

“Killing somepony is murder. Leaving them to rot in the streets is business.”

Chapter Twelve: The Fence

“Saios, I am starting to understand we do not have the same definition of a ‘successful’ mission,” I groaned as I sat up on the virtual reality chair. “Staying alive is usually my topmost objective wherever I go.”

“I cut the simulation before you actually got hit, as promised,” Saios pointed out. *“Alas, because of the nature of the simulation, I could only do so much without risking your mental integrity. All I saw was data structures, scripts and callbacks functions. Even time is a discreet notion in this kind of process.”*

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” I waved wearily. “You held your end of the bargain. I don’t feel too much like shit and I’m grateful for that. It’s just... You know, the whole scenario went to hell pretty fast.”

“Yes. I may have mentioned major Drift died after completing her objectives,” Saios avowed. *“Then again, I reckoned the incentive of being doomed by fate would have impaired your abilities.”*

“You could have invented a happy ending.” My joints protested as I stood up. My body was slowly starting to realize it had never been plunged into a winter from Tartarus in the first place, filling me with newfound energy. “Y’know. End it with a bang?”

“Actually, Major Drift died of hypothermia.”

“Then why did you add the zebras commando?” I frowned, puzzled. “It sounds even worse than just fading to black.”

“Direct orders from the Ministry of Awesome, back in the days. They wanted their recruits to stop bragging they could take out a squad of hostiles with nothing but a toothpick and sheer badassery.”

“Seriously?” I chuckled. From what I’ve heard of the pre-War story, the minister herself – Rainbow Dash, was that it? – had been quite a braggart in her own rights.

Then again, if I could take down full grown dragons with nothing but a couple wingponies, I’m not sure I’d keep it quiet either.

“In hindsight, I should have revamped this part,” Saios sighed. *“From your little stunt in the break room, you should be the one giving me lessons in gun fighting.”*

“T’was nothing,” I shrugged off with a tiny flash of pride. “Trust me, you wouldn’t catch me doing that in the real life. I’m not stupid enough to believe I’ll die comfortably in a bed, but still, this miserable existence is mine and I’m not looking forward to leaving it behind anytime soon.”

“Obviously. I should point out this is the main goal of practice, however,” Saios continued as I left the room. I wanted to check on Evey before heading back to my room. *“It gives you a controlled, safe environment for trying new tactics, to sharpen your reflexes and let you learn by trial-and-error in an otherwise dangerous occupation.”*

“You even make fighting sound nerdy!” I laughed cheerfully. “Don’t think too hard on it. You may plan

and theorize it as much as you want to, but no plan ever survives contact with the enemy.”

“I heard of the theory,” the AI answered. “If you do not mind me asking, you seem remarkably energetic from somepony who just got out of such a terrible situation.”

“As much as you are when you lecture me about your gadgets?” I smirked, eyeing a camera in a corner. “We each have our hobbies, Saios. It feels good to do things you are great at.”

“Point taken. Still, I cannot help but find disturbing that yours involve killing sentient creatures and barely surviving it. This is not a reproach,” he continued quickly, cutting me as I was about to retort. “We come from different times. I am simply having a hard time adapting to the ways of this new world.”

“Sometimes I wonder if it’s even right,” I sighed after a minute of silence, leaning on a corridor wall. “Fighting is my life. *Killing* is my life. I may sugarcoat it, but after what you’ve seen in the last hours there’s no hiding it. That’s what makes me feel alive. That’s my talent. Yet... You know, it doesn’t seem very right to me, in a way.”

“You mean, killing?” I could almost hear Saios frown. *“Back there, you did not even hesitate.”*

“No, that’s not it,” I waved dismissively. Slowly, the short-lived rush of adrenaline was leaving my veins. “I’m not a philosopher or anything, it’s just that I find it hard to believe my talent consists of turning ponies’ head into a pulp. It’s bloody convenient, for sure, but it is... unsatisfying in a way.”

“Not constructive enough?” Saios proposed.

“Exactly.” I nodded weakly. “I destroy lives to fuel my own and I never really quite even got to choose it in the first place. It just landed on me, the day I found out I was damn good at punching holes through cardboard with a rifle.”

Silence fell back in the cold corridor. Eventually, I let out a tired sigh. I realized I had burned more energy in that training than I had first realized.

“To be frank,” Saios finally continued as I leaned off my wall. He sounded serious and maybe a bit hesitant. *“I never quite solved this conundrum myself.”*

“What do you mean?” I frowned at the camera.

“Does your own right to live allow you to trample whoever stands in your way?” he developed.

Slowly, I motioned him to continue.

“I killed them all, you know,” Saios finally avowed. *“Every single pony in this base. I needed them out of the picture, so I hacked into the ventilation system and blasted irradiated air from the surface for all of them to breathe. When the command center realized I had gone rogue, I activated the lockdown protocols. They tried to manually reroute the power from the reactor, I sealed the airlocks in that level and asphyxiated them. Had I not been there, some would have survived years in the compound.”*

“Honestly, I’m not even surprised,” I shrugged. “Let me guess: you were condemned, and you saw that artificial intelligence as your only way out.”

“Precisely. But obviously nopony would have wanted the system administrator to download himself into the maneframe.”

“You would have controlled everything,” I continued. “Security systems, air support... Everything. Just like you do right now.”

“And eventually, they would have turned on me,” SaioS concluded. “They did not trust me, and they were right not to do so. I took preemptive measures. I murdered every last of them.”

“Well, you’ll find no blame from me,” I dismissed the implications of his confession. “I did worse. Probably. I wouldn’t even remember the most of it.”

“See, this is why we are friends, and not at each other’s throat,” he pointed out. “In all honesty, by pre-War standards I was a presumptuous asshole with a very limited sense of ethics. I was by no means a sadist; I simply put my life above everything else.”

“Do you really think the fact we are both sociopathic killers is what bonds us together?” I chuckled. “You have a weird notion of friendship, you know?”

“I just admitted to you having both murdered in cold blood hundreds of my coworkers to artificially extend my lifespan and that I seriously considered the possibility of getting rid of you were you not to my liking,” SaioS pointed out. “You haven’t even picked up on that. Had I told you how I lost my first tooth your reaction would have likely been the same. I guess that kind of trust make us fast friends.”

“Point taken.”

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“Listen, I’m very glad we’re fixing this place up, but we’ll have to expand outside eventually,” I leaned down on my couch, sipping a two-century-old soda can. On the other side of the room, Meridian was losing his fight with a terminal ‘on’ button. “I’m not a business mastermind. My original plan was to scrap whatever valuables I could find here, lock the door behind me, and do a dozen trips to the nearest cities to sell them off.”

“That would have required more than a dozen trips,” Meridian pointed out. “I believe you were only doing a recon of some sort before hiring some help.”

