

Chapter Nine: Sanctuary

*“The Wasteland runs on ponies, exploring, trading, living. Without ponies, the Wasteland is just land.
Ponies are what make it special.”*

Goddess.

Never in my life did I ever think I would see a real-life, honest-to-goodness Goddess. She welcomed us with open hooves, leading us to the city. I smiled, looking up at her. It wasn't fair that she had wings and a horn, but she was divine. I didn't question her strange eyes, either. Slit pupils were a bit weird to me, but who was I to complain about the appearance of a supreme being? Maybe she was related to the Goddess Luna, she was supposed to look similar. And with the blue coat, and blue and purple mane, she could...

“We-” she said, “are always looking to welcome new ponies to Our- town. We- believe that any pony who has travelled here past so many dangers is worthy of joining the Unity that We- have created. We- would be honored if you were to stay the night.” She smiled, and waved a hoof toward the city before us.

I wondered about the steel rod through her skull. She didn't seem to notice it as we walked. Her blue and purple mane fell around it, obscuring a large portion of the actual metal. None of us mentioned it, we just kept silent and listened as we walked to the city. It was just how Lost and I were raised, I guessed, and it fit Xeno rather well, to say nothing; she was just staying true to herself. Every so often the Goddess would shake her mane, looking like she had a bad itch to get rid of, then continue walking.

Seeing so much intact was breathtaking. Unlike the ruins around Leathers, and everything we'd seen on the way here, this town looked normal. In the mountains there wasn't as much direct damage from the megaspells, thanks to the natural protections they offered. I could see dozens of ponies milling around, going about their daily lives, almost as if Equestria had never been nuked into a Wasteland.

We trotted through the street, flanked on one side by an apartment building that still had windows. On the other side was something that had probably once been a park. Where we were now was bustling with life, and walking in the company of a Goddess, we were probably as safe as we could ever be.

Through the windows, I saw lights. Nice ones, not like the barely function lights in the raider hideout. A shop door opened to let a stallion enter, and through it, the voice of the DJ on the radio called out “up at Shattered Hoof from being ens-” before the door slammed shut again. I made a mental note to flick on the radio sometime to hear more from that DJ.

I could smell somepony, somewhere cooking something, which actually made me laugh. We had to fight our way here, and these ponies were so relaxed that they could afford to spend the time to cook a decent meal. It was almost like somepony had taken the homeliness of Stable Sixty and put it in this little town. Were it not for the obvious wear of two centuries, I would have sworn I was back in Equestria before the war destroyed it.

“Wow,” L.A. said, her mouth hanging open, “everything here is so intact and preserved!” She admired the

buildings and sights with a huge smile across her face. Looked back and forth a few times, she furrowed her brow. Finally she whispered quiet enough I had to strain to hear her, “Not much to look at, though...”

Raising an eyebrow, I gave the town a once-over as well. Ponies in the street, trotting from place to place. None particularly attractive, I guessed? Some wore saddlebags, looking like they had places to go. Others seemed to walk happily, giant smiles plastered on their muzzles. It seemed like a nice little town.

After a long pause, the Goddess looked down at my sister, and blinked. “We- have spent much time working to make the city habitable. We- wish it to be a safe haven for the future. There are many dangers in the Wasteland, Our- Unity shall be protected,” she explained, her voice straining, hitching every so often. “Through talks with outsiders, We- are aware of what other cities and towns are like, ones that have sprung without Our- influence. We- will bring Unity to all ponies so that there may be peace and survival. Perhaps you will meet Our- ally, travel with her, and learn for yourself.”

She led us down the main street and toward a large building with a sign hanging from its front which read ‘Town Hall’ in faded paint. It sat atop a hill at the edge of town, overlooking a dried lake and the ‘park.’ Several smaller houses surrounded it on either side, dotted alongside the cracked streets.

“Willnot that make this city a target? You have many stallions, and you are secluded. This is good, but it is not enough?” Xeno asked, with no special respect given to the Goddess before us. She was right, there *were* a lot of stallions. Xeno wasn’t looking at the townsp ponies though, instead she stared at the taller winged unicorn, eyeing her up and down several times. If I was flanked by *another* lesbian...

“There is nothing for you to fear, We- have everything under control,” the Goddess responded flatly, turning down a side street. She began walking toward the abandoned street across the way.

We silently followed her. It struck me that we didn’t know what to call her, or where to even begin finding out why Gunbuck had this place listed on the PipBuck. I trotted ahead, intend to ask her about the town and if ponies might need help. Before I could get a word out, I heard the Pipbuck start to click. My skin crawled, my ears twitched, and I looked all around, searching for a sign of the deadly radiation. A few steps more and the slow nagging click went haywire, barraging us with a constant CLICKCLICKCLICKCLICK!

Even with Lost wearing the PipBuck, the clicking was so loud it sounded like it was pressed to my head. The clicking came so rapidly that it was less a click and more of a perilous growl. The warning came too late for me to stop. A wave of sickness washed over me before I could even brace myself. If the radiation in the mines had been bad, *this* was catastrophic. I doubled over in pain, clutching my stomach. I tasted something coppery, and backpedaled as quickly as I could. It was powerful radiation, and without serious protection, I’d be dead in minutes.

The Goddess continued walking as if nothing affected her. Xeno walked on as well, ignoring the sickness that struck me. I held back the vomit and watched as the zebra finally realized we’d stopped, and trotted back toward us.

Lurching forward, I grabbed at my barrel with my steel hoof. It hurt, slamming the metal into my side, but it was nothing compared to what the radiation was doing inside. I dry heaved, fighting the urge to vomit.

“Hidden!” Lost yelped, grabbing me. She pulled me back past whatever invisible threshold I’d crossed, and dug out a spare RadAway. “Are you okay?”

“Mmhhh... perfectly fine, thank you,” I muttered, nodding to her. I took the RadAway, and downed the entirety of it in a single gulp. The aftertaste wasn’t anywhere near as bad this time. Worth it, to save my life. Just what was *in* that side of town? Probably lots, since nopony without a death wish would go over there. Part of me wanted to put on the radiation suit and go treasure hunting, just to find out what was left, but the smarter part reminded me that even with RadSafe, the suit, and a constant stream of RadAway I doubted I’d find anything.

It begged the question though, of why the town was in such a position. Ponies living normal lives, so close to danger that an accidental misstep could send them to their death. Looking side to side, I checked for a marker, a sign, anything to warn that this was dangerous ground. The Goddess might claim that it was safe and unified. I didn’t *quite* believe her, because any town that didn’t warn about local radiation was asking for trouble.

We all backed away as a group.

“Um, miss Goddess, we can't follow you, there's too much radiation here,” L.A. said, yelling just loud enough to get the Goddess’ attention. She draped a hoof over me and pulled me close, a worried frown spreading across her lips.

Turning slowly, the Goddess ahead of us canted her head to the side and raised an eyebrow. “Yes. We- are still working to make it so everypony can live within the entirety of the city,” she explained. “It’s a chore that takes time. Unity is not something that can be reached overnight. In the interim, the radiation is useful for keeping out those We- prefer to keep away. We- recommend seeing Tally for the night. He, or Tab, will be able to set you with a place to sleep.” She pointed toward one of the larger buildings with a wing as an afterthought, then walked off. “We- have business to attend to. We- must talk...” she trailed off, fairly obviously not speaking to the three of us anymore. I’d always been taught that the Goddesses were the embodiment of kindness and consideration, but she just struck me as a bit strange. Maybe it was the steel rod through her head?

“Okay,” I said, looking at the sky. I frowned. Sure, the sun was behind the edge of the mountaintops and giving off the haze of twilight, but it wasn’t quite late enough that we’d need to be sleeping just yet. “What else is there to do?” I looked to Lost and Xeno for help.

“Sell off our treasure?” my sister offered, shaking the bags she was carrying. “I’d like to fix the armor too.” That seemed like as good an idea as any.

We turned toward the building the Goddess pointed to, and headed up to ask about the nearest shop. I stopped and gave one last look around the city, both to the barren irradiated side and the bustling city street we stood on. Something dug at the back of my mind. We were here to help these ponies, but none of the stallions looked like they needed any help. I gave one last look at my surroundings, searching for any problems that stood out. The city was too good to be true.

I laughed to myself. No... something just made me uneasy. The claws picked little pieces out of the back of my mind, nagging me. I didn't feel like I was in danger, like I had been with Wirepony or with my nightmare. I was safe with my sister and Xeno to back me up. Sure there were stallions about, but that was *normal* for a town this size, so why were they still digging...

Lost and Xeno had walked off, talking quietly to one another.

"Hey wait up!" I yelled, and trotted after my sister and friend.

* * *

"You are not a talented pony in selling. The price you list for many of your wares is far more than they are worth. I do not understand you, pony. What good is it to hurt those you wish to make your customers?" Xeno demanded, talking down to the shopkeeper stallion in a way I'd never seen before. "You have set poor prices on wares are selling. Is there a reason we should trust your prices when you are buying from us? Do you not wish us to sell you what we have?"

The stallion looked ready to crack, and was actively hiding his face in his tan mane. "I ju- I just price by what I see!" he tried to explain. "Supply and demand!" Looking back and forth between the three of us, he faltered, and backed from the counter. "Show- Just show me what you have. I'll make sure the price is good. I'll trade what's fair!"

"This is good, shop pony," Xeno said, tapping the counter with her forehoof. "Your leader told us that this was a safe place, with ponies who work together. Prove then that your deals are not as foul as raider's. Sisters, what have we to trade?" She looked back, winking to us where the stallion couldn't see. She might not be completely fluent, but Goddesses-damned! She knew how to cut a deal with a merchant.

Lost and I dumped all the treasure we'd 'acquired' out onto the counter. Bottles and scraps, weapons we didn't want, and other assorted semi-useful items clattered onto the counter and tumbled past onto the floor. I could carry a lot more than I'd thought, apparently. Still, I sorted out the things I wanted to keep and placed them back in my bag. Along with my pistols, I made sure the bottle of Buck was nestled right at the top. Just in case.

"So, she takes care of talking to merchants from now on," Lost whispered to me. "Less times we'll have to deal with somepony like Broker."

I nodded in agreement, watching as Xeno worked her magic with the shopkeep. Whether through

intimidation or just fast-talking zebra skills, she'd already sold half of our things for far more than the PipBuck had indicated they were worth. It almost looked like she was enjoying herself, given how she was slamming her hooves into the counter. She had a smile across her muzzle though, so there wasn't much to worry about.

I decided to look around and see what was worth buying. Poorly-maintained guns and general junk lined the shelves along the walls. On one of the shelves lay a copy of *Guns and Bullets*, just lying out for the buying. I snatched it up before anypony else could, wait, we were the only ones in the store. This would be great to read along with my copy of *Equestrian... Army... Today... Hey!* I'd never gotten to read my magazine. All that time we just sat and did absolutely nothing while I was recovering, and I'd never taken the time to read? I fumed at myself and kept browsing.

"Are there any items you are interjected in purchasing, ponies?" asked Xeno, finally having sold off the last of our junk. "We have sold more items than he has caps for. Buying his wares would be good to make your caps equal. Would you prefer to keep the items he cannot afford?"

"This!" I said, tossing her the magazine. She caught it on the tip of her hoof and set it on the counter. "Let me look around for anything else." I joined Lost on the far side of the shelf. "What're you looking at?"

Lost pointed a hoof to the centuries-old food that filled one of the shelves. With a sigh, she lifted the best looking pieces in her telekinesis and moved them to the table. "Better than nothing. Won't be the same as Marshmallow Sundae's cooking though."

"She spoiled us," I replied. One more look over the shelves, and I found something interesting. On the bottom shelf, hidden in a back corner I spotted several different drugs. There was a tin of something I wasn't familiar with called Mint-als. I did recognize several syringes of Med-X, and a bottle of Buck. A tentative tap indicated the bottle was full. There was even a bigger syringe labeled- Wait, a *syringe* of Buck? I'd never seen that before. I pulled it out and looked at it. The label was on sideways, but it looked good. Buck injected straight into the bloodstream? That would probably work so much better. I snatched up the various drugs in my hooves, and happily placed them on the counter with the food and book.

"Do you really need all that?" Lost asked, staring over her glasses at me. "You're not in any fights right now, or in a difficult surgery. You don't need it."

"But, what if somepony else buys it? Or what if we *do* need it for a fight?" I said, trying not to sound like I was pleading. This was for emergencies. Given how I felt, I might need them soon.

"You have plenty already. Put it all back," she said, and pointed me toward the shelf.

I begrudgingly put everything back, but made sure to stuff them deep in a corner with lots of other things in front to keep other shoppers from seeing. I knew I had plenty, but it never hurt to be prepared. If there was anything I'd learned in the past few days, it was the importance of preparation. That and that I *really* liked how Buck made me feel. The withdrawal though... That was beside the point. The idle clawing in

my head just made me want backup.

“Okay okay! Look, you’re bleeding me dry here,” whined the earth pony behind the counter. How nice of him to wait for us to finish talking. “You can take all the food you’ve got, the magazine, *and* the rest of my caps. But I’m out after that. You need to leave. We don’t have a lot of trade here in the city, so I need as many caps as I can get.” He threw several caps down on the counter.

“Thank you, merchant pony. It is good luck, for a change, that we have met. This is good business we have had,” said Xeno with a smile. She collected the caps and tossed them into my bag with accuracy I’d thought her incapable of.

“My name isn’t ‘merchant pony’ you know, it’s Sale Price,” Sale griped. He frowned and started putting his newly acquired goods behind the counter. I heard him mutter, “Not that I’ll have any sales anymore...” No more sales? Oh well, we had plenty of caps now...

We left the shop and headed toward the apartment-turned-inn. The minute the shop door was closed, Xeno turned around and beamed at us, “I got a good deal for your goods, sisters! He was easy to convince. I told him of the prices of wandering merchants, he did not think he could compete.” She was so happy she was practically prancing in place.

I smiled, happy to see her happy. For such a dour zebra constantly focused on death and her drugs, she seemed genuinely glad about robbing the shop owner blind. “But we haven’t met any traveling merchants, Xeno,” I said.

“I did not think that was information he needed to know!” she said, grinning.

