DAY ONE

The First Day of the Rest of Your Life

but the past still haunts you

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Lemon Frisk trotted around the abandoned factory, wondering what had been produced in it. The sign at the front had completely rotted away, leaving nothing but the two metal supports, and some decaying pieces of wood still hanging onto them. Even on the ground, nothing was left of the rest of the sign.

He felt excited. This would be the first new place he'd enter in at least twenty years. He'd seen his share of security mechanisms, and had frequently been shot at by security drones, but at first sight, this factory didn't seem to have any of that. From two hundred years of experience, though, Lemon Frisk knew better than to trust first sight.

He walked through the wind-polished remains of what had once been a glass door, and poked his head into the main hall. "Hello? Anypony in here?" he said with his raspy, two-hundred year old voice. No one responded. He hadn't expected anyone to, anyway. What he *had* expected was a ceiling turret popping out and trying to blast him to gibs, but that didn't seem to happen either. Instead of guns, the ceiling had a very inviting sign that, despite being rotted away nearly as badly as the one outside, showed the familiar

shapes of the Sparkle Cola logo. The ghoul smiled. If this was a Sparkle Cola factory, it could be a gold mine of caps.

He carefully walked into the building. It looked like it had been looted a long time ago. In fact, so long ago that the metal door, that whoever had looted this hadn't gotten through, was now practically rusting off its hinges on its own accord. Besides the ancient damage, though, the gleaming twisted metal of the broken lock indicated a more recent, and possibly more successful attempt. Lemon Frisk walked towards the door, and gave it a nudge. It opened inwards with a creaking sound, and revealed stairs leading to a cellar.

"Buck me," he said, voicing his thoughts to the empty space. "That means it's looted too."

An odd sound from below caught his attention. It sounded like something breathing... no, whimpering? Just as he was about to investigate, a perfectly good bottle of Sparkle Cola was thrown at his head. He skillfully evaded it, and saw how it crashed onto the floor behind him and shattered, spraying a mix of glass and sugary beverage into the main hall.

Lemon Frisk raised his eyebrow (he didn't have much choice in which one; he only still had the left one) and peeked back into the doorway. "Hey now, there's no need for that!" he said, his raspy voice echoing off the walls of the cellar. "That was a perfectly good bottle of Sparkle Cola!"

"G-get away, you monster!" a voice yelled from below. It sounded like a mare, or a young buck.

Lemon rolled his eyes. "Yeah. No need for that either. Look, kid, I don't know how you got there, or what's been chasing you, but it seems to be all clear now. Just little old me."

Another bottle was flung out of the storage cellar. Lemon caught it in his teeth, and put it in his saddlebag. "Will you stop throwing those things?! I'm trying to scavenge them, which is a lot easier if they're not all smashed on the floor!"

"Y-you just want the bottles? You won't hurt me?"

"I might, if you waste any more o' them." Lemon Frisk said, annoyance sounding through his voice. He heard a soft 'eep!' from the cellar. "Oh for the Goddesses' sake, I'm joking! Can I come down there, kid? If whatever was chasing you 's still out there, that rusty door still beats standing here in the open."

"Uh... okay", came the weak response from the cellar.

When he entered, he saw another bottle of Sparkle Cola, levitated in the air by an orange glow of magic. Apparently, his basement dweller wasn't taking any chances. A rusty orange unicorn mare with a pale blue mane was hiding behind one of the racks in the cellar. Lemon Frisk ignored the floating bottle, and stared at the huge underground storage space.

"Will ya look at that!" he said, grinning at the rows and rows of undamaged Sparkle Cola bottles. "Kid, you found yerself a gold mine!"

The mare carefully came out of her hiding place, and looked at him with a horrified expression on her face. "What... what are you?"

Lemon Frisk sighed, and looked at the pipbuck on the mare's leg. Unconsciously, he glanced down at the malfunctioning pipbuck melted into his own leg. "Fresh outta the stable, huh?" He shook his head. "I guess we should get you a copy of the Guide. Didn't bring my own, it was all melted together."