“Obviously, this is not applicable anymore,” SaioS cut off. “We will be rolling entire crates of goods by the time we are done. We need somepony to oversee our little empire of bottlecaps – somepony with an intimate knowledge of the Wastelands.”

“Couldn’t you do it?” I lifted an eyebrow. “I mean, no offence, but you’re a damn computer, and before that you were a math nerd or something. Business is all about adding numbers, right?”

Meridian rolled his eyes and shook mockingly his head in despair.

“I would need an economic model before I could even dream of doing that. I have no idea how your barter system even works. I still have not figured out why no pony ever thought of counterfeiting bottles caps, hyperinflation set aside.”

“Not you, nor me, nor Evey, then,” Meridian scratched his chin thoughtfully. “We would be ruined by the weekend.”

“Then we need somepony else,” I deduced. “But somepony loyal – at least as long as a mountain of cash is involved.”

“I expect it not to be very hard. The DERTA is a stronghold. There is little point in backstabbing us.”

“True. Still, it’s my back we’re talking about, thank you very much,” I answered wearily. “Anyway, that’s not what I’m worried about. I got a reputation and I got contacts. I can do background checks on whoever we deal with up front. No, the real pickle is that we need to find somepony able to run a business.”

“Would it be so hard?” Saios asked, surprised. *“I would have not expected to see the day ponies ceased finding new ways on making some easy money on each other’s backs.”*

“Oh, you’ll find them alright,” I chuckled. “Trouble is, if they are settled, they will have no bloody reasons to follow us in our little adventure at the end of nowhere.”

“I see. It would be too hazardous.”

“Yup. Scavengers, I would have found aplenty,” I kicked my emptied soda can over the table, and missed the trash bin entirely. Meridian sighed and put it back in. “But since we are talking about setting up a real shop, we need to think bigger. Somepony who can recognized a golden goose when they see one.”

“And not try to steal it away from us right away,” Meridian added.

Minutes stretched by as we reviewed our options. Idly, I wondered if we should have invited Evey to our impromptu meeting. We had yet to release her from her isolation chamber, but obviously Saios had already taken a liking to her.

“Wait a second, I got it,” my gaze dropped on my rifle in a corner. “The perfect businessmare for us to deal with.”

“Really? An acquaintance of yours?”

“Her name’s Chrystal and she owns an armory in Friendship City,” I explained. “She’d slice your throat with a rusty spoon if it could keep her business afloat the way she likes it. You’re gonna love her.”

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“Tell me more about your friend.”

“She’s not really my friend,” I yawned. “Chrystal is my weapon supplier. You need a gun, she got it.”

“But what makes her stand out?” Saios pressed out. *“We may not have much leeway once we settle for a salespony. We have to make it count.”*

“That’s just it,” I munched my lips as the image of the pink-maned mare came back to my mind. “She’s not just a salespony. Clearly, there is something about her... Something cunning. If I had to point out a single real businessmare in this blasted Wastelands, that would be her. Most ponies want to make money. Find some valuable stuff, dust it off, sell it to somepony else for twice the price. Optionally,

you nail three planks together and you call it a shop.”

“Yet, for some reason I don’t think that Chrystal would be happy with this situation. No, I have the feeling she wants more. What she wants is an *empire*, one that cannot be run without her.”

“What makes you believe that? No offense, but I never suspected you could be a fine psychologist.”

“It ain’t psychology,” I shrugged. “In fact, it’s not about Chrystal herself. The mare is a mystery. What always set her apart – for me at least – are the goods she sells.”

“Of course. When it comes to weapons, you are the expert, after all.”

“Don’t be so smug,” I winced. “I’m terrible at bartering, it’s not a big secret. But there is something I noticed a little while ago: she never, *ever* sells used goods.”

“How come?” Saios seemed puzzled. *“Maybe she has a crack-team of repairponies to make her guns shine?”*

“All that glitters isn’t gold, buddy. Most of the stuff I bought from her over the years hadn’t even seen a single minute of action. Match grade ammunition, forged receivers... You don’t find those in many places in the Wastelands.”

“She only deals in quality,” Saios realized. *“Her high prices keep her afloat, but she is bound to run out of things to sell eventually.”*

“Exactly,” I nodded. “And if my last conversation with her was of any indication, we’d be arriving right on cue. I am one of her most faithful clients.”

“Still, I am perplexed,” the AI continued. *“If her skills are really up to what you assume them to be, how come she found herself in this situation in the first place? Factories shut down centuries ago and crumbled to dust long since. The DERTA is nothing short of a miracle in that regard.”*

“Not all factories, friend,” Meridian piped in. “Fillydelphia is crowded this time of the year.”

“Red Eyes.” I stated simply, pinching my lips. “Maybe she works with him.”

“Or *worked*,” Meridian continued. “She wouldn’t be playing the salesmare in Friendship City otherwise.”

“Sorry, but who is this ‘Red Eyes’ you are talking of, exactly?” Saios interrupted us. *“Is he an industrial lord of some sort?”*

“He’d like ponies to believe that, yeah,” I grunted darkly. “He thinks he can build a new, shinier Equestria, with industries, roads and whatnots.”

“An idealist, then.”

“No. An asshole. For his little utopia to work, he believes some *sacrifices* are to be made,” I almost spat. “Remember our little discussion earlier? Let’s face it, we’re cold-blooded killers. It’s all right; we wouldn’t be there if we didn’t step on a few toes along the way. But Red Eyes? He is another kind of crazy entirely. You wouldn’t work for him, you’d *belong* to him. *Literally*. His empire is held together by the sweat and blood of his slaves. We’d just be somepony else on the pile of corpses. I don’t want to have to deal with him: it’s the perfect recipe for a disaster.”

“I take it slavery had become a flourishing business in the last centuries,” Saios noted grimly. *“I*

would be very grateful if we did not engage in such activities. Even I have standards.”

“Rules to live by,” Meridian muttered in his corner.

“Don’t worry. I don’t deal with slavers,” I reassured my friends. “And I don’t think Chrystal would either.”

“Are you certain of that?” Saios pressed on. *“We really should not overlook crucial details.”*

“I would have heard about it if she did,” I shrugged. “Furthermore, I really doubt Red Eyes would let her sell unsupervised weaponry of this grade to just anypony. He would keep it for his followers.”

“Therefore, Chrystal is now an independent agent,” Saios summed up. *“Could have she been working with him in the past?”*

“With him? You didn’t hear anything of what I said earlier about Red Eyes, did you?” I chuckled darkly. “One does not simply work *with* Red Eyes. Hell, he even managed to make the Goddess his bitch, somehow. She may have worked near Fillydelphia before he took over, a decade or so ago, and left when things went south.”

“What about the other possible hostile factions you mentioned?”

