

## **Chapter 4: Change In The Wind**

[*Lady, you're trouble!*]

I opened my eyes to assess the situation.

*Bars on the doors. I guess we didn't get out.*

Naiara and Bosco were nowhere to be found. I was alone.

Again.

This wasn't like the first time either. I wasn't alone facing the terrifying possibility of making my own way in a world I didn't know. No, this was far from that. I curled up as I lay alone and facing the terrifying possibility of having that little bit of my own way permanently taken away. I was a prisoner. I would be a slave and sold to the highest bidder. I very much doubted that the highest bidder would be a nice and upstanding citizen. The Wasteland was not a world where such people became rich enough to be the highest bidder.

I tucked my head into the crook of my legs. No, there would be no soft-hearted master for me. Peanut may be a perpetually affable person but he said himself that he couldn't allow our attack on him. He would make sure that whoever he took bits from for me would be of a suitably nasty disposition. To send a message if nothing else. I would be used and abused over and over again. It would send a message.

Foolish little Snowflake-no, I would be *Red Ice* wouldn't I? Fitting really.

Bosco was right. It was a stupid idea. I knew nothing about Plottawa yet still thought I could walk past countless slavers, chat it up with some people I'd never met before and leave without a trace. How arrogant. How very *Red Ice*.

In my mind the Overmare was smirking.

*Yeah yeah, I know.*

Old Equestria won. It got me. It didn't even need to fire a shot either. A good lesson. Old Equestria is subversive. *Red Ice* was arrogance, pure and simple. I thought myself smarter than the world around me after a few days. Probably from day 1. My way was right. I gave no thought to any other. No, Bosco, I totally don't need to kill. Go ahead and take my bits, Naiara. Hi, Raiders, care to chat about your problems?

*Pure hubris. Snowflake knows best. Everything'll be fine.*

*Just look at me now.*

Alone. Again.

*I...am alone, right?* "Is anyone there? Guys?"

Silence. That could be good or bad. They might be captive too but held separately.

It would compound my failure if those two had been captured as well.

*Maybe...just maybe, there's hope for them after all.*

Perhaps they hadn't been caught after all. Naiara'd picked the fight but Peanut only knew who I was. He only knew *Red Ice*. He wasn't exactly in any condition to raise the alarm either after I'd fixed him to the desk. I was passed out in his office but the others could have gotten away.

I really hoped they'd gotten away. Damning them by my actions was infinitely worse than damning myself. Bosco was still just a kid. Naiara was a zebra. Neither of which were likely to make things pleasant for them if they were enslaved.

*What have I done?*

It really was what \*I\* had done, wasn't it? Old Equestria couldn't take the blame. That would be too easy. Before I'd feared the red ice. Now I'd claimed it. The monsters it had touched were no match for the monster who'd taken on the name.

*I really hope you escaped, Bosco, Naiara. You need to spread the word. "Stay away from the Red Ice! Stay away!"*

*That seems to be the closest thing to good I can do in this world.*

It wouldn't be enough. Not if those two didn't escape.

I lowered my head back down and closed my eyes. I'd know soon enough.

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*\*CLANG\* \*CLANG\* \*CLANG\**

“RISE AND SHINE SLEEPING BEAUTIES! Can't have you taking up room in here all day.”

Ah. My wardens approached. Would I recognise them from the big party? Would they recognise me? We were, briefly at least, the heroes of the hour after all. Whoever it was they weren't graceful. Those were some heavy-sounding steps.

My gaoler rounded the corner and stopped in front of my cell. I gaped. He chuckled. “Well if it ain't *li'l Stronghead*. Finally awake are ya?” The buffalo deputy with beech fur stood completely relaxed on the other side of the bars.

I couldn't believe it. “You? You're here? How? Why? Does Chief Rockhaunch know?”

The buffalo cocked his head at me as if this was the craziest question in the world. Was this sort of betrayal *commonplace*? “Well o' course he knows! He set the rotation after all.”

My mouth went dry. *No, not the chief. He seemed so upstanding. So collected. Not*

*a cowboy cop. Not looking out for number one. Not...this.* “How...how long have you and the chief been working here?”

The deputy grinned back at me, gearing up to talk a little about himself. “Oh years now. Too much turnover in the forces makes folks uneasy. They need to see the same bodies day in and day out. They trust *buffalo*, not badges.”

He was so cavalier about it. A long, stress-free con. He was right too. You see the same bodies day in and day out and eventually you stop noticing them altogether. They’re just part of the routine. You don’t look closely. That’s when they get you. Simple.

Simple yet heartbreaking. “I...really thought you were better than this.”

He frowned. “Now what’s that supposed to mean?”

I matched his frown. “You were hired to protect the people of Lethbridle. Not betray them like this!”

He seemed thoroughly confused now. Finding meaning in your work was apparently a foreign concept. “Betray them? Who’s betraying them? We’re looking after them like we promised when we took up the badge!”

“At least until the money’s in Peanut’s coffers you mean!”

“Who in the hell is Peanut?!”

I finally managed a chuckle myself. “Wow. That’s sad. You must be really far down the ladder if you don’t know your benevolent leader after years and I managed to meet him in less than a day.”

He was looking very wary now, staring at me with the strangest expression on his face. “I think we’d best get some medical types in here to look at you. You’re not making any sense.”

I barked out a laugh. “No? Sure then, bring in the doctors. I bet Plottawa’s got just *fantastic* healthcare for its slaves. Peanut wouldn’t allow anything less, right?”

Understanding dawned in his eyes and his laughing resumed, full-throated and full-bellied. “Waahaahaahaa! Oh you had me scared for a while there girl! Here I was thinking you’d taken a harder hit to the head than you did. Oh this is a horn-curler and no mistake!”

I was not in the mood for this mockery. “What? What’s so damn funny?!”

He didn’t say a word for a moment as he unlocked the cell and slid the door open. He beckoned me into the hallway. “Come have a look at this notice and then tell me whether or not you’re still impressed with ‘Plottawa’ or not.”

I stomped out of the cell grumbling about smartmouthed hornheads and looked around for whatever was causing that annoying grin on the deputy's face. "Alright, smiley, what's got you so amus-"

*Oh. I see. Well...I feel stupid. Again.*

Stencilled onto the wall in big black letters were the words:

### **Lethbridge Jail - Overnight Cells**

"So how does it compare to Plottawa hospitality?" The deputy utterly failed to keep the amusement out of his voice as my tried to keep from showing him my burning red face.

"Wh-what happened? The last thing I remember before waking up in that cell was fixing Peanut to his desk in his office at Plottawa."

The deputy just shrugged. "Dunno, I wasn't on duty when you showed up here. I just came on this morning and there was a note to make sure you were okay when you woke up." His tone turned sincere. "You are okay, aren't you *li'l Stronghead*? The chief wouldn't be pleased if you weren't. He's taken a little bit o' a shine to you after that noggin-knockin' you gave him."

*I'mnotaslaveI'mnotaslaveI'mnotaslaveI-oh right, talking...*

“Yeah, I think I’m okay. I’d kinda like to know what happened though. Are Bosco and Na-are my friends around?” Naiara still might not be welcome in Lethbridle. I really didn’t want to cause her any trouble. I didn’t want to cause trouble period right now. Or ever again if I could help it.

The deputy just shook his head ruefully before a dreamy look came over his face. “Couldn’t say, little lady. Like I told you, I just came on duty this morning, had a few days off with a certain special ladyfriend-”

“Lithu, right?”

He managed to blush and look shocked at the same time. “Now how did you know that?”

“We met in the bar. You were passed out in the corner.”

He rubbed the back of his head with a hoof, shamefaced. “Well yeah, hehe. After that we got to talking and had ourselves a nice few days together.”

“Aww, how sweet.” I couldn’t help myself.

The buffalo just blushed deeper. “Ahem. Anyway, I don’t know where your friends are and they aren’t here. I suggest looking around town. Though since you’re just up I’d say take it easy and don’t go storming any more slaver compounds for a



little while. Sound good?”

I gave him a small smile. I was glad to be free but apprehensive about my friends' whereabouts. “Yeah, sounds good. I'll be going now...you know I never did get your name.”

“Deputy Dent, ma'am.”

“Deputy Dent. Thank you for taking such good care of me. Give my regards to your sweetheart.”

His beech fur turned rose briefly. “I'll...make sure to do that ma'am. And you don't need to thank me for taking care of you. It's why I wear the badge.”

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I was utterly unwilling to set hoof in the market district again for fear of running into that ghoul and this left me with only one place in Lethbridle that I actually knew the location of: Nightcap's bar. Nursing an ever-warming cider I kept my back against the wall and stayed silent as I took stock. Not that I could hear myself even if I were to talk. The place was packed and the clientele were considerably rowdier than last time. Everybody seemed to be gathered around the central tables cheering but I couldn't see what was the cause.

*Okay, let's review: I, well...Naiara, picked a fight with a combat master in his*

*office. I, not Naiara, then proceeded to freeze him to his desk and give a fake name when he asked who I was. After which I passed out. In between passing out and waking up in Lethbridge jail Bosco and Naiara apparently got at least me out of Plottawa and then took off somewhere without telling anybody where they were going. Chief Rockhaunch agreed to watch over me while I was out. Today I woke up after a few days, based on the length of Deputy Dent's private getaway with Lithu. Neither Lithu nor her colleagues Latvi or Esto appear to be here. Here being the only place I know to look for them.*

*To sum everything up - I'm here in the only place others might know me yet none of those others are here.*

*Great.*

*I frowned as the crowd at the centre of the bar began cheering louder. That's not helping me think. What is going on anyway?*

I downed the dregs of my beverage and strolled over. Too many ponies were crowded around for me to see. The crowd noise was still annoying and I was determined to find out what was going on so I began pushing. A half-dozen ponies got a horn in the ribs before I managed to get through the throng. A surprising sight greeted me.