He looked at the mare, who was still looking as if she was talking to a monster that could devour her at any moment.

"Oh. Sorry, where are my manners?" he said, baring his yellow teeth in a polite grin. "I'm Lemon Frisk, and, as you could've guessed from my deteriorating state, I'm a ghoul. Nothing wrong with that, either."

"You're a z-z-zombie pony!?" the mare asked.

"Careful there, I know fellas who'd go feral from being called that." Lemon said, cocking his eyebrow again. "We really prefer being called ghouls."

"And you're... nice?" The voice sounded hopeful. Lemon Frisk almost wished he wouldn't have to tell her the whole truth.

"Well, a lot of us are decent fellows. Mind you, there's those so rotted in the brain they attack and devour anything that looks more alive than themselves."

He stared the mare in the eyes. "But that's the same for the living ponies. And those raiders are a lot nastier than feral ghouls, from what I've heard."

From her horrified reaction, and the general fact she was still alive, Lemon could see she hadn't run into any raiders yet. He sighed, and shook his head. "What's a kid like you doing out here in the wastes?"

"I'm not a kid!" the mare said, frowning. "I'm an adult mare!"

Lemon Frisk cocked his eyebrow yet again, making a mental note to spare the poor thing in the future, lest it joined Righty. He could live without a lot of things, but he wasn't sure eyebrow-cocking was one of them. "I was born over two hundred years ago. You lively ones are all kids to me."

"That's just not fair." the mare shot back. "I bet you weren't much older than me when you got like that."

Lemon Frisk grinned. "Heh, I think I like ya, kid. But if you want me to stop calling you 'kid', maybe you should give me an alternative."

"Oh!" the mare said, realizing her embarrassing mistake. "I-I'm sorry! I'm Misty Cloud."

"You look more like a *rusty* cloud to me." Lemon said, looking at her orange coat, and suppressing the urge to move his eyebrow.

"Yeah, like I haven't heard *that* one a million times." Misty Cloud muttered.

"Well, anyway. Nice to meet you, Misty Cloud." Lemon Frisk said. "Let's look a bit further, see if there's an *empty* bottle storage here too."

"Why would you want that?" Misty asked, looking mildly confused.

"Well, this is a factory, so if there's empty bottles down here, it stands to reason there are fresh bottle caps, too."

Misty's expression hadn't changed. "So?"

Lemon Frisk shook his head and sighed. "I really gotta get you a Guide, kid. Guess we're off to New Appleoosa next, and hope miss Doo is home."

* * *

Lemon Frisk looked at the mare walking before him, wondering what cutie mark she had under these saddlebags. Probably something with a cloud. Names were like that, somehow. Still, here in the wastelands, "Misty Cloud" had to be the most goddess-damned depressing name you could have, with the pegasus cloud cover looming overhead.

"What are you staring at my flank for?" Misty Cloud said, suddenly turning to him.

"It's a nice flank." he said without missing a beat.

She huffed. "I think you're a bit too old for me."

"Oh, *now* she thinks I'm too old. Talk about double standards." he retorted, grinning.

She shot him a dirty look, but didn't say a word, turning back to the map information on her pipbuck. "I got 'Appleoosa' on here, but no 'New Appleoosa'. I guess it's... new?"

"Fricking genius, aren't you?"

"Oh shut up. I never used this map function before. It's probably outdated by about 200 years."

"Well, so's mine. And molten together, to boot."

Misty looked at the pitiful excuse for a map. "Don’t tell me you actually paid for that thing."

"Well there was only one other map to buy." Lemon Frisk said, a pensive look on his face. "The other one was in much better state, actually... perfectly readable, all folded open... unfortunately, it was also completely fused to the table. I preferred the more, well, portable one."

Misty blinked. "I see. What, um, fused it, though?"

Lemon Frisk sighed. “Canterlot. It’s... a mess there. Stuff fuses.”

