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Prologue – 'And he's the ones who likes all our pretty songs'

If I have to tell you my story, I have to start from the middle. Well, not really the middle. Just, from the event that began to branch it all off, you know? This is not a biography, there's no need to tell you about me from the day of my birth. Not in chronological order. And this isn't only *my* tale. This is a story, and like most stories, it usually starts in *media res*, like zebra say. In this case?

It starts with me waking up.

-I-

"Sleep. The great unifier, ain't it?" I stood still as it slithered around, brushing his tail against my discolored tuft of hair before settling for sitting in front of me, on the other side of table. **"No matter the bodily accessory or lack thereof, if their flank is decorated or not, executioner or victim, everypony finds solace in slumber. In dreams."** I jerked my head to the left to not stare at its smirking face. **"And yet, you prefer *my* company to dreaming. What does that say about you?"**

"You're annoying." I clicked my tongue, keeping my gaze away. I'd learned long ago. Ignoring it. Tuning it out. The only way to not let it get on my nerves.

"I hope so. The day I'm not even a nuisance to you anymore is the day I *truly* die. Fortunately, I have plenty of confidence in my ability to tick you off." I narrowed my eyes. He was *gloating*. What kind of pony-no, not a pony, and not a *he*- gloats in *its* ability in being a thorn in the hoof? The one living in my head. That's who-*what*!

I couldn't ponify it. Not even with *grammar*. I had to keep it alien, an unwanted passenger, to ignore at *best*, to loathe and hate at worst, but I had realized long before that even negative ones were still *feelings*. Feelings are for people. Feeling are for ponies, zebras, hell even *Hellhounds*. It didn't deserve feelings. It *couldn't* have feelings. Not *my* feelings. Bad enough that it had my thoughts.

"Now, now, *Tombstone*. Don't change the subject. Why do you walk my nothingness, instead of lulling your sleep with dreams?" That was usually the time I shut my eyes, feigning sleep. While being already asleep. I know, ridiculous. It seemed a good idea, and at least I couldn't see its face any more. **"What do you fear? What does your subconscious conjure from your memories?"** I realized a few days from there that its voice alone was *much worse*. Grating, irritating. And the way he rapped his hooves on the table... **"Or is it that your mind is so broken that your dreamscape turned into a twisted movie theater? Replaying the worst events of your life over and over? With a *curious* predilection for ones where fault is to be found in your choices, blood on *your* hooves?"**

"... Hey, asshole." It raised an eyebrow, amused at my cussing. I had my eyes closed, but by then I could *foretell* his facial expressions. "I'm waking up." *It* pouted. Never scowled.

-I-

The inner clock works, you know? You actually *can* tune your body so that you always wake up at the same hour or that you sleep the same amount of time. I favor good sleep and rest, so I'm of the second school of thought. Eight hours, always. Unless something wakes me up. That morning, I had had a *relatively* good night of rest.

"Luna, I hate it when he starts talking *Gala*." Gala, yeah. I know from good sources that old Equestria's Grand Galloping Gala was as *dull* as most of the people attending were *stuck up*, *favouring* a high-and-mighty level of **lexicon**. So, whenever you see someone talking all *thou* and *predilection*? Tell 'em Tombstone says 'You're totally *Gala*'. I stretched my neck, yawning. A swig of water from my canteen and my grogginess disappeared. A little gargling, and I spat out grime and dust. "Come on, Tombstone. Time to get some breakfast." I stretched my whole body and rolled on my back, my akubra hat sliding back into place. My left front leg landed on the lever, my left eye finding the scope, the familiar feeling of the rifle's butt against my shoulder. "Like clockwork."

I had seen them the previous evening. Just in time, since I was running out of supplies. I followed them till they set up camp. I pressed on, looking for a good spot for my *nest*. I eventually found a rocky hill overlooking much of the surrounding area, including the path they were traveling. They had just come out from behind the shambles of the highway. '*And he likes to sing along.*' My little habit. I always hum a single strophe before each shot. The lyrics are for my mind only, though. I set the cross-hair on the less grimy of the five. A mare with a long green mane.