"I don't believe it."

Two pairs of eyes, one forest-green and the other scorching sapphire, stared back at me. “Snowflake-dahling! We meet again!” Schwarzwald gave a jaunty wave and an easy smile graced her scarred lips as she lay down her cards.

Next to her, Wings also lay down her deal and faced me. She didn’t display the same enthusiasm as her partner. Instead she afforded me a cautious appraisal. “You’re still alive then?”

I tried not to let this dissuade me. We weren’t friends. Not really. We had fought together though, that should count for something. I smiled back uncertainly. “Yeah. You too it seems. How have you been?”

She didn’t immediately respond but an answer came from across the table. “Hey! Gossip later, play now!” The speaker, a gruff stallion scowled over his deal.

Next to him, a mare who could best be described as decoration followed suit. Her shrill voice backed him up. “That’s right baby! That cut-up old nag’s just stalling cause she bet all her caps and is bluffing!”

Schwarzwald suddenly went very still. Wings noticed and immediately lay her cards down on the table. “Hell no, I fold. Oh little girl you really shouldn’t of done that.”

The fetlock-candy wasn’t finished though. “Oh right, like I’m scared of that

middle-aged mare. My baby is the toughest pony around. He won't let anything happen to me."

The stallion was puffing up with pride. "That's right, sweetheart."

"Oh, is that right? You're the toughest are you, 'baby'?" Schwarzwald's voice was about as far from jovial as you could get. A glaring change from her usual demeanour.

The stallion apparently didn't notice. He puffed himself up. "Damn right I am! You think you can take me? Don't cry when I bend you over the table and make you scream my name!" The crowd wasn't cheering now. Everybody was eagerly awaiting what would happen next.

Schwarzwald chuckled before uttering one word. "Try."

The crowd immediately sprang into action. Tables were lifted and set aside, chairs were hauled away, bodies were pushed back and in moments a clearing developed with the stallion, his 'sweetheart', Wings, myself and Schwarzwald in the middle. The stallion began popping his neck. "Sounds like you're ready to go. Wanna make it interesting? Our card game was interrupted before we could settle up. How about whoever wins here takes the whole pot?" His date was staring at the pile of caps with open greed.

Schwarzwald barked out a mocking laugh. "That is what you think interesting? I

propose a real wager. Since you want to ‘bend me over the table and make me scream your name’, how about this?” I was suddenly off-balance as she grabbed Wings and I around the shoulders. “You win and you get not only me, but my two friends here. We’ll do whatever you say, no questions asked. All. Night Long.”

My eyes went wide. “Hey wait! Schwarzwald!”

Wings nudged me from the side. “Relax. Just watch.”

“What?!”

“You’ll see.”

The stallion was leering at the three of us in a way I was in no way comfortable with.

*Why am I involved in this? I just met them again 2 minutes ago!*

He nodded, his eyes drifting south. “Deal.”

Schwarzwald held up a hoof. “Hold on there ‘baby’. You didn’t hear the other side. If *I* win. I get *you* all night. Same rules. You...and your chirpy friend there.”

It was the filly’s turn to gape. “M-me? Ew, gross. Baby don’t do it!”

This was, apparently, the wrong thing to say. The stallion rounded on her in fury.

“What, you think I’m gonna lose? Who do you think I am?!”

She shrank back in fear. “B-baby...”

The stallion wasn’t listening anymore. He was running on pure macho pride now.

“Shut up!” He glared at Schwarzwald. “You’re on, bitch!”

Off to the side, Wings deadpanned to me out of the corner of her mouth. “I’ll be surprised if he lasts ten seconds. Come on, let’s make sure Chirpy over there doesn’t bolt.”

We took up station on either side of the now-shaking filly. I didn’t like where this was going. “Hey, Wings? Should we be doing this?”

She just shrugged. “Schwarzwald knows what she’s doing. She won’t hurt this one. She’ll definitely hurt the stallion but he had his chance to walk away.” She winked at the quaking pony. “Don’t worry. She’s only rough if you want her to be.”

The only response was a small squeak.

By now the two fighters had taken up station on either side of the arena. Nightcap had materialised with the last call bell. Both fighters were waiting on the signal. The stallion was pacing and jabbing at the air. Schwarzwald was barely moving at all, just standing there with a delighted smile on her face.

Nightcap looked between one and the other then rang the bell.

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“What’d I tell ya? 6 seconds.”

Wings and I were collecting up the winnings while Schwarzwald directed the unhappy filly out the door, occasionally spanking her as a hurry-up gesture. The unconscious stallion was slung over Schwarzwald’s back. She didn’t even seem to feel the weight as she grinned like a demon.

Sitting down, I took one final look as the new bedfellows disappeared out the door. “Bosco wasn’t kidding. She IS scary.”

Wings laughed roughly at this. “Yeah she is. She’s also very, *very* good with her tongue. Somepony’s crying her name tonight. Whatever name she gives them anyway.” She took one look at my face and guffawed. “Hahaha, get any redder and you’ll melt, Snowflake.”

I didn’t say anything as the mental imagery of Schwarzwald’s no doubt soon-to-be-wild night ran rampant through my mind so Wings continued. “So where is Bosco anyway? He dead?”

Aaand my good mood evaporated as the world outside of Nightcap’s bar reasserted

itself. I fought the depression that immediately surfaced but I wasn't smiling any longer. "I...don't know where he is. I don't know if he's okay or not. He got me out of Plottawa and back here but he was gone when I woke up."

Wings choked on her drink. "You got caught by the slavers? Damn that's fast work to get you out again!"

"Uh...not exactly. We didn't get caught. We snuck in. There was an...altercation with the leader which didn't go well and I kinda...got knocked out. Bosco and a friend of ours got me out but I dunno where they are now." I hung my head. "Or even if they're okay."

"If that's the case then you don't have to worry."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll hear soon enough. Does that thing on your wrist pick up radio broadcasts?"

"Yes..."

"Tune in to DJ Pon-3 over the next few days. He'll fill you in. He's kinda like the Wasteland news. Reports on all kinds of things. You'll get your answers there. For now just remember this. Your friends are fine."

"How do you know?"



She shrugged with a wry smile. “If they dragged your unconscious backside all the way from Plottawa then they weren’t likely to be bothered. DJ Pon-3’ll tell you the rest. I get the feeling you’ll really like it, *Red Ice*.”

I gasped. “How do you know about that?”

Her eyes lit up. “You mean that really is you? I was just guessing. Oh wow, I know a celebrity! Here I was just thinking that DJ Pon-3 was mispronouncing-”

“Wings!” My sharp cry cut her off. “Can’t you just tell me what’s going on?”

She regarded me coolly. “Not all of it. You’ll get a better picture from listening to the radio. I’d just be repeating what I’ve heard.”

“But-”

“Remember this, Snowflake. I like you. You helped me out when you didn’t need to. Schwarzwald likes you because you’re, and I quote, ‘funny in a cute way’. However don’t think that means I owe you answers to anything.”

I frowned at her. Where was this coming from? I know she doesn’t owe me answers but she’s double-talking and pawning me off on some ‘DJ’. Is it really so much to give me what information she does know rather than leave me clueless until I can get the ‘better picture’? All I wanted to know was whether or not Bosco

and Naiara were okay. I was worried about my friends, she couldn't cut me some slack for that?! Seems like she wasn't just harsh on the battlefield.

*Maybe that's what I need right now.*

“Wings?”

“Yeah?”

“You don't have to tell me what happened if you don't want to. However, given what you know, do you think my friends will show up here?”

She didn't even hesitate, which I took for a good sign. “Oh yeah. Definitely.”

*Perfect. Now I can focus on the reason I went to Plottawa in the first place. Wings and Schwarzwald should be more than enough backup for my friends in the meantime. “In that case, you still owe me a favour.”*

The cautious look from when I first arrived. “Be careful, Snowflake. I owe you, but don't be stupid with this. Think about what'll happen to you AFTER we're even.”

I ignored her entirely non-veiled threat and pressed on. “Relax, this won't be hard. I'll be heading out of town in a little while to take care of some business. All I need you to do is look after my friends if you're still in town if they should up. Just while you're all in town. You're better in a fight than I am and there might still be

trouble from Plottawa.”

She was silent for a long time as she mulled this over. I didn’t mind. I had a few things to work out in my own head.

*If I can get her word that she’ll look after them then I can head out to the caravan company and pass along word about Contego and Vorbis. Bosco and Naiara shouldn’t have to make the trip after all the trouble I got them in by dragging them to Plottawa. Plus if Peanut comes after me then they won’t be in harm’s way. Only I’m Red Ice after all, not them.*

Wings seemed to reach a decision. “...alright. I’ll do it. IF I see them in town then I’ll look after them until they or I leave. No more. I won’t put my life on hold just to babysit your little friends.”

Relieved, I gave her a wide, honest smile. “I know. Thanks Wings. This really means a lot to me. We’re even after this, I swear. You look after those two while I’m out, and I’ll be your friend for as long as you want.”

Now the chocolate-furred griffon just looked confused. I made a ‘nevermind’ gesture and got up to leave. “I have to go. When Schwarzwald gets back, tell her I said thanks too.”

*This is how it should be. I’m not putting Bosco and Naiara in that sort of danger again just because I want to be nicer than the Wasteland. Bosco, Naiara, Wings,*

*Schwarzwald, Rockhaunch, Dent, all of them. They can survive in the world outside the Stable. They might not be able to survive in MY world and they shouldn't have to.*

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“Goood evening Equestria! It is I, your voice in these not-so-nice lands, DJ Pon-3!” As I left the Lethbridle south gate under the fading light I had to raise an eyebrow at the faceless DJ’s enthusiasm. This would be...interesting.

