



## **Fallout Equestria: Operation Flankorage**

### **Chapter Thirteen: Stable Wrap Up**

*"That doesn't tell me anything about who I am. I need answers. I feel like I'm looking at a complete stranger."*

I heard the door hiss open behind me and I reluctantly pulled my head out of the griffin's carcass to look at the newcomers.

A tawny buck and fluffy, blue mare with matching blue jumpsuits stood in the entrance with looks of utter horror on their faces. A much larger, red stallion in an armored version of the same outfit and a large, metal harness clamped on his head seemed more disappointed than appalled. It didn't matter.

I had more prey.

I turned around and bared my fangs as the griffin's blood dripped down my chin and pooled at my hooves. My breathing was heavy and the staccato hammering of my heart drowned out all noise. I had never felt better in my life. I was no longer the weak, fragile pony that needed living shields and trickery to survive. I was strong. I was fast. I was angry about something, but I couldn't quite put my horn on the exact reason. But most of all, I was still hungry.

The two ponies in front moved their mouths and made some indecipherable noises as I slowly circled around them. I clicked my claws against the floor in anticipation as the red one shouldered past the others, babbling something incoherent to them. Just a little further away from the group, come on, come on. Got ya!

I pounced at the crimson stallion with a snarl. My charge was met with an armored buck to the chest, distorting my barrel, throwing me across the room and slamming me into a solid steel wall.

I gasped from the oddly numbed, but still considerable pain as I pulled myself back up. I could feel one of my ribs had pierced my lung and one of my hind legs had a jagged spear of bone jutting out of it just below my knee. I magically reset my bones and hissed as I felt them slowly knit back together. A distant voice started to whisper in my ear, but sounded more like a brisk wind than actual speech. My euphoric rage was starting to fade and it was taking my new found fount of power with it.

More food; that was what I needed. More food would bring me more power. I dived for the ravaged body of the griffin, but was knocked away again by the steel stallion. Tumbling end over end, I thudded against the thick glass of the office window.

I rolled back to my hooves with much more difficulty. The world was moving faster and my body felt so much heavier.

I roared out a challenge at the buck who had dared to get between me and my feast. If he would not let me feed on the lionbird then he would take its place on the menu.

My claws left deep scratches in the steel plating under my hooves as I charged back at him, intending to chew those meddlesome legs off. I reared up and swung a claw at his shoulder and I found myself on my back. He had caught my fetlock with his own and had thrown my legs too far up for me to maintain my balance.

Rolling back to my hooves, I rained blow after blow at him, but failed to hit him even once. Every time he would deflect my claws so I had to step back to regain my balance, embed

my talons in the floor plating or over reach myself and painfully slam my face into his metal chest.

I was slowing down and he just seemed to be getting faster. It wasn't fair! I was finally strong. I readied myself for another attack. There was no way I would let some... whatever this thing was... Hunter? Yeah, Hunter felt right and oddly familiar. Gah! I couldn't get distracted. No Hunter was going to take it away from me.

"...cr," the voice came again, almost intelligible over the roar of blood in my ears. I swiveled my ears around to try and pinpoint the source of the obtrusive whispering in my head. It was very distracting.

My metal coated opponent took the opening my befuddlement left and twisted both my front legs around into unnatural angles. I collapsed in a heap, my entire upper body numb and useless.

The red began to fade from my functional eye and my head was spinning. I rolled my head up at the harnessed stallion. BARON? When did BARON get here? Everything was getting all bendy and blurred. It was like hypothermia all over again. Me and mountains clearly did not mix well. The thrill of power was fading into hazy deliriousness and I was having difficulty sorting out what was happening.

"OCHER!" Icy bellowed, causing me to wince as if he had actually been bellowing in my ear. "Snap out of it!"

"Uuugh," I groaned, shaking my head and straining to move my paralyzed limbs. "Stop yelling at me, Icy." I looked up at the harnessed stallion, seeing three of him. "Hi BARON... Why can't I move my legs?"

The red buck loomed over me. His features and clones phased in and out of existence, making him switch from the harnessed bounty hunter to a red blob. "He is crashing," the Hunter stated to the others. "I think I managed to burn him out."

Something about that sounded familiar, but for the life of me I couldn't remember where. "Bur... burned..." I struggled to make my mouth form words. "Oug? Oub? Out?" That last one sounded right. "Wabt du you men bund out? Am nut un fiber..." I trailed off as my mouth became too tired to use anymore. Black was replacing red in my real eye and the cybernetic's sputtering was getting worse and worse.

The ever shrinking tunnel of my vision managed to discern Rippertini and Keystone walking up behind BARON and looking down at me with a mix of fear and disgust. I tried to address them, but my body felt like it was made of lead and refused to follow my commands. Stupid, lazy body.

Everypony faded into blobs of color as I struggled to speak and move. Why bother? Too tired...

Everything faded to black.

<\_=====ooO Ooo=====\_>

"Seven, six, five..." a little voice called out into the darkness, "four, three, two, one. Here I come!"

I moved my little, deep purple hooves away from my eyes. I was on an iron bench in a

flagstone paved atrium. Raised beds of aromatic flowers and sweet smelling fruit laden bushes were sprinkled around the several metal seats. Tall, dark stone walls encircled the plaza with two extravagantly engraved oak doors leading out in opposite directions. The warm sun streamed down through a tall, stained glass ceiling, depicting a white unicorn head on a blue field coated in silver stars. Crickets chirped in the foliage and the bustling of busy ponies could be heard softly echoing through the yard.

I had no idea what was going on. I wasn't having a dream; it was too real, too vivid. Shetland had no place like this so there was no way I was remembering this... besides, I had never been purple before. I didn't recall touching a memory orb and if I had Icy would be strutting around, probably making fun of my clearly foalish form. Whatever was going on, I could feel a little horn on top of my head and my unicorn colt body was comfortably familiar. I felt as if I was making my own decisions, but at the same time, that those choices were predetermined and I was just playing a part.

I zipped off towards one of the doors, seeing it was slightly ajar and pushed it open with my black-purple magic field. I was wearing very comfortable clothing; they were warm and felt like they were lined with silk. Something was flowing from my shoulders, a cape of some sort.

I dashed into a long corridor of dark stone, split by a bright red carpet running down the center of the straw cushioned floor. Torches on wrought iron sconces lined the walls, between heavy, polished wood doors and tall, narrow windows, filling the cavernous hall with dancing shadows. At the far end another grand door was flanked by long banners with the same unicorn bust and stars as the window in the courtyard.

A powder blue unicorn mare was walking down the hall with a basket of potatoes in her indigo magic field. She was wearing a pale yellow, hooded robe similar to the ones that the New Ministry of Peace ponies wore, but far more rustic. "Your Grace," she said, bowing deeply as I galloped past her.

I skidded to a halt and circled back around, practically bouncing in front of the mare. "Miss Coral!" I squeaked. "Did you see Star or Viola lately?"

The purple mare nodded. "Yes, Your Grace," she replied with another bow. "Lord Star and Lady Viola passed this way, into the antechamber a few moments ago."

"HAY!" a filly's voice called down the hall. "THAT'S CHEATING!" I looked around Coral and saw a light brown filly with a long, braid of purple mane poking her head through the far door. She squeaked as soon as she saw me and dashed away.

"Thanks Miss Coral," I said to the robed unicorn as I pursued the other foal. "There is no escape from me!"

I pushed the door open with my umbral magic and bounded into the antechamber. Long tapestries of sweeping landscapes, hoof stitched portraits and intricate, magical designs hung, interspaced between the towering windows and elegant torches. Cushioned stools stood under each window, each wrapped in silky, cream cloth. The chamber ended in a smaller, but far thicker door with a crested shield hanging above it. Two unicorn stallions in chainmail barding and deep blue tabards stood at attention on either side of the heavy door. Each had a voule, a blade resembling a curved meat cleaver on a ten hoof stick, floating at the ready in their telekinetic grips. Another hall branched off to my right about half way down the hall and a violet braid vanished around the corner.