* * *

“Tally!” yelled the stallion calling himself Tab. He stood inside the apartment building the Goddess suggested we stay at. Tab tapped his hoof impatiently, turning and yelling again, “I am not the innkeeper! You are. Get down here so I can get back to my damn bar!” Well, he was one angry stallion. Given the soft look in his sky blue eyes, I’d expected far different.

“Well, there’s really no rush,” I said. Whether this was a sanctuary town secreted in the mountains or not, they were still a close knit clique, and we were outsiders. It might just be best to go find somewhere a little more out-of-the-way to sleep for the night.

Tab’s expression changed in an instant, reverting to the soft-looking stallion we’d first seen. “I’m really sorry about this,” he said. “Tally’s usually really good about tending the inn. He might be a while, so would you like a drink while you wait?” The blue-maned stallion pointed to a giant hole in the wall. It looked as though there’d been makeshift renovations, and there was even a little rusted-out bar built up inside the room.

My ears lowered. Booze was *not* my friend. At all. Lost, however, jumped at the chance, and got herself a drink of something-or-other that I didn't care to know the name of, to sip on while we waited. The two of them made small talk, the stallion all smiles and offering to help. I stood with Xeno against the back wall, watching.

"Little too friendly, isn't he?" I asked my zebra friend.

"Ponies have yet to cease confusing me. You treat each other so differently," she said, frowning. "My kind treat all zebra as their own, weare a community. Weare..." She paused and muttered something in her native tongue and then looked at me. "I am unsure how to say these things. We welcome all without question."

"You sure I can't get you two anything while you wait?" yelled Tab, looking past his conversation with Lost to Xeno and me. A bit too friendly... A dismissive wave of my hoof and he turned back to my sister.

"That's what the Goddess said too. I just don't feel like we're really welcome," I explained, looking around the makeshift bar. At least Lost looked happy. "Mom really drilled it into our heads before she died. She always said 'stay away from cities. Ponies look out for their own and don't care for newcomers. You're not one of them, ever' until she was blue in the face." I shrugged. "Old habits die hard."

"Better old habits die hard than *you*, pony," said the zebra. Wait, what? She looked at me for several seconds before spouting off something in her zebra tongue. "That did not translate as well as I had thought it would. Your mother was a smart one; she has given you many good lessons." She clopped a hoof over my back, pulled a cigarette from *somewhere*, and walked toward the bar.

I watched from my spot, shifting restlessly. This town didn't seem like it needed saving. I needed to check the radio soon, see if there were any broadcasts that might help. Worst case, I'd hear about the heroine again...

The door to the building slammed open and a positively tiny unicorn stormed in. He looked exhausted, having the same bags under his eyes that constantly framed my sister's.

"Tally! Finally," yelled the barkeeper stallion, "we've got guests." He nodded his head a few times toward my little group. "I thought you were here, I guess you were," he stopped, looked up and whistled, "out!"

"Yeah, I umm, I had some things to do. So, my good mares, you need a room?" he said, flashing a wide smile. Without waiting for an answer he went around behind the makeshift counter and hopped up onto a stool so he could see over it. With the extra height I got a good look at him. He really was tiny; much smaller than my sister and me.

I walked over from the bar and stood before the purple-coated unicorn. "Yes, the Goddess suggested we talk to you and get a place to stay," I explained.

“Well, I’ve got plenty of rooms, this apartment building used to house quite a few,” he said, waving a hoof behind him. “The rooms are all in great condition! Just right for a group of mares looking to get out of the Wasteland for a night. A pretty mare like you,” he said, winking at me and sending a shudder down my spine. “...probably wants to have a nice, soft bed. Which floor would you like?” He dove under the counter and began rummaging for something.

“The... second floor?” Lost said from the bar. It was a suggestion, and better than the one I had. Both Xeno and I nodded in agreement, though I couldn’t bring myself to look at her.

“Sounds wonderful!” Tally said, pulling himself back up onto the stool. In the faintly brown haze of his magic he held a set of keys. “Here ya go, this room has anything you could ever need.” Once again he flashed the wide smile and eyed the three of us. He pointed a hoof to the door at the side of the room. “Just up the stairs that way and down the hall, you can’t miss it. Room number’s on the key. Don’t worry if you lose it; I have plenty of spares.”

Creepy. We thanked him, paid up, and went to the room. Just as promised, it had everything. Much of it was obviously converted from family apartment. But there were beds, a workbench, a *working* bathroom, and a table to eat at. More than we could ever expect. It was really wonderful what a little bit of mountain could do to keep Balefire from totally destroying everything. Aside from the constant murmur of quiet voices through the walls, this place was wonderful. Now if only the claws in my mind weren’t picking away at something I couldn’t place.

Why’d Mom have to make me so paranoid?

* * *

I looked over to Xeno. L.A. really didn’t need to throw us out while she fixed her armor and the pistol she’d burnt out. It didn’t matter, big sister said out, so out we went. I thought it probably had more to do with her wanting to avoid finishing our conversation, or fessing up to the fact that she freaked out for no reason. It was for the best, I didn’t want to let her know that I’d overheard her and Crème.

The zebra trotted quietly to my side, deep blue eyes looking casually to the line of buildings across the way. She’d walked right into that radiation without so much as flinching. “Xeno, why does nothing seem to affect you?” I asked.

“I have answered this. There are many drugs that I take. They are useful for surviving in the Wasteland,” she explained, pointing to her bag. As if remembering she had them, she pulled one of the looted cigarettes from her bag and placed it in her lips. “When my brothers and I were old enough to assist with hunting and scavenging, we were given gifts for survival. They have helped much.”

“Do you think you learned what he sent you off to learn?” I asked, trying to keep my mind busy. The streets weren’t nearly as full anymore, and the walk through town was comforting and calm. We took the time to window shop at the broken-out buildings. By the time I looked back, the cigarette was lit.

Seriously, how did she do that?

“I donot think so. My learning has been most spent staying alive. Meeting you sister ponies and losing my brothers was the major change. I have gone from traveling and surviving, to interacting with ponies,” she said, flipping a hoof casually. “Zahi and Zaki did not like ponies. There were incidence at the start of our journey.”

I just nodded. The little snippets of her past were honestly fascinating. To think that we could’ve been mortal enemies and trying to kill one another if we were living two centuries ago. It wasn’t that hard to get along and share. I looked at the sniper rifle across her back. Sharing, the one thing that could’ve prevented the Wasteland from ever happening. We weren’t so different.

“It is funny, I think. Your raiders will shoot anything!” she said, chuckling. “I have watched a pony shoot himself in his frustration!” She giggled a bit, something I never thought I’d see her do. When her guard was down, she acted almost normal.

“I’ve never seen you laugh like that,” I said, trying to bring up how guarded she acted all the time. “It’s like the time you squealed. I never thought you...” The stare she gave me shut me up in a second.

“I do not squeal,” she said.

“But you did,” I corrected her, “when Wirepony first showed up, he got up behind you and- Ok you don’t squeal.” Looking away I took a step back.

Note to self; Do not piss off the zebra who makes the concoctions that keep you alive...

“I do *not*,” she said again, spitting out the cigarette. A stomp punctuated her mood. “As I was saying. I think it is strange, the way you ponies fight. When meeting new ponies, my brothers were often attacked, yet I was ignored. Do you view mares as less dangerous? I have met many dangerous mares. Youare a dangerous mare...” She looked me up and down once, frowning her brow. Pointing a hoof at me, she said again, “Youare very dangerous.”

“Have to be. Like you said, ponies here focus on death constantly,” I said, snarkily. “You have to take out the most dangerous threat first, that’s how you survive. Did your brothers shoot first?” The two of them shooting me wasn’t really a sore point anymore. I felt more guilty about killing them than anything. No matter what my reasoning. I should’ve gone for a leg shot or something. Given how many times I’d taken damage to my legs, I knew just how much a pony, or zebra, could survive... I tapped my steel hoof against the crumbling street idly. Not really wanting to know the answer, I changed the subject, “So, those parting gifts?”

“My mother gave me two extremely powerful elixirs. She then taught me to make my own potions, concoctions, and libations,” the zebra explained. “She follows the old ways, she believes in the stars and their curses. I learned better.” She raised a rear leg and nodded toward the hypnotic mark on her flanks.

“They do not care, they merely expand away from us. There is no greater power at work.”

“So why do you think you’re surrounded by bad luck?” I asked. We reached the end of the street and turned around. There was a town hall over on the hill a short ways away, down another road, but there wasn’t any reason to go explore it. The building was fairly nondescript, and rotting from centuries of weather and radiation. The ‘Town Hall’ sign hung limply by a single chain, and the windows were all blacked out. If it wasn’t completely looted... No, these weren’t ruins to hunt for treasure through. This place belonged to other ponies.

Still, it couldn’t hurt to just look.

“I have never said *bad* luck. I merely feel that a special luck follows me,” she said, turning with me. “It is not something I expect ponies to understand. Very few ponies have understood.” She dug around in her bag and pulled out one of the larger jars. Holding it in her hoof she continued, “I am not as skilled as my mother. She made potions that dulled the damage of the Wastes and the radiation, strengthened bones to keep them from breaking when fighting to survive.” She looked at the jar longingly. “One day, I will create something to rival her. I will be a good zebra, no matter what the stars or luck say.”

Just like us, she just wanted to be a part of her family again. I’d taken that away from her, partially at least. Didn’t she realize we saw her as family now? Having been welcomed into the Steel Rangers, even if just as family and not members of the order, we were part of something better. They wanted to let her in too. Why did she have to be so difficult. Ponies and zebras weren’t so different...

“I think you’re a good zebra,” I said, placing my steel hoof on her shoulder. “Let’s head back. Lost’s had enough alone time. On the way, I’ll tell you about the time I got surrounded by zombies just because I had to go pee...”

* * *

“Ta da!” L.A. said, presenting the newly-repaired armor to us. While Xeno and I walked on the streets below, she’d managed to get the armor into nearly new condition. All the dents and dings were gone, and even the etched designs looked perfect. Practice down in the Stable, where she could relax, must have done wonders for her skills with fine manipulation.

Cheater.

At least I had Xeno on my side, with hooves like mine that couldn’t work tiny objects or anything else fancy. Then again, she had that fancy ‘appear and disappear’ trick she could do with a simple wave. Probably just a different kind of cheater magic. I sighed, “It looks good, sis. Next time, let’s not get to this point, okay?” Being the voice of reason felt weird.

I trotted over to the window and looked out the blackened glass. I could at least see the city street below, past the spiderwebbed cracks in the window. What had this place been like before, when Equestria truly

existed? Was there a family who lived here hundreds of years ago? Did they have foals, jobs, vacations, or... whatever it was that Equestrian ponies did?

A stallion galloped across the street and out of sight. Where was he going this late in the evening? The clawing at the back of my mind started nagging again.

“What do you think of the Goddess?” Lost asked. I turned back to join the conversation, and found her staring at Xeno over the rims of her glasses.

“You ponies believe that she is a Goddess?” Xeno asked, pulling a jar from her bag. She swirled it idly, continuing, “She is different than both of you, different is not better. For ponies like you who have told me many times that they do not trust others... I think it is odd that you do trust her, without question.” She took a drink from the jar, practically glaring over the rim at my sister.

I didn’t feel like getting into it with either of them, so instead I pulled some food from my bags. The food we’d brought from Stable Sixty would go bad soon, and as Lamington had said, I needed to use it well. Fresh food would fill all of us better than preserved snacks and sodas. I passed some out to the others and snacked on a delicious, radiation-free carrot.

“She speaks strangely. Do you think it is because of the metal in her head?” Xeno asked, between idle nibbles of her own carrot.

“I think so. She stutters. That’s not very Goddess-like, is it?” my sister mused from behind a bottle of Sparkle~Cola.

“It’s not, but there’s something going on here either way, right?” I asked with a shrug. “The town seems unremarkable so far, other than the condition it’s in. So, why would Gunbuck have a marker for it even before coming here? There isn’t anypony that needs saving.” I looked at the PipBuck on my sister’s foreleg. Why couldn’t he have at least left a note?

“Maybe it’s not that they need saving? There could be something we’re not seeing here,” Lost said. She looked at the screen and began pressing buttons with her cheater magic. “I mean, the PipBuck itself doesn’t even say *why* we’re supposed to be here, just that we are.” She pressed her hoof to her forehead, between her glasses and horn. I felt about the same. “Maybe they all just need a good lay?” Suddenly she snorted soda from her nose. “Maybe Gunbuck was coming here for a good fuck?” Unable to stop, she snickered into her hoof. “Trying to get the taste of that psycho mare out of his mouth?”

We shared a laugh. Sure it was ridiculous, but it helped. A pang of sadness shot through my chest, and I thought about the past few hours... The past few days. Should I really be laughing, now that we were back in the dangers of the Wasteland? It’d only been a few hours since we left the first place we could’ve called home. An awkward laugh at a half-assed joke about stallions and sex? Was this all that was out here for us?

Closing my eyes, I remembered all that'd happened. Nightmares about gangers, then that monster, but... then family. The memory was more than just Seethe staring me down while I couldn't move. Now it was Lamington without his helmet, and not just that, all of the others with him. It was victory over a monster.

"I miss the Steel Rangers," I said, staring down at the floor. I could feel the little picks and pokes of the claws, but they weren't worth the trouble.

"I do too," my sister said, using her magic to tilt my head back up. She smiled at me. "We'll see them again soon." Even smiling, her face held the same sadness I felt. The air felt heavy in the room all of a sudden, as if a great weight was being pressed down and crushing the air we tried to breathe.

"We are the only mares in this town, aside from the pony you call a Goddess," Xeno announced, cutting through the haze without missing a beat. "You may be correct, that these ponies need a good 'lay' to make things better." She hid half her face with her jar, making it impossible to tell just what she meant by that observation.

Stallion, stallion, stallion. She was right... Sale Price, Tab, Tally, every pony I'd seen on the street. Every pony aside from the Goddess had been a stallion. Realization set my brain into overdrive. *Only* stallions? No no, I screamed at my brain as the digging in the back of my mind started with full fervor. A town of only stallions and a Goddess with rebar stuck through her head? *No!* I took a deep breath, trying to stay calm. I didn't want Lost or Xeno to catch on. It was okay, the stallions hadn't tried anything so far...

Spare keys.