“Now then fillies and colts, you know I’d love to talk a little more about the rank injustice around these parts, and the evil ponies responsible for it all...”

*Who and what is he talking about? Isn't evil just kinda the thing in the Wasteland?*

“...but this time I’ve got some news from a little further afield. I’ve just now gotten some fresh info about a couple of other notable noisemakers up north! Cast your minds back a few weeks Do you remember when I had the pleasure of reporting on that cool-cookin’ *Blue Fire*? Well they’re back in the news after supposedly wiping out a whole nest o’ Raiders up near Lethbridle. Keep up the good work...uh...whoever you are! I’m still working on that. A source did mention feathers though, so if you see a tough-looking Pegasus in those parts and you’re up to no-good then I’d consider closing up shop. That one ain’t messing around!”

*A Pegasus in Lethbridle? I never saw one. Granted I was mostly unconscious*

*during my time here but still...it'd be nice to see at least one after all this time out of the Stable. What's up with that anyway?*

“Now this next part has me scratching my head, folks. See while *Blue Fire* was tearing through Raiders near Lethbridle the neighbouring town of Plottawa got itself a big name visitor! Now I'm not naming him on the air since that scarlet snake keeps butting in on my talk time but this is very strange since I'm pretty sure the stallion's still in his home base in Fillydelphia. Reaching as far north as Plottawa without anypony noticing is a scary thought. I'd advice staying away from there folks. Way away. This might be the first time Plottawa has dealt with this particular pony but it can't spell good news for anypony, even if the reports I'm getting back were that the meeting actually turned violent.”

*Violent? Uh oh.*

“So violent, in fact, that the Plottawa slavers have actually put a hit out on Red Eye-dammit I wasn't gonna say his name! Well anyway the rank-and-file up in Plottawa apparently aren't pleased about Red Eye's treatment of their boss. I couldn't get that name.. I guess even slavers can be loyal, huh? Either way I'd say avoid the area at all costs. Both Plottawa and Fillydelphia can wield some serious muscle and if they go at it then a lot o' folks will get caught in the crossfire. We've just gotta hope that they wipe each other out and do the whole Wasteland a favour.”

*Oh crap, did I do that?*

“That’s all for now, mares and stallions. Stay safe and stay positive! I promise next time I’ll have some news from closer to home. I’m always bringing you the truth no matter how bad it hurts. This is DJ Pon-3 signing off.”

The channel went dead and I switched off the radio.

*So that was DJ Pon-3, huh? I like him. It’s nice to know there’s somebody out there who’s looking out for their fellow Equestrians. Maybe I’ll get to meet him someday.*

The thought cheered me as I strolled on. Soon Lethbridle was out of sight behind me.

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My peaceful dozing under the rocky outcropping where I’d taken shelter after night fell was interrupted by the crackle of my radio coming to life. “Huuuaaahhhh! Sorry for yawning fillies and colts but this is an unscheduled broadcast. Your faithful Wasteland word warrior was tucked up nice and snuggly warm in bed like all the other good little foals when out of nowhere I’ve got my helpful assistant banging on my door because the Plottawa slaver boss is on the line saying he wants a chat. I guess you good folks won’t have to wait that long for his name after all because he’s joining me on this broadcast through a link to his office up in Plottawa. Good ponies of the Wasteland, I give you Peanut, freedom-stealer extraordinaire.”

*Peanut's threatening DJ Pon-3? This can't be good. I hope everything'll be alright.*

I was fully awake now, listening in eagerly so that I didn't miss a second of the conversation.

Peanut's voice was as warm as when he'd pulled me into a dance. The no-nonsense flat quality of our office confrontation was entirely absent. He was certainly skilled in employing his natural charisma. "First off I want to thank you for agreeing to speak with me, dear DJ Pon-3. I always look forward to your broadcasts with cheer and do my darnedest not to miss your show. I do apologise for the lateness of discussion but there was a misunderstanding that I believe is in desperate need of clearing up before some negative actions come of it."

*"Darnedest"? Seriously now, what ARE you Peanut?*

"What understanding would this be that's got a big bad ponynapper like yourself fretting?"

"While I don't think the tone of your question is productive to a pleasant chat I'll answer you anyway. You made a mention of Red Eye visiting Plottawa and a fracas ensuing. I'm here to tell you that nothing could be further from the truth..."

*Oh I can think of a few things.*

"Oh I can think of a few things."

If this upset Peanut he didn't show it. "...yes well, as I was saying. I'm afraid that your source for this information may need to work on his enunciation. For you see Red Eye did not in-fact visit my home of Plottawa, though he is certainly welcome to do so and I guarantee his safety and comfort should he take up my offer. No, Red Eye is, as you so rightly pointed out, still in his own base of operations in Fillydelphia."

My heart skipped a beat. I was really in trouble here. Once word got out that I was the one who kicked up the fuss in Plottawa it'd be even less likely that I'd be able to return to Lethbridle or Cefar or anywhere in the area anytime soon. I might *never* get back to the Stable! To make matters worse Bosco and Naiara could be named as my accomplices! If they missed this broadcast they wouldn't know people would be after them! I mentally begged Wings and Schwarzald to be up to the task of protecting them. I'd never forgive myself if I ended up dragging them into terrible danger. Again.

*Not like I can forgive myself anyway but that's besides the point.*

"Red Eye is home in Fillydelphia. No, my assailant was in fact not a stallion at all. It was a mare, still a filly really. She was not even an Earth pony but a Unicorn. She called herself *Red Ice*. Given Red Eye's fame it is understandable that a mistake could be made as the tale was passed on. Perhaps she thought to use the confusion to her advantage? Regardless, Red Ice and her companions attempted to



assassinate me in my office. Luckily my wonderful subordinates were able to drive them away.”

*What? That's not what happened! Why isn't he taking credit for whooping the three of us? He's making out that a 'still a filly' got the better of him. Why?*

DJ Pon-3 seemed as confused as I am. However he found this news amusing rather than worrying. “So you let three random ponies walk right up into your office and start shooting? Did you fire your security afterwards?”

Peanut did a masterful job of sounding affronted. “I’ll thank you not to make light of those ponies’ sacrifices. The only reason that these ‘three random ponies’ managed to get so far into our compound is because they savagely murdered my guards and took their uniforms.”His voice turned melancholy. “The fault is mine and I can never make it up to the families of those guards. I treat all my staff with respect and trust. Sadly there are so many that I have not been able to develop as strong a friendship with as many as I should have. I will work harder in that regard to ensure that this tragedy is not repeated. These wounds are my penance for failing this time.”

Sensing weakness, DJ Pon-3 jumped in. “Yes, can you give us some details about your wounds? As I understand it you were not the instigator of this bounty offering against Red...Ice. In fact it was your troops-”

“Not troops, guards. I am not raising an army.”

“...right, ‘guards’. No army there, sure. Anyway, your ‘guards’ put the bounty on Red Ice because of what she did to you. So tell us, what did you do to you?”

Peanut’s voice shifted again, this time to anger. “She killed three of my ponies. The rest is unimportant. I do thank all of my subordinates for their devotion and I will personally match the bounty amount offered by my staff should Red Ice be apprehended. The spirits of my murdered comrades demand nothing less.”

The faceless music pony was unimpressed. “So you managed to answer a lot of questions except the one I asked. Anyway, to sum up: Red Eye did not attack Plottawa, that was a new pony going by *Red Ice*, is that correct?”

“Yes. That’s correct. I want to stress that point. Plottawa is no enemy of Red Eye.”

“You are his competition though.”

“Certainly not. Red Eye has a vision. I merely provide a service.”

“That service being the trafficking of living beings against their will?”

“There are worse fates out there in the Wasteland. All my...indentured servants are cared for. They receive food and medical care that surpasses what they might find on their own and nopony in my employ is allowed to raise a hoof against them.”

“And these basic rights, not privileges, justify you taking all choice away from them? Does that justify you depriving them of their future, Peanut the slaver?”

Some of the warmth seemed to recede from Peanut’s tone but he made an effort to remain unperturbed by the DJ’s words.

“Each pony in the Wasteland is entitled to their own opinion on the matter. I think it’s somewhat late to get into the deepest implications. As you mentioned at the beginning, I am interrupting your rest. I have said my piece to correct the error concerning Red Eye and to raise awareness of the dangerous menace Red Ice. The rest is for other ponies to decide for themselves. With that, dear DJ, I shall bid you a good night. I await your next broadcast with the same affection and anticipation as always.”

A change in the background static indicated that the line on Peanut’s side had gone dead. The radio host remained silent for a few seconds. It was long enough for me to begin reaching for the switch to turn off the radio before DJ Pon-3 spoke up again. “Well well well, how about that Wasteland listeners? Here I was all excited to see Red Eye take on an enemy that could bite back and it turns out Peanut’s actually a fan! I am disappoint! I’ll give my thanks to this *Red Ice*, whoever she is. Three less slavers in the world and a serious drop in reputation for Plottawa. Not a bad night’s work. Huuaahh! Speaking of night work, ol’ DJ Pon-3 is just about running on empty, folks. Let’s call it here and we’ll pick up at the regular time

tomorrow. So long Equestria. Enjoy what's left of the night. Over and out."

No static this time. The line was dead. I sat there trembling. Not from fear this time. From anger!

*What do I have to do? Everything I do ends up looking bad!*

I was furious. I was just trying to survive out here! The Wasteland wouldn't leave me alone. It paired up with Old Equestria. They were determined to make my life miserable.