I smirked and seemed to innately know that hall lead to the throne room and that there

was no way to circle back around me. I gave chase, receiving half bows from the two guards as I passed. "I have you now my lady!" I cackled in faux mania, made all the more silly with my childish voice.

The throne room was an ornate hall. Its walls were covered in murals of elaborate landscapes that phased from rolling, white sand dunes to a boiling, green sea and finally to a meadow speckled with white flowers. A series of polished marble platforms extended out of the back wall, forming wide steps leading up to a throne of polished, dark wood resembling two rearing unicorns across the back and another two sitting sphinx like served as hoof rests. The long carpet that had run down the corridors lead directly to the base of the throne. Fake trees made of silver with blown glass leaves and small gemstone berries flanked the throne, intertwining above the raised platform.

Four more unicorn stallions in extravagant, full body concealing suits of half plate armor each swathed in a unique tabard, depicting precious gems (a heart shaped ruby, a tear shaped emerald, a diamond sun burst and lance of amethyst) stood at the foot of the throne with five-pronged military forks in their magic grips. Their faces were hidden behind armored masks modeled after the stylized, white unicorn that decorated the building.

A light blue unicorn mare was lounging across the throne's hoof rests. Her long, wavy mane bulged out from under a large gold crown and fell across her back in thick pink sheets. She had a heavy cape made from rich purple cotton and trimmed in gold silk wrapped around her like a blanket. She waved to me lazily as I entered with a little smile.

Two brightly colored, glazed pots the size of grown ponies stood on either side of the door, filled with perfumed water. A little reed was sticking out of the one to my left along with a wet, white tail floating on the top. I grinned and reached in with my dark magic field, pulling out a damp, orange, unicorn colt with the impromptu straw sticking out of his mouth. "I got you Star... where are your clothes?"

The damp colt looked up at me sheepishly and spit out the reed.

I set him down and he went behind the pot to retrieve a deep blue cape and cowl.

I turned to the mare on the throne who was chuckling softly and pointing behind her seat with her hoof.

"I guess Viola slipped around us!" I called out, crouching down and stalking towards the throne. "Come on Star! Get dressed and we will go check the kitchens!"

I passed one of the motionless guards (the diamond one) and caught my reflection on his mirrored breast plate. I was dark purple with an oiled back, black mane. I was wearing a deep red tunic tied at my waist with a leather belt and a gold buckle. A heavy, black cape was fastened to my shoulders with two sapphire clasps. There was a moving, leather pouch hanging from the belt.

Making my way up the stone steps I beamed at the powder blue mare. "Thanks mother," I whispered as I passed.

The mare nodded with a mischievous smile and curled up in her cushion.

A trap door was sitting ajar right behind the throne its self. I eased it open to reveal a dark, stone staircase leading down.

I delved into the darkness, seemingly incapable of making a magical light and fumbled around for each step. It grew notably colder with every step I took and a steady drip started to echo through the pit along with my hoof falls.

I came to the foot of the stairs and fumbled around, but only ended up wandering back to the stairs and banging my fetlock. "Ouch!" I exclaimed, holding up my sore hoof. Any attempt at being sneaky was pointless now. "That is it!" I magically opened the pouch on my hip and lifted out a ball of gray fuzz on a string. "Nibbles, find Viola."

The ball of fluff uncurled its self into a poofy rat and hopped to the floor. The rat zipped off into the dark. Guided by the string attached to the little rodent, I followed.

A scream came from elsewhere in the chamber and the room lit up. I was in a simple rectangular room with drains along the sides and a wooden door opposite the stairs. The chestnut mare was sitting in the corner and lighting the room with her horn while she fumbled to get Nibbles the rat off of her purple braid. She was wearing a light yellow dress with green trim, now badly wrinkled and stained with dirt.

"Found you!" I announced brutishly as I cantered over to her. She did not respond and continued flailing at the rodent in her mane. I let out a shrill whistle and Nibbles hopped off the girl and scampered back to me.

"You're a butt," Viola pouted as she readjusted her dress.

"That is 'You're a butt, Your Grace,'" I replied with false indignity.

The little lady stood up and flicked my horn, making it sting and wobble uncomfortably. "Queen Sterling Silver helped you didn't she?"

I ignored her question and wandered around the little room. "I've never been here before. What is it?"

"A royal escape tunnel *Your Grace*," the filly replied snidely, bumping me with her hip. "Father says it leads out into the mountains."

A glint in one of the drain grates drew my eye. "See? That's why I need help," I replied as I went over to investigate. "Your father is the royal engineer. You'd find some little hole that nopony knew about and we would never find you. It just wouldn't be fair."

She followed behind me, keeping me in the light. "Says the little prince... What are you looking at?"

I harrumphed and knelt down by the drain and probed for the shiny thing with my magic, but I couldn't get a grip in it. "There is something shiny down there," I replied as I crawled a little closer. "It could be an old coin, a gem, a rare bottle of wine or even an ancient relic!" My voice grew more and more excited as I went on.

The brown filly looked over my shoulder, but the object was still outside the range of her light. "Or it could be a piece of broken glass."

"Regardless!" I announced, leaning in further and sticking my hoof through the grate. "I must know!" I heard a series of crunches and looked down at the crumbling grout around edge of the metal bars.

The grill came loose beneath me and dropped me down into the drain. I tumbled end over end down a wet, rocky slope and splashed into a pool of freezing, slimy water.

The shock of cold water felt like a vice of needles squeezing around me and I felt like I was made of bruise. I quickly managed to get my hooves back under me and force my head back above the water.

“Are you alright Pyrite?!” Viola called down.

“Yeah,” I wheezed as I tried to crawl back up the slippery slope, but could not get any hoofing on the slick surface. “Yeah! But I’m stuck!”

“I’m going to get help!” the chestnut filly shouted back down. “Just stay there! I’ll be right back!” The light faded and died as the little lady’s hoof steps ascended the stairs. I was quickly plunged into complete darkness.

I stood there alone; up to my neck in water... wait, alone? “Nibbles?!” I called out, magically pulling on the rat’s leash. It was stuck on something so I blindly fumbled along the floating line. “Nibbles?! Where are you?!”

My hoof brushed against matted fur. I floated the little thing up to my face and I could not feel it breathing. “Nibbles? Come on, stop it.” I shook the drowned rat gently. “Please do something.”

The temperature in the room plummeted and a cold, white light flickered into existence in front of me. I looked up and saw a stack of polished granite slabs, bound in brass rings and exuding a luminescent mist, perched on top of a stone altar. Lattices of ice spread out every time the mists brushed the water’s surface. The walls were covered in slimy, green algae and practically crawling with small leach like creatures.

The stone tome seemed to call to me. I took my dead rat and slugged thorough the half frozen slush, actually feeling warmer as I got closer. A wisp of mist passed over me, coating me in a thin crust of ice that seemed to only tingle. I continued moving forward, the ice falling off me in sheets.

Reaching the pedestal, I reared up and planted my hooves on either side of the stone book. Strange runes were engraved in the cover and smaller letters seemed to shift across the ice that filled the larger ones. I touched it and was immediately flooded with some sort of power that felt like cold fire running through my veins, alternating between warming and chilling me with each beat of my heart. The moss on the walls blackened. The slug things shriveled and peeled off into the water. Little black and purple embers floated to the tip of my horn.

I took a deep breath and the tiny flame seemed to breathe with me. More by instinct than anything else, I moved the tiny flame over Nibble’s chest and pressed it in.