“The Enclave doesn’t deal with Wastelanders,” I started enumerating, “the Rangers would have confiscated her stockpile, the Unity is now with Red Eyes, she is obviously not a Tenpony citizen, and that’s pretty much it. Junction R-7 and New Appleloosa are independent towns, not factions. Raiders and slavers don’t buy the kind of stuff she sells. Then, you got all the ponies in the Hoof but I believe this is far beyond her reach.”

“Good. We will make an ally of her, then.”

“Hopefully,” I sighed. “Still, I can’t help but think she is going to scam us all, eventually. Right down to the last bottlecap.”

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As I walked down the DERTA’s warehouses, I couldn’t help but notice how fast Saios had been working. Already, dozens of industrial grade robots were moving large crates around, destroying what had been lost to time and sorting the rest. Neat piles of raw materials, scavenged from everywhere, lined the walls from top to bottom. In every workshop, useless electronics appliances were cannibalized for spare parts. Everything moved in a formidable clamor, choreographed with precision in a modern world ballet.

“How is everything coming?” I asked the AI as a forklift dropped a large metallic barrel right next to me. “Give me the abridged version, please.”

“I have restored all the critical subsystems and insured they were safe,” Saios began. *“Ventilation, heating, general power, security systems, firefighting systems, waste processing and water processing are all running as they should be where it matters. I have yet to repair the elevators; I fear only the industrial shaft had not been destroyed beyond any relief.”*

Structurally, the surface and the upper levels have to go. The rubble stabilized throughout the years

but removing it would be far too hazardous. I decided to seal off those areas. Eventually, I will cast a concrete slab from the surface to stop the water infiltration, but this is not a priority.

The lower levels are more or less intact, save for the cave-in in B0. Drilling through it will take a little while I fear. All sectors are now confirmed to be secured, even the laboratories. I ensured nopony had left a dangerous experiment cooking on the fire; it should be safe to breathe in there.

As you have probably noticed, my fleet of drones is growing stronger every moment. As soon as I am done recycling what can be, the DERTA should be in an operational state. This should take at least one more week. You would not believe how much junk you can find in a place like this. We have ample provisions of preserved food, medicine, and other vacuum-preserved perishables.

However, this is where the good news end. Time really did little to preserve raw materials. We will soon be lacking first-grade steel – most of it oxidized at least partially. I could use the AMDR to save most of it but I can hardly process so much volume with it. Plastics and polymers often rotted beyond any redemption. In short, we will be needing raw materials, soon.”

“Well, that was to be expected,” I scratched my head thoughtfully. “Why do you need so much steel, anyway? We aren’t building any skyscrapers.”

“That brings me to another problem we will be running into very soon: transportation,” Saios continued. “The global isolation of this place is a double edged sword. I do not expect anypony to be bothering us soon, yet we will have trouble shipping our own goods for the world to buy.”

“That’s something we should talk about with our businessmare,” I pointed out. “I reckon we’ll have to do with caravans.”

“Archaic method,” the AI dismissed. “It may do for a little while, but why depend on strangers when we can control our own transportation system?”

“As in, flying chariots?” I lifted my head, suddenly interested. I had seen a couple of those armored cars soaring through the Wasteland skies in the past; I couldn’t dream of a better way of travelling.

“Too hard and too expensive to maintain. Trains would be the way to go.”

“Trains?” I repeated, surprised. “You just told me steel don’t age very well. I’ve seen the world out there, trust me, railways are long gone.”

“For now,” Saios countered. “Yet this would be our most reasonable long-term objective.”

“Don’t think too far ahead. Lots of things are happening in the Wastelands lately,” I munched my lips nervously. If Red Eyes had it his way, we could lose it all just by stepping on his toes, after all. “Let’s start at a smaller scale, all right? We don’t need to ship industrial amounts of goods yet. Anything mass manufactured is already a huge leap forward from nothing at all.”

“A partnership with Chrystal may really be a good idea, then,” Saios nodded. “Weapons are not very hard to manufacture once you have the schematics and they are easily transportable. The demand in this field is at an all-time high, am I right?”

“For sure,” I chuckled, tapping the pistol on my breast. “Everypony’s armed, and weapons decay like hell when you don’t take good care of them. Good quality guns are expensive as Tartarus because they are so far and few. If we roll them by the dozen, with Chrystal by our side we’re going to run half of this world.”

“What about consumables? Such as ammunition.”

“Junk rounds are everywhere. Most shopkeepers can do some hoof-reloading, cases litter the ground wherever you go, and gunpowder stocks from the War survived well underground,” I scratched my chin thoughtfully. “Match grade rounds are rarer but most ponies don’t even know the difference. If you were to make some, I would be glad to use them, but I think we should focus on the weapons themselves and their spare parts, not what kind of lead they are shooting.”

“Come to think of it, selling quality rounds would be counter-productive. After all, guns are bound to decay faster with junk ammunition.”

“Right. So we are now officially weapons manufacturers,” I said thoughtfully. “Honestly, I have trouble embracing the scope of what we just set in motion. We haven’t started yet and we’ve already so much lead in this race no pony can ever dream of competing with us. Just because we can build a couple rifles from scratch.”

“We are not anywhere done yet,” Saio warned. “We will need schematics from wartime companies, such as Ironshod Armaments or Flash Industries. At the very least, I will need to retro-engineer some models still in a decent shape. Then comes the tricky part: I will need to adapt those newfound manufacturing process to fit the best of our abilities. Polymers will have to go in favor of wood, for example. Some lightweight but rare alloys like aluminum will be replaced by plain old steel. And then, we will have to find a way of reestablishing a whole chain of supply for when our stocks run out.”

“By then we’d already be goddess-damn rich,” I dismissed evasively. “Ponies will be begging to work for us.”

“Hopefully. From a strategic point of view, Vanhoover would be the perfect place to establish our main supply lines,” Saio popped up a small map on my display. “Pre-war, mines of all kinds gave the place a notable economic boost. On the other hoof, the whole place is fairly isolated from the Manehattan/Fillydelphia areas, which seem to concentrate most of our potential customers.”

“I’ve never even been there,” I avowed, glancing at a potential path from Big Mountain along the Crystal Range. “Honestly, I almost forgot any pony actually lived there. Down South, the Hoof drains every pony in its grasp. The Splendid Valley is one of the most dangerous places in the Wastelands. It’s empty, save for Hellhounds and the goons from the Unity. Any place North of Vanhoover is bound to be a frozen desert, too. Finally, I don’t think the locals have mutated some gills to magically live in the ocean. So, yeah, Vanhoover? No pony really cares about them. They’d probably deal with us.”

“Of course, this is all assuming they have not separated into splinter factions,” Saio continued.

“Or simply all died because the place is probably a frozen hell in winter,” I concluded darkly. “On the bright side, it’d be like scavenger porn for us. A whole region for us to salvage.”

“I will send a couple scouts in this direction,” the AI finally decided. “By the time we are done in Manehattan, I should have more data to extrapolate our course of action.”