*They took away away my safe haven, my Stable, MY HOME! Them and their stupid messed up way of thinking! I just wanted to help Contego and Vorbis but now I'm a triple pony-killer! I don't want any more murders on my conscience! Who cares if it was the slaver boss saying these things? People will believe him. He's just like Roc. Give a nice smile and people will fall over themselves just to support him! They get everything! They're popular, respected, supported, rich! They don't have to worry about being alone or scared or cold. They're fucking WINNERS!*

With still-shaking hooves I took out the memory orb. With most of my gear buried in snow outside of Plottawa, this was the only thing I had left from Stable 61. I hadn't felt right leaving it unattended. The Overmare might have casually tossed me out but I had hope that she was STILL my Overmare. That someday I'd get back in. Back home. I held it gingerly between my hooves. What little moonlight

made it through the clouds illuminated the crack running along its surface.

“All of this is your fault.”

I looked out of the cropping to the nearby ravine. I could toss it in and be done with it. Go back to Lethbridle, find Bosco and Naiara and apologise then start a new life. I could live in *Hoofshine Harlots* if I wanted. Only me and Bosco could get in after all. Hell, I could re-open the brothel if need be. I could be Snowflake, Mismatch’s successor. I could even pull the same schtick. One day a unicorn filly, then a zebra, or an Earth stallion.

All I had to do was let the orb roll off my palm.

“To whom are you referring?”

“YEEEP!!!” I shot backwards, instinctively cradling the orb in my hooves. Unfortunately I failed to take into account the solid rock just behind me and the instant blinding pain where my head struck the stone was a painful reminder.

“Motherf- damn that hurts!”

I glared up at the two sets of upside-down eyes staring at me from atop the lip of the rock roof. “What do you two want? If you’re looking to rob me, I haven’t got any money.”

Both of the mares were around my age or maybe a year or two older. The

moonlight wasn't the best to see by but it looked as if both had light blue coats. Their mane were anything but the same though. The one who'd spoken had a long scarlet mane with a black trim adorned with a star-shaped ornament. The other's mane was shorter and largely a rich cobalt interspersed here and there with white gashes. A single bang hung longer than the rest. Usually it would rest over one eye but as she was hanging upside down it swayed beneath her in the night air.

The latter grinned at me. "Buuut you do have talkative little thing on your wrist. Was that DJ Pon-3 I heard clear as if she were standing here?" Her voice was rough and casual, very different from her companion's refined, melodic lilt.

Said companion answered before I could. "Of course it was, dear sister. You know you pick up everything with those wonderful ears of yours. However..." She turned her royal blue eyes, identical to her sister's, back to me. "...I confess I'm more interested in that shiny little trinket she's hiding in her hooves than the dear DJ's broadcast."

I stayed silent, not wanting to reveal the truth of the matter. Neither of the two seemed concerned as their conversation continued. "Hah! Can't beat my sis' peepers. Show us what you're hiding, girl!"

I didn't like the situation. I literally had my back to the wall and was outnumbered on top of that. I needed to get some room to manoeuvre, literally and figuratively. Trying to project a relaxed air I slowly stood up and began taking a few steps

towards the outside. “Do you always act so casual with a person before introducing yourselves?”

I was halfway to the open air. Both fillies were still hanging over the ledge lip and watching me like inverted hawks. The red-haired one looked slightly upset at my words. “Oh where are our manners? You’re absolutely right. We were a tad forward. Come, sister, let us introduce ourselves. My name is Cassiopeia Venatici. A pleasure to meet you. And this is my sister...”

She nudged her sibling with her shoulder, which set the solitary bang swinging. The owner of said bang gave a brash grin. “...the name’s Aqua Breeze. Nice to meet ya! So seeing as we’re all friendly-like I’ll say again. Now show us what you’re hiding, girl!”

I was three quarters of the way out from under the outcropping and the two hadn’t moved from their perch. “Well nice to meet you two...uh...too. Did you say that you were sisters?”

Breeze snuggled up to her sibling momentarily. “Ayup. She’s the best sister that I could ask for *and she asked you a question!*”

*Okay, so their patience is not infinite. Almost there. A few more steps.*

“Sorry about that. I’m just trying to show an interest in you two. I’ll answer YOUR question first, Aqua Breeze. You asked about the radio broadcast. Yes, that was DJ

Pon-3. I've got a gizmo that can pick up the radio broadcasts anywhere in Equestria." *Supposedly.*

Breeze's eyes had been growing wider as I talked. So had her grin. I apparently had her attention now. Unfortunately she had a sister. "That's very impressive, however I'd like to remind you of two things: One, you chastised us for not giving our names yet we still haven't heard your name in response. Two, I did ask you a question about that object in your hooves. I really would like it if you'd show it to us."

*Dang. So close. It sounds like they're done 'asking'. What am I gonna do about the name thing? They know nothing about Snowflake but how much do they know about Red Ice? Do I want them knowing about Snowflake? Should I give them a fake name? What should it be?*

*Uh-oh. They're starting to look impatient. Better say something. I guess I better show them the orb.* "Let me show you in the moonlight."

I took a few steps out into the open air and, when they didn't immediately attack me, I moved my hooves out of the way and showed them the orb. The "ooh"-ed appreciatively and nodded to each other. Cassiopeia cleared her throat. "Yes, I do believe we'll be taking that Memory Orb." Next to her, Aqua Breeze was sporting a grin that had a definite edge to it.



I slowly shook my head but kept my eyes on the two. “I’m afraid I can’t allow that.” The orb disappeared beneath my cloak and I took the opportunity to surreptitiously slip on my Power Hooves.

Staring down at me from the ledge, Aqua Breeze rolled over so that she was rightside-up. “Well that’s the thing. We’re not exactly thrilled to take ‘no’ for an answer. Are we Cassie?”

“No, Breeze, I don’t believe we are. Please, nameless miss, do not make this harder on yourself.”

I cocked my head to the side. “You’re very polite for thieves. Do you guys work for Peanut?”

Breeze giggled. “That guy from Plottawa? Nah we’d never heard of him before listening in on your midnight broadcast.”

“You heard that? How long had you two been there?”

“We got here just after it started. The noise was what got our attention.”

*I didn’t hear them at all! They could’ve snuck up on me and I’d never have known. These two are trouble.*

“At least I know you two aren’t looking for me.”

‘Cassie’ looked confused. “Why would we be looking for you, dear? Are you somepony special?”

*...I’m an idiot. Why don’t I just hang a big sign with “I’m Red Ice” around my neck?* “Me? No. Just a pony with terrible luck apparently.”

“Hmm. Well I am inclined to believe you. You’re a little young to have much of a reputation.”

Breeze wasn’t satisfied though. “Hey, sis...”

“Yes?”

“She’s a Unicorn mare, right?”

“Come now, Breeze. The light isn’t that bad. You can see her horn, can’t you? Although it might be premature to call her a mare.”

“So would you say she’s still a filly, really?”

“In body and, I think, in spirit.”

“See the thing about that is...those are the exact words that that Peanut colt used to describe the pony who jumped him in his office. The one calling herself Red Ice. I don’t know whether you saw or not but she was paying *real* close attention to what

was being said on the radio.”

*Oh hell. Cassio...something-or-other was right. She DOES have good ears.*

Understanding dawned on Cassie’s face. “We never did get your name, did we? Well she’s not red but she does have a Cutie Mark that could easily refer to ice. What do you think, sister?”

*She can see my Cutie Mark in this light?! Her eyes are insane!*

“I think I really really want a look at that wrist gizmo of hers.”

Cassie nodded. “Yes. That memory orb seems significantly more valuable now as well.”

I took a few steps back. “N-now...let’s talk about this...” The rest of my plea died on my lips upon seeing what happened next.

Rolling upright, both sisters stood upright on the ledge.

Then they spread their wings.

“PEGASI! You’re Pegasi!...WHERE THE HELL HAVE YOU BEEN?!”

My sudden outburst took both of them aback. “W-what?”

I ignored their wide-eyed stares and continued. “I’ve been out here for days now,

over a week, and you two are the first Pegasi I've seen. What, did you all forget how to NOT fly or something?"

The two Pegasi's wide eyes narrowed remarkably quickly. Breeze spoke first. "You think that's funny, do you?"

I still wasn't really listening closely. "Seriously though, what's been going on? Where have all the Pegasi been hiding themselves?"

Cassie wrapped a comforting wing around her sister. "This is in poor taste, Red Ice."

"What do you mean?"

Breeze angrily shrugged off her sister's embrace. "She's mocking us! Let's just take her now!"

"Who's mocking you? You two really are the first two Pegasi I've seen since leaving the Stable."

This caused a momentary relaxation in Cassiopeia. "Ah, now I understand. Calm down, Aqua Breeze. She's not being facetious. She really doesn't know."

Breeze looked to her sister and then back to me before turning her head away with a disgruntled "tch". I kept her in my view but focused on Cassie. "Doesn't know

what?”

Her face was emotionless. “Aside from a very small minority, no Pegasi descend below the clouds. Even fewer live down here.”

“What?! That’s insane! Pegasi don’t live in the Wasteland at all?!”

Breeze rejoined the conversation. “No, they don’t. The ‘Grand’ Pegasus Enclave decreed it. Even went so far as to declare any Pegasus who didn’t agree with them as a race traitor.” The raw emotion in her voice was evident.

“Was this because of the war? And what’s the Enclave?”

“The Enclave is the ruling authority for all Pegasi. All of those who live above the cloud barrier anyway. After Cloudsdale fell in the war they washed their hooves of Equestria and the whole affair and went skyward. Closing the door behind them, as you can plainly see.”

“What do you mean?”

Breeze made a dismissive sound in the back of her throat. “Dumb dirtpony. Look up once in a while why don’t you?”

I looked up.

*I can’t see anything. Barely any light gets through the...ah.* “The clouds?”

Cassie nodded. “Yes. A parting gift to Equestria.”

I felt dizzy. 200 years of isolation? This was madness!

*Hold on...* “So why are you two down here?”

Ms. Venatici had obviously been expecting this question. Her head drooped instantly. Her eyes were covered by her mane. “We...we...”

She got no further. Her sister had apparently decided question time was over. “Enough! We answered your question. Now you’re coming with us!”

