cliff in person, I say we let them." The security mare gave me a worried look, but backed down and returned to her seat.

The wall of flowing metal rippled and became mirror smooth. A very fit, crimson, earth pony stallion with a meticulously groomed, jet black mane materialized in the reflective surface, filling the entire wall of metal and towering over everypony else in the room. A ring of light scars adorned his flank where his cutie mark should have been; whoever had removed his was far



more careful than the zebras had been with mine or poor Rock Salt's. He wore a shiny, black cape, draped, stylishly across his right side with the distinctive, green screen of a PipBuck peaking out from underneath the cloak. His left eye was a vivid blue, but it was his right that caught my attention. A sleek, metal sheath covered his right eye socket, glowing with an ominous red light; I was starting to feel self-conscious over my own toaster-eye and was relieved that I had elected to go with my eye patch.

A hazy room came into focus behind him. He was standing on a balcony with a faded, green banister, overlooking an auditorium packed cheek to jowl with filthy, emaciated ponies. Many ponies in the crowd seemed to be suffering from burns and weeping lesions across their entire bodies. A pair of black-green alicorns stood to either side of him, their faces were still wet from a mixture of sweat and silver blood.

"Greetings. So you are the representative from Stable 114, the newest member of our noble project." The red buck's words were oily smooth and was obviously well practiced, practically dripping with confidence and authority; under different circumstances I may have asked him for lessons. "I am Red Eye, and you are the merchant that has been giving my Harbinger so much trouble."

"It has been a pleasure dismantling your twisted, amoral regime," I replied with poisonous pleasantness. So this was Red Eye? Hardly impressive to look at compared to some of the other monsters I had seen, but I was far from foolish enough not to understand the threat he represented; it was probably a cult leader like him that ushered in the apocalypse in the first place. "And I look forward to evicting your murderous thrall from my home."

"You poor, misguided child." He shook his head in disappointment. "While our methods may seem to be harsh, I assure you that we only seek to better the lives of everypony and the wasteland in general."

"By killing them in cold blood?!" I snapped, slamming my hooves into the table hard enough to make the statuesque duke start and cause the other two to nearly jump out of their seats. To the moon with diplomacy at this point, I wasn't about to let this monster start glorifying his atrocities. I stood and addressed the rest of the crowd. "By stealing them from their homes?! By stripping entire communities to the bone?! By beating and raping them over and over again, until they are broken husks?!" One of the pony shadows by the insectoid figures on the overlook shuddered at my last exclamation amidst a depressingly subdued murmur of unrest.

"Truly depressing acts, all of them. Symptoms of what is plaguing this world." Red Eye hadn't even missed a beat in contemplation. "Equestria is sick, but it is not beyond hope. Within the Unity, there is no such strife. We all work together towards the common goal of a restored Equestria. But until such a time where all ponies are ready to join the greater good, to be truly free, none of us deserve such freedom. Sacrifices must be made if we are to ever achieve our true utopia." I could hear Maple's teeth grinding as she seemed to try and slowly drive her hooves through the solid steel floor.

"Red Eye," the ice blue duke interjected before I could vent my fury at the slaver scum's insistence that crimes against equinity were necessary sacrifices. "We have already refused to join your organization and if we wish to hear sermons your emissaries seem more than happy to oblige us. Could we stick to the reason for this gathering? The legality of the Children of Unity's presence in Stable 114."

"Yes, yes, of course," the unity stallion apologized with a curt bow and small flourish of his cape. "Please forgive me, but this Stable buck reminds me of myself before I learned the truth and I hoped to educate him." I was sick to my stomach, not at the thought of having anything in

common (aside from the physically obvious) with this murderer, but that I actually felt a twisted surge of pride from his praise. "It is truly a shame that such a misunderstanding came between us. As I am sure Harbinger has been kind enough to point out, we were invited to your Stable."

"So you have said," the orange maned, economic pony said impatiently. "But that fails to provide evidence or explain why this pony," She gestured to me. "clams that you slaughtered numerous ponies. Forgive my skepticism, but that hardly sounds like a well intentioned integration."

"A truly sorrowful turn of events." The cyberpony shook his head, sounding genuinely remorseful, but with his skill with words it was impossible to be sure. "We received this message nearly three weeks ago."