The dead rat took a stuttering breath and coughed up a thimble full of murky water and what looked like bone fragments. “Nibbles!” I cried in excitement at the revival of my pet. The little creature rolled back to its tiny claws and looked up at me, the umberal, black flames flickering in its eyes. It wasn’t perfect, but it was alive again. I scooped up Nibbles and nuzzled it. I had my rat back.

A flash came from behind me. I turned and saw something dark peeking out from under my tunic. I pulled the red fabric up and saw a black flame emblazoned on my flank. I got my rat back and I discovered my special talent; this creepy book was the best thing ever.

A booming voice sounded throughout the chamber. "PRINCE PYRITE?!" The stone book's glow instantly died.

I blindly fumbled back to the slope, plunging back into the bitter water. "I'm here!" I replied as a rosy light appeared through the hole left by the grate. The ruby crested guard appeared in the opening and grabbed me in his telekinetic magic.

<\_=====ooO Ooo=====\_>

Muffled voices interrupted my utterly bizarre dream. I rolled around on something that was supposed to be soft, but was failing miserably. The considerable weight of my cybernetic was missing and I could feel my uncomfortable bedding on my bare hide. I tried to open my eye, but it felt as if they were made of lead, sliding closed if I tried to force it to open more than a sliver.

I made out a blurry, gray wall made of concrete to my right. That was boring even by delirious, semiconscious standards. I rolled over; a depressingly arduous task. I was in a small room with a toilet against one wall. The far wall was made of close set, metal bars, looking out into a room with a door on each end and several desks down the middle; one of which had a pinto unicorn in a suit of security armor seated behind it. This was oddly familiar. I had been here before... I was in 114's security office! ...and in a cell, that couldn't be good. Why was I in a cell?

"What the fuck is going on here BARON?!" I heard Maple's voice bark as she stomped into the room with the harnessed stallion in tow. "You told me we had at least a month before he started to lose control!"

Losing control? What were they talking about? And why the hell were they messing around in here with the battle going on?

"I was wrong," the Hunter stallion replied slightly irritably as he set a bunch of small bottles full of multi colored liquid on one of the desks. "I assumed he was just bitten, but he must have consumed some infected blood or got some of it in an open wound."

I had been worried that getting a mouth full of the demon's blood was going to be a problem, but what did it have to do with... I didn't. No, I couldn't have. I went to the Overmare's office, set Icy to work on the door controls, Gellwin came in and the Crescent...

"Then fix him!" the security mare snapped, tapping the Hunter stallion on the chest. "You said you could."

I pushed myself up to my knees, still trying to sort out what had happened.

The red buck popped open a hole in his harness and started emptying the bottles into his robotic spine. "I said no such thing. I said I could retard the process if I had access to a proper lab for a day or so. Fortunately, the feeding frenzy didn't fry his brain and he didn't eat the colt so he isn't beyond my help." He swept the empty bottles into a trash bin under the desk. "I am sorry to say your Stable is not up to the task."

*I hadn't even taken a step when she swung the child down to the metal floor with a horrific crunch...*

My memories were coming back in flashes, intense enough to make me stagger. She had killed the foal and I was so angry.



"Fine then," Officer Beetle interjected, standing up from his chair. "You tried. Let's just put the beast down and be done with it."

*My talons hooked into her chest and I snapped at her neck, but was thrown off before I could get a good grip...*

I shook my head and stumbled over to the bars, dragging my longer claws across the floor.

The azure mare shot the other security pony a glair. "No." She turned back to BARON. "Then where do you need to be and what do you need?"

*I bit down harder and yanked my head back, ripping out the majority of her throat and leaving her gurgling and grabbing at what was left of her neck...*

I quivered, tasting the griffin's warm blood in my mouth again, causing me to quiver in a mix of disgust and delight.

"I know of two in practical range," the harnessed buck replied, shaking his head, "but they are far from safe. Either the Black Apple or the Ministry of Arcane Science hub in Canterlot should have what I need."

*Rushing back up, I buried my muzzle into her chest...*

I ate her... I really ate her. I collapsed to my knees and retched through the bars, expelling a splatter of bloody bile across the security floor. I could make out several feathers in the vomit.

Maple turned and rushed over to me. "Ocher, just breath."

I flopped against the bars and just stared at the puddle that had once been a Unity griffin. "What happened to me?" I asked raggedly, unable to rip my eyes away from the sludge.

Maple knelt down in front of me, but I noticed that she carefully stayed out of my hoof reach. "Those things that we fought in the tunnels are infectious and your condition got worse faster than we expected." She looked genuinely sympathetic.

***"You mauled and ate the slaver,"*** Icy hissed at me. ***"Then you attacked your allies while completely ignoring me!"***

I closed my eyes and shook my head. I hadn't even heard him. I looked back up at Maple and BARON, who was walking up behind her. They knew what was happening to me the whole damn time, but kept it from me, just like Keystone had. I looked away from the two, too hurt and ashamed to maintain eye contact. "Why didn't you tell me?"

The azure mare turned away from me. "You had a lot on your plate and we didn't want to cause you any unnecessary stress."

"Unnecessary stress?!" I spat back in disbelief. "I think it would be kind of important to let me know I was turning into a flesh eating monst-" I cut myself off with another round of nausea.

"It was my idea," BARON stated flatly. "There was nothing I could do about it at the time

and I figured that you would do something stupid if I told you all the details. I made a mistake.”

I turned back to Maple, spitting a blob of bloody phlegm on to the floor. “And you went along with this?”

She looked back at me. “Frankly Ocher, I think he was right.” My jaw dropped in disbelief. “I was going to tell you after we got to the city, but then one thing just lead to another. I’m your friend, but I couldn’t in good conscience put everypony here at risk for you. Can you honestly tell me you would be able to focus on the task at hoof if I had told you that you were slowly becoming a demon?”

“I-” My voice caught in my throat. ‘I’ll deal with it later’ had become my mantra since entering the wasteland, could I really fault them for doing the same?

Hells yes I could! I may have been keeping my head in the sand, but I chose to put my head there. I sighed. But she was right. I had tried to ignore the issue, but if somepony had taken me aside and brought it up I would probably have flipped out. “No I couldn’t...” I growled. “But you two are going to tell me everything **now**.”

The harnessed stallion walked closer and laid down next to Maple. “You have been infected with a mutagenic compound found in the body fluids of the ferals. A bite takes about a month to run its course, but infection rates vary with dosage and infectious medium.”

My eyes went wide. Body fluids? Oh goddesses, Scoop! What had I done to her?! I buried my face in my hooves, shaking back and forth. “No, no, no, no...” I looked back up at BARON pleadingly. “Can you stop the process if you catch it early?”

The red stallion cocked his head. “Early? Your case is anything but early.” Maple glared and elbowed him in the ribs. “Oh, early,” he continued, putting the pieces together. “No I can’t, but don’t worry about it.”

“Don’t worry about it?!” I bellowed at the heartless bastard. “I have turned my marefriend into a monster!”

The harnessed buck waved his hoof at me dismissively. “No you didn’t. If you were a biohazard I would never have let you get near her. Unless you two had a bone marrow transplant I don’t know about there is no way you could have infected her at that point.” I started salivating at the mention of creamy bone marrow, but quickly shook to clear my head, this was too important. “Your body was not producing enough of the mutagen to create a self-sustaining infection in anypony else.”

“How do you know?” I replied, still panicking. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure,” BARON responded flatly. “You just entered the infectious stage about an hour ago and fortunately it didn’t burn you out.”

I breathed a sigh of relief and looked down at my hooves. I didn’t know how BARON could know so much, but I had to believe him. I couldn’t live with myself if I inflicted this on the first pony I cared for this way. “So, I’m infectious now?” I asked morosely, the realization that I would never be able to be with my special somepony again sinking in.