I pushed on the lever. The rifle rewarded me with the usual vibration: starting from the chamber and spreading all the way to my shoulder.

-I-

"*Fuck!*" The other four travellers immediately took cover behind a couple of nearby ood carriages. They had probably fell off the highway, considering their damage. The mare cried out in pain as she collapsed, my bullet biting into the ground after digging her a grave injury.

If you ever find yourself fancying the idea of sniping -and I mean *real* sniping-, you'll want to make yours the old bait tactic, *if* you're on the attack. *Never* kill your first target. Cripple it, make it helpless and make it suffer and cry out in *pain*. Then wait and see if anyone helps. "Where did that shot come from?!"

"Holy-It went through *both* of Verdant's front legs!" They took out their weapons following the example of the other mare. Two shotguns. A bat '*enhanced*' with nails. An automatic pistol. Nothing that could reach my position, even *if* they somehow found out my position. Not that I couldn't take them all down before they even crossed half the distance to my nest.

"H-Help meeee!" The prone mare whined miserably as she shed blood and tears. Those kind of injuries sting like a son of an Alicorn *without* wasteland dust getting into them. She was in for a world of it. "It **hurts!**"

No one moved. I never expect them to. Not because the apocalypse brought heightened tactical sense, or because an excess of radiation causes sudden bursts of insight, though. You see, the bait trick would work wonders in the old war. The wasteland? It's all big dragon eats small dragon, and it can only work on ponies with their heads still screwed on right. I don't use it to kill more easily. I don't need it. Barring hunger and thirst I have all the time in the world. My targets, on the other hand... So why waste a bullet, you may ask.

"Maybe you'll give me satisfaction?" After a couple minutes of cries for help from the mare and colorful expressions from the others I noticed a change in the body language of one of the three bucks, the youngest. He was biting on his lower lip. Tense as a taut wire. I pulled on the lever and loaded another bullet in the chamber. *'And he likes to shot his gun.'*

The three ponies still in cover exploded in a cacophony of curses as the buck with the sand coat bolted out of cover. My rifle vibrated. *'But he don't know what it means.'*

-I-

"Come on, Verdant. You'll be alright! I swear!" Once the shock of having seen his traveling companions' heads suddenly acquiring new ventilation systems wore off, the young buck gathered the injured mare and brought her to cover behind the nearest carriage.

"T-Thanks, DustClop." The mare kept on crying and moaning. Still, she was the one who saw me coming. She gasped and tried to scoot away, bumping into her would-be-savior. He noticed me too, going for his weapon. He was the one with the bat.

"*F-Ftay pack!*" The comprehensive oratory impediment -I have my own *Gala* moments- only amused me. I smiled. I guess it didn't come out as a *good* smile, since next thing I knew he threw himself at me.

Smile gone, I pivoted on my front hooves and bucked him hard in the face. He landed on the ground in front of the injured mare, who shrieked out his name. I clicked my tongue, annoyed at yet another situation supporting my theory: I have the worst social skills ever. I turned my attention to the bodies, for food. Meaning I browsed for supplies in their saddles. Don't jump to conclusions.

'They were carrying some good gear.' Their weapons -exception made for the bat- weren't the usual chunks of battered metal and wood. They showed signs of usage but also of repair. No rifle ammo, though. I took enough food for the trail and a handful of bottlecaps from the dead mare's pouch. Then I kicked the saddles towards the now cowering couple of ponies. The injured pony let out a shriek as they fell around her, one directly on top of her recovering protector.

"Your medical supplies just landed on top of mister hero." I could see the confusion on her

face but I had no interest in clarifying. With my luck, she would suddenly throw the buck at me. I turned around and left. I was making good time, even with a programmed stop for some breakfast. Barring run-ins with other groups of *Reds*, I was going to reach **Stable 43** before noon.

-I-

The sun was high in the sky as I reached the area. I stopped for an instant, taking in the big yellow ball and the surrounding blue. I still couldn't get used to it. As gloomy and disheartening it had been the cloud cover had been *precious* routine. Something that you could always expect to see no matter what. It helped normalize your life. Luna knows the Wasteland was crazy enough.