My brain hit a wall. I looked around the room. There weren't any chains, there weren't muzzles hidden anywhere. I just needed to think about something else. Think about *anything* else. Lamington, he'd make it better. Why didn't we go with him? He and the others would have protected me. But I had Lost! She was good in a fight, proven by what she did to those raiders. Xeno was here too, she'd help. She hadn't run off yet, so of course she'd help.

I wrenched my brain back from the claws. Only stallions? Well, maybe every one of them was into other stallions! That would perfectly explain why they didn't need other mares. And, and, then they wouldn't need to go after me. Because they were all gay.

Reining my thoughts in, I let out a sigh and skewed my ears back. We just hadn't seen them, *that's all*. Just because we didn't see a pony didn't mean she wasn't there. The world outside of our vision still went about life as normal. I laughed inwardly, and looked back to my sister. She hadn't caught my near-freakout...

"That was the first thing I noticed," L.A. said, pulling her lips into a wry smirk. That's right, I didn't miss a thing... I could just casually slide back into the conversation... The thinky pony realized right off the bat what was missing. She didn't bother to say anything, because she thought we'd all noticed at the same time. Obviously *I* hadn't. "They're probably all working inside, we don't have to *see* mares to know

they're here."

I glared at her, but said nothing. What a great job at being a thinky pony I was doing, not noticing something so obvious. I remembered saying to myself that every pony I'd seen was a stallion, yet didn't put two and two together. I sighed; I had a long way to go. At least I'd drawn the same conclusion she had.

But what was the significance? Both of them noticed, so it must be something big. Every stallion here was super nice to us, more so than they honestly needed to be. I didn't want to think about it. Instead, I got up and walked to the nearest bed I could find. "Wake me if you figure out what the problem is," I yelled back to the main room.

I faceplanted onto the bed between the pillows and laid there, listening.

* * *

The bed was terribly uncomfortable.

The voices through the walls were annoying. They needed to either talk loud enough that I could listen in, or be *quiet*.

I could hear Xeno talking with my sister over the murmurs through the walls. They droned on and on about language, and how zebra and pony tongues were different. Let the thinky ponies talk...

Time passed slowly, though I wasn't actually counting this time. I didn't have the PipBuck as a distraction, so all I could do was lay. Eventually I heard their talking fade and disappear, followed by the light from behind the door clicking away.

At least they sounded happy while they spoke. I smiled, happy with my family at least. Lost was always there for me, and Xeno had proven herself to be exceptionally useful. I yawned, finally getting tired. If sleep would just come soon it would be perfect.

I closed my eyes, trying to will myself to sleep. If I just laid still and focused on my breathing, sleep would come. I got an itch, and tried to ignore it. My legs were already asleep, if I just stayed like this I'd- I scratched the itch. Every part of me was awake again. Why was it so hard to just fall asleep?

Was it because we didn't have the nice comfy Stable beds this time? I'd really been spoiled too much by them. Lost wasn't in the room with me, had she decided to sleep with Xeno in the other room? What if they were both into mares? Xeno was eyeing the Goddess, and I knew about Lost's preference. That's not fair. Lost was *mine*. I wouldn't lose her to anypony else, not Xeno and not Crème Brûlée.

I grabbed a spare pillow and pulled it close, squeezing it with all four legs. I didn't want to lose her. She said I was all she had left, but she was all I had left too. Wasn't my love good enough? Did she need

somepony else to do those things for her? I... I could be what she wanted! No... no I couldn't. Burying my face in the pillow, I cried. She wouldn't leave me alone in the Wasteland, would she?

No, Lost was *always* there for me. Xeno too, she was useful and a good friend... Hey, I was thinking in circles! Maybe that meant... I yawned again, I couldn't see anything. Maybe I was asleep...

~ ~ ~

I sat in a flowerpot. A very big one, with warm, soft dirt packed all around me like a loamy blanket. Sunlight tickled my mane, and I let out a sigh. I hadn't been this comfortable since my last shower in Stable Sixty. Granted, that was more warm water and not warm dirt, but I really couldn't complain about-

Rough paws clamped around my mane and pulled me out of my flowerpot. I squeaked in surprise as I hung face to face with a *manticore*. The leonine beast had a single scar running from underneath his (her, its? Did having a mane mean they were male, or did they *all* look like that?) left eye, down to its lips, where a chipped fang showed from beneath a fuzzy lip.

"Did she really kill him?" the manticore asked, turning me around as if to inspect me. The creature's voice was surprisingly feminine for such a hulking beast.

I could only hoarsely squeak again in response. I couldn't talk, for some reason, and started to panic. Of course manticores could talk, I just couldn't remember having heard one do so before. I didn't like this, not at all. I wanted my flowerpot.

"That's what she said," the same feminine voice said. Though this time, it came from behind me. I kicked at the manticore in front of me, turning to look at the other voice. Surprise! It was another manticore! This one had to have been the first one's twin... or, wait, mirror image. The scar under the second monster's eye ran down its *right* cheek, to a chipped *right* fang.

Lefty, or so I decided the first manticore's name was, held me a safe distance away from his face, to avoid my flailing hooves. "Shh, she's waking up!" Lefty said, quirking an eyebrow. He held me with outstretched paws and peered at me for several seconds.

I hung still, not daring to move. Was he going to eat me? I'd had enough of me eaten by wasteland monsters already, thank you!

"Hmm. Guess it was a false alarm," Lefty said.

"Doesn't matter," said Righty. "Find out whatever you can about her. She could wake up at any time." The manticore reached up and pulled open my torso with a claw. I winced, but it really didn't hurt. It just felt weird and empty.

"Lots of guns in here!" Righty said, sounding pleased with himself. He pulled a half-dozen assault rifles,

two high-caliber pistols, and a minigun *out of my chest cavity* and stacked them on the ground. Then he opened the top of my skull and pulled out a little brown bottle. “Not much else though: some Buck and general Wasteland wanderer stuff. Nothing special.”

Lefty sounded disappointed. “Okay, well, don’t take anything. If she knows we’re onto her, there might be a problem.”

“We got what we needed. Let’s go,” said Righty.

Lefty nodded and dropped me back into my flowerpot. I sank, down, and down and down...

~ ~ ~

“You two stay here, I’m going to talk to her.”

Mom pointed to some rubble just off the road we were traveling on. There was a space underneath just big enough Lost and I to fit under.

“Alright Mom,” Lost said, and scampered off to the rubble.

“Can, can you check and see if she has any toys to sell?” I asked, smiling hopefully. The Wasteland was fun to hunt through, but still. It’d be nice to have a toy or two to play with. Lost and I could do so much with just one! A traveling merchant would have that, wouldn’t she?

“I’ll ask, honey, but food and ammo come first,” she said, giving me a weak smile in return. “You know that. If I have enough left over, and she has something, I will. Promise.” She had a sad look in her light green eyes, and some part of me knew better than to think we could spare caps on toys, but I had to ask. With a gentle poke on the nose, she motioned with her hoof for me to go hide. “Now, go.”

I did as she said, snuggling against my sister underneath the outcropping of broken concrete and rusty rebar. Together we watched mom run up to the broken road and flag down the traveling merchant, her brahmin and her mercenary bodyguard. We stayed quiet and hidden somewhere safe. Mom handled the trading while we were safely out of sight. Mom was so smart.

“Think she’ll get us anything good?” I asked Lost, leaning against her. This part was so boring.

“I don’t know! I hope she gets some of those snacky cakes, they’re the best,” Lost said, licking her lips. They *were* delicious, and one of the few snacks mom let us eat. Together we watched as Mom traded and made deals.

Leaning forward, I watched them talk. The merchant was a yellow earth pony with a fairly unique scar across her nose and eye. She had the unicorn bodyguard standing watch, near her brahmin. Flicking my ears around, I could pick up bits and pieces of what they were saying. Something about a gun, she

laughed, and said something I couldn't make out. I strained to hear, and finally heard the merchant say "Pleasure doin' business, Green Gypsy."

"Don't you forget it!" she said happily, already trotting back toward us. Her bags looked much fuller than before, and the smile across her lips meant she'd done well. It faded when she got to us though. "C'mon out little ones," she said. Looking to me, she offered a hoof to help me get out from under the rubble. "Sorry Hidden, no toys today."

"Awwwwwww!" I whined, pulling myself out. Oh well, at least she tried.

"Okay, okay. No toys, but presents at least. Here," she said, lifting out a package of the snack cakes with her magic. "One for each of you. Lost, you have to share." She eyed my sister, and wagged a hoof at her in warning.

Together we shared the cakes while we walked. Lost levitated both in her magic, one for me and one for her.

Cheater.

The three of us walked off the road, and back into the ruins. The rest of the day was going to-

Mom stopped mid-step. Without looking at us, she said, "Girls, go hide."

"But, mom..." I pleaded.

"Now!" she scolded, pointing a hoof.

We did as we were told, finding more rubble to hide in. Nestling together as close as possible, we tried to look as small as possible. It wasn't really hard for us to disappear into the ruins of old Equestria. Lost was just big enough to protect me if something happened, but I trusted Mom with all my heart. My sister shivered, an anxious look across her face. Mom never yelled like that. Whatever had her riled up must be bad... I swallowed, watching with a heart full of worry. But Mom would be fine, *no matter what*.

"Come on out then!" she yelled, her horn glowing with a green haze of telekinesis. From her saddlebags slid a hunting rifle and a plasma rifle, her Dedication and Devotion. A worried look crossed her face, and she looked side to side. Whatever she called for wasn't coming out, and I started to twist my ears about trying to hear whatever she could see.

The ground trembled beneath my hooves, and I shot a glance at Lost. She wobbled beside me, her eyes wide with fear. Whatever it was, it was either gigantic or-

The ground erupted underneath Mom! She dove out of the way, just in time to miss a set of wickedly sharp-looking claws. They stabbed up into the air where she'd stood only a half-second before. The claws

shifted, and a hulking monster like I'd never seen burst from the ground. It landed on three legs, with the claws dug through the busted concrete chunk. I slid back further into the ruins, looking at it. This, was this a Hellhound? Mom had mentioned them once before, saying they looked like big scary dogs.

Mom's story didn't describe the Hellhound right, calling this a 'big scary dog' was like calling raiders 'unfriendly!' Trembling, I took in as much as I could, my eyes darting back and forth between Mom and the monster. The creature stood hunched over, wearing heavy armor over his head and shoulders, a ratty brown vest covering his scarred and patchy coat. Mom stood at the ready, looking tiny compared to the Hellhound.

The Hellhound carried a giant cannon in his free front paw, a weapon that looked something like a powered-up version of Devotion. With snarling lips over huge fangs and claws that looked like it could slice her in half, it looked like walking murder. I bit back tears, not wanting to think of what might happen if Mom didn't win.

Mom didn't flinch, though. She looked toward us, and then back at the Hellhound. "I got foals to protect," she shouted at the Hellhound. "PipBuck says you're red. Either get going this second, or there's gonna be problems." She aimed both of her guns at the clawed giant. If she was worried, she hid it well. I hated when Mom was like that, so angry and shouting.

The Hellhound just smashed the concrete stuck to his claws, and before her sentence was finished he charged at her. Brutal claws swept across the air, right at her face.

Mom was faster, though just *barely*. She danced on her hooves out of the way, spinning the guns in her telekinesis around and firing a shot from each at the Hellhound.

"Lost, I don't like this! What if he hurts Mom?" I asked in a loud whisper. I curled tighter against my sister, worried about watching Mom die. We couldn't lose her! The monster was big and terrifying. He could kill Mom in a single swipe if he caught her. I shivered, my mind going wild with possibilities.

"Mom's tough, Hidden, she'll make him go away," Lost said, and flashed a reassuring smile. She shivered against me, unable to hide how worried she was. Together we could only watch as the two of them traded attacks. The hound's claws never seemed to land a real blow, only taking out pieces of her mane. At the same time, none of her shots seemed to do more than graze him.

Mom would win. She would always protect us.

The Hellhound didn't like missing, and leveled his cannon at Mom. She darted out of the way as he fired. My eardrums exploded from the deafening boom. It was so loud that I thought a Balefire blast had gone off in front of me. A sizzling blast of magic erupted from the cannon's barrel, and vaporized the ground where Mom had been standing. He trained the gun on her as she ran, and I clamped my hooves over my ears to keep from going deaf as he fired on her.

Mom returned fire, but none of her attacks seemed to do any good. Bullets didn't faze him, and the energy blasts barely left scorch marks. She dodged and weaved around the magical energy the Hellhound fired at her. Slowly, she was closing the gap between them, his shots barely missing as he got closer and closer.

I watched, mouthing to myself, '*Mom, run, please... Don't get hit!*' Mom was playing this way too dangerous. I knew she was tough, but the monster was too fast for her. Worse still, I saw a- Goddesses no! "Mom, behind you!" I yelled, as the ground buckled and bulged behind her.

"Hidden, stay down!" she yelled back, before turning to see what I'd yelled about. "Oh *shit!*" Fear in her voice, she turned to the first Hellhound, who tossed his weapon aside and charged her. The ground behind her burst open as another Hellhound charged to the surface.

My heart skipped several beats as I saw her caught between two monsters that could kill her. Celestia! Luna! Don't take my mother!

She backpedaled a few steps and shielded her face with her Pipbuck. A half-second later, the perilous claws raked right across it. The arcanotech device snapped in half. Lost and I gasped. A missing limb was a death sentence!

The PipBuck's sacrifice saved Mom's leg. The tips of the hellhound's claws dug gashes across Mom's face. The top half of her ear disappeared into the ruins entirely. Mom screamed and toppled onto her side. She rolled a few times along the dirt before sliding to a stop.

Lost's hooves on my shoulders were the only thing that kept me from running to her. She held me in place as Mom groaned on the ground. Her guns clattered to the concrete. I tried to get to her. I could help. If Lost would just let me...

Mom worked her way to her hooves. Blood covered the side of her sliced up face, but she'd survived it. I fell back onto my haunches again, practically collapsing against Lost. How my sister stayed so calm during this, I'd never know.

The second Hellhound disappeared. I looked for any sign of him, breaks in the ground, something.

Nothing. This wasn't good, not at all.

I shrunk back into the overhanging rubble to make myself smaller and harder to see. Lost did the same, and we huddled together, practically in tears. Mom had to be okay! She would kill the monsters and we'd all go home. Just like *always*.