Maple nodded and scotched closer. “I’m sorry Ocher, I really am.” She stuck her leg through the bars and stroked my mane, seeming almost motherly.

I let out a low, rumbling purr and pressed my cheek back against her fetlock. I needed this, contact, closeness, something. I pulled back and pinched my nose with my fetlock. What I needed and what I could have were very different things now. "You can't. I'm infectious, poison." I pushed myself into the furthest corner from my allies.

BARON put his hoof to his armored dome and shook his head. "Something about body fluids seems to escape you." He lowered his hoof back to the floor. "Unless you plan on feeding her your blood, biting her or rutting her-" Maple bristled at the concept and I couldn't blame her. "you aren't going to cause any problems. Hell, you could kiss her if you wanted."

I flustered, why would he even bring that up? "How the hell could a bite be infectious, but a kiss would not?"

"Saliva kills the virus that transmits the mutagen," the red stallion replied, as if he was giving a lecture to foals. "You have noticed how the ferals eyes are red correct? And I'm sure you felt a few pops when you attacked the griffin." I nodded dully. "That was your smaller blood vessels rupturing from high blood pressure. It turns your eyes red and makes your gums bleed. The virus can survive in the blood long enough to get into the wounds caused by a bite. Now, there are a few other things you will need to know before we let you out of there."

I scratched at the floor, leaving grooves in the metal. "You can't let me out. I'll just hurt ponies again." I dropped my head and let my shaggy mane fall over my red tipped face.

"Finally," the pinto security stallion piped up. "Somepony who is reasonable. Keep the animal in the cage."

"We are going to let you out, Ocher," the security mare stated in a tone that left no room for argument. She reeled on the unicorn buck. "And you will show some damn respect Officer Beetle! If it weren't for him I would be dead several times and you would be stuck in the Stable's dark, oily guts until the slaver finally cut you out and slapped a collar around your neck. Do I make myself clear?"

The pinto stallion bristled but stepped back and slinked over to the door. "Yes ma'am," he grumbled resentfully. I had the distinct impression that Maple's return knocked this guy off the top of the totem pole.

"Right," BARON said, digging through his bags. "You are still less dangerous than most of the sociopaths in the wastes anyway. Think of it as a bad temper you need to keep under control."

I gulped. "But I already have a bad temper..."

"Then you should have plenty of practice."

"My temper doesn't make me want to eat ponies!" I snapped back. How could he be so calm about this?

"Yes, about that," the Hunter stallion responded, his demeanor unchanged from my outburst. He threw a plastic packet full of brown strips of something. "You will have an easier time with self-control if you don't starve yourself."

How was I starving myself? I was eating two or three full meals a day. "What is it?" I asked, floating the packet and opening it. I sniffed at the strips, my enhanced nose being one of the few perks of this change. It smelled smoky, savory and had a hint of honey; rather enticing

really.

"Radigator jerky," BARON replied, laying out some miniature mechanic's tools on one of the desks. "I picked some up at the griffin hub of the sky port just in case."

I chucked the bag of dried flesh back through the bars. "I'm not eating meat!"

The jerky bag came sailing back in and struck me in the face. I sat and blinked, more from surprise than anything else. "Yes you will," the harnessed stallion ordered sternly. "You are carnivorous now, whether you like it or not. If you don't eat meat you will lose control again. Your body won't let you starve and you will go savage." He gave me a very serious look. "Every time you enter a feeding frenzy it is less and less likely that you will come back out of it and if you ever get a taste of equine flesh you will be beyond my help."

I begrudgingly picked up the griffin food again. "You seem to know an awful lot about this thing that most ponies around here think is just a myth."

BARON placed my mechanical eye on the desk and started doing... something with it; I was having a hard time following the harness' four darting, robotic tendrils. "I ought to. I helped design it."

He what?! Not only has this thing been terrorizing the region for a century, but it also created the demons that haunted the valley?! How did it plan to explain this away? Maple seemed to share my shock as she stomped over to him and yanked him away from his work. "Why would you do such a thing?" she asked critically.

"I had my reasons," he replied irritably, yanking away from the azure mare. "And are you honestly complaining? If I hadn't you would still be in this mess, only I would not be able to help you. Now are you going to let me work or not?"

The white maned mare walked around the table BARON was working on and slammed her hooves down. "Not until you tell us why you would do such a horrible thing!"

The armored buck growled as the blue earth pony's hooves knocked several of his tools off the desk. "I can't tell you. It is classified."

"Seriously?" I asked irately, stomping up to the bars. "Why the hell not?! You made it for the war right? Who could possibly care if something is classified anymore?!"

The robotic doctor groaned and brought his hoof to his face. "No, I mean I literally cannot tell you." He sounded almost sad about it. "I would tell you if I could, but I haven't managed to completely disable that security feature yet. Now please let me get back to work on your eye and eat your damned radigator."

I leered at him for a moment as I floated out one of the smoky strips of spiced meat. I wasn't sure what to make of that. On the one hoof, I couldn't see him getting anything out of us by keeping us in the dark; if anything the suspicion would make his life more difficult. On the other, two centuries to disable some security device struck as a stretch to me.

*"He has done a good deal of fucked up stuff, but so far lying to you has not been one of them,"* Icy reminded me, obviously still sore at me for unintentionally ignoring him. *"Now stop pushing your luck with the ancient robot that is helping you and take your medicine. I won't get drowned out again. Clear?"*

I glanced from my jerky to the pile of half-digested griffin on the other side of my bars and something struck me. I was such a self-obsessed shit. I knocked on my cage, causing Maple to stop trying to drill holes through BARON's head with her eyes. "Um, I need to know... Crescent?"

The guardian mare pondered for a moment. "The colt?" she asked hesitantly. I nodded, looking down at my hooves. "I'm sorry Ocher, he didn't make it."

I sighed. I had already known, but I had to have somepony else tell me for it to really sink in. I hadn't really connected with the kid before, but he was one of Moon Bell's friends and they did come in to my store nearly every day for treats, and to apologize for breaking something at least once a week. I couldn't really wrap my head around why the foal had given his life for me. What in Tartarous had I done to earn that from him? I looked up at Maple through my bangs. "I didn't..." I glanced to the pile of meat in the corner. "Did I?"

The azure mare trotted over to my cage and stuck her hooves back through, softly taking hold of my face and forcing me to meet her gaze. "You didn't do anything to him." She brushed my mane out of my face.

"What part of 'if you ever get a taste of equine flesh you will be beyond my help' did not sink in?" The red buck asked, not looking up from his work. "Now you had best eat up, the battle isn't over yet."

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I popped another strip of unctuous jerky into my mouth as BARON refitted my cybernetic eye. He had made a few modifications, changing the light, reinforcing the chassis with bits of PipBuck and replaced some of the wiring. I still looked like I had a toaster melted to my face, as I essentially did, but at least the new, yellow light went with my real eye.

Maple had scrounged another beam rifle out of the armory to replace my lost gun before heading off with BARON to check on the Stable and Frostborn wounded; as short hoofed as we were on trained fighters we were even shorter on medics. That left me with Officer Beetle, who had spent the whole time leering at me. I couldn't really blame him for it, given what I had done, but it was still damned annoying.

I swallowed my chemically treated, mutant meat and floated up the rifle. "So, what is going on with the battle so far?" I was still hurting from what had happened, but I had managed to reign myself in enough to be useful again. "How can foal sitting me be justified if this isn't done yet?"

"The worst of the fighting is done," the pinto officer answered, floating out two pistols to augment the twin shotguns on his battle saddle; he had been forced to give up his other two shotguns for some of the other defenders to use. "But the damn slavers are like infestation, crawling into every dark corner and digging in. Most of it is just mop up, two or three degenerates in a broom closet, but there are still a few areas that are giving us problems." He cocked his shotguns and flicked off the safeties of the ten millimeter pistols. "They're rallying around the remaining scrappers and alicorns in little strongholds throughout the Stable."