To suddenly see the cloud cover disappear meant that something *big* had happened. The Pegasi would have never gotten rid of it, so someone else had done it for them. I guessed it had something to do with the sudden influx of Enclave bulletins over the radio, but I hadn't given it much thought at the time. Only when I saw the sky and the sun, the stars and the *moon* -that beautiful, ivory gem- did it really dawn on me that routine had been broken.

I swiftly focused back on the task at hand: find the Stable's entrance. Or better, locate it. I already knew where it was. A natural cavern on side of the hill, but the data was dated-did that on purpose. No, seriously!- two centuries and over. The picture had *grass* in it. Maybe the mouth had caved in with time? "Or maybe not."

The entrance hadn't caved in, but the shape was different. Weather and time eroded part of the stone. As I approached the hole, I heard the rush of water. *That* was something new. I carefully approached the entrance. The light illuminated the slope leading down to the sturdy metallic door with an engraved 43. A couple meters before that, though, there was a small stream rushing from one side to the other.

That made me curious. A bit worried. No stable had been built near any water-bearing stratum. While an alternative water supply may have been useful, stables were already equipped with water talismans. Also, the risks of erosion and the liquid being radioactive after exposure to balefire just weren't acceptable. So, where the hell was all that water coming from?

"Damn it." I had to break one of my personal rules to not break another, more important one. I stepped inside the cavern, stopping a few meters on the slope. The rock walls would give me at least some shielding. I sat up and opened the right pouch of my saddle, then bit on the padding. "Got to be quick." I set it on the ground in front of me.

Curious fact about **PipBucks**, they can be operated in two ways: using the buttons and knobs on the chassis or via a linking mind-spell which allows you to operate it telepathically, which requires you to wear it. Although the more advanced functions like *Tag Location* -a system to trace other PipBucks-, *Eyes-Forward Sparkle* -**E.F.S.**, a short/mid range threat detection system- and *Stable-Tec Arcane Targeting Spell* -**S.A.T.S.**, a combat targeting aid- require the telepathic link between PipBuck and owner, other functions like the *Inventory Sorter*, the automatic mapping system and the Radio could be operated by hoof. And also by

hoof, you could turn off all wireless functions of the PipBuck, rendering it a glorified wardrobe adjuster.

That's how I usually kept mine, in my saddle. But at the moment, I needed to turn it on if just for a few seconds. I already knew something had gone wrong in Stable 43, but exactly *what* eluded me, and the water didn't fit in with anything I was prepared for. And rule #1 is ***Always be prepared.***

"...now what happened! I woke up to three feet of water on the whole level!" An emergency broadcast. *"And my bunk is on the top level! The lower ones are already-Oh, goddesses! T-The Stable Door's commands are unusable because of the water! We can't get out! We're trapped!"* I cringed. I just then noticed water dripping down from the door's chinks. The door supposed to resist balefire megaspells. But had they ever thought about testing it against water pressure? *"Please, if anyone hears this! If anyone's alive, help us!"* I turned it off. I had used my window of opportunity, and I had heard enough. Also, I heard nothing. No *clicks*.

I was suddenly grim. Somewhere in the Stable was a source of clean, non-radioactive water. A source so potent that it had turned the underground bunker in a big watery grave. In the middle of the fucking *Wasteland*. If it hadn't spelled horrible death for hundreds of ponies and foals, I would have laughed at the irony. As it stood, I dreaded what would come bursting out when I opened it.

-I-

On the inside, water had probably gotten to the controls before they could open the door. The system is hydraulic, would have worked no problem. It probably still did, but the Stable ponies had found themselves at a loss because the panel had fried. Its twin on my side was still working, but there was the slight problem that Vault doors opened towards the inside. Which meant that the door would have to fight against the pressure of water, and that wasn't a battle it was going to win. Ever. So, I decided to roll with the winner.

Ain't that good with explosives, but know the easiest way to detonate a mine safely? I'll give you a hint: I had just stuck three mines on the rock near the side of the door which was losing more water, and I was now aiming at the middle one with my revolver, held in my mouth. I turned tail and ran before the bullet hit home. When it did-Have you ever seen a Vault door fly through rock?