Another series of ripples spread across the magical mirror, distorting the red stallion's image and replacing him with a jet black, middle aged, unicorn mare. She was wearing a deep blue Stable 114 jumpsuit and had her golden mane pulled back in a tight bun. She was standing in a circular office, in the middle of a ring shaped desk. What did Mayor... no, er, what was it called? Overmare, right. What did Overmare Goldlight have to do with this?

*"This is Overmare Goldlight, twelfth administrator of Stable 114,"* the umbral mare stated, her voice sounding slightly distorted in the recording. *"I am herby officially requesting the assistance of anypony who can here this."* She what?! *"The Stable's systems are failing and can no longer meet our growing energy needs. We can not even divert enough power to open our own Stable door and supplement our resources."*

Something was very wrong with this message. Her speech patterns were off. This message was a fake, no doubt about it. I doubted that anypony else would notice, but I had known that stubborn mare my entire life.

*"And she had lied to you all those years,"* my arctic voice sneered. *"But this is a complete load of horse apples. 114's systems may have been degrading, but it was far from starved for resources."* How the hell would he know that? I didn't know that, how could my crazy?

*"Um, I'm just being logical,"* the thing in my head replied evasively. *"We came out that side passage so they obviously could get in and out. Also, Maple would have mentioned it if the Stable was falling apart."*

"We promptly responded to this cry for help," Red Eye announced as he repaired on the sheet of silver metal. "We even expended the resources to bring a pre-war engine on line in order to remove their imprisoning door." He sighed and dipped his head, rubbing his temple with his left hoof. "Unfortunately the administrator had neglected to inform her security forces of our arrival. That unfortunate misunderstanding devolved into an attack. My children defended themselves and claimed the surviving combatants in accordance to our treaty with your government."

"They shot first," the security mare at my side growled, quivering. "Your raiders shot first and we defended ourselves."

The cyborg stallion turned his gaze on my companion. "I understand. Your leader's failure must have made our arrival chaotic. Your mistake, while costly in pony lives, is understandable and I forgive you."

The blue mare clamped her jaws over her fetlock hard enough to break her skin. A thin

trickle of blood flowed out of the corner of her mouth, mixing with the tears of rage that were rolling down her cheeks.

She had lost her wife, and this monster was claiming that it was her fault. I wrapped my leg around her shoulder and pulled her against my fluffy barrel, glaring daggers at the arrogant cult leader. What I wouldn't give to be able to reach through the augury spell and throttle this bastard.

"Regardless," the crimson buck continued, addressing the councilors once again. "I hope this has reassured you of my benevolent intentions." If I didn't know better I would probably end up siding with the charismatic orator. "Now if you will excuse me, my attentions are needed elsewhere. I hope to see you again, it has been fun."

"Count on it," I promised, dragging my free fore leg off the table. My diminutive claws scraped across the stainless steel table, leaving surprisingly deep grooves in the metal. I immediately blanched at my blatant exposure of my own blemished nature. An angry murmur came from the overlook along with a look of barely contained revolution from Lapis. The statuesque noble was inscrutable as ever. Racket arched an eyebrow at me, pulling out a stylus and a small computer from a briefcase she had apparently been keeping in her lap and began to type something.

"That is good to hear," Red Eye responded, seemingly oblivious of my unintentional display of my mutation. "The Unity needs as many smart ponies as it can find. Until then." The mercurial waterfall began to boil away, causing image of the magnetic 'prophet' to waver and vanish. The alicorn who had been maintaining the spell collapsed in a heap; still breathing, but barely.

The Preacher cantered back into the spotlight, a self satisfied smirk plastered across his face. "The Unity rests its case. We now await the council's judgment."

The councilors exchanged brief glances and all fixed their eyes on me. They had made their decision before Red Eye had even shown up. The deceptive bastards had known that my claim was hopeless the entire time! "The council has made its decision," Dawn Star whispered calmly, his magical voice instantly silencing the unrest my claws had caused among the observers on the balcony.

I was just about to stand and protest their inevitable dismissal of my case when a message popped up on my E.F.S., disconcertingly filling my blindside with text.

*'>This was a farce from the start, but there is still hope for your cause. Stay calm and dignified. If you trust me we can bloody the Unity's nose and both come out of this debacle squeaky clean.'*

"We will not be sending military forces to the Unity occupied settlement, Stable 114," the unicorn noble continued.