Mom stood on wobbly legs, her horn sparking back to life. Both Dedication and Devotion lifted into the air, wrapped in the green haze of her telekinesis. She charged the Hellhound, firing the whole time with both guns. She managed to get a few good shots, despite shooting while she ran. She aimed for the sensitive spots, eyes and mouth. If only she could fire and dodge at the same time!

The Hellhound swung at her again, missing by mere inches as she ran past. I clenched my eyes shut, not wanting to see. He roared in frustration, and I opened my eyes just wide enough to see him stop to grab his cannon. With a look of pure rage, he leveled the gun at her. Several times he fired the gun, sending burst after burst of blue magical energy at her. She was alive, and dodging! None hit as she ran, and he couldn't keep up.

The second Hellhound dug out from the ground directly in front of Lost and me. He looked terrifying, with a giant helmet covering his eyes, and spiked armor over his shoulders. With teeth as long as I was tall, I feared he might just eat us. My heart froze, and I dove behind my big sister, pulling against her to try and get away from the monster's reach. In the distance, Mom's voice carried over our screams of terror. As he drew back his gleaming claws, he lurched. The horrific booming screech of the Hellhound's cannon blew my world apart. The Hellhound about to kill us faltered, caught in crackling blue magic. Before the sound faded, he burst into blue ash.

Mom stood between us and the Hellhound, a smile cross her lips. In the middle of a fight she had figured to use his own weapon against his kind and let him kill his companion. I wished one day I could be as clever as her, at least when I was big enough to fight monsters like this on my own.

"Mom!" I yelled, but she said nothing.

With the second Hellhound gone, Mom could focus on the first one. She turned and charged him again, moving from side to side while firing both guns. Her shots just made him madder. She dodged to the side again, but wasn't fast enough. The Hellhound actually *threw* his gun at her, right to where she was stepping. It hit her, hard, and she collapsed to the ground again with a scream.

Her magic broke for only a second. She collected herself and grabbed the cannon from the ground beside her. Even hit with the cuts and bleeding, she was doing well. The Hellhound closed the gap, and raised both paws above her.

She was okay, right? I prayed to the Goddesses. Celestia. Luna. Please, Mom is all Lost and I have. We can't survive without her. I wanted to look away, to hide my face against my sister and wait for Mom to say it was okay. I couldn't hide, I had to watch. I had to see that the Goddesses were looking out for her.

The cannon fired, hitting the Hellhound straight in the face. He went rigid, stopped before he could attack. Blue lightning crackling between the armor and helmet he wore. Mom took the pause to her advantage, and scrambled away on her hooves.

The Hellhound collapsed, letting out a deep groan. With a roar, he pushed himself back up. Before he could get back to fighting, Mom attacked, diving in close and stabbing him with her horn. A sickening squelch sound later, and the Hellhound was stopped dead, her horn dug into his mouth and through the roof of it.

She didn't stop there, though. She brought up the stolen gun and fired over and over into the side of his head. Hellhounds were tough, but their own weapons worked wonders against them. Finally sure the beast was dead, she pulled back and backed away from the corpse.

Mom just killed two Hellhounds all by herself! I stared in awe. My mom was amazing! She bled from the gashes in her face, but she was okay. With blood staining her green coat, she stood and collected her things. Smiling despite the wounds, she looked over to us. Her magic faded, and the Hellhound's cannon fell to the crumbling street.

Tears rolled down my face. That was too close. She'd barely survived. Her face looked terrible. I could see her teeth through her cheek. I didn't want to look, I couldn't bear it, but I had to look. This was the Wasteland, this was what it did. And she surv-

A roar loud enough to shake the building we were hiding under tore through the air. Mom's eyes went wide and she spun around, full of fear. A positively gigantic Hellhound dug through the base of the building and into view. This one dwarfed the other two, had the same shoulder armor on, but lacked the helmet. We got a good view of the rage in her eyes over the death of her companions. Mom was in a bad spot. Wounded, her guns already put away, and a big monster about to attack her.

"Nope, done with this shit. I got foals to protect," she announced, spitting some blood out. Her horn glowed again, and the barrel of the fallen Hellhound's cannon lifted up. "Which means, fuck you." The gun fired, and another blast of magical energy shot through the air. Covering my ears with my hooves, I watched it catch the Hellhound in the face.

She didn't stop.

The gun fired until all that came out were clicks. The Hellhound hit the ground, nothing left of her but a mass of blue ash that slowly disappeared into the ruins.

Her horn stopped glowing, and the spent gun clattered to the ground. She stepped over the other corpse and back to us, looking back and forth every so often to check for dangers. Waving a hoof to us, she beckoned that we leave our hiding spot. "Let's go home kids. I need a healing potion and a long nap. Then we move camp somewhere safer." With a thoughtful glance, she collected her things, and the weapon the Hellhounds had dropped.

Even covered in blood and bruised, looking terrible, she stood tall and didn't even limp. Open gashes covered her face. The PipBuck was trashed, cut clean into two pieces with the screen dead. Her mane was matted to her face and covered in blood, just like her horn. She was even missing a piece of her ear. And despite all that, or maybe because of it, she still just looked like mom to me.

She is *so cool*!

~ ~ ~

I woke up with the sun glaring through the window into my face. It was early enough that the light hadn't passed behind the clouds. In an instant, I was wide awake. An uncomfortable pressure had me running out of the bedroom as fast as I could. Great way to start the morning, Wasteland. I ran past Lost, who looked over her book at me, and straight into the bathroom. There weren't any zombies hiding in there, right? Never again...

Feeling far better, I trotted from the room and plopped down on the comfiest-looking tattered cushion I could find. I looked to my sister, who was idly reading the *Big Book of Arcane Sciences* we'd taken from the Stable Sixty Steel Rangers. I scooted close and peeked over her shoulder to see how far she'd gotten in the book. Apparently *very* far. Goddesses she read fast.

"Have a good sleep?" Lost asked, closing the book over one hoof and looking at me.

"Yeah. Did you?" I asked her, giving a quick nuzzle. It was weird to not have her nearby while I slept, especially with the weird dream I'd had. So I took what I could get, and leaned against her.

"Nope, up all night reading. I played around with that memory orb we found too," she explained, setting the book down on the opposite cushion. She hopped up and held the orb in her hooves. "It was so cool! I was inside the body of this other pony. I couldn't do much, and it scared me at first, but it was really interesting once I got used to it. Everything she saw, I saw. And I had to move when she did, which was really weird. Like, you're trapped there, there's no quick way out. But it's all extremely vivid, everything crystal clear. You can even feel the other pony getting stressed or sweating, everything! The pony I was in had to watch a stupid presentation, some businesspony going on and on about the future and the war. Everypony in the memory was really shocked because of a huge change."

"Seriously, do you ever sleep?" I asked, deadpan. I knew better than to wait for an answer about her sleeping, and continued. "What was the presentation about?"

"Nothing we didn't already know," she said, holding the orb out to me. "It was an hour long talk about how they were changing over to work on armor instead of building skywagons. Apparently, the office building the raiders had taken was part of Leathers too, a separate office away from the noisy factory. I had to sit through the whole thing, and apparently they weren't the only company in the area revamping." She flopped back down onto the couch and leaned against me.

"Boring!" I said with a laugh. I took the orb in my forehooves carefully. "So how do you get into it?"

"Magic," she announced, whirling her hoof in the air with some flair. "And it's not boring, it's history! It would have been very interesting if we didn't already know. I was trying to get into it by staring, concentrating on it, touching it to my head, everything. I gave up and went to levitate it back into the bag and fwoosh! I was inside."

“Cheater magic,” I fumed. Just another thing I’d never get to experience because I was the odd pony out. I set the orb down on the book and changed the subject. “So, what’s for breakfast?”

“I thought we should wait for Xeno to wake up before we ate, since she’s part of the group now,” L.A. said, giving a little yawn. Dammit sis, no- I yawned too.

“I had a weird dream last night,” I admitted, wanting to pass the time. “It was really strange. Two manticores were pulling guns out of me! It didn’t hurt, it was just... weird.” Openness was important with my sister. After harboring the nightmares that I’d had before, and letting them get to me so badly, I wanted to get things out in the open right away. It was also a good way to pass the time so I didn’t spend it all staring at Xeno’s bedroom door waiting for her to come out.

“Another nightmare? Is everything okay?” she asked, looking down at me with a frown. She wrapped her forehooves around me and pulled me into a tight hug, one I returned.

“No, not a nightmare,” I said, rubbing my flesh forehoof against my mane. “Just weird. They were both the same manticore. Same looks, and both sounded like mares. I don’t know, it was weird.” I wished I could remember more about the dream, but it was hazy and hard to remember. There was the other dream though, about- “Oh!”

“Oh? Oh what? What oh? Finally decide you like mares?” asked Lost, teasingly. She moved away from me just a hair and looked over her glasses once more. “I’m kidding. Is everything alright?”

“No!” I practically yelled, feeling heat on my cheeks. “I remembered my other dream is all.” Flailing my hooves just a little, I smiled wide. “It wasn’t a nightmare. I had another dream about Mom.”

“Are you sure that’s not a nightmare? The last time you had a dream about her, it didn’t end well,” asked Lost. She placed her hooves on my shoulders and looked directly into my eyes. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, I’m fine. Look,” I said, trying to reassure her, “remember that time with the Hellhounds?” I continued without waiting for a response. “I just... I guess I remembered? Anyway it was super vivid. She took down all three just like she did that time.” The feeling of loss hit me like a bullet straight through the heart. “I miss Mom...”

“I do too, Hidden, but it’s been years,” she said. “We’re adults now. We can’t rely on her strength forever.” She pulled me into a tight hug. “I miss her more than I could ever put into words...” She squeezed as she said it, and I couldn’t resist hugging her back.

“Where’s Xeno, already!” I demanded, changing the subject as quickly as I could. We had things to do here, and didn’t have time to deal with sadness from a lifetime ago. That was just as bad as worrying about the war, a decade, a century, two? What did it matter. Past is past.

“Want to go check on her?” Lost asked, motioning to the door to the room Xeno had slept in.

I nodded and hopped up from the couch, just in time for L.A. to pick the book up in her magic and continue reading. Trotting over to the door, I rapped my steel hoof against it a few times. The extra thumping might wake her up faster. No answer. I knocked again. “Xeno, c’mon. Wake up, we want breakfast and we can’t start without you.”

Rolling my eyes, I pushed the door open and stared at... the... empty bed. Where was Xeno? I looked around the room. Her bag was still full of all her things, nestled in the corner behind a rotten piece of furniture. Her bed didn’t look to tousled. In fact, it looked like she hadn’t slept in it at all. I placed a hoof on it, and felt nothing but cold. She must have been gone for a long time.

“She’s not here, sis!” I yelled into the other room. Grabbing our friend’s things and bringing them out with me, I looked at Lost with worry.

“I never saw her leave. We had a really good talk after you went to sleep last night,” she said, floating the book away and into her bags. “Do you think she’d just leave us?”

“No... She was just starting to really open up. She left her things, too. She never lets them out of her sight. Let’s go ask around town?” I suggested, after plopping her bag down. Why couldn’t I just have magic like my sister? It really wasn’t fair that I couldn’t talk while carrying things.

“Alright, Xeno has pulled a disappearing act before... Let’s have breakfast, see if she comes back. If not, we go looking for our zebra,” L.A. said, pulling out some food from her bags. Well, at least we still had delicious snacks from Marshmallow Sundae.

* * *

“I don’t understand why you won’t let me get Persistence out,” I said, walking close to my sister as we combed the town for our friend. The nagging little claws in the back of my mind were back in full force again. Now that I recognized the lack of mares, I couldn’t help but feel every stallion’s eyes on me.

“Persistence? Is that what you’re calling it?” she asked, skeptically.

“That’s what the PipBuck calls it,” I corrected her. We’d already asked several ponies about Xeno, but none would give us an answer.

“Still no. I told you, if you go wandering around with your guns out, we’re not going to get any answers even if somepony *does* know something,” she explained, sighing heavily.

Everypony was extremely polite, offering us drinks and an extra night’s stay for free. Sale Price even offered a generous discount for anything we wanted to buy, provided we never let our zebra friend back inside his shop.

“Lost, I’m worried. No pony’s even seen her,” I said, practically whining. I really didn’t like the idea that we’d lost her already. “She couldn’t have just *disappeared*.” Something felt really wrong; Xeno never went anywhere without her bag of... stuff. She was super-protective of it, and her going anywhere without it scared me. If she’d really been gone from the time Lost was in the memory orb until morning, I didn’t want to think about it.

“Do you think we should check the town hall?” she asked, pointing to the big building at the top of the hill. I nodded, and we started toward it.

We didn’t get very far before the Goddess interrupted us. She dropped to the ground directly in our path in a cloud of dust. Her marvelous wings outstretched, she stared down past her muzzle at the two of us. “We- have become aware you seeking something in Our- town!” she said in a booming voice. “What is it you are doing?”

“We’re looking for our friend. She disappeared,” I answered, bowing ever so slightly. She was a bit intimidating up close and yelling at us.

“That is troublesome, We- have heard nothing of this. Perhaps one of Our- daughters will be of assistance,” she boomed, smiling wide. “We- will take care of everything.” She looked back and forth between Lost and I. Her wings folded to her sides, her smile disappearing. She leaned down to stare at me. “You trust Us-, do you not?”

“Of- Of course,” I stammered. I could *never* doubt one of the Goddesses. She might look different from Celestia and Luna, but she was still one of them. “What do you mean, ‘your daughters?’ I just want to find my friend!” I caved, if only to get her to stop staring at me.

Her dark blue eyes squinted, and she lifted her head back to her full height. “We- wish to save Our- daughters, and all ponies. Through Unity the Wasteland will be made safe for them,” she said, explaining exactly nothing. “We- shall allow The Goddess an explanation. Our- words will make it so you may understand Our- goal.” She stopped moving, for nearly a minute, while I stared in awe. What did she mean, ask The Goddess? The Goddesses were Celestia and Luna, there wasn’t just ‘The Goddess’ at all. “Hmm, We- are unable to reach The Goddess at this time. We must take Our leave now.”

With that, she spread her wings and flew off, giving no further explanation. I watched in confusion as she disappeared into the sky, literally. Once she had gotten a short distance away, she just popped out of existence in a flash.