A *river* followed. A huge stream of water carrying everything which wasn't bolted down in the Stable. Including everyone who had been living in it. It was macabre, and yet I couldn't look away. I *dared* not as body after body in various states of bloating flowed out of the cave and down the hill. Out of respect, but also because I was looking for a particular kind of dead pony. Ones wearing labcoats or engineering tools.

It took minutes for the flux of water and fillies and colts and mares and bucks to stop, and as I peered inside the partially collapsed cave I could see that water was still pooling in front of the entrance. Whatever had caused all this, it was still functioning. I turned downhill, looking for the labcoat, stepping over countless bodies as I did.

Whenever something that alien happens in a Stable, it *always* involves a technological and/or magical mishap. The best way to get some insight in it is to hack into a terminal, but in that case Stable 43's ones were underwater, and they aren't programmed to sprout gills in case of inundation. My best bet at the moment was a lab-pony's PipBuck. Those things were made to sustain much more than some water. Even a lot of water. They *are* tested against pressure.

But, luck wasn't on my side. There were ponies of all ages and colors laying dead on the hill, but no one wearing any kind of lab coat or maintenance gear. *'Engineering and labs are usually on the lowest levels of a Stable. They probably got stuck further inside.'* So, it was either checking each and every body and PipBuck or venturing inside the flooded stable. I chose the second option. On top of having the risk of still coming up short on information, inspecting hundred of dead bodies all on your own?

I retrieved my revolver, holding it with my teeth as I slowly made my way down the cave, already cursing the low water-level. Too shallow to hide in and the pitter patter and the ripples made any attempts at stealth useless. Coupled with the fact that I couldn't use my rifle in enclosed spaces, it all left me quite peeved. I found more bodies at the entrance. About twenty. These ones had missed the hole where the door had been as the release of the water's pressure jettisoned everything out. They had impacted the walls of metal and rock, violently. I was stepping around broken, crunched piles of pony. A small blessing: one was wearing a labcoat. I had to move three bodies before reaching her. A ruined purple mane framed a wrinkled cream body. Her head was livid, her body rigid. Skin had started to come off at her limbs. "... May Luna give you peace." A little prayer, then I recovered my own PipBuck from my saddle and connected the two. It took a handful of minutes to copy all the data. None of it was encrypted. Again, small blessings.

I started with the latest journal entry. The date was the day I started traveling to the Stable. I cursed under my breath at the revelation. Too late.

Entry 084/15

The project is at an impasse. The specimen has reached full maturity and the latest tests have proved fruitful, except for this last obstacle. The experiment is still too invasive. We projected it to be so to adapt to the dry environment of the Wasteland, looking for water deep underground, but we didn't foresee such a... Thirst. That's the problem when experimenting with genetics and magic instead of technology. There's no such things as taps, and most of the time you can't foretell the results. It just keeps on pumping out water.

The toxin we developed only harms it. If this keeps up, we'll be forced to go back to the planning stage. Maybe this time we'll make it so that it'll store water in its leaves, to squeeze later at modicum?

I stomped hard on the water, cursing. Another freak accident. No oversight, the Stable had been built over a water-bearing stratum on *purpose*. I was disheartened. *'I bet on paper it looked good, maybe perfect. But why does it always go wrong?'* It was the third one I saw in my life, and the third time things had gone bad for them. I get it. Stables were never supposed to save everyone, but you'd think they'd at least be supposed to keep the lab-rats

inside alive! "... Alright. That's unfair." I exhaled, calming myself down. True, they had placed the Stable near a water source on purpose, they had probably left a spot metallic-free too, but it wasn't like Stable-Tec had left instructions to the Overmare saying 'Start working on developing something that can find water but cannot be turned off to fill your Stable and drown everyone inside. Have a nice day.'. If they did, only a *cretin* -Gala moments, remember?- would have followed them. In this case, it was just a tragic accident. A mix of bad luck and carelessness.

'A toxin. So, whatever this thing is, it's organic.' Probably a plant. I had heard of plants from before the war -mostly thriving in buffalo territory- with deep roots systems, reaching past 170 feet, made to search for underground water. They had been working on the genetic engineering of something like that? Maybe enhanced it with magic.