Instantly she soared high into the sky, soon joined by her sister. Still distracted by the new cloud revelation I almost lost them in the dark. I called out to them in a last-ditch attempt at defusing the situation. “Wait, please? We don’t need to do this.”

“Too late!”

Cassie put her hooves together in front of her. For the first time I noticed the bracers she wore around her forelegs. Aqua Breeze had similar armour strapped to her legs. Seeing no other recourse, I triggered my Power Hooves.

The red-maned sibling kept her hooves together and dropped like a rock towards me. Her dive would flatten me if she connected. After my disastrous battle with

Peanut I was not greatly confident in my martial prowess. I began a dash to the side, hoping to avoid the charge. The Pegasus was fast though. Not as fast as Peanut or even Naiara but more than capable of keeping up with my untrained flank. A simple dip of her wing put me back in her path. When she was almost upon me I made a clumsy swing which missed but at least had her pull up, breaking off her attack.

Cassie didn't immediately retreat to the sky though. She stayed a few feet off the ground and circled. I kept her in my sights in case she charged again.

Two thuds sounded from the dirt at my hooves. Startled, I looked down to see two dark apples on the ground.

*Grenades!*

I leapt aside as they went off. The heat was intense and the shockwave sent me rolling. I'd barely managed to stagger upright before Cassie hit me in the shoulder with both hooves. The force of the hit sent me sprawling instantly, which probably saved my life. The hidden blades within her bracers just missed my flesh as I fell away. Instantly my adrenaline picked up and I moved faster.

*I have to get away. I have to get away or I am going to die!*

I couldn't see Cassie from my fallen position and desperately scrambled upright. I spotted her floating maybe 10 meters up. She didn't press her attack. I had a

half-second to ponder that before something long and hard slammed into the ground next to me.

My heart pounded in my chest as I sprang away and darted in the not-Pegasus direction. I'd barely gone 5 meters before another rod touched down before my eyes. I turned 90 degrees and headed off again but yet again was halted.

I raised my eyes skyward, seeking out the Pegasi I'd been mostly ignoring, Aqua Breeze. She was smirking at me as she hefted a 4th spear and launched it downwards. It thudded into the dirt to the side of me. I looked at it in confusion for a moment.

All four rods suddenly began sparking. Beams of electricity shot from one to another, boxing me in on all sides. I was trapped!

“Shock Lock. My own design. Nice, no?” Breeze's smug voice sounded from just above the cage where she watched with Cassie.

I said nothing and tentatively reached out my hoof to touch the wall of lightning...

*OHSWEETMERCIFULGODDESSESTHAT'SSOUNBELIEVABLYPAINFUL* ...And almost instantly drew back my now-completely-numb hoof. Frantically I cast about for something, anything to assist me in this situation.

The results were not promising. Three sides had nothing but open terrain and the



4th had literally nothing at all. I hadn't realised how close to the ravine I'd been driven. It was a mere meter or two to the edge. Over the crackle of my lightning cage I could make out the faint sound of rushing water.

*This is a terrible idea, and I am justifiably upset that it is the only option I can think of.*

This was my only chance. I wasn't in as bad shape as back in Plottawa so there was a minute possibility that this wouldn't knock me out cold again. Having no better option, I concentrated on the rod closest to the ravine and began focusing on my horn.

"Hey! Her horn's glowing!"

"Stop her!"

*Too late.* The ice covered the rod and the electrical current winked out. I was woozy but amazingly still conscious. Hobbling on three legs I erratically made my way to the edge. A crash sounded behind me as Cassie couldn't react to my irregular gait and slammed into the dirt. I was at the cliff edge and momentarily hesitated as I saw just how big a drop there was before I would hit the water.

This moment's hesitation turned painful as Aqua Breeze's hastily thrown grenade contacted with the back of my head and sent me over the edge.

*Because I couldn't have just a little bit of dignity at the end, now could I?*

After what felt like an age in the air I smashed into the water. Pain erupted along my entire body as I tumbled beneath the swell. I had no idea which way was up or even where the river was taking me. I only hoped it was flowing fast enough to get me away from the crazy fillies at the canyon top.

A tightening in my chest reminded me of the need for fresh oxygen so I kicked out towards the surface. Or what I thought was the surface. When my head contacted the river bed and stars burst before my eyes I quickly reversed direction. Breaking the surface as darkness crept into the corner of my vision, I allowed myself a brief moment of elation at still being alive.

Then my hoof jerked.

I looked down at the still-numb appendage and noticed a half-inch hole punched straight through it. Aghast, I searched along the cliff walls to where Cassiopeia Venatici was sighting down the scope of the high-powered rifle she'd produced from...somewhere. I was swept around the bend just as her second bullet clipped the wall by my ear.

*She really does have good eyes.*

~~~~~

“MMMMPHHPHHPHHPHH!” I screamed through the leather gag.

“Yes, we know you’re in pain. Everypony in the compound knows you’re in pain. Shut up about it already!” The purple Unicorn mare with the orange mane was healing my bullet wound but the limb had shaken off the electric numbing and immediately (and continuously) made its displeasure at being perforated quite clear.

I was disinclined to acquiesce to her request and continued thrashing. She tried in vain to keep her horn steady at the wound but lost patience very quickly.

“SOMEpony GET IN HERE!” She hollered angrily towards the corridor. There was a sudden clatter as several stallions burst through the doors at high speed.

“Yeah, boss?” A dim-sounding voice asked for further instructions.

“You grab this dumbass and hold her down. I’m gettin’ a headache tryin’ to keep my horn in the right spot. We’re puttin’ her under a memory orb trance til I’m done.” Fedexi Lexi, the boss of Sprinkles Sprinkles supplies who pulled double duty as their doctor was no angel. She was hard and tough and *brutally* good at what she did. Just don’t expect her to be nice about it. She’d taken one look at me after I’d dragged my half-dead self from where the river had spat me out to the (mercifully close) compound and gotten to work. They had no anaesthetic. Hence the gag. Well...*gags*. I’d bitten clean through the first one in a matter of minutes.

“Dahh...you got it boss.”

I suddenly found myself unable to move at all as the ponies trapped my limbs. Lexi held a memory orb up to my horn. “Here kid, magic yourself into this. By the time you come out we’ll be done here.”

Frantically I shook my head. After what had happened in the Stable I was in no mood to go through that again. That mishap was then entire reason I was even out in the Wasteland. I didn’t care that the first one had been damaged and hadn’t played back properly. It had been hours of mental torture. I barely kept hold of who I was.

*Hell no am I doing that again.*

Lexi apparently disagreed. She seized my mane and shoved the thing painfully at my horn. “I ain’t askin’! Get in there!”

I panicked and my horn reacted on instinct. Apparently that was enough as the world dropped away around me.

oooOOOOOOooo

“Are we there yet?”

*Don’t care. I don’t want be here. Let me out. LET ME OUT NOW!*

“No, Caramel, we’re not there yet. Would you like to know how I know we’re not there yet?”

“Sure, let’s hear it.”

“BECAUSE WE’RE STILL OUTSIDE!”

*No no no, I’m not interested in whatever this is. I want to be back in the surgery!  
The pain wasn’t that bad, I’m sure I could keep quiet. Lexi? Lexi can you hear me?  
I’ll be good and quiet, I promise. You can let me out now.*

“Wow, Sassaflash, you’re always so good at this sort of thing.”

*...Really?*

My host, Sassaflash, shrugged and flexed her stiff wings.

*Another Pegasus...*

“Well thank you, babe. You know I still think you could do just fine for yourself if you focused on what you were doing rather than looking around all the time.”

Caramel didn’t seem terribly put out by this. The pretty stallion, there really was no other word for the flowing locks and delicate features, nudged a shoulder as he strolled beside her. “But then I wouldn’t get to spend so much time with you. We

always have a good time when you're helping me with stuff, don't we?"

Sassaflash rolled her eyes helplessly and whispered to the side. "Yeah but that's because we always end up having sex afterwards. Dumb he may be but damn if he's not capable between the sheets."

*Why am I hearing this?*

Caramel apparently noticed her monologue. "What's that Sass?"

She sighed in exasperation and shook her head. "Nothing, Caramel. Keep an eye on the map. We don't wanna get lost up here. I've never been this far north."

"A-kay!"

Apparently perfectly satisfied to have a minor task assigned to him, Caramel spent the next hour constantly looking between the map and their compass while Sassaflash silently followed. This had the sobering effect of giving me time to think about my current situation. I was, frankly, tired of freaking out over all that I was doing. I'd been shut out, stalked, shot at, smacked around, shocked, shot *up* and now stitched up in a stupor. Granted I'd had less to deal with in the Stable but this couldn't continue. No matter what happened, I was gonna go the next few days without freaking out. Whatever I saw or did I would accept it.

*"How typical of Old Equestria, Red Ice."*

*Shut up, Overmare, I'm not in the mood!*

Silence. I claimed it as a minor victory.

Roughly two hours had passed for Sassaflash and Caramel and the sun had begun to set. Both seemed sluggish and lethargic so they'd settled down under an outcropping I was quite familiar with. Caramel had his head in Sassaflash's lap.

"Do you think we'll like Stable 61, Sass?"

*Wait, WHAT?! No! No. Keep it together. They were heading to the Stable. They wanted to escape the war just like our predecessors!*

Sassaflash had a faint smile on her face as she stroked his silky hair. "I'm sure. This is the right move for us. After all that's happened...Big Macintosh...we need a fresh start. The Stable will give us that. It'll keep us safe."

Caramel didn't immediately respond so my host looked down at him. He had a faraway look in his eyes. "I...really miss him. I thought it'd get easier but it doesn't."

She just held him closer. "I know...I know."

oooOOOOOOooo

Waking up from this memory orb was less uncomfortable than the last one. It was

barely a transition at all. I didn't even notice at first. I just kept stroking the mane of the pony in my lap.

“Want to have some ‘fun’, Sass?”

*That didn't sound like Caramel.*

I looked down. The flowing brown locks were replaced by wirey orange frizz. Fedexi Lexi grinned up at me expectantly.

“Sorry Caramel, I'm not in the mood.”

The grin turned to confusion. This was apparently not the response she was expecting. “Well that's a little disappointin'. I was all set to watch your freak out.”

I just shrugged. I meant what I said...thought...whatever in the orb. Besides, after some of the stuff I'd been through the past week I was hardly likely to be spooked by waking up in close proximity with a strange pony. Especially one who just spent the last few hours fixing my leg. I knew this because it was the one doing the mane-stroking and was missing a bullet hole. “Thanks for fixing me up. I take it you've seen the orb yourself?”

“Uh-huh. A bunch of times. There are worse ways to kill a few hours when business is slow.”



“Do you know who they were? Sassaflash and Caramel?”

Lexi shook her head. “Nope. Picked up the orb a while back after a trade run to Neighlway. Just a couple o’ long dead lovers now.”

I knew I’d heard the name of that town before. Ah, that was it. “Neighlway is Steel Ranger territory isn’t it? Did you have any trouble?”

She laughed as if this was comedy gold. “Psh, naw! Those tin-saddles need food and ammo and gear like the rest of us. They like having a supply chain. Course that don’t mean we don’t put heavy security on those runs in case they get grabby. I like paying customers but I like them to stay paying.”

I’d resumed stroking her hair as I processed this. She didn’t seem to mind. “So how’d Sprinkles Supplies get started anyway?”

“Beats me. I found the place Maybe 10 years back. Abandoned but fixable. The name was already on the walls but I figured that nopony was using it so...”

“Recycling. Doing your part for Equestria.”

She chuckled at this. “Exac’ly. That’s a nice way to put it. Think I’ll use that for future marketin’.”

“Happy to help.”

“Well it goes on the bill for fixin’ your leg. I ain’t no charity.”

I reached into the pockets of the slaver gear I was still wearing, sans identifying marks, and withdrew the insignia I’d gotten from Contego. “Maybe this’ll settle my fee.”

A serious atmosphere immediately descended upon the room. Lexi’s next words were light but edged. “Now where did you get that?”

*I’d best not do anything to upset her.* “I got it from Contego personally. I snuck into Plottawa and spoke to him and Vorbis. They’ve both been captured. The caravan’s completely destroyed too. Vorbis told me to get this back to you rather than try to break them out.”

She relaxed upon hearing that, at least a little. “Yeah that’s Vorbis alright. Never met a pony with a surer head on his shoulders. Alright I’d say this works as payment. You’ve got my thanks.”

“No problem. Like I said, happy to help.”

The tension left her, and she lay her head down in my lap again. “Well I’m not happy that they’ve been caught, but it’s better than not knowin’.”

“They won’t be mistreated. That’s not the deal in Plottawa. Bad for business to

rough up the merchandise apparently.”

She nodded distractedly. “Yeah I guess. What’s next for you though?”

I pondered this. “I don’t know really. I came here because I had an obligation to Contego and Vorbis. Now that that’s taken care of I really don’t know what I’ll do next.”

“Got some free time on your hooves? Want to earn a few caps? I’m taking on extra caravan guards for a trip to Grindstone. It’s a buffalo settlement to the northwest.”

“Buffalo? I’m in!”

She smirked. “Oh so you like ‘em big do you?”

I smirked back, hardly embarrassed. “Not like that. I’ve got three brothers and they’re all buffalo.”

She cocked an eyebrow at this. “Well if that don’t beat all. I could use your help for sure. You know how to talk to ‘em and you ticked off a guy I’ve got cause to dislike. Not to mention having Red Ice on the staff might help out our rep.”

*So she knows. This is turning into the worst kept secret in the Wasteland.* “A fan of DJ Pon-3 then?”

“He don’t really take sides. Makes him easier to trust than anypony else on the

squawkbox.”

“There is that.”

Lexi sat up and stretched, her white arrow Cutie Mark pointing towards her hindquarters. She saw me looking but didn’t comment. “Come on, I’ll get you all set to join the caravan.”