Maple nearly leapt out of her seat at the white blond unicorn, but I pulled her in closer. "No," I whispered in her ear, my eyes darting between the dozen power armored honor guards who had all leveled their magical rifles at the security mare's head. "You can't save anypony if you're dead."

She growled, but stood down. That was good. There was no way I would have been able to hold her back if she didn't want me to. The guard ponies lowered their weapons but kept their eyes on my companion.

"While your circumstances are truly tragic," the New Ministry of Peace mare apologized, eyeing Maple nervously. "But we can not justify attacking our friends and allies on the word of somepony we barely know. On top of that it appears that the Unity was well within their rights and are maintaining a legal occupation. However, we are not without mercy." She extended her pink and yellow cloaked hoof to us. "You will not be reprimanded for your attempted deception or turned over to the Unity for punishment."

"While you are still welcome in the city I have arranged for you to join one of my expeditions to a location of your choosing," Racket said with her impish smirk. "It strikes me that a journey like this may be *cleansing* experience after what you have been through." Well that was hardly subtle.

*'>New Mission Objective: Speak with Racket in her office.'*

"I believe that concludes this matter," the well dressed mare continued, putting her computer back into her bag and standing. "As everypony seems to be flustered I would like to motion that we take a recess to clear our heads before we take the day's petitioners."

"That's it?" the slaver priest protested indignantly, trotting around the table to me. "This stallion is directly responsible for the deaths of no less than thirty Children of Unity and there is no telling how many other ponies he has butchered in the name of his self righteous delusion."

"Now that is just silly," I replied, reapplying my calm front flashing him my pointed teeth. "I don't kill ponies. That is the domain of sub-equine monsters like yourself. I have no problem killing those." I warped my voice into a rather good imitation of Red Eye's. "Your mistake, while costly in pony dignity, is understandable and I forgive you." He glowered at me, flushing a light red and raising his hoof as if he planned to strike me. Oh go ahead, please. Give me a bucking excuse.

"That is quite enough," an authoritative mare's voice boomed across the chamber. The room immediately went silent and all eyes went to the raised, overmare's office. The lighting had shifted to reveal the figure in the window to be a khaki earth pony with a slicked back, snow white mane and pale green eyes, standing in a wide stance with her forelegs crossed behind her back. She was wearing a light blue military uniform with one breast nearly plastered with medals and a pair of small, square framed glasses perched on her snout. She was completely motionless save for the rhythmic swishing of her tightly braided tail.

"But general Permafrost-" the slaver priest began to protest before being cut off by the militant mare.

"Do not push your luck, Preacher," the imposing pony continued, leering down at the assembled politicians. "The council may be forgiving of your insolence, but I am not. You have won your case, do so with some dignity." She turned to me with a chilling stare. "As for you, Merchant. You have bucked a dragon's snout and escaped with your life. Don't waste that blessing. Now, all of you, get out."

The general turned and all the chamber's lights abruptly illuminated the assembled observers.

The colorful mix of unicorns, earth ponies and griffins slowly milled out through a pair of doors on either side of the room. The two insectoid figures were pegasi standing at attention, coated in thick, black armor with scorpion like tails and antenna like protrusions from their helmets. To their right Echo watched us in a fresh pressed, pristine uniform, looking distinctly

uncomfortable. A fluffy, bubblegum pink unicorn mare with a spiky, indigo mohawk was asleep on her hooves, leaning on one of the two flamboyantly armored, earth pony stallions who flanked her. The one on her right was wearing a caparison made from ring linked bottle caps and the other had a grizzly suit of metal armor, studded with sharpened unicorn horns.

Three earth ponies in the black accented power armor of the Black Apple Rangers were slowly making their way to the exits. One of them, a tomato red mare with a black mane, was not wearing her helmet and looked as if somepony had taken a food processor to her face and then put it back together with bits of metal. At the very back were two ponies with pale gray stripes (zonies maybe?) in tattered clothing that I doubted did much against the biting cold. They were huddled next to a griffin wearing a ragged, New Ministry of Peace robe.

Scoop bounded up to me and wrapped me in a tight embrace. "I am so sorry," she mumbled, nuzzling the right side of my face. I could feel my cold fury and unnerving bloodlust start melting away the moment I felt her warm body press against mine. "I honestly thought they would help." The little mare extended her other hoof and pulled Maple in so all three of our faces were smushed together, cheek to cheek. "I promised you help and I will get it for you. Ron and I will launch such a smear campaign that the public outrage will force the council to overturn its decision and do the right thing."