At the moment, I was faced with the task of taking care of the thing. Maybe find some of that toxin, inject it. On top of wasting precious clean water when there was no one collecting it, an uncontrolled flood isn't good, no matter how dry the soil is. *Especially* with dry soil. And it would address the main reason I was in the Stable for, too. I checked the mare's pocket. No vials nor syringes nor anything. I was all out of small blessings, it seemed. I downloaded the Stable's map from her PipBuck, then started browsing her journal entries. I found one dated four days before the last which answered my questions.

Entry 81/15

The toxin was a failure. We tried to craft it so that it would hamper the specimen's functions. Temporarily incapacitate it or diminish the output of water. Instead it almost killed Roxy. They gave a name to the plant? We put the remaining samples in the safe in the Overmare's office for the time being. They could come in handy for future re-engineering but I don't feel safe -heh, look at what I wrote- leaving something that poisonous in the lab's cabinets.

"For the love of Luna..." That was a problem. I can work my way around most computers in the Wasteland but I can't pick a lock to save my life. How was I supposed to open a safe in the Overmare's office if the terminal was fried?

-I-

Apparently, someone had had my same idea: going for the vials. Problem was, he had had the bad thought of closing the door behind him as he reached the Overmare's office. By the time he had opened the safe, the water had broken the door's controls and locked him inside. How I knew that? I knew because I could see a lab-coat wearing stallion floating in the water inside the room through the glass windows. He had died not with fear in his eyes, but a 'damn iiiiiit' face. Floating to his right, a metallic case.

As I thought about how to shatter the glass without making everything come out in one big wave, carrying the object Luna knew where, a metallic noise echoed from above me. I immediately went for my revolver. As I grasped it, the noise became a loud bash. Like something solid, with *momentum*, throwing itself against a metallic wall. *'Or a grating.'* The ventilation system, I thought as its cover fell in the office. Out of it, something quick, slick and green. It wrapped itself around the metallic case. I shot the window. Armor piercing

bullet.

The water's pressure did the rest. I narrowly dodged a blast of water and glass shards. I placed the revolver back in its holster and jumped for the metallic case as the thing lost its grip on it. I bit on it, wincing as I landed. That was some hard metal.

'Give me!' I tensed. I looked around for the source of that thundering voice. Found none. **'Give me that!'** Louder than before, but I still saw no one. My eyes widened as the *something* slick from before cracked in my direction, slamming the metallic railing with enough force to dent it as I dodged. It allowed me to observe it better. It moved as alive, but it wasn't a tentacle: it was a vine. A giant vine, just like it's twin which crashed through the air vent above and behind me. I ran forward and dodged another stab. **'Give me the poison!'**

The voice was female, but loud, angry. And a tinge of desperation? More and more vines burst through the ventilation system. I had a suspect. I skidded to a halt on the wet metal as a vine cut in my path. I jumped, over the rail and towards the atrium. I rolled to a halt in the water, throwing back my now wet hat and depositing the case in it. I grasped my revolver as the vines plunged in my direction. The second bullet in the cartridge was an explosive one. I aimed and shot, clicking my tongue on the trigger. One vine cracked in half, losing blood-like dark green liquid, its companions trashing around wildly as the voice screamed in anguish. Loud. In my *head*.

"... Roxy?" I tried. The scream continued. "Roxy!" I repeated, louder. Slowly, the cry of pain and the vines' erratic movement died down. "Roxy. Is that you?"

'You know my name?' The voice echoed. It was like a young filly, only throaty, raspy. Like she had a cold or was thirsty. I restrained a snort of laughter at that thought. **'Who are you?'**

"My name is Tombstone." The immediate threat was gone. I *really* hoped I had run out of screw ups at diplomacy with that morning's smile. "Roxy, what happened here?"