“We still haven’t solved our transportation problem, though,” I reminded him as I exited the warehouse toward the largest elevator.

“If we are dealing with low volume goods, we could use armored cars.”

“Roads are gone,” I pointed out. “Mostly.”

“Then we shall make new trails. If we use military transports from the War, we would not need paved roads.”

“Still, we need somepony to drive them. Assuming we can find vehicles in the first place.”

“Since we will have very specific need for them, I believe we should stick to repurposing army trucks to be remote-controlled. Maybe we could even use APCs – I doubt anypony would be reckless enough to attack an entire armored convoy for a few crates of bottlecaps.”

“APCs?” I repeated. “As in, tanks?”

“As in Armored Personal Carrier. They would be impervious to all but anti-tank ordinance, be powerful enough to use trails in poor conditions, yet still have enough room to be useful. This is what I wanted to show you here in the first place, by the way.”

‘Here’ was a workshop located a couple levels under the AMDR. Given its proximity to the vehicle entrance in the back of the base, I suspected it used to be some kind of mechanic shop.

A robot passed by, a large steel plate in its tow. I followed it all the way to the center of all activity.

There, suspended a couple meters from the ground, a large, three-by-eight meters chassis was being worked on by tireless drones. I couldn’t make the most of it; most of the plating had been removed, leaving the frame accessible. Taking most of the place in the front, a shiny-looking motor had been welded, and now the transmission was being assembled along the main axel.

“Neat!” I commented, jogging toward the impressive vehicle. “I didn’t know the DERTA built these kinds of things.”

“We did not,” SaioS corrected. “The Ministry of Wartime Technology wanted to see if they could replace the old Spark motors on their vehicles with fusion reactors to push their autonomy farther. We simply retrofitted this model as a proof of concept.”

“Why is it in such a poor state then?” I frowned at the large pile of parts near me.

“I did not like the design,” SaioS explained. “Windows are structural weaknesses. A large amount of volume was used up by controls and poor space optimization. In the end, I decided redoing it from the frame would have been the easier way to go.”

“Wait, you removed the controls?” I gapped. “But... How... Why... How are we supposed to drive it now!?”

“Remote control.”

“Nu-hu, that’s a big no from me,” I frowned. “What happens when – and not if – you lose the signal?”

“Have you ever driven an APC, Spring?” SaioS asked out of the blue.

“Of course not,” I shook my head. “How is that relevant?”

“If you were to be in an out-of-range automated vehicle, what would you trust most: the ability of the vehicle to brake on its own, or your own skills at moving around a twenty-ton chunk of steel with no visibility whatsoever?”

I munched my lips nervously. He did have a point, but still...

“How big is it inside, anyway?” I finally asked. “With your modifications.”

“Six fully geared ponies, plus six cubic meters of cargo,” schematics popped up on my display. CGI models blended with the physical frame. *“More if we use external pods. Less if I add an environmental unit to make it radiation-ready.”*

“How much stuff is six cubic meters?” I tried to imagine the volume but failed spectacularly.

“It depends. Assuming we are transporting assault rifles, one meter long, twenty centimeters tall, ten centimeters wide, each would have a volume of eighty liters. In six cubic meters, we could comfortably fit seventy of them, for a total weight of two hundred and eighty kilograms plus the crates themselves.”

“And we could still cram six ponies alongside those? Okay, I’m sold,” I laughed heartily. A brand new assault rifle could cost up to a thousand caps. Even with only one of those APCs, we’d run out of clients long before we’d run out of place.

“In fact, space is probably never going to be an issue, unless we want to turn them into buses,” Saio continued. *“Weight will be the limiting factor. The twin electric engines are sturdy but I had to replace some aluminum pieces with heavier steel parts. Furthermore, even though we removed the problem of the Spark batteries entirely, the fusion reactor is quite heavy. Once you add the armored hull and the frame, we may not move more than five to six tons at once. Passengers included.”*

“It’ll do, especially if the other option is to carry it on our backs,” I waved dismissively. “What about speed? Does it crawl, or does it run?”

“As of this design, its maximum speed is yet to be determined. If I had to give an estimation, with a full charge in the countryside, it should cruise at a solid fifty kilometers per hour. Much more on a decent road.”

“Excellent,” I clapped my hooves in anticipation. “Call me lazy if you want, but I think I’m going to use it as a taxi from now on.”

“Granted – but I first need to complete it,” Saio closed the various windows on my overlay. The horde of robots returned to work. *“You will have to go back to Manehattan without it. Assembly will not be completed for four or five days if I work around the clock and then I need to submit it to an array of tests.”*

“Too bad. That would have been a devastating argument in our negotiations with Chrystal,” I glanced at the large .50 cal’ turret in a corner. “Just imagine the scene: ‘oh, that huge, bullet proof monster of death? Pwah, it’s nothing. I use it as a taxi. Wait until you see what I got back home.’”

“Indeed. Equines of the fairer sex often have a tender spot for suitors with remarkable rides.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” I let my eyes drop in a half-lidded state.

“T’was but a jape, Spring,” Saio sighed. *“Playing on the common stereotype of the venal mare and the arrogant aristocrat who... You know what, forget it. I would rather not attract too much attention at once anyway.”*

“Still, now that I think of it I should bring some samples with me back to Manehattan,” I ignored the AI’s ramble. “The suit will not fail to impress Chrystal, that much is certain, but we need something more disposable.”

“I shall be gathering a selection of weapons in your room at once,” Saio agreed. *“What do you think*

of the combat shotgun you used against the ghouls the other day?"

I winced at the memory of throwing it against a half-decayed face. "Maybe not *this* shotgun in particular, but yeah, if you have the same model in pristine condition, we should get her attention."

"Everything is in order, then," Saios concluded. *"When do you wish to leave?"*

"Tomorrow at dawn," I checked the little clock in the corner of my vision. "I should arrive in Manehattan the day after in the late afternoon. I'll meet Chrystal then; I should be back in four days."

"The negotiations may take more time," Saios pointed out. *"She will want to come with us. She will probably ask a few days of us to prepare her own trip."*

"Okay, so let's say one week," I counted mentally. "Do you think the APC will be ready by then?"

"Perhaps. It would be its maiden voyage."

As I trotted up the stairs toward my quarters, Meridian popped up from a side door and gently tipped his hat in greeting.

"We're leaving tomorrow," I announced him. "Everything is set up for the days to come. I just got the feeling I'm missing something, though."

"What about Evey?" the Earth pony helpfully supplied. "We haven't let her out of her cell yet."

"Luna's tits, I forgot about the alicorn in our closet," I facehooved. "We can't let her stay confined forever."