"You will do no such thing young lady," Racket scolded, trotting up to us. Following behind, carrying her briefcase, was her aid, a little green colt. The young pony had been sitting patiently in the shadows and actually looked rather adorable in his tailored, brown business suit.

"And why not?" the reporter mare asked indignantly, pulling her head out from between Maple and mine and pressing our faces into her chest. My head grew a little fuzzy from the two mares' combined scents and the oddly alluring aroma of the security pony's still trickling blood. "The Voice of Flankorage has the right to broadcast any message we feel is right. The Frostborn can't afford to stop us, what makes you think you have the right to?"

"I don't," the aqua pony replied, shaking her head. "But it is in your best interest to keep quiet for now." She adjusted her collar and trotted towards the door. "Now, if you would be so kind as to follow me," She beckoned us with a flick of her orange tail, "we can get some real business done."

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"Miss Racket will be with you shortly," Paper Weight, the CEP's little assistant colt, informed us from behind his desk. I was having a hard time taking him seriously as he needed to sit on a thick stack of books to see over his own workstation. "Please be patient and feel free to help yourselves to some hors d'oeuvres."

We were sitting in a plush waiting room on one of the upper floors of the needle-like skyport. The brick red walls were lined with portraits of stuffy looking ponies in suits. There was a set of double doors on either side of the room, one behind the colt's table and the other between two fuzzy couches. Maple and I were sitting straight backed on a red velvet lounge with Scoop sprawled out on our laps. A few workers in burgundy uniforms wheeled in a cart covered in little brown crackers adorned with various spreads and garnishes.

"So, what do you think she has planned?" the security mare asked, polishing the Grim Harvest with an oiled rag.

"I'm not sure," I replied, floating a wafer smeared with a yellow jam and topped with little red flowers into Scoop's waiting mouth. "All I know is that she definitely hates the Unity as much

as we do. She seems to be the only ally we have at the moment.”

Paper Weight perked up and ran his little hooves through his chestnut mane. “She will see you now.” He pressed a button on the side of his desk, causing the doors behind him to slowly swing open. “You might want to be quick about it, the boss lady isn’t known for being all that patient.”

The aqua business pony was standing behind an elaborate desk. She had changed into a clean, but far more casual corduroy jacket over a burgundy, twill jumpsuit. This mare had a real thing for red. “You, sir, have friends in high places,” she said, leaning against her desk and waving us into her office. We trotted in, with Scoop riding on my back.

“Now, before we go over anything I need to ask, are you willing to fight for your home?” the councilor pony inquired as the door remotely shut behind us. “How far are you willing to go for this?”

What an utterly daft question to ask. I hadn’t trudged across sixty miles of monster infested wasteland, was shot repeatedly, nearly got eaten on three separate occasions and got horribly mutilated for shits and giggles. “As far as I need to,” I replied tersely, placing my front hooves in the table, opposite Racket.

“Likewise,” Maple interjected, still fuming from Red Eye’s message. “I will go in there alone with a sharp stick if I have to.”

“That is exactly what I wanted to hear.” The orange maned mare grinned and narrowed her dark red eyes. “Forgive me for my caution, but what I have set in motion isn’t what one would call legal.”

“How illegal are we talking?” Scoop asked, perking up and resting her chin on the top of my head. Racket arched her eyebrow at the news pony on my back. “... I won’t tell anypony, Crusader’s honor.”

The executive pony contemplated this for a moment, scrutinizing the little, blue equine. “Let’s see... bribery,” she finally answered, waving her hoof in the air, “misallocation of military resources, fraud, sedition and conspiracy to commit treason. Needless to say, if this goes badly we will all hang.”

“Hang?!” I exclaimed, taking a step back. “I’m going to need you to elaborate on this a little bit.”

“There was no way we could side with you in this case officially,” the CEP admitted, sitting behind her desk and pursing her hooves in front of her lips. “We can’t afford to officially act against the Unity at this time. We are in dire need of their metal.”

“Hold on,” I stopped her, raising my hoof. “Isn’t Flankorage a mining city? How could you have a metal shortage?”