'I-I don't know.' 'She' sounded sad, scared. Confused. **'At first, we were all happy. Mommy and daddy were happy because I gave them good water. If they were happy, I was happy. So I kept on giving them good water. They were happy. I was happy.'** A sob. I cringed. The lab ponies in this stable had no idea what they had created, had they? **'But then they hurt me! They gave me the poison with a syringe a-and it burned! And I screamed and I cried but they didn't hear me! I didn't understand!'** 'Mommy' and 'daddy' were probably the two lab ponies. They didn't hear her? Why couldn't they? A dark chuckle echoed in my mind. I ignored it. **'So I thought-I thought maybe it was too little! Too little water! I had been bad, didn't give them enough good water, and they punished me! Because mommy and daddy would never hurt me without a reason!'**

"Sweet Luna." I cringed. I understood why her voice sounded like that. She had been *crying*. But. How the hell could a telepathic voice from a plant get raspy from **crying**?! What was I dealing with, here? And why did I feel bad for her? It was a *plant*!

'S-So, I gave them more good water! Lots of water! But-But everyone started screaming and now mummy and daddy... They don't talk to me anymore! T-They went still! Why?! And then the big boom-! I'm scared! Why?! Did I do that to mommy and daddy?! But I have been good! I have been good...' And she started crying. Really crying. *Wailing*. Last time I heard someone that desperate-I shook my head. Wasn't the time.

At the moment, I was faced with the following situation. The plant was, somehow, sentient. She was talking to me, crying in my mind, sounding like a young filly who'd been left alone in a dark, cramped place. Which was kinda true. A young filly who had wanted to be good for her *parents*, in the only way she knew. Luna, that was some quality mindfuck material. I had wanted to get rid of the source of everything, but if I had to listen to her dying laments as I did... Also, I wasn't confident I could get to her main body, especially if the lower levels were under-

'T-That's why... I need the poison.' She sniffled and my eyes widened. She couldn't mean-! **'I-I've been bad again! I need to be punished! To be hurt!'**

"No!" And there I was, trying to talk her out of it. The situation was getting weirder by the minute. At the moment, though, I was focused on stopping what sounded and acted like a four years old foal from committing suicide, even if she saw it as chastisement. Which wasn't much better, considering the source. *'Think of something, think of something...'*
"You'd go still too! And it would hurt! A lot!"

Some silence. **'F-Fine.'** I hoofed my face. **'S-So, I will be just like mommy and daddy.'** The vines inched closer to my hat.

"Roxy, you *can't*!" I backed away. Why was I so against her making my job easier? Curiosity about her sentience? Her telepathy? I didn't want to hear what would amount to a foal weeping in agony?

The vines stopped. **'Why?'**

"Because... Because..." Now, that was the question. And I had to come up with buffaloshit on the spot. "Because you have to come with me!" *'Aw, fuck me!'* She was silent. "N-Now you've learned your lesson! Too little water and too much water are *both* bad! Now you can leave on the *mission*!" *'Seriously, Tombstone?'* Yeah, I was pretty much pulling everything out of my rear as I went.

'... What's a messhun?' She asked. I could actually picture a filly cocking her head to the side as she said that.

"Ehm, it's something you have to do because it's the right thing! I'm on a mission too!" I continued, now actually forming actual factual lines. "Now that you've learned, you have to go out. See the world. So that someday, when you can have children, you will all give good water to lots of people!"

'M-Me? The...' She paused. I hoped she hadn't seen through me. **'Mister Tombstone, is the world 'Equestria'?' That surprised me. I nodded. 'I heard mommy and daddy talk about how... How I would help all Equestria.'** I sighed in relief. Thanks, mommy and daddy. **'A-Alright. Thanks for telling me, Tombstone.'**

"You're welcome." Hooray, Tombstone.

"Can you come pick me up?" And then it dawned on me. How was I supposed to bring with me a *Stable-sized plant*?!

-I-

"Ehm, Roxy?" Roxy had demonstrated her talents once again, emptying the lower levels of the Stable from water, allowing me access. The lower I went, the more the vines. On the lowest level, you couldn't see the ceiling and the walls. "I thought you'd be *smaller*. I can't carry, you know... All of you."