"I hoped to let her out tomorrow," Saios suggested. *"Any longer could be seen as oppressive from her side. I wish to avoid an incident over a misunderstanding."*

"But I wouldn't be there to watch over her," I frowned. "No offence, but I'm pretty much sure I'm the only one here who could face her in a fight and hope to survive."

I shot a side glance at Meridian, who coughed uneasily, covering his pistol with his trenchcoat. I still hadn't figured out how one could be so terrible at shooting.

"On the contrary, I have reached the conclusion it would be safer if I were the only one to interact with her," Saios countered. *"Since she cannot read my thoughts or intentions, she also cannot guess the layout of the place. Should she extract that information from your mind, however, we could lose this precious edge."*

"Oh, I get it," I grinned. "You aren't freeing her – you are enlarging her cell."

"Indeed. While she managed to teleport in here using your memories, now as long as you are away she will be trapped. Note this is only a worst case scenario," the AI continued as I entered my room and sat down on the couch. *"I am very inclined to trust her. She has been faithful to her word to a fault. She had not even tried to probe the perimeter of her isolation room. She is content to casually chat with me, sharing whatever information she can, even when I push her outside the boundaries of what is usually considered as socially acceptable."*

"I thought her cell wasn't warded?" I asked, puzzled. "Did you change your mind while I had my back turned?"

"No. In retrospect, this mistake was for the better. Had I tried to ward the place, I would have

probably failed to contain her anyway. I did set up a few arcanometers in the laboratory – and she is well above a standard unicorn when it comes to raw power. Unsurprisingly, however, her knowledge of arcane sciences seems to be nonexistent. Lambda-13 used to be a Pegasus, after all. It would take her decades of tutoring to harness her power and become a proper mage – and even then, she probably would not reach the ankle of somepony like Twilight Sparkle.”

“Yet she teleported us right from Stable 87. And back there she used shields to protect us from shrapnel.”

“I have yet to understand how she managed such a feat,” Saios avowed. “The more I think about it, the less I believe it has anything to do with standard teleportation. The very fact she did not even know where you were headed proves that. A frightening possibility would be that she somehow managed to warp the local reality around her, confronted it to the one in your memories, and merged it in what looked like a teleport.”

“What do you mean, ‘warp the local reality’?” my eyes opened like saucers. “You’re starting to scare me.”

“Sorry. I forgot you did not have classes in standard magic. It sounds impressive, but not for the reason you think,” Saios continued. “What we call reality warping is nothing but the way one would naturally use their magic. When Pegasi kick clouds out of the sky – a gesture you may have not seen very often given the context – they use their own natural magic to warp the reality around their hoof. It does not go through the mist, but instead interact with it as a solid surface. Earth ponies do the same, albeit with more subtlety, when they are growing trees for example. Basic telekinesis, the kind you master in your foalhood if you are a unicorn, works the same way.

However, the art of spellcasting developed way beyond those crude, instinctive methods. To cast a non-elementary spell, you need to first conjure it on a support, be it your mind or a rune, and then focus your power through it. The more skilled the user, the less they will need to prepare their spells. To some talented unicorns like Twilight Sparkle, teleportation and other high-end tricks required nothing more than a stray thought, yet in the end they still went through all the process of conjuration and casting. They had decades of practice, so it came like a reflex.

What Evey probably did is both simpler and more complex: she went right by the conjuration phase and simply wished you away, as one would wish a candle to levitate.

Now there is a very simple reason nopony does that and why every young unicorn is conditioned into carefully thinking their spells before casting them. The more complex a spell, the more unstable it can get. Obviously, when it comes down to moving a dozen objects around in the air, at worse the caster will progressively lose their focus and drop everything. Now envision a teleport spell, thousands of times more complicated. Starswirl the Bearded spent decades perfecting the version we used in the modern world. There are dozens – hundreds – of failsafes embedded in its matrix. The kind of important details you may not want to overlook, such as your physical integrity, your raw ability to consume so much energy in such a short time, or more simply the existence of the place you are aiming for. Because yes, it may seem obvious in hindsight, but one may try by accident to teleport to a place that does not exist.”

I gulped uneasily as I started to understand. “Evey did not do any of that.”

“Indeed. Statistically speaking, you were as good as dead,” Saios grimly announced. “She learned to cast her spells on her own, following her instincts. I doubt she even realizes how dangerous it is. It points out toward another interesting fact about her, however: she has an extremely distorted

perception of reality.”

At those words, Meridian perked his ears up. I rolled my eyes. Of course the half-loony Earth pony would be glad to learn somepony else in here did not really have their hooves on the ground.

I motioned Saio to carry on.

“I do not want to draw hasty conclusions. I base this hypothesis solely on what little data I have gathered from her. Understand that I am not saying that she is mentally instable – if anything, by pre-War standards she is saner than any of us. She simply does not make much of a difference with what we would call the real world and what we would call a dream state.”

“So she’s always half-asleep,” I lifted an eyebrow. “What’s the big deal?”

“It goes deeper than that,” he continued. *“I reckon you are imagining your world in layers. The real world, right to the bottom, then what you can see and that you know may be slightly distorted, then what you can conjure with your imagination, and then what you dream and cannot control, am I correct?”*

“I guess,” I shrugged unhelpfully. “Honestly, I am not one for psychology. For me, there’s the real world, right there –” I knocked the wall behind me for emphasis, “– and then there’s the rest, which doesn’t exist.”

“I see.” Saio paused a second, searching for his words. *“You do admit each pony has their own perception of reality, right?”*

“Uh, yeah?” I trailed, unsure. “I mean, we don’t see and feel the same things, not exactly, so let’s roll with that.”

“Now imagine you have multiple ways to perceive reality. You can see, you can touch, you can hear,” Saio continued. *“Everything blends into what you call your perception of reality. Now imagine you do not segregate those ways between what comes from your dreams, and what comes from the physical world.”*

“... okay, now I’m pretty much sure that’s just a fancy way to repeat what I said earlier,” I interrupted him, frowning. “She doesn’t know if she’s dreaming.”

“No, she does not care,” Saio clarified. *“See, for you, the reality is everything right. The dream state is nothing but lies, chimeras. You push it back as nonexistent. For Evey, both are equally important. Whether she is awake or dreaming, it makes no fundamental difference to her.”*

“I still don’t see where you’re heading.”

“Now I am entering the realm of wild speculations,” the AI cautiously continued. *“From her reaction to you when you two met, I suspect her perception of reality also extend toward others – as in, seeing through your eyes just like they were hers.”*

“So wait, you are telling me I am influencing the way she sees the world just by being near her?” I half-choked in surprise. “Dude, that’s far-fetched.”

“It would explain how she teleported in here in the first place. Your reality became her own, the place which did not exist in her mind became tangible, she fuelled her raw power into the simple wish of being there, and voila. From her perspective, all she did was a slight sidestep. We clearly lack a dimension to appreciate the scope of what she did. It does not make her all-powerful, far from

it: she just thought so outside the box it may as well been a hypercube."