Confused, I asked, “Lost, what was that?”

Lost didn’t answer.

I looked back, but Lost was nowhere to be seen. “Lost?” I yelled, suddenly very worried. Her bags, and

Xeno's, were gone. I circled around several times, looking for anypony that might show me where my sister went. She was gone, her stuff was gone, and there weren't *any* ponies wandering the streets.

"Where is everypony?!"

* * *

I knew it. Not wearing guns had been a bad idea. Why'd I listened to my sister? Because she was my sister, and she knew best. I looked down the empty street to my left, then back to my right. No ponies, mare or stallion. Even living in the Wasteland with my sister, secluded and hiding out for so many years, this still felt lonely. All around was silence, deafening me.

The only times I'd ever been away from Lost were in Stable Sixty and around Leathers. Each time, I'd deemed it either necessary or safe. To save her life, she ran and I fended off the Wirepony monstrosity. In Stable Sixty, I trusted every pony there, and knew no harm would come to my sister. But with her just... gone? I didn't know what to do.

I fell to my haunches, suddenly unable to breathe. I looked around once more. The shops didn't hold Xeno, neither did any of the housing buildings. That left... I looked over at the town hall. I hadn't seen a single pony go near it, and part of me wondered if it was an irradiated deathtrap like the far side of town. I needed to narrow things down first. There were plenty of places we hadn't checked, plenty of places that townsponties had oh-so-politely kept us from looking. If I could find Lost and Xeno before I had to go there, I would. An empty building at best, and at worst?

The fact that I locked up so bad without my sister to guide me was pathetic; weakness beyond the pale. Slowly, I stood and turned to face the building on the hill. An abandoned building would be a good place to hide somepony, but I had been facing it the entire time. Unless they knew some fancy form of cheater teleportation magic? I'd only heard about that from Mom, though.

My ears skewed back, catching something in the air. Somepony talking. It could be Lost. She'd only been gone a minute or two while I was trying to hype myself up. Either this town had some ghosts from old Equestria spiriting away ponies, or... I didn't want to think of other options. She probably just came up with some idea and bolted, thinking she'd be back before I noticed. I took a deep breath, and ran toward the sound I'd heard.

Following the swiveling of my ears, I rounded a corner behind one of the shops. The alley lead to the apartment building across from where we'd stayed the night. Skidding to a stop, I brought my left forehoof to my face.

"Hidden, start being a thinky pony," I said under my breath, to myself. I backed into the alleyway again and dropped my things on the ground. Be prepared, just in case. I grabbed my battle saddle, with Persistence and the shotgun. After that, I took out the armor from Stable Sixty. Still wishing I had some cheater magic, I pulled everything on, and checked that my guns were set. Good pony. Thinky pony.

Prepared pony.

Through the otherwise total silence, I listened to the murmuring and the voices. I peeked out from the alleyway, right ear twitching, and heard more from the building we'd stayed in. Why hadn't I thought to look into it last night? For that matter, why hadn't I noticed it when we first got to town? Two buildings to check, then I could move on.

What if Tally and Tab were still there? Were they in on the disappearances? Could I get past them and sneak by to check? I looked down at my steel hoof. It wasn't the quietest thing in the Wasteland... Lost was always the pony who was good at sneaking out. If she was there, I had to try.

I laughed to myself. Knowing my luck, there was nothing wrong at all. I was just being a silly pony working herself up over nothing.

I stepped in, already running a speech through my head about how I'd forgotten something in the ro-

Tally wasn't at his desk. Tab wasn't at the bar either. I dove around behind the makeshift counter, knocking over Tally's stool.

Behind the desk, on little hooks, hung dozens of identical sets of keys. Tally hadn't been kidding when he said he had plenty of extras. I looked for our room, and found three sets. Snagging one in my teeth, I jumped over the counter and scrambled up the stairs. Lost had probably just run back to the hotel, letting me finish the conversation with the Goddess.

I rounded the corner on the second floor, shifting to fit my guns through the doorframe. No pony in the halls. I walked slow, setting my steel hoof down as gently as I could. I pressed my ear against the first door I came to, and listened.

The voice through the door was soft, wistful. I couldn't make out a single word it said. The noise was so quiet, it seemed like there wasn't even a voice. Just an overpowering murmur coming from every direction with no actual origin. Looking at the door, I backed off and moved towards the room we'd stayed in.

The door was open. None of the keys had been missing from the spares, but our door was wide open. I looked inside, checked every room. No pony. A voice echoed through the hallway. A door slammed.

"...believe it's been a week already. Time flies," the voice laughed, "when..." The voice trailed off. It was a stallion I hadn't heard before. He walked past the door without noticing me, hidden just around the corner. No pony was with him. Was he talking to himself?

I peeked around the corner, just in time to see the light through a doorway disappear. I trotted over and knocked once. Without waiting, I tried the door. I needed to find my sister, right now. The door opened without any resistance, it wasn't even locked. Inside was a room nearly identical to the one we'd had, and

a quick check showed... Nothing. There were no other exits, and nopony inside. What in the? Where had he gone?

I backed back into the hallway.

This was a dead end. If there even *was* a pony around, it wasn't Lost. I had to check other places. I ran. Past the voices that weren't my sister or my friend, I ran. I needed to find Lost, and fast.

* * *

The second building was much the same. Nopony at the entrance, and every floor empty, with every door locked. I felt so stupid for going 'tunnel vision' and looking for a problem I could spot right away, never considering the answer might be held behind closed doors.

Convinced I was alone, I felt safe enough to break one down. I found a door, in a back corner, under a broken and flickering light. I smashed it in. The room was empty, just the same moldy striped wallpaper like everything else. The room was completely clear, just like the rest of the town. The worst part was turning around and seeing somepony leave behind me. I chased, but when I ran down the hallway, there was nothing. Just my hoofprints in the dusty corridor.

Somepony was fucking with me now. I knew damn well I was paranoid around groups. Mom had drilled that into my head. But I didn't need to be hallucinating just because my sister wasn't right next to me! I folded my ears back, forcing myself to stop straining to hear every little thing. I backed into the room and collapsed on the nearest couch. The mere idea that I'd missed all this really hurt my resolve.

How could I find my sister, or make the world around me safer, if I couldn't even tell when something was horribly wrong in the town I was in? I needed to listen to the little nagging claws in the back of my mind more often. Being so associated with that dream had made me tune them out. I didn't need help. I shook my head to get the thought out of my mind.

"Ignore it Hidden, you're better than this. Get over your fears. They're holding you back."

I stood, mad at letting all this get the best of me. I didn't have time to for self pity. I just needed to beat some sense into myself. Somehow in my frustration, I made it to the wall on the far end of the room. I slammed my head into it, needing something to drill my focus back.

"Why."

SLAM.

"Can't."

SLAM!

“I.”

SL-

“Ahh!” I yelled, stumbling forward as the wall swung open before me.

“What in the...” I asked the air, looking at the hollow opening where a solid wall had been moments before. Rubbing my flesh forehoof against my now bruised forehead, I looked at the false wall. The seams blended perfectly with the stripes in the wallpaper.

“Sneaky bastards,” I muttered, stepping forward. If Lost and Xeno had disappeared anywhere, this would be it. I was going to kill whoever took my sister and friend away from me. I stormed through the secret doorway, ready for whatever might come at me. I wasn’t going to waste the first break I’d had in this search by sitting around and feeling sorry for myself.

* * *

The voices and murmurs were worse in the tunnel. I’d trotted down several flights of stairs, and moved my way into pitch black. It felt like I was underground, but I couldn’t tell for sure. At some point, I lost track of just how many steps I’d clambered down, and what counted as a ‘floor’ anyway? The echo though, that was the worst. I couldn’t tell which way was forward and which was back.

Deep down, part of me wished I was a unicorn like L.A. At least then I’d have a light spell I could use. I didn’t even have the PipBuck for light. The dark didn’t scare me. Not since I was a filly, but... this wasn’t the Wasteland. There weren’t any sounds I knew, there weren’t peeks of the stars through the cloud cover to light the way. I didn’t have a campfire or a sister or a mother to keep watch while I slept.

It was just... Black.

I scraped my shotgun against the wall, moving slowly. If I kept along the right wall, I’d find something eventually. I just had to feel my way through. Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes and took another step forward. My hoof clanked hard against the stone floor, followed by three softer thuds. I was alone down here. I walked, not counting steps. I didn’t want to think about how far I’d walked down here or what might be just behind or in front of me. No pony, no monster, was going to sneak out and grab me.

And even if they did, I had guns! I was prepared! Slowly, I stepped forward, one hoof after the other, nice and slow like a thinky pony. Listening. My ears swiveled back and forth, trying to pick up on something, anything. All I could hear was the dull echo of noise far beyond my reach.

The scraping of metal against stone overpowered the sound for the most part, kept it out of my thoughts. I took another step. The wall was gone.

I fell.

The clattering of my hooves and battle saddle echoed all around. More than one tunnel, or just a turn? Goddess, could I ever catch a break? I just stayed still, laid there and listened. Ears flitting back and forth, I tried to pinpoint the sound of the voices to decide where to go.

Scrape... Scrape... Clank.

That... wasn't my shotgun against the stone wall! I opened my eyes as wide as I could and looked around. Nothing but blackness. Left was black. Right was black. My breathing came in quick bursts as I looked around. I wanted to scream, I wanted to turn and run. Lost would find me if I just went to back. She'd know where to look for me if I disappeared. She was stronger, she was smarter... She could get out of this on her own.

"No!" I yelled to myself, louder than I should have. It echoed around the walls, creating an eerie loop of shouting. I stood up, and leaned against the wall again. I was stronger than that. I could do this. If I turned right, then I was facing... I tried to remember the layout of the town from what I'd seen. Was this toward the town hall? Or was it toward the radiation?

I didn't have time to figure it out. The voices got louder, echoing in the same eerie loop as my own voice. Closing my eyes again, I took another step.

Scrape... Scrape... *Clank!*

It sounded closer, or just louder. The sound was almost like chains dragging against the floor... Where was it *coming from*? I spun in a circle, or tried to, until Persistence got caught on the wall. Yelping, I backpedaled a few steps, and looked back and forth. It was useless, with all the blackness. The minute I got the PipBuck back, I was locking it to my leg and never letting it go. I'd weld it to the steel hoof if I had to, so I could always have a light and E.F.S. to keep me sane.

Had that scraping been going on the entire time I was down here? Was holding the gun against the wall just masking it? It didn't matter. Without some sort of light, I couldn't tell where it was, or how long it'd been there. I just kept moving.

Tapping my guns against the walls, I tried to keep from scraping them against the wall too long. I needed to follow the gentle scraping around me. The voices were mostly gone, as if hushed by the sound of the chains it was dragging against the floor or wall or... whatever they were doing!

I stopped in my tracks, and clenched my eyes shut. No. No, no, no! My brain betrayed me, thinking on its own. Chains were like wires... Wirepony was a monster made of wires and steel ranger armor. What if there were more!? What if the town had some sort of chain monster eating ponies for, for... for whatever the Goddesses knew!

I threw my hooves in the air, scraping them against the ceiling. Falling back to the floor, I hung my head. I couldn't let my mind get carried away or I'd never get anywhere. Chain monster, how ridiculous? Smiling to myself, I let out a little echoing laugh. Like the Wasteland would let another one of those monsters exist.

Having calmed myself down, I took a step forward. This wasn't as bad as I was making it out to be. Just a tunnel from the War, probably used to move ponies safely in the event of a zebra raid or something. I bet there were even lights, they just needed some power.

This wasn't anywhere as bad-

Something wrapped around my mouth and neck and *pulled*.

* * *

Straining against the chains that held my legs, I hit the ground. Hard.

"Fuck!" I screamed, looking around. Whatever it was, it'd blindfolded me. What was the point of that? It was already pitch black in the tunnels. Even without a blindfold I couldn't see *shit*. I thrashed about on the floor, trying to find a way to my hooves.

"Shut. Up!" yelled a stallion's voice.

"We're doomed, you know that?" said a mare. "This one'll lead her right to us."

I wasn't too pleased with being blindfolded, tied up, and carried off to the Goddesses knew where. Even the five minutes that I'd been chained up were enough to push my anger to a fever pitch. For once I wasn't afraid of being restrained, I was too pissed off to be scared. A hoof pushed my head down, and somepony's telekinesis pulled the blindfold off. I pulled my chained forehooves up to block out the silvery light, and looked up at the ponies around me: a nearly-black unicorn stallion and an off-white unicorn mare.

"Willow, stop your yelling!" yelled the stallion. The mare looked taken aback. With a grimace, both looked at me. "You're a right lot of trouble, y'know that?" he said, pressing a hoof to my mouth to keep me quiet.

"You're going to lead her to us. And then we're all dead!" yelled Willow, as loud as she could without breaking a whisper. She pointed a hoof. "Get out! Back the way you came." Following the way she pointed, I saw the same secret door I'd gone in through the room in the apartment building.

They'd carried me back? I glared at the two unicorns, on the verge of killing them. I moved away from the hoof holding my mouth closed. "Give me my sister," I demanded. I glared at the two, looking back and forth between them.

“Button, we need to get back, *fast*,” whispered the mare. She looked past the door, staying in the shadow it cast, as if she didn’t dare move into the light. “If she catches us...”

“*She* has your sister. Now get out. Go fast, and do not return,” said Button, using his magic to push me toward the door. “Lead her to the tunnels, and we’ll kill you.”

I struggled and dug my hooves against the floor as best I could. Damn chains. The mare joined in, using both magic and hooves to shove me past the threshold. I slid past, tripping and falling as I hit a loose floorboard.

The door slammed shut as I toppled over, locking me into the room all alone again. The murmur of voices was gone, and no amount of straining gave me anything. The chains disappeared, and I fell free.

Back to square one...

“*Hey...*” said the mare through the wall. The door creaked open, barely an inch. A single silver eye peeked through the sliver, a glowing haze making it just bright enough to see. “The zebra’s with us. She’s safe.”

The door slammed shut again, disappearing into the striped wallpaper.

“*Town hall*,” whispered a voice, just barely loud enough to hear.