“Yes, we have all the ore we could need,” the aqua pony replied, waving her hoof dismissively. “We even have the facilities to refine it into steel ingots, but what we don’t have are factories. Before we made contact with the slaver empire we needed to have metallurgist unicorns craft our metal goods one at a time. Meanwhile the Zebras had been bringing griffin factories back into operation for the last twenty years. Griffin factories may not be up to the standards of Equestrian ones, but there is something to be said for quantity over quality.” She stared down at her hooves and shook her head, causing a lock of her compulsively groomed

mane to fall across her eyes. "To put it frankly, we just didn't have the horsepower to compete with all our enemies. But since we started trading for I-beams with the Unity we have been able to drastically increase our infrastructure, and the larger munitions they can produce in Fillydelphia have allowed us to bring some of our most powerful vehicles and weapons back into service. If it weren't for those windfalls we would have completely collapsed over a year ago and you would have emerged into a world where simply being a pony would be a death sentence."

"That is fascinating," I responded as politely as I could. It was hard to remain pleasant after hearing that I had a band of slavers to thank for the 'good' condition of the region. "It truly is, but what does it have to do with me?"

"I am simply trying to explain that this was the inevitable outcome from your appeal," Racket sighed, rubbing the bridge of her nose with her fetlock. "It was not a reflection on your skills as an orator; which were impressive by the way." I puffed up my chest a from at her praise.

"Anyway, here's the plan," she continued. "Officially, I am sending an arms shipment to Coltinville in the south west with an escort of Frostborn Chevaliers and a hoof full of mercenary guards of my own. You would join them and set up a new home in the resort town. However, I have arranged you to take a detour to the ski lodge to recharge the vehicles. While they are in the vicinity the expedition leader will decide to check in on our 'good friends'. According to your testimony I doubt they would pass even the most rudimentary inspection and if all goes according to plan they will shoot first. That will give us our pretext to liberate the Stable and restore your good name."

"That sounds like a big risk," I said, rubbing my chin. "What's in it for you?"

"Would you believe me if I said it is out of the kindness of my heart and love for my fellow pony?"

"No." Nothing is free.

"Smart," Racket replied with a smirk. "To be honest, it's because those slavers are trying to run me out of business. They attack my traders as soon as they get out of the valley, undercut my prices with their slave labor and are gunning to take my seat on the council. So any opportunity I can take to hurt them is its own reward... That and your patron is a very good pony to have owe you a favor, as I am sure the considerable resources that have been thrown behind this operation attests."

This 'patron' owed me a favor? Who owed me a favor? The drunk Shrike? I didn't kill her.

"Yeah," Icy said snidely. *"You only left her alone among the corpses of her comrades. And even if she was grateful I doubt some raider would have the pull to facilitate a plan this complex."*

Right, right. Um, who else have I helped?

*"And is still alive."*

And is still alive... That was a depressingly short list.

"So," the business mare went on, forcing me to stop dwelling on my own shortcomings as a hero. "Are you in or out?"

"We're in!" Maple shouted before I could even think. "When do we leave?"

"Immediately." The aqua pony stood and trotted to the door. "I have taken the liberty of adding you to the preferred customer list. Get yourself resupplied from my stock room in the docking ring and meet the others in bay 7."

*'>Canterlot Caravans fame gained, liked.'*

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"Welcome to the Canterlot Caravans home office outlet!" Paper Weight announced, ushering us into the shop. The little colt had volunteered to be our guide for as long as we were in the sky port. The gesture was just so cute, I couldn't bring myself to point out that my PipBuck was a very competent guide, when I actually paid attention to it that was.

We had taken a freight elevator up to the ring shaped hub. The raw metal terminal was surprisingly roomy with nearly three pony lengths of clearance overhead. Different colored lines were painted along the walls, leading out of the eight exits. The inner ring consisted of guarded, warehouse like rooms between wide passageways to the outer ring and, I assumed, the docks. Nearly a hundred ponies milled around between the corridors that lead to the zeppelin docks and the stockrooms.

Looking around I saw that the eight docks were owned by the various factions I had seen in the council chamber. One that had previously to belong to the Ministry of Awesome (I had always liked that name; it conjured images of action heroes sitting around a room, coming up with new kinds of coolness, awesomeness and radicalness... whatever the difference may be.) had become the Enclave dock with several of the insectoid armored pegasi protecting a black, metal door that looked like it had been recently installed.