~~~~~

*This is not helping me to keep my composure.*

“What do you mean you’re not gonna do it?!”

I nodded over Lexi’s shoulder at the pony standing in the wings. “She shot me. I’m not going anywhere with her OR her sister.”

Cassiopeia Venatici bristled at this. “You leave Breeze out of this.”

I scoffed even as I fought hard to keep my composure. “Yes because she’s blameless in this.”

Aqua Breeze swooped down from where she’d been tying supplies to the caravan roof. “Hey I probably saved your life. No pony has a better eye than Cassie. The only reason you were able to make it here at all is because your hoof was numb from my Shock Lock. The pain would’ve drowned you otherwise. *You’re*

*welcome.”*

I just stared. *Is she serious?*

Lexi shared my sentiment. “Breeze, was it? That was the single dumbest thing I’ve heard all year. Shut up. That’s an order.”

Cassie lay a hoof on Breeze’s shoulder to stem the imminent eruption before addressing the caravan boss. “Why is the Unicorn here? We weren’t told there would be others besides ourselves.”

Lexi met her stare evenly. “This run to Grindstone passes pretty near to Neighlway. We want to...*discourage* Steel Ranger interference.”

She made a slow circuit, facing Cassie, Breeze and myself in turn. “Think you’re up to the task? I don’t allow any friendly fire on my runs. You WILL work together or else the half dozen seasoned vets I’m sending along will kill all three of you. Are we clear?”

~~~~~

“Oh would you let it go already? We said we were sorry.” Aqua Breeze was not fond of the fact that I disliked being attacked. We’d left the Sprinkles Supplies compound hours ago and she’d kept up a running diatribe the entire trip. Apparently she’d made it her goal to befriend me, the pony she’d been so

proud of caging just the day before, because “we’re on the same side now!”

So far it had not been successful.

“Actually,” I interjected and pointed at Cassiopeia. “She apologised. You never did.”

Breeze’s smile faltered. “Err...”

“I’m waiting.”

Breeze looked to her sister. Said sister was smirking at the exchange and watching with obvious amusement. Defeated, Breeze caved. “Oh, alright! I’m sorry I threw grenades at you.”

“...and put me in a cage.”

She drew herself up haughtily. “My Shock Lock is not just a-”

The abrupt cutoff caught my attention. I thought she might’ve been trying to find the right word but she wasn’t even looking at me. Cassie was staring at her sister with concern.

Breeze’s eyes darted this way and that in the midday sun, searching for something.

“Sister?” Cassie voiced her consternation.

Ignoring her, Breeze hollered at the guards on the wagons. “Hey! How long til we get where to Grindstone?”

The guard checked the map and hollered back. “Still a ways yet. We’re skirting the edge of Neighlway territory now. Hours to go.”

This was not happy news. Breeze was still scanning the skies. “Get everypony up and armed! Something big’s coming!”

Instantly Cassie was at her side. “Where, Breeze?”

The blue-and-white mane shook. Breeze couldn’t tell. “I can hear them but I can’t figure out where from. Can you see anything, sis?”

Cassie tried but quickly gave up. “Too much haze. The heat’s throwing me off.”

The guards had been listening in and now were looking uneasy themselves. “I don’t hear anything.” One ventured.

Breeze dismissed him. “You don’t have my ears, chum. Something...no, *a lot of somethings* are on the way.”

My Pipbuck lit up with red signals. I stared at Breeze in amazement. *She’s got more range than my Pipbuck! No wonder they found me last night.*

I turned in a circle, allowing the locator function to determine which direction the enemies would be coming from. The readings were confusing and I had to wave it back and forth to make sense of what I was seeing.

*This thing says they're over that way...but over this way too?*

Cassie's voice broke the tense silence. It sounded faraway. "This lot-of-somethings? Does it sound like it has wings...lots of wings?"

"Yeah." Was the grim response.

Cassie pointed up. "I've found them."

*Right, three dimensions.* I followed her hoof but saw nothing but the midday sun overhead before us. "I don't see anything. You sure?"

Both sisters nodded. Their attentions were both fixed on the same spot now.

My Pipbuck chirped agreement with the direction but offered no more info. "Then what are we dealing with?"

Both produced weapons. Cassie wielded the rifle she'd pierced me with before and Breeze had what looked like an oversized memory orb in each hoof. As she sighted along the barrel Cassie paused to blow some red hair from her eyes. Her voice was flat. "Red Ice, go join the others at the wagons. Use your magic at close range."



Putting aside the issue of taking orders from my attacker, I still didn't like this idea.

“What about you two?”

Breeze's voice matched her sister in tone. “We can fly. You can't. Go help the ground-pounders.”

“Help them against *what*?”

“Hissyflits.”

I struggled not to laugh at the absurd sounding name.

*What are they? Characters in a babybook?*

I was the only one who found it amusing. Upon hearing the word several guards cursed and the rest went wide-eyed.

“What are...Hissyflits?”

Cassie flicked a perturbed glance my way before returning to her scope. “Not the time. Move!”

I inwardly sighed. *I get the picture. Bad news. Best do as she says.*

I clambered up on top of one of the caravans with two stallions wielding pistols in their mouths. One offered me a spare but I declined. “Can't hit a thing with that.

I'll make do."

He turned away. Looking our group I realised that I was the only unicorn here. *I hope they're not expecting me to be Shining Armour. They'll be disappointed.*

Cassie's sudden gunfire startled me. I looked up to see Breeze go racing up into the sun...which seemed to be developing a dark spot at its center. As the stain grew larger it began to resolve into individual shapes. They were small but there were an awful lot of them. Breeze tossed her orbs straight into the heart of the swarm. There was a moment of stillness as they vanished behind the gathering of fliers.

Then fire raged through the mass as the incendiary grenades ignited. Dozens of charred corpses dropped lifelessly.

Breeze immediately broke off and retreated. The remaining attackers charged after her. Cassie fired in quick succession, dropping any beast that got close enough to harry her sibling.

As the fight drew closer to us I finally understood how the creatures got their names. The static-y sound grew louder and louder as they approached. Their leathery wings certainly flitted as they moved and their feline faces bore oversized fangs which glistened in the light. Something told me I didn't want to take a nibble from one of those teeth.

*Still not as big as a Molar Bear's chompers though. That's something at least.*

Cassie paused her barrage to load more ammo. Now that they were close enough, the guards opened up with their guns and the mass slowed down. Still enough survived the volley to get dangerously close to Breeze. Cassie and the others were occupied and couldn't cover her.

“Look out!”

Breeze glanced behind her and saw the beasts' proximity. “Oh shit!”

She reached for the greave around her right leg. I didn't see what she did but suddenly a glowing wall of light sprang up between her and her attackers, who smacked into the construct. The flock recovered and hesitated. They appeared confused by the new hindrance.

Cassie wasn't. She'd reloaded and resumed firing. The other guards followed her example and got their shots in. The horde was starting to thin out but the light wall was beginning to fade. I watched helplessly with my short-range Power Hooves and wished there was something I could do to help.

Breeze answered my wish. She slammed down next to me and triggered her greave. A cracked and smoking crystal popped out with a thunk. She slammed home another one then grabbed me, shoving the new crystal in my face.

“Ice, charge this up!”

I stared back in confusion. “What?”

She waved the greave around frantically. “Hurry! There’s not much time. Pour your magic into this before the barrier fails!”

*Well I could maybe do that at least.* I concentrated. It was amazing how much easier it was to do magic when my life was in danger. My horn blazed almost instantly. Aside from a few drop-offs I kept up a constant stream of cold.

Amazingly the crystal soaked it up like a sponge until it shone a brilliant snow-white. I could barely look at it. Breeze seemed satisfied though. I was glad of that because I was starting to feel faint.

“Good. Full charge!”

She swung and pointed the greave at the Hissyflits, who screamed down as the barrier disappeared.

“EAT IT!”

A blizzard blew out of her greave towards the monsters, who scattered in an attempt to get out of its path. Maybe two dozen were successful. The rest were hit by the storm of magic and instantly froze solid. Shattering on the hard earth as they dropped from the sky. The blizzard vanished just like the barrier and another ruined

crystal was ejected from Breeze's terrifying weapon.

Unfortunately she seemed to be out of tricks as she deployed a hidden knife from her other greave and held it before her defensively. Cassie had likewise holstered her rifle now that the enemy were too close for its range and had her own hidden blade out. A whip trailed from Cassie's other bracer which she wielded with deadly precision. Her impressive eyes guided the snake-like chord wherever she wanted. Blocking and striking at the same time.

Each of the nine ponies were now facing 2 Hissyflits apiece. The guards were more confident now that they had the measure of them. The flying creatures were still threatening but seemed to rely on numbers to swarm their much-larger prey.

I was so busy watching the others that I almost lost track of my opponents. Good thing they don't just hiss. The hellish scream sounded out behind me and I swung around. I blindly brought both sparking Power Hooves together on one of my assailants, instantly crushing it and silencing its scream.

Too bad it was behind the first one.

I got a really close look at the thing before its fangs sank into my shoulder. It had the head of a cat but the eyes were double diamonds of purple and gold. A forked tongue and wirey stubs of limbs hung from the undersized body. It was obvious that most of the work was done through the head. Said head was currently pumping

whatever made those fangs so shiny in the light straight into my bloodstream. Instantly my shoulder stiffened up and felt 3 times as heavy as normal.

I fell backwards as I tried to awkwardly smack the thing off. The sound of gunfire increased as the guards and the two pegasi sisters fought off the remaining bat-cat hybrids.

I saw none of this on account of rolling on the ground with a little bastard doing its best to chew my ever-more-immobile foreleg off at the base.

I did, however, see the armoured limb that flashed down microns from my face and crushed the Hissyflit underhoof.

Shocked at this and the sudden absence of gunfire, I was a little slow in rolling over and looking up at the roughly pony-shaped shadow standing over me. It appeared to be speaking with the guards. The voice was robotic, distorted. “This one has been bitten. She will come with us for treatment.”

*I will?*