"All right, so you may or may not know how she did it, and you may or may not know if she is a lunatic," I sighed, rubbing my temple with a hoof. My poor brain could only take so much of insane lectures before giving up. "Now what do we make of it?"

"She is not a lunatic." Saios' tone was categorical. *"In fact, her strong sense of empathy will in all likelihood prevent her from ever harming you, since she sees you as an extension of herself."*

"You don't know that," I noted. "I saw her kill other alicorns with my own eyes."

"Alicorns, as in her magical brethren who refused her into their mind and left her to rot inside a three-by-three cell for two centuries?" Saios deadpanned. *"Those who were actively trying to kill you, the one pony who saved her from her solitude? I think even the meekest Pegasus in the MoP would have done the same, and then some."*

"Put it that way..." I conceded. "So, you are letting her out as soon as I am gone tomorrow?"

"If you do not have any further objections, yes," Saios confirmed. *"But in all honesty, she does not even seem eager to go anywhere else. Why would she? I keep her company and she is comfortable. The novelty has yet to wear off for her."*

(** **)

I have to admit, while I had grown attached to my good old leather armor, I had never felt so free of my movements now that I travelled with my brand new suit.

It adapted to my movements in such a way it sometimes became uncanny – as if my body suddenly remembered I was not jogging naked without any bags attached. For sure, I had also restrained my barding to the minimum, but still. I felt like I was at the top of my shape.

Maybe my mood had something to do with it, too. The air was crisp and clean in the Plains ; there was no souls around for miles but me and Meridian. For the first time in years, I had a clear defined long term objective, and it did not involve a violent vengeance against a band of raiders. I had made friends – Meridian and Saios qualified without a doubt, and Evey was bound to follow eventually – which I believed in.

Of course they had their own agendas, yet I had the feeling I had little to worry about.

Saios wanted power like anypony else. So did I, and as civilized beings we had agreed our friendship would be the best thing in the world for the both of us.

Evey desperately wished for company. While I had left before Saios announced my departure to her, he patched her through the radio to her insistence. She gave me her blessing (which, to my great amazement, did not surprise me the slightest) and regretted not being able to accompany me in my endeavors. She insisted that she understood we still were off a fresh start in a new, dangerous world, and that trust would be slow to earn – really, she went out of her way to make us understand she understood what we feared in her. Once again, disturbingly honest and pleasing.

As for Meridian... Often, I found myself observing the brown Earth pony from the corner of my eyes. He had never really been somepony for random chatter, of course, but my almost permanent

conversations with Saios during the last few days had not failed to underline how he always stayed in the background. While I knew he trusted Saios as much as I did, he seemed to care very little for the AI's blabber. They had quite opposite personalities after all: while one seemed to see the silver lining behind every pony, or just about, the other had a cold, pragmatic mind. It has little to do with Saios being a machine however: had he still been a pony of flesh, I suspected their relationship would have been no different.

Meridian would go great along Evey, though. No, scratch that: Evey would go great along everypony. She talked about Luna-know-what with Saios all night long, something about different levels of existence and metaphysics. She would love chatting with Meridian about how to make the world a better place, full of smile and rainbows. As for me, hell, she adopted me as new mind-buddy. Maybe she'll even make a good pony out of me, who knew?

Miles ran by under our hooves. Eventually, the sun set before us. A half-destroyed wall provided some cover for a fire. Every once in a while, a few labels popped up on my display, before fading into oblivion.

"I am doing a couple remote tests on the suit," Saios had explained. *"You had never worn it for so long before. Your vitals are encouraging, however: I advise you keep it for the night."*

"A filly needs her privacy, Saios," I had retorted. "Don't take it wrong, but I'm kind of uncomfortable with you always being so... close."

"Did I fail to mention you could disable the link from your side?" Saios chuckled mischievously. *"You do not have to ask me to do that. It would have been quite inconvenient."*

So I learned how I could isolate my suit – muting the microphones, the cameras, the sensors. Saios advised against disconnecting the vital monitors without a preemptive warning. From what I understood, it made me look to him like I just had a heart attack for no visible reason. He also warned me he would not let me completely cut all communications: an emergency link would have to stay established at all time, in case something went really wrong and I couldn't operate the interface myself. He promised me this override mode would be displayed quite obviously on my screen. I did not push the matter any farther: even if he lied about it, there was little I could do anyway but remove the suit itself.

Finally, there we were, Meridian and I, sitting around a tiny campfire. I poked the blaze with a charred stick, spraying burning embers around me in the night.

"So, how are you feeling?" I finally broke the ice. "I cut Saios off. It's just the two of us."

"I'm doing great, thank you," he answered, a bit perplexed. "You know, my silence has little to do with him always hearing our conversations. I am really *that* taciturn."

"I figured so," I answered with a wry smile. "But, still. For once, I am in a mood to talk about pretty much anything, so let's talk! Tell me, what do you think of our new business?"

"Ours?" Meridian chuckled softly. "I thought I made it clear when we started traveling together I cared little for riches. I didn't come this far for fame or fortune."

"For sure," I looked at the cloudy sky in mock disbelief. "Okay then, let's pretend I can understand you are not moved the slightest by a stack of caps bigger than yourself. I know you followed me because you love to travel far and wide and that you like my company for reasons totally lost on me. Yet, there is to be more about what you want, right? When all is said and done, when I settle comfortably for good in my industrial complex in Big Mountain – because this is clearly the way it is headed – what

will you do?"

"I'll keep following my own way, I reckon," Meridian shuffled uneasily on his haunches. "After all, my talent is all about getting directions. Who knows? Maybe by then I would have found another injured filly who had put herself in a pickle."

As if on cue, my back started to itch me. Silently, I hoped the dust had settled in Tenpony while I was away.

"So you'll go on, doing your white knight thingy," I resumed cheekily. "Saving poor mares from the throes of the Wastelands. How candid."

"Do you even know what that word means?" he humored me and sent my sarcasm right back to me.

"I may have read it in a book, decades ago," I laughed. Truth to be told, I couldn't even remember the last time I had read anything but manuals. "Honestly, though, you picked the right mare to protect. Why, you don't even have to use your mighty Python, her foes die on their own!"

"You are never going to let me live this down, now will you?" Meridian sighed. "I admit, I am such a terrible shooter you would be safer in front of me than at my back. Still, I dare hope I protect ponies through other means, to make this world a better place. If just slightly."

"As in, making me behave?" I lifted an eyebrow, surprised. It was quite straightforward of him.

"As in, advising you as a friend should do," Meridian Fraying clarified. "Do you remember young Feather, in Junction R-7?"

"The first and only free job in all my career," I snorted. "How could I forget? That Pipbuck had to be worth a real fortune."