'It's okay. I have an idea.' She answered, glad that at least one of us had any ideas. I was following a slowly receding vine. Another turn, and I was in the lab. **'You found me!'**

"I can see that." As I descended, I had noticed red flowers blooming on the vines. Roxy's *taps*. They were pretty, but none were as beautiful as the one in full bloom in the middle of the room. Blood red with yellow stamens, as big as one of my hooves. It stood above a bunch of pony-thick vines. Six slimmer, rope-like ones came up from them in a spiral with the blossom on top.

'You can just carry red-me!' She chirped, and I noticed how the six vines were twitching. **'Come closer!'**

"Ehm... Alright." I acquiesced. Four of the small vines suddenly snapped off, snaking slowly in my direction. I shuddered, but stood still, trying to relax. They wrapped and knotted themselves around my body and shoulders, the flower nestling itself gently on the left one. The last two vines then snapped off as well, adjusting themselves so that they followed the lines of my body on each side, ending up at the base of my tail. They all were the exact length to not leave any pieces hanging, and they didn't feel tight nor impede movement either. I was honestly surprised.

'Okay! We can go!' She said, the flower's petals brushing softly against my leather armor. Just like that, I now had a traveling companion. I sighed.

"Well, welcome-" I was cut off by a sudden cacophony. *Clicks. Clicks* everywhere. From my own Pip Buck in my pouch, from the ones of the dead ponies in the nearby rooms, or the corridor. **'What's happening?!'**

'The bad stuff.' Roxy answered telepathically, having read my thoughts. I started walking out of the room. The click from radiation didn't lessen, if anything it got worse.

"Roxy, what bad stuff?" I asked, worried, a suspicion creeping in my mind. Please let me be

wrong, please let me be wrong, please let me be wrong-

'The stuff I took out of the bad water to make it good water! Now that I'm not big-me anymore, it's coming out...' I sucked in my breath. **'... Uh-Oh. Is the bad stuff bad out the water too, mister Tombstone?'**

'FFFFFFFFFFFFFFFF-!' I could hear *it* laughing its ass off.

-I-

I gasped, having ran out of breath hightailing it out of the Stable while losing enough mines to demolish the cave. I heaved, the familiar feeling of radiation sickness settling in. My legs gave out. I dove for my pouches and bit on a dose of Rad-Away, downing the bitter orangey sludge. **'Weee! That was fun, mister Tombstone!'** Fun, she said. I had discovered just how Roxy had mutated and gained sentience and telepathy. The water she had been pumping out and *filtering* was irradiated. I guess she only developed the latter after flooding the Stable, though. **'We were going so fast! Can we do that again?!'**

"... No, Roxy." I groaned, suddenly feeling tired as I allowed myself to relax. Or maybe it was my stomach churning as the Rad-Away did its work. A whine of disappointment echoed in my mind, and it finally downed on me just *what* I had saddled myself with: a sentient, telepathic plant able to turn irradiated water into *purified* water with the mind of a filly. *Literally* saddled myself, if one took in her resting place. I don't know how much I laid there, a devastated Stable behind me and a river of bodies in the front, a little lake forming at the feet of the hill, the water having pooled in a depression. I was hungry when I broke out of it, so at least an hour or so. Roxy had been silent the whole time. "Roxy, you still there?"

'Yes. Mister Tombstone sounded tired, so I was shut uppy. Was I good?' I rolled my eyes despite myself. A filly desperate for attention and approval.

"Yes. You were very good, Roxy." I stood, the Rad-Away having done its work. I was still hungry, but that could wait till I found a spot away from the mountain of bodies on the hill. "Say goodbye to mommy and daddy."

'Bye, mommy. Bye, daddy.' She sounded sad, but her voice wasn't raspy anymore. **'I'm going with mister Tombstone to see the world.'**

"Don't call me mister Tombstone, please. It makes me feel... Old." I started stepping down the hill.

'Okay, mistah Tombstone! Where are we going, mistah Tombstone?' Groaning at the young... *Bloom* completely missing the point, I thought about an answer. I needed to resupply. I was out of mines. Then, I would have to turn on the Wireless functions of my PipBuck again. See what other Stable needed a visit. Hoping that back home weren't actively searching for its Tag as I did.

Just another day in the Wasteland.

**Meinos Kaen presents
A Fallout Equestria Fanfiction**