~~~~~

Cassie and Breeze had taken flight instantly and the guards had better things to do than fight over a ‘scab’. So I now found myself in the renowned hospitality of the Neighlway Steel Rangers.

There had only been two Rangers at the battle but they still outgunned the 6 guards. These ponies were walking arsenals! On their backs were heavy duty weapons I suspected would be more at home mounted on a wagon or something and they were kitted out with all sorts of goodies besides that. It was a wonder they could even stand up under all that gear. They must be strong as Buffalo! I'd been slung over the back of one while the other watched the guards for a response. My bearer hadn't even seem to feel the added weight.

The two ponies had said nothing more as we trooped towards Neighlway. From my precarious position of being slowly paralyzed on the back of a living tank I didn't manage to get a good look at Neighlway from the outside. All I saw was that the walls looked imposing and cast a long shadow. We passed through a very long tunnel before emerging into an underground facility where many more ponies in armour went about their various duties. There were also ponies in robes who seemed to be support staff rather than frontline fighters. I passed several rooms where I caught glimpses of activity: Maps, screens, terminals and weapons were spotted out of the corners of my eye. Still my two escorts trudged on silently.

Finally I found myself deposited in a medical ward, which had happened disturbingly often since leaving the Stable. As I lay on the table, twitching occasionally as I tested what parts of my body I could still move and trying to stem my rising panic, the two Rangers took up positions at the door and stood to

attention just before they opened and two Earth ponies walked in.

One was dressed in a labcoat and began mixing up a concoction after a short consultation with the Rangers. The other was an older Earth stallion with far more elaborate trappings than his compatriots. This attire and the way he held himself gave the air of importance. The doctor pony jabbed a needle into my shoulder and injected something at the sight of the bite wound. It stung but within seconds I felt the minutest sensation of loosening muscles. The medical pony left with one of the Rangers as the older pony sat down next to me. “Forgive the suddenness of our bringing you here. I’m afraid that the guards didn’t have the necessary medical supplies for treating Hissyflit venom. Well, not before your heart stopped anyway.”

Said heart skipped a beat at this matter-of-fact statement. That and the fact that I was suddenly very aware of the weight of the Pipbuck hidden under my Sprinkles Supplies jumpsuit. “Is...is that so?”

The old stallion gave a smile but it was probably not as reassuring as he hoped it would be. “Yes. You’re quite lucky, young one. Were we not there you might not be here, as it were.”

I couldn’t really think of what to say to that. Instead I tried to keep things light. “So where’s here, mister...”

The stallion quickly sat back and gave that failing smile again. “Ah, forgive me. I



am Elder Iron Sights of the Steel Rangers. This is our Neighlway contingent. Welcome. May I have your name?"

*This is definitely not a job for Red Ice.* "I'm Snowflake. Nice to meet you."

Iron Sights inclined his head in greeting. "A pleasure, Snowflake. We are always glad to be of service to our friends at Sprinkles Supplies. Do give my best to Fedexi Lexi when next you see her, won't you?"

"...You know the boss? Sorry, I haven't been at the company long."

He waved his hoof in acceptance. "That's quite alright. Yes, she was very wise to approach us about a business venture early on when she started up her company. Truly a capable mare."

I still couldn't properly move my shoulder but it definitely felt better. "I'll tell her you said that. Speaking of which, I should really be getting back. I thank you for your help and will be sure to get some caps sent to you as soon as possible but I really-"

"A moment, please."

*Uh-oh.*

"Y-yes?"

“If you’re willing, I have an alternative payment method that should cover the use of our medical supplies.”

“Y-yes?”

Iron Sights let out a sigh. “I’m sure you’ve heard by now about the trouble in Plottawa a few days ago?”

“Um. DJ Pon-3 mentioned it on his radio broadcast.”

A flash of annoyance crossed the Elder’s face at the name. “...Yes, he did. I’m afraid that the Plottawan slavers have become increasingly aggressive since Red Eye or Red Ice or whoever it was infiltrated them and attacked this ‘Peanut’. They have attacked several of our business partners who are under our protection.”

I stayed silent. Nope. Not got a say a thing on this subject.

Iron Sights wasn’t done talking though. “As such, we have many of our Knights and Paladins out in the field at present. Due to a slight scheduling mishap we actually have no Unicorns here at Neighlway at the current time and don’t expect any back for a few days.”

“Um...is that a problem?”

He let out a long exhale of vexation. “Unfortunately yes. Tell me, are you familiar

with memory orbs?”

*Oh, damn.* I was suddenly very aware of the orb in my pocket. “The boss uses one for putting us under when she needs to fix us up.”

He chuckled at this. “A clever mare indeed. Yes, they can be used for that purpose. We are more interested in the contents of the orbs themselves. As you know, they contain memories of ponies who lived before the bombs fell. Even if it leads to nothing we must examine each and every one to determine whether they contain important information that we can act on.”

“Even after 200 years?”

“Certainly. Many things from the past have lasted that long and will last even longer. The memory orbs themselves for example.”

“...Okay. I still don’t understand what this has to do with me, though.”

His expression suggested that he considered me a little slow on the uptake. “Well, as I mentioned before, you are the only Unicorn in Neighlway at present. A Unicorn is necessary to activate the magic of the memory orbs. We have recently managed to repair two orbs that had been damaged. We are quite excited to see what memories they contain. If you could look into them for us then we will consider your debt repaid and provide you with the means to return to Sprinkles Supplies.”