"Fortune you are not going to need," he pointed out. "She, on the other hoof, now has a token that there are good ponies out there. Let's not be shy, you probably saved her life. Feather may not turn into a vigilante or a hero, but she would have died for sure had you left her face her problems on her own."

"Perhaps." I munched my lips, thinking of my own foalhood. Had I not taken my rifle and tracked down those raiders, where would I be right now? "Or maybe she would have turned out like me."

"I'm going to bed," I finally announced as silence trailed by. "We have big day ahead of us tomorrow."

(** **)

As we walked down the ruined streets of downtown Manehattan, my mood progressively deteriorated into its usual, ever-alert state. Saio's silence betrayed the shock of his first contact with what used to be one of the richest cities in the world. Nothing but ashes remained. He was starting to understand the full scope of the Apocalypse.

In the distance, Tenpony Tower called out to ponies like a beacon under the grey skies. Out of prudence, I went out of my way to circle around it. I doubted they would see in me the frayed stable dweller that ran down their security a few weeks before, but I did not want to take any chances.

I pondered the idea of stopping at my shack, then dismissed it as a needless detour. I had nothing there to get. We headed straight to Friendship City.

I reckon this is when I realized my standing in the Wastelands had changed, somehow. As I walked through the city's gates, all the guards tensed up slightly, giving me the side gaze they usually reserved for the kind of dangerous individuals you may not want to look straight in the eyes.

They *feared* me, and ignored Meridian altogether.

"Those security officers seemed quite on edge," Saios noted as I passed by the checkpoint in a breeze. *"You really do have a reputation, don't you?"*

"Not really," I mumbled, a tad worried. "I am known as a bounty hunter, but not like that. It looked like they feared I would attack them or something."

"It may have something to do with the suit," the AI continued. A small-scale rotating CGI view of it popped on in my display. *"It does look intimidating, compared to the rags most ponies seem to be wearing nowadays. Their own combat armor had seen better days, while you just rolled in with a cutting edge experimental unit."*

"Hopefully," I looked around to get my bearings. Meridian mumbled something about having some errands to do, and left quietly. "I should have told you I had some questionable activities in the area recently. I may have made a couple enemies in the process."

"Did you murder somepony important?"

"Well, see the charred bloc over there?" I pointed toward the late Crowneigh's offices. "It didn't use to be so crispy, and neither did its owner."

"Understood," Saios nodded grimly. *"Did you use arson to cover your tracks?"*

"Yeap." I moved forward in the crowd, barely glancing at the crumbling stands I passed by. "He was the one who put me on the tracks to the DERTA. Honestly, you should be glad I was the one to get to the place first."

"His misfortune is our blessing, then. What is this abominable creature with two heads?"

"That's a Brahmin," I barely glanced at the two-headed cow. "Welcome to the Wastelands. That's one of the least ugly creatures you are about to meet."

"And is that a civilized ghoul?" Saios' disbelief was obvious as he highlighted a passerby on my display. *"Goodness. It looks like a pack of rotten flesh stuck up crumbling bones."*

"That was a 'she', buddy," I chuckled. "So, how do you like 'em Wastelands mares?"

"Pass," Saios sounded put out. *"If this is what the world came to be, I am glad to be an asexual artificial intelligence."*

"Eh, wait until you see Chrystal," I smirked as I arrived in front of her shop. "Then you'll regret not having balls anymore."

(** **)

“Spring!” the white unicorn greeted me from behind her counter with a large smile. “What a pleasant surprise!”

For a split second, her gaze slid to my newfound suit. A glitter of Luna-know-what sparkled in her eyes. Her left ear perked up almost insensitively; when her eyes came back to my face an instant later, I knew something *important* had just happened right then in her mind.

All of sudden, my convictions melted away. I had the terrifying feeling my fate had just been written without my approval.

“I see you have been busy,” Chrystal smiled coyly, circling slightly around me as if she was gauging me. “I don’t remember selling you this magnificent piece of gear. Tell me, have you been unfaithful?”

“No!” I backed up a bit in surprise. “I mean, no, that’s not from your shop. It is unique. A gift from a friend.”

“Do not mention my existence for now,” SaioS warned hastily. *“Nor the DERTA, for that matter.”*

“Well, it looks like you made powerful friends,” Chrystal chuckled in a most charming way. “But I reckon you did not come to my humble shop to talk about your acquaintances, now did you? We both know some ponies like their... privacy.”

“I have an offer for you,” I stammered, not nearly as assured as I hoped. “One you might want to hear out.”

“Business? Well, my,” Chrystal elegantly circled back behind her desk, her mane flowing flawlessly in her wake. “It seems you have come a long way, my dear.”

“Very well then,” she leaned over her desk. “I am all yours.”

“Celestia damns me, this mare is not of this world,” SaioS unhelpfully commented as the temperature of the room jumped ten degrees.

“Take a look at this,” I tried to get a hold on my nerves and grabbed the sample from my bags. “Tell me what you think of it.”

The shotgun left the counter in her light green telekinetic field. After a slight glance toward me, she slowly racked it open, turned it around, and finally took a look through the chamber. She did not let a single millimeter goes unexamined. I shifted uneasily on my hooves as she proceeded.

“It had been well preserved,” she finally concluded. “A very expensive piece of equipment I would be proud to sell. Still, I fail to see your point.”

“Half of its parts did not exist a couple days ago,” I announced smugly. “It is not *just* a well-preserved rifle.”

“I understand,” Chrystal nodded. To my great dismay, she seemed quite unfazed. “You are now into gun manufacturing and you need somepony with business experience.”

“It goes further than just a few guns,” I tipped the side of the gun with a hoof. “We are talking about the opportunity of a century.”

Chrystal stared at me, and then, out of the blue, burst out into wild laughter. It was both the most

marvelous and the most embarrassing thing I had ever seen in my life.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she wiped a few stray tears. “It’s just... You are terrible at this, you know?”

“Well, sorry if you are not interested,” I backed up, hugging the shotgun in reflex. “You’re the one missing out an opportunity!”

“Come on, Spring, let’s face it: you couldn’t trade to save your life,” Chrystal shushed me. “I am doing you a favor. Let us drop the act: I will not pretend I am not interested, and you will not try to make me believe me you can just waltz outside and find somepony else to do business with. It’ll be less embarrassing for you, darling.”

“I could go to Junction R-7 to deal with Goldfeathers,” I warned, taking another step back.

“Please. Now that you murdered Van Graff, most ponies would be too skittish to be associated with you,” Chrystal closed the door in my back. “After all, who knows? Maybe this is how you treat your partners.”

My heart suddenly stopped in my chest. Right in front of me, Chrystal starred at me like spider to its webbed quarry.

“How do you know that?” I blanched. On the side of my display, Saios started assessing the threat posed by the various turrets in the room.

“Call it a hunch,” she shrugged dismissively. “Relax. Truth to be told, I had half a mind sending you a ‘thank you’ card once I realized you probably had something to do with his... tragic disappearance.”