* * *

They kept Xeno. They threw me out? How *helpful*! I had a goal now though, and that was all I needed. Whoever that pony was, she’d given me the confirmation I needed. That town hall. Either it was an irradiated death trap, and the Goddess was turning my sister into a zombie or, worse, maybe it was... I shook my head and ran.

My hooves thudded on the dusty floorboards and pounded the stairs as I ran outside. No pony to be seen in any direction. Everything looked just like the irradiated buildings across the park. No Goddess anywhere, either.

I mouthed the battle saddle’s bit, gently. I needed to be ready to fire if any pony or anything got in my way. What had that Willow mare meant, when she said they were doomed? Surely there was something more going on than a benevolent Goddess and disappearing ponies. I knew Xeno was ‘safe,’ at least I hoped. If that mare was lying...

Then again, they *had* thrown me out without killing me, so for now they had the benefit of the doubt.

Something shifted in the corner of my vision, a shadow dancing across the ground. I spun on my hooves, trailing both guns toward whatever it was. Nothing. I looked up, back and forth. I took a step back,

shifting on my hooves and heading back on my path. I ran up the shattered road, making far more noise than I was comfortable with as my steel hoof slammed down onto the two-century-old asphalt.

“Just paranoia, Hidden Fortune. That’s all it is,” I whispered to myself around the bit. The words were muffled, but I knew what I meant. I looked forward, trying not to let jumping shadows and whispering voices distract me.

I made it to the door, and smashed through it. It wasn’t locked anyway. Inside was what must have passed for an average town hall, with plain walls of rotting wood, and a whole lot of empty. A smashed terminal sat atop a counter to my right, and to the left, a pair of rotting chairs. There was something creepy about the building, something I couldn’t put my hoof on. Something that made those claws in the back of my mind pick up again and start to dig. I ran past the emptiness, past a staircase, down the hallway. I skipped a break room full of overturned tables and useless junk on a counter against the far wall. No ponies, no clues. Across the hall was another room, with more rotting chairs and more nothing.

I stopped, and closed my eyes. The voices led me on earlier; the quiet murmuring was the telltale sign. If I could find it here, I could find my sister. I strained myself, trying to hear something, *anything*. Dead silence surrounded me, so quiet I could hear my heartbeat in my head. I spun around and made for the stairs.

I bolted up the stairs two at a time, running as best I could up with the battle saddle. Running up stairs with a huge hunk of metal strapped to me wasn’t the easiest thing in the world. I hit the top step, and pushed through the door. Counting my luck as better than Xeno’s ever could be, it was open. I stood at the landing and closed my eyes, and let me ears do the searching. Just like downstairs, I couldn’t hear a thing. Time to think like a scavenger and check everything obvious or unopened.

With a sigh, I opened my eyes. I looked around. Two rooms to check up here. I crept through the first door, and found a large rotten office, destroyed by two hundred years of neglect. The skeleton of a pony sat in a moldy chair behind a once magnificent desk, a hole through her head and a pistol lying on the floor next to the desk. Poor pony... Was it really so hopeless as to do that? I sighed, wishing I’d never have to see an all-out war like this pony had.

I turned and left the room. It was empty anyway, except for dry bones and two hundred year old regret. The other room lead to a balcony that overlooked the city. To the side, a shattered robot leaned against the wall. Its three arms hung limply from the giant stem protruding beneath its rounded head. Three eye-stalks sagged underneath a gigantic frayed hat.

“What in the?” I asked, my eyebrow twitching slightly. I looked over the balcony, getting a good view of the city. In the distance, I spotted something moving through the barren dirt fields toward the city, a vehicle of some sort with a cloud of dust behind it. But it wasn’t Lost, and thus wasn’t immediately important. I couldn’t see far enough out without the sniper rifle’s scope to make out any details. I knew Xeno had needed a weapon, but I was *really* regretting having given it to her. I spun around and ran back into the building.

“Think, think, think!” I yelled to myself, prancing in place. Willow said the town hall was the place. There had to be something. Another hidden passage? Did they run the length of the whole town? Whatever they were hiding from must be what was coming. That’d explain why all the ponies suddenly vanished. Maybe the Goddess, if I could find her, would explain. She’d know where Lost was and protect us.

Unless she was hiding her from me herself.

I paced along the walls, resting my flesh forehoof against it and pushing for something that might give. The hallway yielded nothing, so I moved back into the room with the corpse. The gun was rusted beyond usefulness, and the desk held nothing that might help. Papers too faded to read, and a diary so old the pages had fused. No buttons or latches to activate a secret passage. I circled the walls, moving faster. Whatever was coming, I needed to be faster.

“Ugh! Nothing!” I shouted at nopony. This was *ridiculous*. The best place for there to be some tunnel entrance was the office of the pony who ran this town. That was who they’d want to keep the safest, right? Maybe I wasn’t looking hard enough. I stepped to the center of the room and looked around once more. Any little difference could be the key.

Every wall and corner looked identical. Fuming, I ran back to the hall and down the stairs. I hopped halfway down, around the corner and jumped down the flight of stairs. I didn’t have *time* for safety. I needed to find my sister and figure out what in Luna’s name was coming to the town. What was so bad that ponies were hiding in old wartime hidey-holes? I tripped on the landing, and faltered as my steel hoof punched through the floorboard.

Tumbling forward, I skidded along the floor until I hit the far wall. With a hollow thud, the wall gave in an inch, and I felt a cold breeze across my flank. Slowly, I stood and turned. Before me was the door, hidden well by the warped and rotting wood. Xeno must have been with me, at least in spirit, to make me trip. I looked at my steel hoof and smiled, then pushed the door open and started down.

* * *

The stairs leading down were brightly lit; a stark contrast from the pitch black of the tunnels I’d found underneath the apartments. I slunk down the stone steps, carefully placing each hoof as quietly as I could. If there were more ponies like those I’d met before, I wanted to spot them before they could spot me. I held my breath, listening to hear something before I could see it. I peeked around the sharp corners in the stairway, hoping to catch whatever might be down there off-guard.

The voices were back, echoing softly off the stone walls. The skull-clawing creepiness didn’t hit me like it did before. These voices were happy, and coupled with the warm lighting overhead, made it almost feel homey. I could hear movement too, hooves against the floor, against metal. I kept on, not making a sound. I even went so far as to walk on three hooves to keep my steel hoof from clanking loudly on the stone.

The stairwell ended in a short hallway, with two doors. One was right to my side, with another at the far end of the hallway. Maybe this was where the pony up in the office was supposed to go, but something had stopped her? I looked back and forth. Which to try first? Shifting my ears back and forth, I listened. The voices echoed from the far door. The door next to me held the sounds of moving around, but didn't sound near as happy or friendly. I decided that talking with friendly ponies was better than whatever I might find behind the closer door.

I trotted down, opened the door and stepped through.

Light, color, and laughter punched me in the face.

Brilliant blue drapes lined the walls, radiant in the clean white light from a crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling. A dozen mattresses formed a large circle around the center of the room, all covered in spotless linens, cleaner than any sheets I'd ever seen in the Wasteland. Pleasant-looking mares sat on the mattresses, smiling and chatting with the ponies around them. Not one seemed to have a care in the world.

I stomped my steel hoof, sending a metallic ringing into the room. Every mare went silent and turned to look at me. I ignored the ridiculously out-of-place cheerfulness, and focused on looking for my sister. None of the ponies here were her. This was far more than frustrating by this point. I stomped again, wishing I could shatter the stone beneath my hooves. I was *beyond* pissed-off by this point.

"Where. Is. My. Sister," I demanded, staring at the ponies.

"We- are all sisters under our Mother, The Goddess," they all said in perfect unison. "Perhaps she has Our- sister. Soon Mother will take Us- to Unity. You should join Us- in becoming one." Each mare flashed a smile, all tilting their heads slightly to the right. They spoke just like her, even with the weird tic she had...

"I don't want your unity, or your freaky talking-together... thing. I want my sister. Where is she?" I asked again. I took a step back toward the doorway, looking back and forth at each of the mares. None of them broke my gaze, none even blinking. What in Celestia's name was this 'Goddess' doing to them?

Their room was luxurious, well lit with clean mattresses. There were shelves with all manner of baubles and several intact books. A polished tub sat against one wall, and there were stacks of clothing and towels on a table nearby. There was food in stacks, sitting in a broken refrigerator and even flowers on top of it. It looked like they had anything a pony in the Wasteland could ever want, but if the price for that was acting like that, and 'becoming one' with another pony... was that something any individual could do? I backed to the door and stepped past it, then slammed the door shut. I prayed to Celestia and Luna I never got wrapped up in *that*.

I shivered involuntarily. I could still feel them all *watching* me.

As I stared at the door in horror, their voices returned, quietly at first, followed by loud giggling, and

finally back to the same quiet murmur I'd been hearing the whole time. I kept backing up, wanting to get as far from whatever in the Goddesses' name that was. I backed away through the hall until my hooves hit something, yelped like a filly, and jumped to turn around!

Just the stairs. With a deep breath to calm myself, I looked at the closer door. A door in a war-time tunnel meant somewhere to keep ponies safe during the end of the world, right? Slowly I put my hoof on the door to push it open. The ponies here didn't sound like they were all talking in unison or lying on the floor doing nothing but looking creepy. Whatever it was, it couldn't be worse than... than *that*.

I closed my eyes and pushed the door open. The second it opened, I was hit by a cacophony of sounds so loud I had to pin my ears back and reflexively clenched my eyes shut. The hoarse voices of mares and stallions shouted, metal rattled against metal, and the walls echoed with the stomping of hooves and wailing of ponies.

I opened my eyes and looked into the room. It was darker, lit only by the light coming through the open door. Nearly a dozen ponies were down here, crammed into cages barely big enough to fit a filly. A couple were curled in corners, looking completely despondent. Others rattled their cages with hooves covered in blood. Those same ponies shouted at the top of their lungs, words that I couldn't understand through the hoarseness and desperation. How long had these ponies been caged, and why?

"Hey!" yelled a stallion standing outside the cages. I didn't notice him over the sight of ponies screaming at me through cages.

The plight of these ponies punched a hole in my heart. It hadn't been that long ago that I too had been held against my will, and forced to work in horrible mines full of gangers and bloodwings. A day or a lifetime, *no pony* deserved to be in captivity. Even horrible monsters and ponies who'd given up all right to live as decent Wastelanders didn't deserve this. Being a slave was bad, being held in a cage unfit for radroaches, trapped in an underground tunnel, locked away from the outdoors, was horrific.

Finally I realized there was a pony yelling at me with a pissed-off look on his face, shouting something I both couldn't, and didn't, want to hear. Realizing I wasn't listening, he raised a tiny pistol in his magic and fired at me. The bullet bounced harmlessly off the armor the Steel Rangers had given me. In retaliation, I hit him, *hard*. "Why!" I yelled, screaming over the deafening noise of the room. I stepped over him, and stood on his chest to hold him down.

"It's the only way!" he yelled back, swinging his hoof at me. I smashed it down with my other forehoof. Locking ponies up was the only way? Was that what the Goddesses would've wanted? I struck him across the face with my steel hoof, splattering blood and teeth across the floor, and feeling no small amount of pleasure at it. With the guard knocked out, I turned to the caged ponies who'd given up all hope. I checked him over once for a key or something, but all he had on him was the pistol.

I worked to unlatch the first cage, trying to break out a green-maned mare. The latch was locked, and there was no way I could get the lock picked with my hooves before whatever that vehicle was got here. I

looked at the steel hoof and wondered if I'd ever pick a lock again. *Cheater magic!*

"I... I'll come back. You all wait here. I promise," I said, trying to sound brave and trustworthy. I just needed time to think. I stepped back into the passage between the two rooms, holding a hoof up to quiet the screaming ponies in the cages. I needed to think. I needed...

I ran away, up the stairs. There was no exit in either of those rooms, unless it was well hidden. Back the way I'd come, then. It wasn't like I'd be getting any help from the ponies who'd thrown me out of these tunnels earlier. I didn't need them. I scrambled to the main floor, and pulled the fake door shut.

I had questions, and that Goddess was the only pony who could have the answers. I just needed to find out how to get her to let those ponies go, and let us get away. Whatever this unity was she kept talking about, she could keep it.

What if the 'she' the ponies in the tunnel were talking about *was* the Goddess? Was she the one who was going to kill them? The idea of one of the Goddesses being a murderer wasn't something I could handle. That would be like saying that Celestia or Luna was personally involved in slaughter. I couldn't think of my Goddesses like that! They were divine ponies who watched over and protected us. Sure they didn't always do a perfect job, but it was a Wasteland and there were many ponies with many needs, and two Goddesses could only do so much. Their power only stretched so far. The sun and moon still rose and set, and that was enough to convince me. Goddesses were good ponies.

So why did I have a horrible knot in the bottom of my stomach?

* * *

I wasn't ready to face her straightaway. If what those ponies had said was true, and I really hoped it wasn't, I needed to be a thinky pony and figure out what I was up against. There was a reason they were hiding in the walls and afraid of her. I needed to find out what that reason was, before I went in with nothing but guns and my hooves. Without Lost to make a real plan, I would get my flanks handed to me.

I ducked out of the town hall and hugged the wall, crouching as low as I could. I moved quickly, darting behind one of the smaller buildings to the side, then dashing to an alley. I may have been keeping a low profile, but I wasn't going to find anything by staying out of sight. I ducked into a particularly thin alley, and made my way closer to the center of the town. Crouching down, I looked past the corner of the building to see if anything had arrived yet.

From the opening in the hills we'd entered the night before, came two ponies hauling a large cart. They were strapped in with heavy chains between them, and didn't look comfortable in their position. Atop the cart rode three mares: two unicorns and an earth pony. The earth pony in the middle was purple and pink, with her mane spiked in a wicked mohawk. On one side of her sat an orangey yellow unicorn, and a blue unicorn sat on the other. I couldn't see inside the cart from where I was, but if it had anything to do with the ponies locked in the cages below the town hall, I was going to start murdering.

The Goddess appeared.

She didn't walk into sight, where I could see and avoid her. She didn't even bother sneaking up on me. She just *appeared* right in front of my eyes, too close for comfort. Reflexively I bit for my battle saddle. Before I could, she placed a wing between my teeth and the bit. Ponyfeathers weren't particularly tasty, eugh. She leaned down to eye level.