That was an experience I was not keen to repeat even if the last time hadn't hurt like the first one. "Um...do I have to?"

It was considerably more than a flash this time. "Of course you don't have to. We aren't monsters. However you won't be under our protection after leaving. Immediately. It would be a bad situation for a lone filly even without partial paralysis and no firearm in Hissyflit hunting grounds."

*...Facemask had a point about these guys.*

I slumped in defeat. "Well when you put it like that I'd be *happy* to help the Steel Rangers.

A victorious and vicious grin graced his features. "I am so glad to hear that. Please follow me."

Supported by the remaining Knight I followed Iron Sights to another lab where I was fixed into a chair with the first of the two orbs supported in front of my horn with a mechanical arm. The second lay in waiting further along the apparatus.

Mentally steeling myself, I reached out to it with my magic...

oooOOOOOOooo

"Anything?" A tired voice cried out.

“No, nothing.” Came the reply from above.

*Ah, these two again. I'm Caramel this time.*

As I thought this, Sassaflash flew down from wherever she'd been. “I don't understand. We've been hearing these broadcasts for weeks! How could the door be sealed?”

Caramel seemed equally frustrated. He loudly banged his hoof against the metal barrier three times. “OPEN DAMN YOU!”

Sassaflash plopped herself down in dejection. “We came all this way! Barely made it through that damn blizzard outside and now they Stable's closed!”

*Stable? Blizzard?*

Caramel sat down and tried to comfort her with by pulling her into a hug. “Don't give up. We'll wait here as long as we need to. We will escape the war.”

*Escape the war? Oh no.*

*Oh nonono.*

*Please say they aren't where I think they are?*

Caramel's eyes followed Sassaflash as she glared at the increasingly familiar door.

“This isn’t over! We’ll be back!”

The two got up and began to leave the cave. Caramel was muttering under his breath. “Fucking Stable 61. What are they trying to pull?”

*Damn it. I knew it.*

Caramel nudged his marefriend, trying in vain to keep her spirits up. “Come on, we’ll come back tomorrow. Let’s head back to that abandoned spice farm we passed on the way here. At least it’s out of the cold.”

*Spice farm? What spice farm? There was no spice farm when I left the Stable, just Cefar.*

*Ah, I get it. spiCE FARm. The sign must’ve broken. Heh, lazy long-dead ponies can’t even maintain a sign for 200 years.*

Pleased at my own cleverness, I barely noticed the two standing at the cave mouth. The wind whipping at their faces.

They both spoke at the same time.

“We’ll be okay, right?”

“We’ll be okay, right?”

Sassaflash’s surprise and sadness were most likely mirrored by Caramel.

Moving a little closer together, they walked out into the world of white.

oooOOOOOOOOooo

I came out of the orb trance shaken. I didn't want to think that Stable 61 had turned its back on anybody who wanted to get away from the conflict.

Iron Sights' pathetic smile really didn't help. "What did you see?"

*Nothing for your eyes.* "Two ponies. A mare and a stallion. They were in a cave. I didn't recognise it."

He appeared thoughtful. "That's not particularly helpful. Did they say anything?"

*What are you after?* "Not really. They couldn't get any further than where they'd reached. They were upset. I...I don't think the bombs had dropped yet."

"They were just talking in a cave? Nothing else around?"

"No. It was dark. The stallion I was spent most of the time staring at the mare."

This was immediately ignored. "Well this is a bust then. I guess we'll move onto the second orb."

"H-hey! Can't I get a rest first. I'm new to this."

The technicians were staring at me strangely. Iron Sights just sighed. “That orb was very short. You should be fine, even with the venom still in your system. We continue.” He turned to the hulking steel-covered guard. “Knight, restrain her and we’ll continue.”

That robotic voice sounded again. “Yes sir.”

The hulking mass clunked forward and stood before me. “Please remain still for your own safety.”

I was not happy with this, but complied. “You sure know how to make a filly feel welcome, Iron Sights.”

The Knight bristled. “You will address him as Elder!”

I looked him/her in the...visor as I replied. “You...will be disappointed!”

The technician ponies had finished restraining me and the Knight reluctantly stepped back. The next orb swung into place in front of my horn. I glared at Iron Sights and his nasty little smile as I connected with it.

oooOOOOOOooo

“Do we have to do this again?” The voice was weary.

It was also familiar.



A visibly-older Sassaflash stood in the doorway. She was clad in Steel Ranger armour.

There was a mirror next to her. In it I saw Caramel. He had also aged and was wearing the robes I'd seen around Neighlway.

Sassaflash nodded. "We do. It's been 13 years. Big Macintosh is dead. We need to give it up. We have a life here. That should be enough."

"Enough for what?" His bitterness was transparent. "We sit here in this bunker or root through the decaying corpse of Equestria for scraps! That doesn't help anypony!"

Sassaflash had obviously heard this before. "It's our duty!" She looked away from him as her anger shifted to sadness. "Not that you'd know anything about duty."

Judging by Caramel's lack of reaction he had heard that before too. "What can I do to make you understand, Sass?"

She jerked as if shot by Cassie's rifle. Her pupils shrank to pinpoints. "DON'T CALL ME THAT! DON'T EVER CALL ME THAT AGAIN! NOT AFTER..."

Ashamed, Caramel deflated. "I know. I'm sorry."

Sassaflash got herself under control. She picked up her helmet but paused with it in

her hooves. “We are needed here, Scribe Caramel. The Stable is a pipe dream which we can no longer afford. Our work here is real. It will preserve Equestria. It will bring it back from the dead.”

She donned her helmet and, somehow, lost everything that made her more than the suit of armour she wore. She left without another word.

I watched through Caramel’s eyes as his head drooped and the tears began to fall. “I hate this place. I wish we never came here. The Rangers are wrong.”

He looked at the empty doorway. In the mirror I could see the haunted look in his eyes. “You’ll never forgive me for taking our daughter to the Stable cave, will you? Not after little Sassy didn’t come back...”

He sat there for a long time.

oooOOOOOOooo

I opened my eyes.

“Well my dear? Was this trip more beneficial?”

I blinked away the moisture in my eyes. “N-no. Just two ponies who lost more than they should have.”

He didn’t think much of my deflection. “That’s completely unhelpful Snowflake. I

need details.”

*I really don't like you, Iron Sights.* “It was the ponies from the first orb again. They were older this time. They had joined the Steel Rangers. Their names were Sassaflash and Caramel.”

The nasty smile was replaced by a thoughtful purse of the lips. “I think I know those names. I must confirm this.”

He began to walk away. I yelled out after him. “Hey! Let me go already. We’re even now.”

He looked back and seemed entirely surprised I was still there. “Oh! Yes. Knight! Release her and provide her with an escort and supplies to make the trip home, will you?”

“Yes sir!”

~~~~~

*At least he was true to his word.*

The Steel Ranger Knight escorted me to the limits of Neighlway territory but sulkily refused to chat until I referred to Iron Sights as Elder Iron Sights. I in turn cheerfully refused to do so. Apart from his seemingly random firings of the heavy

cannon on his back which always struck an incoming Hissyflit there was no sound besides our hooffalls.

I wasn't exactly complaining. I had plenty to think about. Caramel and Sassaflash. They'd gone to Stable 61 in search of an escape but found the door slammed shut in their face. I could relate. Without the Stable they couldn't escape Old Equestria and what would become the Wasteland. They signed on with the Steel Rangers. Judging by Caramel's demeanour it had been out of necessity rather than design.

I was in trouble. As soon as Iron Sights got a Unicorn back to the base he'd see the full picture in the orbs. He'd find out about Stable 61.

How long would the Stable door keep the Steel Rangers out of that treasure trove of pre-war technology? They wouldn't stop until they got in.

I needed to buy some time or find a way to warn the Stable.

The Steel Rangers and I would not be friends.

~~~~~

The moment I was out of their territory he turned and began to walk back the way he came.

"Have a safe trip!" I mockingly called after him. His gait became more tense but

there was no other response. Soon he disappeared over the crest of a hill.

I consulted my Pipbuck. It was a trip of a good few hours to get to Sprinkles Supplies. About the same to Grindstone. I had a choice to make. “Do I head back to Lexi or go meet up with the Buffalo?”

I considered this while keeping an eye out for Hissyflits.

“How about a third option?” I was apparently not as attentive as I thought. The unexpected voice startled me so much I fell over.

“Smooth.”

The voice was distorted and tinny. It didn’t sound like a Steel Ranger though. I picked myself up off the ground before looking up. “Who are you?”

When I finally saw who was addressing me I didn’t know what to think.

Floating in front of me appeared to be some form of flying radio.

“You can call me Watcher.”

~~~~~

*Level Up!*

Perks gained: *Are You Low-Orbing Me?* - Your barter skill has increased. More

dialogue options are available for negotiations.

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**Author's note**: Finally the main quest is sorta-beginning. I realised I was doing too much introspection with Snowflake while not a whole lot was happening in the world itself (ironically this was one of my major complaints with *Final Fantasy XIII*). That stops now. I'll still feature plenty of character development but I want to make sure I balance it with stuff actually happening too. The focus will also expand a little to the other characters and not just Snowflake.

I'm still looking for pre-readers for this (I'm more than open to a you-read-mine-I-read-yours deal with anybody who wants to try). This chapter has been written totally solo so I apologise if the quality of writing dips.

Obviously a big thanks to [Kkat](#) for the original *Fallout: Equestria* and Hasbro for *Friendship is Magic* and Lauren Faust for *Friendship is Magic* AND joining Mane6 to help them keep their game going. Another thank you for [Cascadejackal](#) for the title artwork. Click on the links to see more from these lovely people.

Please and thank you for reading and leaving comments/reviews/plot-hole notifications. Everything helps. Hope you enjoy the story fellas and fel-lasses. I'll try to get motoring on the next chapter as soon as I can.