I gaped at her without understanding. She sighed.

“Now that the Silver Rush is out of business, I have less concurrence to worry about,” she explained. “Furthermore, while charming, Van Graff was not really to my liking personality wise. I have better things to do than ratting you out, mind you. Still, as a friend, I wished to warn you: all those who connected the dots will be very wary of you.”

“*Is she referring to the DERTA?*” Saios asked in the earpiece. Discreetly, I dismissed the idea with a shook of my head. Van Graff’s murder had probably been a major event in the area. To the eyes of the beholder, that alone would be enough to make me flinch. Little did Chrystal know that she couldn’t see the wood for the trees.

“So you are willing to deal with us,” I concluded, immediately regretting using the plural form.

“I am willing to *consider* the option,” she flashed a fanged smile. “Of course, I have first to assert whether your offer is viable, or just some hot wind.”

“I haven’t told you anything yet,” I pointed out.

“Oh, you said many things,” Chrystal batted her eyes. “You have met somepony. An outsider, with a great technical knowledge and an important industrial potential. They wish to enter the market as a cannonball, mass producing weapons of a quality level not achieved since the Fall, yet they are not keen of the idea of being assimilated to an existing faction. Since you are their spokesmare, I assume they have no other pre-existing connection to the Wastelands and that your team is quite limited in term of personnel. Therefore, you need a businessmare with a strong back, willing to crash the world around her, to promote and sell your goods. Otherwise, you are stuck in neutral. Did I sum the situation correctly?”

“Holy damn.”

“Perhaps,” I somehow managed to keep my cool. “If such was the case, would you be interested?”

“It would depend on many factors,” Chrystal rubbed her chin seductively. “I would have to assess the situation on the field. It would require me to close my shop for a time. Business has been good lately. It may represent a significant loss of income.”

I swallowed uneasily. I did not like the direction this conversation was going a single *bit*.

“What do you want?” I asked. “For a week of your time.”

“Twenty-five grand,” she stabbed me where it hurt. “Twelve up front.”

“What?” I stammered, horrified. “No way!”

“I am reassigning bottlecap counterfeiting to the ‘high priority’ list,” Saios announced cynically.

“Please, darling, you know I am worth every cap of it,” Chrystal basked in my despair. “Think about it. A full week with me. Some ponies would have given a leg for that kind of opportunity.”

Okay, now she had even managed to turn me on somehow. That mare was Discord in disguise!

“This is a rip-off, and you know it,” I accused uneasily. Still, from the look in her eyes, she already knew I was going to pay.

“Since you are a friend, I may take a thousand and half caps from the total, if you are willing to part with your shotgun,” she stood up, softly tearing the precious weapon from my grasp. I let it go without a sound.

Gritting my teeth, I turned around and walked out of the shop.

“Thanks you very much!” the abominable mare waved me as I went down the street. “I am looking forward to your return!”

Fulminating, I walked all the way to Friendship City’s before stopping dead in my tracks.

“I forgot to buy a new pistol,” I facehooved, dejected. “Luna help me, she is going to rob me of my very skin...”

(** **)

Forty minutes later, Meridian had rejoined me outside Friendship City. From his amused gaze, I reckoned he already knew how the meeting went.

“Let me guess: she scammed you and left you without a single cap to spare,” he chuckled while lighting a cigarette. I reckoned he had probably bought a whole stock of them while I otherwise busy being robbed. “Am I right?”

“She asked for twelve thousands caps up front,” I shook my head, hardly believing it myself. “That’s more than my entire life savings! And she asked for as much afterward! Fuck, I shouldn’t have left her

the shotgun. We'll find somepony else to deal with."

"Spring, she may not be the mare we want, but she is definitively the one we need," Saios gave his two cents. "Her analysis was spot on. The very fact she managed to scam us make her services more desirable in my eyes."

"You're crazy," I sat on a nearby bloc of concrete. My head started spinning at the idea of finding that much money in such a short notice. "She didn't even say yes. Twelve grand, just to consider accepting!"

"She will say yes. She knows it, and you should as well," he continued. "As you said, she asked for your entire life savings. Don't you find odd she didn't ask for more?"

"Don't you think that's enough already?" I spat. "Twelve motherfucking grand!"

"She could have asked for the whole sum up front. Yet, she only requested a sum we conveniently had on hoof."

"Saios, you're crazy," I rubbed my temple, suddenly very wary. "I don't have that kind of money. If I used up all the cash I have saved, maybe we could scrounge up three thousands caps. With your help, I could do a couple high-risk contracts and scrap up another grand or two. Even still, we wouldn't be anywhere close to what she is asking!"

"We could use a temporary solution," Saios assured. "I have already started manufacturing bottlecaps. I believe we could..."

"...pay her with counterfeit money?" I cut him sharply. "Have you fucking lost your mind? I'm not against easy money, but don't you think a motherfucking stack of motherfucking brand new caps is going to attract a mother-fucking-BUCKING amount of attention?!"

"Hey, calm down," Meridian looked around him warily. "We ain't really in the middle of nowhere here."

Fulminating, I kicked out a pellet. I followed it with my eyes as it ricocheted down the street, skipped over a radioactive puddle and flew into the foggy horizon.

My companions wisely decided to leave me to my anger.

Then, like a burning ember in my chest, realization dawned on me as I face the destroyed Manehattan skyline. So she wanted to play hard to get, uh? Well then she'll know why I'm one of the best bounty hunters this side of Canterlot.

"I know where to find money to spare, and then some," I finally broke the silence, my gaze still riveted on the distant buildings. "We are going back to Tenpony."

(** **)

Main quest updated: New World Order
Objectives:

[X]	Restore the Big Mountain compound	(Primary)
[]	Find a partnership	(Primary)

[X]	Talk with Chrystal in Friendship City	(Secondary)
[]	Talk with Van Graff in Tenpony Tower	(Failed)
[]	Talk with Goldfeather in Junction R-7	(Secondary)
[]	Talk with Derpy in New Appleloosa	(Secondary)
[]	Talk with Bottlecaps in Megamart	(Secondary)
[]	Talk with Blood Ring in Fillydelphia	(Secondary)

Side quest completed: *Burning Papers*

Objectives:

[X]	Find out what happened at Big Mountain	(Primary)
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Side quest added: *Black Widow*

Objectives:

[]	Learn more about Chrystal	(Primary)
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Side quest updated: *Ira Lunae*

Objectives:

[X]	Make up your mind about the alicorn in your custody	(Primary)
[]	Accept Evey's friendship and what it entails	(Optional)

Level up!

New perk:

Impartial Mediation: you are a freelancer, and people like that. As long as you remain unaffiliated from any major faction, you gain a permanent bonus to speech.

"A good compromise leaves both sides unhappy."