"Why do you sneak through Our- town?" she asked "We- only wish to save you! Our- daughters wait eagerly for their induction into Unity. Come and accept the gift We- wish to share with you!" She stood tall again, twitching slightly. Goddess or not, her unification wasn't something I wanted to be a part of. No Goddess would help slavers, or warp innocent mares like the ones in the town hall's basement. The tic in her speech wasn't helping convince me she was divine, either, especially since it seemed something the others had picked up on as a personal trait of hers.

"You look like a Goddess, but I want nothing to do with you or your 'daughters!'" I yelled at her, backing up several steps. She was the only pony who could have Lost. Every other option was gone. I stared her down. "Give me my sister."

"We- cannot," she stated, passive and uncaring. "She rejects Our- Unity but she is needed elsewhere. She will aid Our- ally in building a new Equestria. We- must protect Our- daughters. Surrender and go with your sister!"

That did it. I would not allow my sister to be sent away by this monster pretending to be a Goddess. I bit down on my battle saddle, firing Persistence at her.

"*Fool!*" she yelled, a shimmering sphere appearing around her that stopped my bullets in mid-air. "You cannot defeat Us-, yield or suffer." Her demeanor changed entirely, going from a regal pony that looked like the Goddesses, to an outright monster. Her wings flared out and her mane began to flow wildly. "WE- HAVE PLANS HERE! YOU WILL *NOT* RUIN THEM!"

Her horn began to glow, crackling so loud I had to pin my ears back. I turned and ran as fast as my hooves could carry me. She could stop my bullets from hitting her, and she had magic something *fierce*. I knew better than to stay for whatever she was planning.

I ran back to the alleys.

The sky lit up as if a storm were rolling in, the clouds themselves illuminating as lightning arced along the ground, from the Goddess, past where I'd just been. A crack sounded through the air a second later, loud enough to send me to my knees. I put my hooves over my ears, trying to drown out the pounding.

Whatever that Goddess really was, it had me terrified.

“This isn’t a fight I can win, is it?” I asked the Goddesses aloud. I stared at the now dark clouds, the ominous cover that kept the stars and the true Goddesses from watching over me and mine. While I prayed, I reloaded. “Celestia, Luna. Please? Just this once.”

As if my prayers were answered, a voice called out, “My good alicorn,” it yelled, “have I come at a bad time?”

The Goddess didn’t chase after me, instead turning her attention to the voice. “Mmm, yes. There have been undesirables to deal with. We- have the situation under control, Our- daughters are safe,” said the... Alicorn? Is that what they were called? Did that mean she wasn’t a Goddess? “Our- Unity will not be threatened.”

Taking advantage of the free minute, I ran for another vantage point. Mid-run, I finished reloading Persistence. I’d need everything I could get. The alicorn, or whatever she was, needed to be stopped. Whatever twisted thing was going through the steel-rent mind of hers, it couldn’t be good. Brainwashing ‘daughters’ and trafficking in slaves wasn’t anything a true Goddess did. I was putting an end to this, once and for all.

I found a new spot, a good vantage point a safe distance away. The alicorn had her shield dropped, distracted by the new pony who’d joined her. I aimed Persistence, and bit down hard. The entirety of the magazine emptied at the Goddess, and seven bullets punched through her back and wings. None hit hard enough to do significant damage. Worthless. The beautiful hunting rifle was a good weapon, but it wasn’t a sniper rifle, and at my range... Dammit!

Without even flinching she shot a glare right at me and walked calmly to the radiation-soaked part of the city, spreading out her wings.

The alicorn stood a few yards from the pink and purple earth pony, who had stepped off the cart. The two chatted, the earth pony with an unpleasant smirk on her face. I was too far away to hear what she said. The pale blue unicorn mare with her nodded and trotted forward. She wore several leather holsters across her back, hiding whatever her cutie mark might have been. As she left the group, the earth pony yelled, “Don’t disappoint me, Slipstock.”

I moved again, trying to buy myself time by being somewhere far away from where she’d be looking for me. Between position changes, I reloaded again. Persistence was full again, and I swapped out the shotgun shells for slugs. That alicorn took a full load of rifle rounds without batting an eye, and the slugs were the only things I had that packed more of a punch.

I found myself a good spot where I had a safe place to back against, and waited. The mare had to come in front of me, and I could get her as she rounded the corner. I waited, mouth on the bit and shotgun at the ready. A few seconds would be enough.

The mare rounded the corner. She’d never even pulled her guns from their holsters; what a *stupid* mare. I

bit down, and the shotgun erupted, spitting a slug at the unicorn. Even without the PipBuck, I couldn't miss at that distance.

The shot missed. No, it didn't *miss*... she deflected it! Her revolver clattered to the ground, the metal split in half and bullets tumbling from the cylinder. She just smiled at me, and pulled another one.

I didn't have time to dodge. A bullet tore through my shoulder, actually going between my armor and flesh before hitting bone.

I stared, mouth gaping as pain shot through me. How in the Goddesses' name had she done that? I dove away, cursing the mixed blessing my armor gave me. Sure it offered a lot more protection than the nothing I'd had before, but I couldn't move as fast with it on. Dancing on my hooves, I landed, spun and aimed at her again. A second and third gun flew through the air to block both my gun barrels.

She twisted the pistols in the magenta haze of her magic, and all three fired repeatedly at me. I was fighting for my life, and she... she looked *bored*. Like this was just another day for her. A mare that could draw *that* fast wasn't something I'd prepared for. Bullets ripped through several chunks of my mane, and one of my ears disappeared, torn apart and sent to the wind.

The grace of the Goddesses saved me. I raised my steel hoof to block. It made a good makeshift shield, and kept one gun from landing any hits. The other two missed taking my head completely off, but only because I flinched.

The unicorn continued firing, emptying all three guns at me as I turned tail and ran. I danced side to side, moving in serpentine to try and get away. I wasn't the fastest on my hooves, and weighted down by armor and the battle saddle, I couldn't dodge very well. Several bullets grazed me, with more than one painfully digging into my flanks or through my legs. But I'd had worse. I thought back to the pain of having my hoof bitten off, and the searing fire that saved my life. I thought about the surgery, and the nerves they had to connect to electronics to give me the ability to walk. Bullet holes were nothing.

I limped past a corner, tumbling down and pulling out a healing potion from my bag. I downed it, breathing heavy and watching the wounds. The bleeding slowed and the wonderful, itchy, flesh-knitting feeling took over. I was good enough to walk. I just needed time to heal.

A light caught my attention, and I jumped to the side. The three pistols that Steel Rangers had fixed up for me burst from my saddlebags and began firing. That. Was. Just. *Not. FAIR!* How dare she use cheater magic to- I ducked and covered my head, letting the bullets passed by harmlessly.

Slipstock walked around the corner, her eyes half closed and a frown across her lips. "Are we done yet?" she drawled. "I'm bored."

"What?" I asked.

“Ya not puttin’ up much of a fight,” she snarked.

“Why are you attacking me? That pony is insane!” I snapped.

“Who cares? She’s ma boss,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Now are ya done yet? ‘Cause I’m seriously thinkin’ ‘bout gettin’ Amble to let me jus’ kill ya already.” She stomped her forehooves a few times, shaking off the dust I’d kicked on her.

“You’re just fucking with me?” I asked, staring at her in shock.

“Eh? I had some fun while I was at it. Ya missin’ an ear, ain’tcha?” she answered, pointing at me. Almost as if she were taunting, the three guns she’d taken from my saddlebags were lowered back in, and the haze of her telekinesis closed and latched the flaps.

Realization hit that I’d lost an ear, again, and I stifled a yelp. I tapped at it with my flesh forehoof, praying to the Goddesses. I really didn’t want to have another piece of metal replace something I’d lost! The healing potion was doing its job, and it had already healed most of the way.

I bit down on the battle saddle’s bit, not giving the bitch the satisfaction.

Just like the time before, the slug shattered through one of her guns, drawn faster than I could see. She threw the two pieces of it at me, and slid out two more pistols from their holsters. The shifting leather straps left her cutie mark visible for only the quickest of seconds, a gun exiting a holster. Great, her special talent...

If she was fast enough to block any shots I fired from a distance, then I just needed to get up close and personal. I could hit her with hooves and fight where she couldn’t maneuver. Charging her, I slammed my head into her chin, knocking her up just enough to stun her-

She slid out another gun and fired a half-dozen rounds at my face. I backpedaled before I made any contact, bumping into another gun. In seconds, ten guns floated in a circle, surrounding me, all aimed at my head.

“I won’t miss ya this time. C’mon, we’re done here,” she said with a sigh.

“No,” I said, and struck her across the face with my steel hoof. It was enough to make her falter, and when I pulled the hoof back, I could only smile at the blood coating it. Finally, some that wasn’t mine. “You’re going to have to kill me, if you want me to stop.”

She scoffed and brought the guns around to bear again. All ten fired at once, and dozens of bullets hit the steel armor. Silently, I prayed to the Goddesses for something better in the future. It took everything I had to ignore the bullets tearing through the parts not covered by armor. Fighting through pain, I threw my forehoof out and hit her straight on against her muzzle again. Spinning on my steel hoof, I spun around

and bucked her as hard as I could. With her guns all empty, she wasn't that tough!

I bucked again and hit steel. Getting nowhere, I shifted on my hooves to face her again. I reared up, flailing my forehooves forward and dropped with all my weight onto her. I hit the steel of her guns again. No matter how fast I attacked, something always blocked my path. I slammed a hoof into her face, finally catching flesh. She didn't flinch, just pistol-whipped me in the same spot with one of her pistols. We kept on for what felt like minutes, kicks here, pistol-whipping there, a swipe with my steel hoof whenever I could. I'd hit, she'd block, and I was slowly losing ground. I could beat her if I were just faster, stronger, not losing blood. Or if somepony else had to deal with the pain... I lashed out as hard and fast as I could, but she blocked more than I landed. For every hit I actually landed, she got two on me.

There was no way I could keep this up. "Fuck!" I yelled in a mix of frustration and pain, and dropped down low. I rammed her in the stomach, but ended up with a face full of metal. Two guns crisscrossed in front of my face, blocking my assault of her weaker spots. Two more slammed into my sides, hitting against the metal and rattling my ribcage. Blood sloshed from inside the armor, adding to the slowly growing puddle we were standing in. She was too fast to keep up with. Well, I was already down here! I pushed forward, past the guns crossed before me, and grabbed her rear legs. Ignoring the surprised 'eep,' I lifted her off the ground.

I might not have been the biggest mare, and I wasn't the strongest in the Wasteland by far. But I was tough enough to take a frail little unicorn and drop her flank to the ground, no matter how hurt I was. She wouldn't be able to use her guns as a shield for this. The two of us went down hard to the side, and slammed into the blood-soaked dirt. My armor protected me from the worst of it as I slammed into her. And quietly I thanked the Goddesses that the bitch had relatched my bags.

The only thing that managed to fall out was a little, plastic bottle of Buck with perfect timing.

I rolled off the mare and stomped the bottle with my steel hoof. It buckled and shattered. Several of the tablets were crushed, but a few survived. I only needed one. I wasn't above taking treasure from the ground, and being a hunter I knew I had to take whatever I could.

Fuck Broker, but at least he taught me a lesson about taking what I could get. Even if it meant making me eat off the ground.

I bit down, ignoring what I'd just eaten and swallowed.

Through the grit, I could taste the pill. Coppery, but it'd do just fine. I felt it working its magic, and wanted to smash the mare's head in all over again. By the time I'd looked up, she'd gotten to her hooves, and was reloading every gun she had all at once. She held two in the air, aimed right at my head.

The blood, the gunshots? Somepony else's problem now.

I didn't give her the time. I hit one gun hard enough to knock it from her telekinetic grasp, and then

ducked under the other. Shots blasted over my head as Slipstock brought another gun to bear. I spun on my hooves and bucked her in the face. She tried to block it, swinging forward three others and making a barricade with the rest. But I went clean through. The guns hit her in the face, followed by my hooves.

She actually yelped, her accent making it sound almost cute. I didn't stop. I was strong enough to beat her. My heartbeat pounded in my ears. A fierce buck to her face, and she dropped to the ground. My heart pounding, my breath ragged, I smiled at her. "You shouldn't have made it into a game," I said, stomping on her.

Again she tried to block, because even with her fresh injuries, she was still faster than me. But I broke through it, slamming steel to steel to flesh, beating her with her own guns. Another pony could deal with the pain. I just had to hit her harder.

Slipstock spat blood, rolled to her hooves, and backed away. All her guns whirled and struck at me again, slamming into my chest and pushing me away. Distance was something I didn't want. I needed to be close, I needed to be able to hit her!

We circled one another a few times. I wasn't fast enough to take her down by myself, and I was too stubborn to let her drop me. One of us needed an edge, or we'd be stuck in this awkward stalemate forever. I needed Lost. Working together we could beat her, and take down the rest. Together we were strong enough to save the ponies here that needed saving.

Breathing ragged, I stared at the mare, looking for a weakness. Pale blue pony, dirty blonde mane, looked extremely bored. She still held the guns around her, though none fired. What could I do to beat her? Gunbuck I'd shot on instinct. Xeno's brothers perished by my drug induced confidence. Bandits and raiders fell to frantic running and gunning. Wirepony fell to teamwork.

I didn't have time to be a thinky pony. I charged her. I knew what would happen; I might not consider my actions and their consequences, but I was smart enough to learn tactics. I jumped to the side at the last second, past the guns she'd brought up and into her side. I body-checked her, hard enough to get a surprised yelp.

She faltered and collapsed onto her side. I skidded to a stop, amazed that it'd actually worked. I turned and reared. With my whole weight and all my fury, I pounded her with my forehooves. Again and again I hit her, smashing her ribs and legs until I heard cracks. Bitch wanted to play a game, wanted to torture me and drag things out? I'd show her. Her guns came to block, but I went through them. She was fast, but I was stronger than her magic. The steel digging into my flesh didn't hurt, I ignored what got through. Satisfied with my work on her torso, I lashed out and cracked her in the side of her head as hard as I could.

She whimpered, and finally slumped into unconsciousness. The magenta haze around her horn flickered out, and her guns fell to the ground. She let out a groan, and I stepped back.

One down.