I nodded to the heavily armed security stallion. "Understood... Are we going to be okay?" I asked seriously. If we were both going to spend the whole time looking over our shoulders this was going to be a lot harder. "Or should we see if we can get new partners on this little hunt?"

"If you are asking whether I am going to spend this whole trip insulting you or filling you with holes, then no, we don't have a problem," he replied tersely. "I have been given a direct order to show you respect and I do what my superiors say. If you are asking whether I think you deserve that respect or if I like you then the answer is no."

I knew I was going to regret this, but curiosity got the better of me. "Why?" I asked, tilting my head.

He looked me square in the eye; his tone unwavering and matter of fact. "In my mind, you are a damaged and unstable piece of machinery. I do not doubt that you are useful, but you are still what you were bred to be, a battery and the fact that I must take orders from you is insulting."

I snorted, taken aback that his problem was not my loss of control. As offensive and bigoted as that was, I had to admire his rather twisted honesty on the subject. Telling somepony that you saw them as property while they were helping to exterminate slavers took a lot of... something. This particular something happened to be far from my favorite though. "We are going to need to have a long chat when we are done with this."

"And won't that be fun?" he replied snidely. "Now why don't you be a good magic flashlight and lead the way."

I grunted and headed off towards one of the several new mission markers that had popped up on my PipBuck.

The steel gray walls of the Stable's nearly every corridors were splashed with red-brown stains and dotted with bullet holes. Every time we passed one Beetle gave me a leer as if they were my fault. This was sure going to be fun.

Two red dots appeared on my E.F.S. display as we passed a restroom. I nodded at the room and charged my horn. The security stallion bit down on his firing bit and stepped in front of the door.

I triggered the door and unleashed my flair on the pair of raiders cowering in the back of the lavatory, under a sink. "Drop your weapons!" I bellowed, swinging up my beam rifle. "On the ground! N-!"

A chorus of gun blasts cut me off and shredded the slavers as well as their wash basin cover. The cracks made my ears ring and my neck stung as the clusters of lead passed within an inch of my throat.

I turned to see Beetle kicking a fresh set of shells out of his battle saddle. "What the hell?!" I bellowed at the trigger happy buck,

He just shrugged. "What?"

"They were going to surrender!" I barked back, baring my teeth. "And you damned near took my head off!"

The pinto rolled his eyes. "You're in one piece and they were vermin; you don't let a cockroach surrender do you?"

"But they weren't cockroaches, they..." I trailed off. They couldn't be ponies. I didn't kill ponies. "Just let them surrender next time. That way nopony can claim we didn't try."

The quad wielding stallion grumbled. "Yes sir, Commander Battery," he replied sardonically. "I will ask before I shoot them. That way the soldier ponies can shoot them later."

"Good," I responded and turned to leave. Half way down the corridor I stopped and turned back to him. "What do you mean shoot them anyway?"

"Don't be naïve," he snipped back, still trotting to the waypoint. "These fiends had an armed conflict. Do you really think they will use the food and guards to take them back to wherever your soldiers came from?" I had not thought of that... good guys always let them surrender. "No they won't. They will hold a fake trial and execute them. Hell, even if they do take them home they will be probably be killed."

*"How many times did the Lich Emperor surrender to the Sword Mares?"* Icy asked flatly.

"Forty-seven," I mumbled to myself without a pause.

*"And how many times has he escaped to sow discord again?"*

"Forty-six."

*"Exactly. The one time he didn't was the Hearts and Hooves special. My point is that you can't always afford to give second chances."*

"You know," the security unicorn interrupted, "most count from ten when they are pissed off."

I grumbled and continued down the corridor to the waypoint. They both had valid points, but I was not about to kill yielding enemies; it just didn't sit right with me.

We were nearing the Unity group we had been tasked to deal with. A wide window frame dominated a wall under a sign reading 'salon'. Two Frostborn troopers, a lime mare and a lavender stallion, had their backs pressed against either side of the window, sitting in the glass from the shattered window.

The two soldiers nodded to the broken window and the stallion held up an empty grenade belt. I motioned for Beetle to stay put and crawled up to take a peek.

The salon's floor was covered in checkered vinyl tiles instead of the cheap carpet and steel grating of the rest of the Stable. A half dozen barber chairs lined one mirror studded wall. Shelves of mane care tools and two century old products ran along the other side of the room. Posters of ponies wearing extravagant mane styles were plastered between the mirrors, each advertising a different kind of shampoo or styling gel. A sales counter had been flipped over into a makeshift barricade.

An armored griffin and an injured scrapper were directing a pair of battered slavers to take up defensive positions around the room. A second scrapper and a half dozen other raiders were tossed in crumpled heaps at the back of the room.

I slipped back to Beetle and waved the two soldiers over. "Look," I whispered, "they are done and I would be willing to bet that they know it. I am going to go in and tell them to lay down their weapons."

"What if it doesn't work?" the security stallion asked snidely.

"Then I get shot," I replied. "You three get to point, laugh and fill the room with bullets."

He perked up and smirked. "I like this plan."

"I thought you would," I deadpanned. Shaking my head I turned to the soldier ponies. "This okay with you two?"

The lavender grenadier shrugged. "No need for all of us to get shot at. Be our guest." Well, that sure was a rousing vote of confidence.

I crawled under the window and floated up my gun sideways. "I just want to talk!" I called out to the slavers.

There was a long pause. "Throw your piece away and come over!" One of the Unity slavers barked back. "If we see that horn glow we will end you!"

I did as I was instructed and crawled into the room. Almost immediately I was swept off my hooves by a mass of steel and white feathers. "Lord Red Eye!" Serrish, adolescent griffin from the tram station, cried out. Even though I couldn't see her face, I recognized her voice and smell. I was honestly relieved that she seemed uninjured. "What happened to you?!"

"Are you soft in the head, girl?!" the heavily armored shock trooper barked before I could get a word out. "That magical bastard's not Red Eye."

"No, I recognize him," she replied defensively. "This must be some sort of disguise," she looked down at me, "right?" Oh, there was no way this was not going to go badly.

I eased myself from her downy chest and back onto my own four hooves. "No, Serrish, I'm sorry." I shook my head and looked up at her remorsefully. I knew this was going to hurt her. "I'm not Red Eye."

The griffin stepped back. "You're not him?" She looked down at her talons and began to tear up. "I let you in and you are one of them... You said you liked me."

Ouch. Twist the knife why don't you? I sighed. "Look, I do like you." I wasn't lying there. She seemed like a sweet kid, barring the whole slaver guard thing. "That is why I'm trying to get you out of this in one piece. Please, stand down and I swear I will do everything I can to keep you safe." I looked over to the other Unity slavers. "The same goes for the rest of you. Stand down and I will make sure you at least get a trial."

"But, you betrayed me," the Talon whimpered, looking away. "Why should I trust you?"

The scrapper rose to his hooves. "Betrayed you?!" he shouted through what sounded like a collapsed lung. "You stupid cunt! This is your fault!" He swung down his shard rifle. "Forget this fuzzy prick, I'm going to fucking kill you myself!"

Without even thinking, I brushed past Serrish, brought up S.A.T.S. and cued up two attacks with whatever the spell decided I was equipped with at the moment. Unleashing the spell, I lurched forward and jammed my claws into the scrapper's good lung and then slammed my other bladed hoof into his exposed face.

As soon as the spell dropped I yanked my claws out and the shock trooper dropped like a stone. The smell of his blood was intoxicating, but nowhere near as all-encompassing as before



and it quickly subsided. I was breathing heavily and turned to the other two, bearing my teeth as the other three armed ponies that made up my team stormed into the room. "So, are we going to be doing this peacefully or is this going to get messier?"