To their right was the Equestrian military port with several bored looking soldier ponies playing a dice game; I supposed it made sense, who would attack their storehouse in their own city? Next, in the former Ministry of Wartime Technology warehouse, a Black Apple Ranger and two roughly pony shaped robots stood watch. The Ministry of Peace center had been transformed into a hospital by its newer counterpart. The Unity had set up shop in the former Ministry of Morale storage area. The Ministry of Image hub was serving as a lounge for aristocratic equines to relax in. Almost coming full circle, I saw the Ministry of Arcane Science facility had become a savage looking hunter's hall with over two dozen griffins admiring trophies ranging from iron gray dragon skulls to grizzly quilts made from flayed cutie marks; the scene wasn't doing much for my opinion of griffins.

Finally there was the Canterlot Caravans store. A pure white, earth pony mare with a sea blue mane, tied back in a pony tail and a pair of half moon glasses on her snout sat behind a cash register in the middle of the warehouse. While nothing to look at, the depot put my store's inventory to shame, with floor to ceiling aisles full of everything from motor scooters, and full body armor, to entire pallets of cocoa thermoses. Despite the small fortune in goods on display there were no guards to be seen, but from what I had seen of Racket I doubted the store was as defenseless as it appeared.

"We have the best selection and service in the city!" the excited colt continued, bounding behind the counter, much to the chagrin of the salesmare. Even a princess thinks so!" He pushed a small button on the back of the cash register.

"I'm. Princess Celestia," A regal, but obviously spliced together, voice to played from several concealed speakers throughout the room. "And. This is. My favorite. Shop. In.



Flankorage.”

“See? See?” the little, green colt chirped, bouncing up and down. “Even one of the god princesses likes us. So browse and enjoy. I’ll go tell the expedition that we will be departing within the hour.” With that the foal bounded off down the red marked corridor, more bouncing than running.

“Isn’t he cute?” Scoop asked, pressing her cheek against my neck.

“Ayep,” I replied, pressing my muzzle into her soft, midnight blue mane. “Adorable.”

“I want one.”

“You what?!” I exclaimed, jerking back. I had never really considered having children. Yeah, I loved her (At least I was fairly sure I did. This was new for me, but it was something more than lust; I knew that.), but I had never expected this to come up so soon. She was just so young. I knew it was a possibility in the future, but so soon? ...Wait... it was a possibility now! Sweet Celestia! Was my the little mare in heat last night?! What were the odds of conception?! How long did it take until a mare knew?! Oh I was so screwed!

*“No, you’re not,”* Icy differed snidely. *“She was, that’s the problem.”*

Not helping! “Um-I-er,” I stammered. My eyes were unconsciously drawn to her soft, blue furred belly. I knew there was no way she would show yet, but that didn’t stop me from thinking she looked a little rounder; though that was probably from the half dozen deep fried confections she had devoured at breakfast. “I’ll take responsibility fo-”

“Got ya,” the little blue mare snickered, winking at me. Maple trotted up, out of my blind side with the biggest, shit eating grin I had seen in my life. My expression must have been priceless. The little news pony must have intuited my other fear because she leaned up, pressing her cheek against mine. “I’m not in season till next week,” she breathed in my ear. My legs turned to jelly.

“You’re a sadist,” I said with a fake sneer.

“And just too damn cute,” she replied, showing me a heart melting puppy dog face. “You will need to find out just how sadistic and cute I can be when you get back.”

“Sounds fun... Hold on.” I raised my hoof. “When I get back? Aren’t you coming with us?”

“No, honey,” the reporter mare replied, pressing her face against my outstretched hoof. “I’m not. If you are going to pull this off you are going to need Ron and I to start spinning your liberation as soon as it happens. You have seen what the Unity can do if they have time to prepare and you can’t afford that. I need to be here, to gather as much evidence of the Unity’s illegal activities as I can and present it at the same time as your attack.”

“Stay safe,” I said, pulling her into a tight hug. While I lamented being away from her I was honestly relieved. This was going to be dangerous and I couldn’t stand it if she was hurt. Though given what had happened last time she had investigated the Enclave I wasn’t sure if she was any safer here. “And don’t get caught.”

“Same to you,” she replied, and pressed her lips against mine. “Promise you’ll come back and I promise I’ll be here.”

"Deal." I let the little mare go and she darted back to the elevator.

"She can take care of herself," Maple reassured me, putting her hoof on my shoulder. "You need to focus on the task ahead." I sighed and nodded.