Lemon Frisk had indicated the most important places on his map, including the general direction towards New Appleoosa, which itself was unfortunately on one of the pieces molten into another piece of the map. Stacked up with a nice heap of never-used bottle caps, two healing potions from the cellar's First Aid kit,

and with the location of a huge storage cellar full of Sparkle Cola saved into Misty Cloud's pipbuck, they were now trotting in that general direction.

“Why aren’t you using your pipbuck?” Misty asked, glancing at his left leg. “And, for that matter, what in Equestria happened to that thing?”

“Fused. Like the map. I really don’t feel like explaining the specifics of Pink Cloud to you.” Lemon Frisk replied. ”You’ll have to read it in the Guide. Long story short though, Canterlot was poisoned with a rather specific kind o’ nasty, and it does stuff like that. Most ghouls’ pipbucks still work fine though. Mine just melted a bit too far into my leg.”

Misty Cloud took a better look at the twisted mess of pipbuck and foreleg, and immediately wished she hadn’t. Lemon Frisk just smiled, and showed her the monitor, which displayed nothing but static. “The only thing it can still do is give me radio, when I press the right buttons. Makes a really nice weapon though, and my leg’s titanium-reinforced to the bone.”

“Uhuh.” Misty said, nodding slowly. “If you’ve seen it on the bigger map, though, couldn’t you just indicate New Appleoosa on *my* pipbuck?”

“Huh.“ Lemon Frisk said. ”I suppose I could.” He leaned in closer to take a look at her pipbuck, only for her to suddenly poke a hoof in his flank. He let out a surprised yelp.

“What’d you do *that* for?!” he asked, indignantly.

“I just... wondered,” she said, the look on her face midway between disgust and amusement.

Lemon Frisk glared at her. “You *poked* me.”

“I’m sorry! I was just curious how it’d feel!”

Lemon frowned. “Well, don’t do it again.”

“...you’re squishy,” Misty said, unable to hide her grin.

“I’m *what* now?”

“Squishy!” she said, poking him again. He let out another yelp. She grinned from ear to ear now. “And ticklish, too!”

“Stop that!” Lemon Frisk yelled, evading a third poke. “Usually ponies shy away from physical contact with ghouls on their own accord. You? You simply have no concept of personal space!”

“Well I can’t help it,” she said. ”You’re squishy!”

“All right, I get it!” Lemon growled, irritated. ”Now will you please just stop poking me and let me mark the damned town on your map, without letting every radigator and raider in a ten kilometer radius know we’re here?”

Reminded of the very real dangers of the Equestrian wasteland, Misty was suddenly quiet, and with a short nod she stuck out her pipbuck to him.

“I’m sorry,” she said, while he was scrolling over the map to find New Appleoosa. “I just... need to act silly from time to time, focus on the people around me, or I’ll go crazy out here. How do you deal with that?”

“What, the wasteland?” Lemon Frisk said, absentmindedly, while saving the new location into her pipbuck.

“The quiet. The space. The death.”

Lemon Frisk frowned, and looked up. “What happened to you? What *was* chasing you?"

Misty stared at the ground, her eye twitching. "I dunno." she said, weakly. "Something green, with lots of teeth. It came out of nowhere, and killed Big Apple and Spray Paint. Spray Paint was yelling at me to run away, and so I did. I c-couldn't do anything for him anyway... he'd been r-ripped in half."

Lemon Frisk nodded. "And you ended up hiding in the first shelter you could find. Was that door hard to open?"

Misty snapped out the nightmare replaying in her mind. "What?"

"The cellar door, in the factory. I just wondered if it opened easily."

Misty frowned, thinking back to what had been mostly a mindless rush away from the fearsome creature. "Um, the door, right. No. It was stuck really good. I just kept bucking it until it opened. Might've used some magic, too. It's all a bit of a blur."

"How long were you down there?"

Misty raised her pipbuck, and activated its tracking history. "Says here I got there at 12:20, and left at 15:46. After we spent about half an hour looking through the place. So, I guess I was in there for about three hours."