I walked off, having more important things to deal with. One slaver down. I just had a few more to question or kill. I needed to find my sister. Stopping, I downed another one of Xeno's concoctions. I had no idea how they fought, and there was no way I was chancing going in unprepared. Fighting three-to-one odds, while full of holes and bruises, was a *bad* idea, even for a not-thinky pony.

Rounding the corner back onto the main road, I looked to the park where the mares and the alicorn had gathered. The ponies chained to the cart had moved forward, and they were hitching several of the ponies from the town hall's basement to it.

They had Lost.

Sitting in front of the green-maned unicorn mare was my sister. She had chains and hoofcuffs around all four of her legs, and the purple mare, Amble maybe, was attaching a collar to her neck.

"Lost!" I yelled, charging. How dare they take my sister. I was going to kill them all. Whatever they did to me didn't matter. It was another pony's problem to deal with. I was going to break their skulls in with my bare hooves, and make an example out of slavers for the rest of the Wasteland. No pony fucked with *my* sister and lived.

The alicorn looked at me, and smiled. She grabbed Lost in a telekinetic field and lifted her into the air. My sister didn't even flinch, she just stared at me sadly, and then cast her glance to the ground. Was she ashamed that she'd been captured? It didn't matter; captured meant I could save her, and we could go forward. Together we were strong. I just had to get her a gun, and the two of us could take them down.

"Stop," said the alicorn, in a calm and almost quiet voice. The normal booming voice was gone, and she sounded so confident that I would bend to her whim.

I did. With Lost in her grasp, there wasn't anything I could do that wouldn't be a huge risk. I stopped dead in my tracks, not even lowering my foreleg back to the ground. Like I statue, I waited.

"Beat Slipstock? Pffft, ya kill her?" mocked the unicorn, a bored smirk across her lips. "Took her long enough, eh Amble?" She looked over at the pink and purple earth pony. "Figured she'd go down a lot faster."

"Drugs helped," I spat back.

"Hidden, just kill her," Lost said, finally looking up at me.

"Try it and ya sister burns in radiation," said Amble, a smirk across her lips. "Ya new here, new and stupid. This is a trade we've been doin' for a long time now. We've had troublemakers before, and ya got a real big weakness we can exploit." She turned to the unicorn. "Hurry up and get them loaded." She

motioned to the ponies chained standing behind the cart. “I’ll take these two as personal pets.” She turned back to me and grinned. The mare had no weapons, and was down a bodyguard, so why did she look so confident?

I ignored her and looked back at the alicorn. If I killed her, Lost would be free. But if I fired, it wouldn’t do any good, that shield would block- wait, where were the bullet wounds from where I’d shot her earlier? The alicorn looked like she’d never been shot at all!

I tried to calm down, and forced myself to take slow deep breaths. The Buck wasn’t helping. I needed to *think*, not smash. I stomped all four hooves, loudly enough to draw a glare from both the alicorn and Amble. I could feel the pounding in the wound in my ear, and looked back and forth between all three, unsure what to do.

“Lost, I can’t chance that,” I said, finally settling myself. I looked from the bit in front of me to her, then back. I could do it, right? The Goddesses had watched out for me so far. Sure I’d suffered losses and pitfalls, but I came out on top.

I lost a hoof, but killed Wirepony. I got thrown into horribly radioactive mines, but made friends there. I could be a hero. I just had to pull the trigger. I closed my eyes, and took a deep breath.

“Just do it!” Lost yelled. I snapped my eyes open and looked at her. Why’d she have to get taken? Together we would’ve saved the mares and taken these slavers down. “Hidden, we’ve gotten through tougher,” she screamed, pleading with me. Her hooves strained against the cuffs, and I could see her horn glow, trying to fight the magic that held her. The steel rod in the alicorn’s head glowed blue, but no matter the strain on her face, it didn’t budge.

The alicorn held her strong. Struggle as she might, she could only hover in the air.

“What if I miss?” I asked, looking between her and the alicorn. I wasn’t afraid of hitting my sister, I was afraid of missing altogether. Persistence was a good gun, it fired fast and it fired hard, but the distance between us was too much.

“She dies, we sell ya off ta Red Eye, and then ya gonna wish *ya* died, too,” Amble yelled at me. She turned to check her progress with the others. “Look. This place is real lucrative for me, and I don’t wanna lose that. This is ya last act of free will, I’ll *let* ya decide if ya sister here lives or not. That’s all ya get. Either way, we take ya and ya end up bein’ a commodity. I suggest ya cooperate. I treat my pets a lot better when they’re obedient.”

As if on cue, a bullet tore through the alicorn’s wing, into her chest, and out the other side. Before it finished going through, the shield was up around both her and Lost. The bullet plinked into the other side, followed by all manner of blood and gore. The far side of the shield was painted red, but she didn’t even flinch.

The other two had guns out in an instant. Where Amble had gotten one from, I didn't know, but the unicorn's horn was ablaze holding two impressively large plasma rifles and aiming them for the building where the shot came from.

"What was that?" asked Lost, her eyes wide with terror. I could understand, being trapped in a bulletproof bubble with a creature that could easily throw her into the radiation. She shivered, looking at her gore-and-feather-covered tail. "Please, tell me that was Xeno!"

"The only backup we could expect," I said, grinning. I cautiously mouthed the battle saddle's bit and looked at Amble.

"Sunbright, find out what that was. I can handle our new pet," snapped Amble, nodding in the direction of the Town Hall. She spoke like she already owned me. "Find this 'Xeno' and kill whoever it is."

Their alicorn was wounded now, and even if she didn't want to show it, there was no way she could fight with a hole like that through her torso. She turned slowly, not dropping Lost from her telekinesis, and stared at the blood splatter on the inside of her shimmering shield. "We- are unimpressed by your assault on Our- life, Our- town. Our- daughters are safe," she said, turning. "Unity will prevail. The Wasteland has ways to protect its own, if only you could see." That last bit sounded almost sad... Calmly, she strode to the far side of the park, past the point where the radiation had nearly killed me. She trailed Lost along in her telekinesis a short distance behind her. Almost as if she were taunting me, she pulled her just far enough toward the radioactive part of town to set the PipBuck off.

I stared, my mouth actually hanging open. Even at this distance, my ears picked up slow clicking from the PipBuck around Lost's leg. I prayed she wasn't too far in. She hadn't keeled over or started vomiting, so she was *probably* safe... I looked back at the alicorn, and watched as the giant hole in her chest began to close. Eyes widening, I faltered and took a step back. She... She could heal herself? What in the name of Celestia! Luna, please help. Her wings spread, the far one's bones snapping back into place and regrowing. I watched in horror as the muscles, skin, feathers, everything reformed as if nothing had happened. There was no way we could win.

I turned back to the slavers. The green-maned mare had disappeared, gone in a flash when I looked at the alicorn. It was only Amble left to deal with. If I could find a way to take her out. All I had to do...

But that still left Lost.

"Hidden, just kill her. I can-" said my sister, before going silent. Her eyes opened wide, and she went stiff in the air, pulling against her chains. Whatever was happening, I didn't like it.

I took a step forward, only to be stopped by a glare from the alicorn.

"Hey, don't *damage* her!" Amble snapped, shooting the alicorn a glare. It worked, and whatever she'd done ceased. Lost gasped for breath, clutching both forehooves at her throat. "Ya unity or whatever might

heal you, but I need healthy slaves if I'm goin' ta turn a profit." She looked over at me, smirking again. "Anypony who can make short work of Slipstock and still walk away is well worth stealing from my alicorn friend here. I think Red Eye'll want you for the entertainment, once I'm done." The mention of this Red Eye scared me. Twice now she'd mentioned that name, and anypony who needed slaves for entertainment was high on my list of 'things and people to stay the fuck away from.'

"Don't damage her? What do you want?" I asked, buying for time. She started to say something, but I blocked it out. All I had to do was kill the alicorn. How could I get through the shield? Was there any way I could get her before she could kill Lost? I took a deep breath, ignoring the urge to run in and smash. I was outnumbered, but... But I was strong! We'd killed the Wirepony. A distraction? That worked last time. Would it work this time?

I looked at my sister. She panted and stared at me. It hurt that I couldn't help her. I couldn't imagine how she felt, having gotten herself into this situation in the first place. She was crying, and struggled in vain against the chains that held her.

"Lost!" I yelled, cautiously stepping forward.

She looked up at me, and shook her head. Her lips moved, she mouthed the word 'fire' at me, but I ignored it. It wasn't worth the risk. When I shook my head, she just... it looked like she gave up. Her eyes went wide and she hung her head. Her legs went limp in the chains, and the alicorn lowered her to the ground. Slowly, she looked up at me. I stared right back, wishing I knew what to do.

I wished I knew, too. I wanted to yell to her. We could win, I knew it. I just... I didn't know *how*. Lost's plans would work, somehow. But with her stuck in the shield that Goddess-impersonating bitch created, I just... I couldn't think of a way. Without Lost, all I had was impulse and recklessness, both of which would get us killed in this situation.

She looked away from me, and stared at the ground. For the briefest of moments, I thought she might fight back. Might try to use some little bit of cheater magic to do something, *anything*. But, all Lost knew was how to lift, light, and heal. Instead she just stood there, dejected and alone. I wanted to be by her side, but...

"Give my sister back, and we'll leave," I begged, hoping we could barter.

"Unacceptable," said the alicorn, "It is for the preservation of Our- Unity. For the safety of Our-daughters."

"Okay, look. Ya put up a good fight so far, and I like that stubborn streak," said Amble, flipping a hoof up. "It's somethin' I like in my pets." She grinned a big, shit-eating grin that I couldn't stand to look at. "But I'm getting impatient. Ya have fifteen seconds to get ovah here, and I won't sell ya to Filly. Once I finish with ya, I'll *personally* sell ya to a nice bar or brothel instead. They'll treat ya good."

“We’d still be slaves. I can’t,” I said, shaking my head, “*can’t* just give up like that. We came here to help ponies. To stop ponies like you.” I bit my tongue, and closed my eyes. I shivered, my legs twitching back and forth. I didn’t want to say what I had to. It was the only way out.

“No pony up there boss,” said the voice of Sunbright. She stepped out from behind Amble, as if she’d never left. “Just a dead robot and some wartime corpse.”

“Whatever, I’ve got bigger issues to worry about,” snapped the purple earth pony. She stared me right in the eye.

I faltered, and looked at Lost. “Let us go. We’ll leave. I promise on my mother...” I winced, nearly choking. “On my mother’s grave.” That did it. I opened my eyes, and stared through tears at my sister. She had to understand. I couldn’t chance her life. It wasn’t worth it to try for a shot and miss. If she died... “Please just... Let her go. And we walk off. None of this happened. I never heard of this town.”

“Get real ya idiot. I promise I’ll pull a skywagon out of my ass for ya to fly away on,” she said, rolling her eyes. “The only promise ya can make is the promise to stay dead when I kill ya to make sure you don’t come back. Ya *not* walkin’ away from this without chains on ya hooves and a collar on ya neck. I *already* own ya. Why don’tcha learn ya place?”

I placed my teeth on the battle saddle’s bit. I could win this, but it would be a bloodbath. Lost would be fine. She was strong. She was my older sister and I trusted her with my life. They could fire at me, and she had the PipBuck. She could be safe. She was smarter anyway.

I looked at Amble, and Sunbright behind her. I hated this mare as much as I hated Wirepony. How dare she toy with me? At least that monster had been a mindless killing machine, it didn’t know any better. Amble knew damn well just how to get at me... Use my family against me and taunt me with promises I couldn’t trust her to keep. And worst of all, the whole time, she did it with a smile.

I brought my mother into this. I couldn’t feel my heart anymore. Everything inside felt dead. I looked over to my sister, who stared at me with tears down her cheek. I could practically read her mind, yelling ‘how could you’ at me over and over again.

I’m sorry, Lost. I... I tried.

“Lost, get ready,” I yelled, and looked back at Amble. Fine, if she didn’t want to trust my word, didn’t trust me swearing on the mother that given her life to protect us. It wasn’t worth trying to reason with her any longer. I just had to fire, and have faith that the Goddesses had a-

Click.

My ear flicked. It couldn’t.... I looked over, straight down the barrel of a revolver. “No...” I whispered, looking past it. Slipstock stood behind the gun, looking far from bored, and more than a little pissed-off. I

looked past her, past the bloody stains and splotches on her mane and coat. Why hadn't I just killed her?

I looked back at Amble, cursing the smirk across her lips. One last time I looked at Lost, who stared back with unfocused eyes. She wouldn't meet my gaze, and finally I just... Let go.

"I'll be good..."

Footnote: Level Up!

Hidden Fortune:

New Perk: Scrounger – Seriously, you're just now getting around to taking this? I thought this was your *raison d'être* or something. Oh well. You have better luck finding items in the Wasteland, and can search extra times to see if you missed something. With a little help from your special talent, you always seem to find something worthwhile.

Lost Art:

New Perk: Blessed By Luna – Your habit of staying awake through all hours of the night has given you a +2 Intelligence and +2 Perception bonus from dusk till dawn. These bonuses can temporarily raise your Intelligence and Perception to levels far exceeding normal pony abilities. This perk does not stack with the Touched By Luna Trait.

"What about Xeno?"

"I don't know, she's safe. At least that's what I heard the ponies in the walls tell me."

"Ponies... in the walls. Hidden, have you gone insane? Just. *Look*. Do you think she has a plan?"

"With our luck?"

"It's *my* luck you must worry about, ponies. I have a *good* feeling about today!"

"Good feeling about today? Are you daft?"

"Good feeling... Shit. We're all doomed."

(A massive thank you to Kkat for creating, and everyone else who has helped to flesh out the universe of Fallout Equestria. And to everyone who has/will help with editing and making this more palatable... Big hearts to Dimestream[Who wrote the amazingly surreal dream sequence above! Everypony should go thanks Dimestream for being awesome!], Sabsy, Heartshine, Moth, and everypony else who helped with ideas, editing, and brushies. And of course everything is copyright their respective owners. ~Hnetu)

DIMENOTE: Hidden must have rewritten this chapter four or five (Three actually ~Hnetu) times trying to please all of her picky-ass editors, so she deserves a giant hug and possibly also some chocolate. And you pricks had better appreciate what good quality this turned out having, too! Or I'll find a way to SET YOU ON FIRE OVER THE INTERNET.

-Dimestream