The two of us browsed up and down the aisles for what we would need. Maple picked out a set of Frostborn combat armor with all its insignias painted over, and a big, drum fed shotgun. I settled for a light armor weave jump suit and a few ceramic plates that could fit under my Boxy Brown vest. As for a weapon, I found a rifle in the magical weapons aisle that I could have sworn fired bullets, but on closer inspection it drum held a magical power cell. My PipBuck labeled it a 'Beam RCW', some kind of magical assault rifle that used the massive Arcane Charge Packs for ammunition.

Now looking more like a soldier pony in her new armor, the security mare and I brought our new equipment, a healthy selection of medical potions and a saddlebag full of cocoa, to the cashier mare. Thanks to Racket's discount, I managed to haggle down to my PipBuck's 'suggested' prices.

As we were turning to leave I came face to face a jet black, insectoid helmet. "AAGH!" I shouted, nearly leaping out of my skin. Without missing a beat, I slid into S.A.T.S. and targeted the thing.

*'>Echo >Head >95%'*

"Echo?" I asked, letting the spell drop. My E.F.S. compass had expanded into a little mini map. The Enclave pony was wearing a much lighter version of the power armor I had seen the other pegasi using, consisting of a few angular plates over a pitch black body suit. There were large protrusions from all four of her gauntlets and bladed sheaths covered the outer edges of her wings. Her distinctive, arc shaped tail blade was still woven into her braded, teal tail. "Goddesses, don't scare me like that."

"I'm sorry," the soldier pony apologized, pulling up her face plate. "But I urgently needed to speak with you. I would have found you earlier, but that councilor you were talking to was carrying some sort of inhibitor and your PipBuck's tag only recently started transmitting again." Recently?... Paper Weight had the jammer on him. Racket really didn't want to take any chances. "Oh, and hi Maple." the black mare waved.

"What is it?" I asked, heading to the Canterlot Caravans docking port, bay 7. "It isn't that I'm not glad to see you, but I have something I really need to do."

"Whatever it is, its less important," Echo insisted, easily matching my pace with eerily quiet hoof falls. "I need to go back to your Stable. That recording was fake and I fear I can prove it."

"Really?" I asked, stopping in my tracks. "I mean, I knew it was fake, but I didn't think anypony else would, never mind prove it. How?"

"I am not at liberty to disclose that information," the armored pegasus said, shaking her head.

"Then how is that helpful?" Maple asked indignantly, between mouthfuls of shotgun shells.

"As a soldier I can not divulge classified information," the umbral flyer responded with no signs of hurt or offense in her tone. "But as I am on medical leave for my hostage experience, I can point you in the right direction as a private citizen and, I would like to say, friend."

"You can," I assured her, catching myself before I instinctively patted her on the back. That would have gone very badly. "And we were actually heading to Stable 114 anyway, to liberate it. Would you like to join us?"

"Officially, I must say no." The dark flyer pulled her face plate back down. "However, I do believe I forgot my hair band the last time I was in the area and you would be amazed at how much freedom I have when it comes to retrieving Enclave property. When do we depart?"

"Five minutes ago," a little voice squeaked from my blind side. I turned my head and saw Paper Weight tapping his hoof impatiently. "Why is an Enclave trooper coming with you? Did you ask Miss Racket?"

"She is coming with us because we think she will be able to help us strengthen our case," I replied authoritatively, looking down at the foal. "I have not asked your boss' permission, but I doubt she would object." I hated needing to be domineering to a child, but I doubted I could afford to lose Echo to Racket's apparent over cautiousness.

"Fine," he pouted, looking all the more childish in his tailored suit. "But hurry up, we need to go."

We followed the administrative assistant pony down the red lined corridor and into a wide, rectangular room with the far wall open to the sky. Two thin, angular tanks were parked side by side, painted in arctic camo. Each one had a quartet of pill shaped protrusions filled with blue gems the size of grown ponies and a single, forward facing gun that I probably could have shoved my entire leg down. A modified version of the Equestrian flag was emblazoned on the side of each turret, with the silhouettes of Celestia and Luna on a graduating gold to purple field, on either side of Flankorage's triangle of rings.