"That half hour search sure was worth it," Lemon said with a smile, skillfully guiding her thoughts away from overthinking those three hours. "You would've left those caps as trash."

"Well they *are* trash! At least I took some of the full bottles, before you stuffed my saddlebags with *bottlecaps*."

"One pony's trash is another pony's cash, lady."

"Yeah, well I didn't know that. Still find it hard to believe."

Lemon shook his head. "Good thing I found you there. The wastelands aren't a nice place to get lost in, especially alone."

"I wasn't lost. I had the route traced."

"And would you really have gone back through where your friends have been devoured?" Misty 's eyes widened, and she hung her head to the ground. "Yeah." Lemon sighed. "Didn't think so. Come on, let's find some shelter around here."

* * *

There wasn't much left of the town they walked through. It had clearly been hit by something less irradiating, but more specifically incendiary than the Balefire bombs. Most of the town had simply been burnt down, and everything inside the houses was equally burnt and melted. The Wasteland Survival Guide had details on what was usually left unscathed in a balefire target city, but even that was all burnt here. Whatever had done this had gone around corners, blown out all doors and windows, and even buried itself deep into underground shelters looking for victims to burn.

It reminded Lemon Frisk of the way Pink Cloud had seeped through everything in Canterlot, and he shuddered.

“This one’s the same.” Misty said, shaking her head as she looked at yet another first aid kit she’d found in one of the buildings. The healing potion bottle inside it looked like all the others they’d found; reduced to molten shards after its boiling contents had blown it up inside the kit. “There’s absolutely nothing left in this entire town. Unless you can get into the reinforced shelters.”

Lemon looked at the blackened skeletons on the streets around him. “I can’t.” he said. ”And they’d just be tombs of a different kind.”

Misty Cloud nodded. “Come on, old pony. Let’s get out of here.”

They walked towards the edge of the village, where the effects of the intense fire bomb were less severe, and finally found a two-story building which seemed fairly intact. Lemon opened the door, and peeked inside.

“HUAAAAAAARGHHHH!” a blackened ghoul screamed in his face. Misty gasped from the sudden sound, and tried to find something to take cover behind.

“HYEEEAAAAAAARGHHHH!” Lemon Frisk screamed back. The black ghoul stopped screaming, probably out of sheer surprise. Its mouth stayed wide open, though.

Lemon Frisk frowned, and took a better look at the creature. His eyes widened in shock as he realized that its eyes and skin were literally molten away, and, in fact, the whole pony was stuck in its current position. Like the skeletons molten into the sidewalks of Canterlot by the Pink Cloud... only, this pony was literally molten in place, from sheer heat, standing there forever as an undead scarecrow.

“No... not this again...” he said, stumbling back onto his haunches. “M-Misty, there’s a gun in my saddlebags,” he said, barely getting above a whisper. “Please, put him out of his misery.”

Misty carefully crept back from behind the trashed carriage she had been hiding behind. “Lemon Frisk? Are you all right?”

She looked into Lemon’s shocked eyes. “Please,” he begged her. “I can’t do this a second time.”

Carefully, she trotted over, eyeing the molten ghoul suspiciously. A horrible gurgling came from its throat as it tried to breathe, out of sheer habit.

“He won’t hurt you. He can’t hurt anyone.” Lemon Frisk said, pressing his hooves against his eyes. ”He’s just a horrible reminder of what happened here. Please, just let him rest.”

Misty used her magic to rummage through the caps in Lemon’s saddlebags, until she finally found the gun underneath it all. Getting used to its weight and feel, she raised it, aimed inside the wide open mouth of the ghoul, and fired. The ghoul didn’t fall, slump or even close its mouth. The only sign that it was really dead was that the horrible gurgling had stopped.

Lemon Frisk finally looked up, and seemed to calm down. Without saying a word, he walked inside and pushed against the ghoul pony’s side until it broke free from the ground. He put his head under the corpse, lifted it on his back, walked outside and dumped it around the corner. He motioned Misty inside as he walked back in. She followed close behind him, throwing an uncomfortable look at the four hooves that were still standing there, molten into the blackened tiles that were paved on the floor inside the house.