The two other slavers dropped their weapons and just slumped down in defeat.

Serrish looked between me and the dead scrapper. "He tried to kill me. My own commander tried to kill me..." She looked me in the eyes morosely. "I am never going to be able to go back to the Unity am I?"

I patted her back with my tail. "Probably not."

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Beetle lead the way to the medical bay; where Milk Thistle had set up her temporary office. Serrish followed me dully while the soldiers escorted the raiders.

Four members of the Stable militia met us at the door; three pod ponies and one from the Stable proper. The guards greeted us warmly, but became hesitant when they spied our Unity prisoners. Fortunately they were in no mood to argue with me and let us past.

The medical bay was a sterile white room with a dozen medical beds. Six gurneys were pressed against the walls. A bevy of flat surfaces, from catering carts to wheeled tool chests and even several tables from the cafeteria had been packed in. Every flat surface had a wounded pony on it and a hoof full of others in light blue medical smocks rushed between them. I spotted Milk Thistle through a window at the back of the room, working on somepony in what I assumed was the emergency theatre.

Thistle was clearly too busy to see me at the moment and the room's smell of so much blood and chemicals was quickly becoming uncomfortable. I asked one of the guards, a teal stallion who used to be a tailor in the sim, to let her know that I wanted to talk with her when she had a moment. With a final glance around I turned to leave.

"Where has Rocksalt set himself up?" I asked the lime soldier mare. "I need to go over what will happen here when we are done." The sooner I could get BARON to a lab to deal with my condition the safer things would be for everypony. From what I had overheard, Canterlot was sounding like the more promising option. I knew where it was and Racket may be able to help me get there (her company was called Canterlot Caravans after all). Conversely, the Hunter stallion had a very violent history with the Black Apple; whatever it was.

The Frostborn mare mumbled something into her helmet's headset and looked back to me. "The Colonel is actually waiting for you near the entrance chamber," she replied, checking her rifle's magazine. "Something about an Enclave agent."

Perfect, I needed to touch bases with Echo anyway. She had seemed certain she could explain the recording the Unity used to try and discredit me... That and she had always seemed to be oddly supportive, despite her pragmatism, and I could use that about now. I stepped back a little bit and waved my hoof down the nearest corridor. "Lead the way ma'am."

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A light flashed across the cave mouth as Bore and Sabot's Rouncey chased a trio of armored griffins through the hills.

An orange mare wearing only a massive, black officer's cap with a smiley face embroidered in the center was arguing with an armored Chevalier and a black on black, winged silhouette. The three ponies were standing around a long, spindly machine, wrapped in sheets of dull, black plastic.

I approached the group with my eclectic entourage and waited for them to have a moment.

"You really expect us to believe that pile of horse apples?!" Dawn Star shouted at the Enclave pegasus, lightly kicking the device between them. "You know exactly what this damned thing is!"

"I do," Echo replied tersely, slightly twitching her head, clearly flicking through her E.F.S. tabs. "It is a signal booster, as I said. The Unity must have hijacked it to break into this Stable's logs. Even Stable Tech cannot compete with Enclave equipment."

The noble morale mare sneered. "Right, and because your mighty, pegasus science is so advanced that this rabble," she waved her hoof at the ruined slaver camp, "managed to not only find and hack into your toy, but do it without any of you featherbrains figuring it out." The orange mare stepped closer to the dark pegasus. "Pick one. Is the Enclave incompetent? In which case, I will need to advise my father to reevaluate our treaty." The officer unicorn moved even closer until she was standing face to face with Echo. "Or were you conspiring with these slaver scum to break our rules."

The morale mare taped Echo on the chest to punctuate her last statement and in the blink of an eye one of the Enclave pony's fetlock blades was pressed to her throat. Okay, no more waiting my turn.

I rushed up to pull the two apart, but the Chevalier beat me to the buck and threw the two of them apart. "That is enough!" Rocksalt's magically amplified voice boomed. I skidded to a halt in front of the trio and plopped down on my rump. I had honestly not expected to see him in proper, horned Chevalier armor, as he was an earth pony. He turned to Dawn Star. "You back off Captain. She would not have brought it to us if her government was working against the city. Be that as it may," the armored ex-slave turned to address the still highly tense Echo. "you clearly have a bad apple in your bushel. Tell your commander to get your house in order or we will do it for you. Do I make myself clear?"

The teal maned flyer took a few deep breaths and nodded. She turned to me. "I assume you heard all that, Ocher."

I pointed to the device at my hooves. "That broke into Goldlight's logs and broadcast the fake signal."

"Close enough," Echo responded, regaining her composure. She looked over my shoulder at the dejected Serrish and the two battered raiders. "Anyway, what are these?"

"Ah yes," I replied, turning to address Rocksalt. "We took these three prisoners in the salon. I was wondering where I should leave them?" Echo tilted her head, expression unreadable through her insectoid mask.

"Here is good," the orange unicorn replied coldly. She trotted over to one of the raider prisoners. "You are accused of crimes against equinenity." The slaver seemed to visibly deflate and stared down to the floor, mouthing something. "By my authority as heiress to the Flankorage duchy and my position as an officer in the Frostborn military I judge you guilty as charged." She

floated up her massive cannon and came to the raider's head. "The sentence is execution."

I smacked the huge gun down. "No!" I snapped. I would not let them break my word, even to a monster. The morale pony seemed almost tempted to turn her weapon on me, the black pegasus tensed up and officer Beetle gave me a look that just screamed 'I told you so'. "I promised that they would at the very least get a fair trial. Maybe you can trade them back to the Unity to free some slaves or something like that."

"That would work," the yellow stallion replied, taking off his helmet and wiping some sweat off his scarred face. I saw the edge of a circular scar in the center of his forehead. Holy shit, that poor buck **was** a unicorn! He must have noticed my shock as he shot me a look that said 'don't bring it up' in no uncertain terms. "As we are leaving a garrison here, we should have the room to take a few back to the city." Dawn Star stepped back, clearly displeased with veteran Chevalier's decision.

I glanced over my shoulder at the silent and dejected griffin youth and chewed my lip. If the scrapper was any indication, the Unity would kill her or worse if they ever got hold of her again. "What if the Unity won't buy them back?" I asked, readdressing the soldier ponies. "What will happen to them then?"

Rocksalt shrugged his shoulders. "It depends on their tribunal. Best case, the New MoP gets their hooves on them and they can spend their lives as sanitation workers, though they may end up in penal squad or working in the mines."

At best this kid could look forward to spending her years in some filthy, reeking pit or killed by those she would call allies and she had me to thank for it. "Any chance I could oversee one of their sentences?" I asked hopefully. "The young griffin's perhaps?" The other raiders were already adults, they had a choice about what they did with their lives.

*"That, and you don't feel guilty about playing with their feelings,"* Icy interjected, almost seeming supportive. *"If you are going to do this at least be honest with yourself about why. Mistake guilt for kindness and you will just end up hurting her and yourself."*

"Psychoanalyzed by my mysterious brainmate," I mumbled to myself while the two Frostborn ponies talked over my request, "fun times."

*"Come off it,"* the arctic entity replied snippily. *"You know I'm just trying to help. Lie to yourself long enough and you will start to believe your own horse apples."*

Yeah, I had kind of gotten that vib from Red Eye when we had spoken.

The Frostborn Colonel turned back to me. "I think that can be arranged if a few conditions are met."

I perked my tufted ears. "Oh?" I looked over my shoulder to see Serrish's response to the good news; I had to be better than living in sewage. To my disappointment, she seemed completely uninterested in her fate. I sighed and looked back to Rocksalt. "What would those conditions be?" The young griffin may not care, but I did.