About three dozen soldier ponies were waiting around the room in various states of readiness; only a third of them were in the Chevalier power armor. One dark gray mare was dying her mane blood red in a sink by what appeared to be a maintenance station; her tail was the same red, but was showing cotton candy pink at the roots. A brick red unicorn was absentmindedly throwing a small bouncy ball against one of the tank's insignias with her bright yellow tail. A tawny, unicorn stallion who was built like a rock was lying down in a corner with a scoped hunting riffle snuggled under one leg and a plush, orange pegasus under the other. All the others were standing in neat rows in the center of the room, while a mare dressed in a greatcoat and smiley face hat marched up and down the lines.

"Is there a problem ma'am?" one of the guards, a sea green buck about my age, with a spiky, brown mane, asked nervously as Dawn Star stopped in front of him.

"Yes trooper," the orange unicorn said contemptuously, glairing holes through the young stallions face. "You were born."

The aqua soldier blanched and stepped back as the morale pony brought her massive cannondy cane level with his face. What the hell was she doing?!

I drew my new rifle and charged into the room, Maple hot on my heels. "Don't!" I bellowed. Why was nopony else trying to stop this?!

"Wait!" a familiar, gravelly voice came from behind me. I turned to see a huge, red stallion in full body armor. What was BARON doing here?

I picked up the soft click of the unicorn noble's cannon. I turned back just in time to see the cannon's trigger completely vanish. I was too late.

\*Honk!\*

A spray of brightly colored confetti enveloped the soldier buck and blasted his mane back. What had just happened?

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY!" Dawn Star screamed, flailing her forelegs in the air. As if on cue, all the other military ponies started singing.

"This is your birthday song."

"It isn't very long."

As abruptly as it had begun, the singing stopped.

"Welcome," the morale mare called out brightly, waving to me. "I'm so glad you took so long. I was afraid I would need to rush this and accidentally put the cake mix in my cannon instead of the confetti again. Oh, or a real shell, that would have been embarrassing." This pony was certifiably insane!

"Umm, never throw me a party," I said, putting my weapon away. "What is BA-er-The King doing here?."

"Everypony here knows who I am," the harnessed stallion spoke up from behind me as Dawn wandered off, blathering on about all the unpleasant things she could have filled her gun with (raw sewage and used needles stood out as being particularly unpleasant). "There is no need for subterfuge. Something big is brewing in the south and several powerful ponies have agreed to back my new alias in exchange for my support when the time comes." That was ominous.

"What sort of something?" Echo asked, cocking her head. "I haven't heard of anything."

"You wouldn't have." BARON turned to the black pegasus. "Not through all of the Enclave propaganda anyway. There are more conspirators in the wasteland than most ponies dare to imagine. Some of the major players are bringing their plans to fruition and somepony new has stumbled into their web of schemes. Don't ask me the specifics." The armored pony stopped me before I could inquire further. "I have only seen the signs: the Unity is expanding their influence rapidly, Steel Rangers are increasing their patrols and even the Talons are gathering in numbers that haven't been seen in over sixty years."

"That still doesn't explain why you're here," Maple said apprehensively, interposing herself between the immortal and myself. "Last time you were with us was due to some form of twisted honor and you still nearly got Ocher killed. Why should we trust you now?"

"If you are worried that I'm only doing this for money or a pat on the head from the ponies who think they hold my leash I can assure you I am not," the armored stallion replied with an unnerving chuckle. "I am in no need of money; in fact, collecting on my own bounty was a rather existential experience and one that will sustain me for decades. As for why I *am* here, let's say I have a personal interest in seeing you succeed."

“Just keep your distance,” the security pony growled, barring her teeth. “I don’t trust you.”

“A smart decision-” BARON began before being cut off by an authoritative voice.

“You can continue this discussion on the Rouncey.”

A toned, yellow stallion was standing on the entrance ramp for one of the tanks, staring down at us with exhausted looking, slate gray eyes. His brick red mane was ragged and rough cut in stark contrast to his freshly pressed officer’s jacket. A trio of long, jagged scars ran across his face, with similar wounds scattered across every visible part of his hide. His haunches were almost solid scar tissue and ragged brands of a crescent moons were seared into his hide where his cutie marks should have been.

Rocksalt?!

Footnote: Level Up

New Perk: -- Empathy - You have studied other ponies, giving you the inside knowledge of their emotional reaction to you. You will see the reaction level of the person you are talking to, when involved in an indepth conversation.

This is a story based off the magnificent work of Kkat ([Fallout Equestria](#))

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