“Close th’ door.” Lemon Frisk said, his gravelly voice shaking. He walked to the middle of what used to be the living room, and slumped down.

* * *

“What was *that* all about?” Misty asked.

“It’s so sad.” Lemon said. “Feral ghouls. They’re like broken records, constantly replaying, a pony reduced to a reminder of what happened there. And this one, he... he was stuck there!”

He looked at Misty Cloud, tears in his eyes. “WHAT IF HE WAS STILL LIKE ME!?” he yelled. “What if... he was conscious, aware of everything, for years, until his brain just rotted away? What would a life like that be like?”

“I heard you say ‘not this again’,” Misty said, sitting down besides him. “Did this happen to you before? Did you have to put a... feral ghoul... out of its misery?”

Lemon just nodded. Misty put her leg over his neck, and gave him a squishy hug. “Tell me.”

Lemon nodded again. After a slight pause, he started talking.

“I had a family. In Canterlot. A mate, and a son. We all went into the Stable. Those last moments, when the pink cloud started seeping through the walls... we’d never been so scared. I remember holding my dying wife as I choked to death.”

Outside of the house, the sun was setting. Its final rays peeking out under the Enclave’s cloud cover. Misty looked at the orange orb with a childlike fascination, until Lemon Frisk’s voice broke the spell.

“When I woke up, I knew something was wrong. Something was different, about me, about all of the Stable. I breathed in the pink cloud without it hurting, and realized that it didn’t even matter whether I kept

breathing or not. It was... scary, but in some way, a relief. I was still there, somehow."

Misty nodded. "Your family didn't survive, did they?"

"Blossom Tree's head was molten into a wall. And little Lemonade Sparkle, he..."

He looked at Misty, desperation in his eyes. "He got up! He looked at me, nudged against Blossom to get up... and then just walked to his bed, crept inside, and lay there, his eyes wide open, staring at nothing."

"We'd taken his bed from our home, you know. Because he'd be familiar with it, in the Stable. I walked outside, looking if we were the only survivors in the Stable. It seemed we weren't. Lots of ponies were in the same state I was in, and they were already discussing the situation."

"At first, I just thought it was the shock. That he was just like me, but traumatized by what happened. That is, until the others noticed it happened to quite a lot of ponies in the Stable. The symptoms were always the same. They kept doing, or attempted to keep doing, whatever they'd been doing the days before in the Stable. And they got incredibly aggressive if anyone tried to nudge them out of that pattern."

A sad frown appeared on Misty's face as she realized where the story was going. "Your own son... oh dear Celestia."

Lemon Frisk nodded. "I tried not to do it. I tried to keep him alive. He stayed inside our home, and wasn't hurting anyone. That was, until we moved away Blossom's body. He yelled and screamed and bit anyone who came close, and then just went to bed as if nothing had happened. After a few days, he somehow got more used to the changed situation, and just kept standing on the place where she died, for several hours, each day."

Night had fallen in the burnt village. The only light in the building came from the eternally staticky screen of Lemon Frisk's pipleg. Misty Cloud lit the lamp on her own pipbuck to provide some more light.

"After a few weeks," Lemon Frisk continued, "he just creeped me out. There was no life in there, no spark. He was just a horrible reminder of the Lemonade he used to be... and of Blossom, and of all the other ponies that died that night. So one day, I just held him, pretty much how you're holding me now... and then I grabbed a piece of concrete, and smashed his little head in."

He looked up at the mare that was holding him, his eyes filled with a lifetime of sadness. "I can't do that again, Misty. It was so hard."

Misty Cloud didn't reply. She just gave him another squishy hug.

Footnote: Level Up!
New Perk: Sticking Together: When teaming up with another Stable pony, your inventories count as one, allowing you access to the storage space and use of the other pony's items until you part ways. If that ever happens, don't try to take all her valuable equipment - she knows you're ticklish.

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