"The Captain knows more about the legal issues than I do," the yellow unicorn responded, indicating to the mare in the huge hat. "She will fill you in, but it may be better if we wait for whoever is in charge of your Stable, as it concerns the whole community."

Officer Beetle stepped forward. "Acting Chief Sugar's orders be damned," he growled.

"I am not going to let you make decisions for the whole Stable."

I leered at him; my patience for his bullshit was quickly running out. "I had no intention of doing so," I replied as evenly as I could. "I have already asked Milk Thistle to come out here. Why don't you go get whoever runs the rest of the Stable and we will go over it?"

The pinto security buck seemed all set to argue with me and seemed to stumble over himself when I didn't disagree with him; it would be a lie to claim it I was not amused by that. "I... Fine." He stomped off, back into the Stable.

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The sizable entrance cave was feeling rather crowded with a mix of pod ponies, Stable ponies, Frostborn, mercenaries and bound raiders. All six surviving members of Stable security, including Maple, Beetle and Blanket Stitch, as well as Keystone and a few ponies I had not spoken to represented the Stable. Rocksalt, Dawn Star and Dust stood on the high ground near the cave mouth with their tank destroyer sitting in the entrance menacingly; their setup was very well organized to inspire intimidation.

Milk Thistle was the sole representative of Shetland and was trotting anxiously, clearly unhappy to be away from the medical bay. I was having trouble looking her in the eye... Crescent had essentially given his life for mine.

BARON, Echo, the mercenaries and my captives stood with me off to one side. Alabaster and Granite seemed to be keeping as much distance between them and me as they could; I honestly couldn't blame them. Rippertini, oddly enough, actually stood next to me, seemingly unphased at what she had seen me do. I was not planning to look a gift horse in the mouth, I would take any ally I could find.

"Now," Dawn Star shouted so everypony could hear her, "We, the Frostborn of Flankorage, have fought to free your home, but this invasion has left you exposed to the dangers of the wastes." A murmur went through the Stable ponies. "But we can help you. If Stable 114 joins the Sovereign City of Flankorage as a protectorate we can leave a garrison of soldiers here and extend the protection of our treaties to your society as well. All we ask in return is your loyalty and abidance of our laws."

"This is not a decision to be made lightly," Rocksalt continued where the morale mare left off. "The Captain here is transmitting the terms of this offer to your PipBucks, review them carefully and we will answer any questions you may have."

Almost simultaneously, all the Stable ponies brought up their fetlock computers. I accessed my own with my cybernetic eye and flipped through pages of legal speech. Let's see, no murder; duh. Don't steal; no brainier. Respect private property... unless you are the government; that one was a little unnerving. Food and water rationing, that one was only relevant to the city proper. Ah, legal repercussions... huh, one of the numerous legal specifics had been highlighted for me.

*'While civil crime has standardized punishments that all territories must observe, each territory has the right to punish capital crimes that occur in their territory as they feel fit; the counsel reserves the right to overturn any decision made by a provincial government.'*

Ah ha, that was what the scarred buck had in mind. If Stable 114 decided to join I could claim responsibility for the griffin girl's crimes and set her punishment as helping me out or something.

I flipped through some of the other treaties and addendums while I waited for the others to think it through. From what I had seen in the wastes they really didn't have much choice. If they didn't join Flankorage they would not last a year before some monsters found their way in or the Unity came back.

"Clever bastard," BARON mumbled from behind me.

I turned around as unobtrusively as I could. "Huh?"

"Your Stable has just been forced into Flankorage's empire," he replied quietly.

"Well they haven't decided yet."

"Don't be naive," the harnessed stallion grumbled. "They don't have a choice in the matter. Your home may have been under the claw of a dragon, but they have just bucked that dragon in the balls on your behalf." Okay, not seeing the bad yet. "Now they are saying that they will leave you to its wrath unless you get under their, admittedly nicer, claw." Oh! That was underhanded.

"What is this part about mandatory military service?" Milk Thistle spoke up irritably. "You want us to sign over our lives to you?"

"Ma'am, we are spread thin as it is," Dawn Star replied. "We will defend you for now, but every province must provide horsepower based on their population in exchange for our resources. We will train and equip your forces so you can protect yourselves. If you are attacked we will bring the full force of our army down on your enemies, but on that same token, we require you to send forces to assist us if we chose to call on you." She thought for a moment. "The militia you have assembled already would be quite sufficient. Send them to the city when you have the chance and we will train them for you."

"We don't really have a choice in the matter do we?" Keystone asked despondently.

"Sure we do," Beetle replied. "We can play ball with these ponies or we can fend for ourselves in the frozen hellscape."

Maple turned to address the Chevaliers. "What else would we need to do for your protection?"

"Nothing at all," Dawn Star replied chipperly. "Though I would advise you send an ambassador to the city to represent your Stable in the council. You also probably want to talk to Canterlot Caravans, The New Ministry of Peace and the my father to get financial, social and diplomatic assistance respectively; I have also transferred the information on those groups to your PipB-

The roar of the Chevalier's Rouncey cut the young noble off as it lifted into the air and zipped off. The Chevaliers, my companions and I rushed out of the cave with the Stable security in tow.

The slaver camp was in ruins, with the twisted wreckage of their shelters and scorched bodies. The two IFVs were looping around to flank a group of half a dozen alicorns, two deep green ones, three midnight blue ones and a single violet one, who were flying from further up the mountain. The violet demigoddess had luminescent green eyes and seemed almost radiant compared to the others.

One of the green alicorns formed a shimmering bubble of green energy around it, but it was almost instantly burst as the tank hunter Rouncey fired its main weapon and reduced the creature to a fine, pink haze. Almost simultaneously, both Dust's lightning cannon and Dawn's confectionery weapon opened up on the group of winged unicorns, blasting the remaining green one into a rain of scorched meat. The rest of us could do little more than just watch as nopony else was equipped to do so.

The three midnight mares fled north while the luminescent, violet one turned to face down the magical war machines. She brought up another emerald shield and hovered in the Frostborn's path.

The lighter transport opened fire, lancing the magical barrier with beams of destructive energy, but the arcane assault seemed to have little effect. The Rouncey whipped past to give its more heavily armed sister a clear shot and pursue the fleeing alicorns.

The glowing alicorn vanished in a flash of green veined, purple light. A split second later one of the lighter IFV's levitation pods exploded in a spray of metal and crystal shards. The demigoddess reappeared in the middle of the steel carnage, her shield sputtering in and out of existence around her. Sabot and Bore's war machine plummeted out of the air and crashed into the snow, tumbling end over end down the slope.

I charged down the mountain after the crashed Rouncey as its larger sibling reduced the alicorn to pulp, the stronger shield no match for the tank hunter's hoof wide gun.

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"Anypony in there!" I yelled as I clawed at the battered steel of the downed Rouncey's side door. "Somepony, please answer me!"

Echo and the Chevaliers beat me to the crash, but couldn't do anything about the door until I got there; the Frostborn elite's weapons could get through the steel, but would risk hurting the two ponies inside. The vehicle itself was a mangled wreck, but fortunately had come to rest right side up. One of its pods was completely gone, the other three had cracked gems and bent sponsons. The turret was bowed and spewing rainbow sparks in all directions. The entire nose of the vehicle was buried in the ground.

I finally sliced a leg sized gash through the door, but my attempts to force the hatch open only managed to gash my fetlocks on the jagged strips of metal. BARON came up behind me, pulled me out of the way and ripped the door open like it was made of cardboard.

As soon as the Hunter buck opened the vehicle wide enough I wiggled past him and through the opening, ripping some stinging gashes along my sides. Dawn Star and Maple followed close behind me; the power armored ponies were still too big to squeeze through the twisted door frame.

The interior actually didn't look too bad, a bit dented, dark and still claustrophobic, but more or less intact.

I lit up my horn and climbed over the boxes of ammunition, food and other supplies that had broken free from their restraints and were scattered across the compartment. The morale mare headed to the back to open the rear hatch while my security companion and I cleared debris away from the cockpit door.

Fortunately the interior door controls were still working and we managed to get into the cockpit without difficulty. It was an utter mess. The thick glass of the front window had exploded inward, covering the chamber in jagged, knife-like shards. Instruments sparked and sputtered as they struggled to keep the crippled vehicle's failing systems running. Sabot's puce form was sitting motionless in her seat, head still in the turret cam helmet. A stream of blood ran down the controls in front of Bore's station and a strip of bloody, black-brown scalp hung from the Rouncey's still swinging horn clamp.

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I waited anxiously on a metal bench by the medical bay doors, back in my Boxy Brown armor and with my beam RCW slung across my back. Serrish was sitting next to me and starring off into space. The Stable leaders agreed, somewhat ruefully, to the Frostborn's offer while we were getting the two pilot ponies out of the crashed Rouncey and made my custody of the griffin youth official. Since then, the adolescent had been silently following me like a lost puppy. I knew I needed to have a talk with her, but I felt it better to wait until I was in a better mental state myself. Officer Beetle had told me that my other two captives had 'attempted to escape' when we left and had to be shot; what a load of shit.

I peered in through the window at the packed recovery room that had once been the Stable gym and was conveniently just across from the clinic. I spotted several familiar faces, sprawled out on exercise mats. Sabot had suffered a serious concussion and was in a coma; one of the nurses had told me that her odds of recovery were good, but not certain. Bore had his head heavily bandaged as the crash had ripped his horn off at the root and that was beyond even BARON's ability to fix with the facilities at hoof; it would take years of therapy and regenerative spells before he would be able to fly his Rouncey again. Red Tape was sitting in a wheelchair at the back of the room. She had survived the salvo of spikes, but one of them had struck her spine, severing it at the hips and costing her the use of her hind legs, baring a very good response to regenerative spells back in the city, for the rest of her life.

*"Don't even think about it,"* Icy instructed sternly.

"Don't think about what?" I asked under my breath.

*"Don't start on that 'it's all your fault' garbage,"* he retorted sharply. *"These are soldiers. They were here to free this place from monsters. They got hurt doing their jobs and helping ponies."*

I grumbled. I could not claim that it had not crossed my mind... but since when did guilt need to make sense? I was no soldier. I was a bucking store clerk.

*"Exactly. You risked your life to help them when you had several outs. These are mostly trained soldiers, so knock it off."*

Before I could respond I caught a whiff of Echo's unique odor of rain and ozone. "Hey," I said dully, turning to the silently hovering Enclave mare.

"I must say, I am hard to spook, but that sniffing thing is unnerving," she stated, sitting down next to me and pushing up her mask. "I wish I could do it."

I looked her sternly in the eye. "No you don't."

"Fair enough..." She looked around and pointed to the adolescent griffin on my other side. "Can you ask her to go somewhere else for a few moments?"

I shook my head. "Sorry, no. If she leaves my sight and one of the Frostborn or 114 security see her before I do they will kill her."

The soldier pegasus grumbled. "Alright then, since she is stuck with us I suppose she ought to know." she continued, slightly vexed, as if Serrish were an annoyance more than anything else. "BARON has managed to secure us transport."

"Oh? That is good news."

"In that busted sky tank."

If my mouth had been full I would have done a spit take. "What?!"

She gave me her nearly invisible smile. "Yeah, she is badly battered and the Frostborn don't have the parts to fix her. The Hunter said he could do it and that was that. She is ours until he can get her to fighting strength again and then they will buy her back from us." She waved her hoof in what looked like a pantomime of a back pat. "Congratulations, you now own a floating death box."

I looked over to the gym and the two broken pilots. But that was their flying death box. I couldn't take it from them because they got hurt fighting in my little war.

*"Well then you had better get it fixed up before Bore gets his horn back,"* my cold advisor said with uncharacteristic warmth. *"Think of it as a get well gift."*

I couldn't help but smile at that. "You know what Echo, I think this may work out nicely."

The medical bay door hissed open and the dark green doctor mare trotted over to us, looking solemn.

I got to my hooves and started towards the doctor pony. "Thistle, I am so sorry ab-" I began, but was quickly silenced by a hoof to my lips.

"Don't, Ocher," Milk Thistle instructed with a shake of her head. "Just don't. This is going to be hard enough as it is." I nodded obediently as she led me back to the bench. "I know it isn't your fault, but I can't help but think that if you weren't here he would be." The doctor mare who had taken care of me since I was a foal seemed to have trouble looking me in the eye. "A lot of the other ponies here feel the same way..." She chewed her lip. I did not think I would like where this was going. "Ocher, I know this isn't fair to you, but we need you to leave for a while."

I was not expecting to be welcomed back, but to hear it said still felt like a buck to the stomach.

It must have shown as she immediately looked away. "Look," she continued, "we all know you saved our haunches here. This will just take some time... I'm sorry."

I felt something soft touch my shoulder. Turning, I saw Echo's wing draped across my back. She was trembling with effort, almost violently, but still kept it there a moment. The sheer gravity of that left me speechless. She had willingly touched me.

I nodded to the umberal pegasus wordlessly and stood. I had expected this, at least it wasn't permanent and I had a good group of friends to lookout for me while I was in exile. It wasn't like the twisted halls of the Stable had ever been my real home anyway... I sighed and



headed towards the exit. Before I turned the corner I held up my PipBuck and turned back to Milk Thistle. "You know how to reach me," I said with forced humor. "And I deliver."

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I trotted outside with Echo and Serrish in tow as the sun was falling behind the mountains. The valley was actually rather beautiful with cloud muted the golds and oranges of sunset tinting half the forests, cutting off abruptly to a deep purple where the mountains cast their shadows.

Bore and Sabot's Rouncey was waiting for us by the tram station. The crippled war machine was levitating a few hooves above the snow on its three remaining pods. All the Frostborn insignias had been stripped off the vehicle, most noticeably, the flags that had been emblazoned on either side of the gun section.

BARON was literally bucking some of the dents out of the chassis. Alabaster, Granite and Rippertini were sitting on the back ramp, playing a game of cards. Keystone was seated in one of the back seats; given what he had done, I wasn't sure how I felt about that. Maple was climbing down off a ladder, having just finished writing 'Blankflank' along the side of the IFV in big, black letters.

I trotted over to them, stopping in front of the security mare. "So, Blankflank?" I asked with a mix of curiosity and awkwardness.

"Yup," she replied with a smile. "Poor thing has lost its mark and its purpose." I hadn't thought of it like that, but now that it had been pointed out, the flag symbols had looked like cutie marks. "We had best get started on finding out her new one."

I tilted my head. "You're coming with me?" I asked, honestly surprised. "What about the Stable? Aren't you the security chief?"

The azure mare shook her head. "I have never wanted command; too much paperwork, and not enough time spent helping ponies. Beetle can have it. As for the Stable..." She brushed the gold bands on her front right fetlock. "I have what made it home right here. Besides, who else is going to keep you from becoming a ponycicle?" She shook her head and snickered. "No, you are stuck with me for the duration."

I pulled the defender mare into a tight hug, taking care to avoid using my claws. "Thank you." Yeah, this exile thing may work for me.

Footnote: Level Up

New Perk: -- Piercing Buck -- Piercing Buck makes all of your Unarmed and Melee Weapons (including thrown) negate 15 points of damage threshold on the target.

This is a story based off the magnificent work of Kkat ([Fallout Equestria](#))

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