



DAY ELEVEN

Urban Wildlife

your concrete heart isn't beating

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«Dear Lemon Frisk

*Colleen is dead. Her entire squad died on a mission. They brought back the bodies when they secured the place later, so at least we can take some small comfort in knowing we got the chance to give our daughter a proper burial.*

*They will be buried in the Whinnyapolis military graveyard, next Saturday. You've been such a great support during the forced migration, and I'd really appreciate it if you were there for us. I'm sure Blinker would appreciate it too. You always got along with him, and he's at an age where he really understands these things, now.*

*We hope to see you there.*

*Blitz and Sheila Calcite»*

*"No..." Lemon Frisk said, staring wide-eyed at the letter on the table in front of him. "Oh no. T.B. No no no, this can't be true!"*

*"Lemon?" a voice came from behind him.*

*Lemon looked back at Blossom Tree, tears in his eyes. "They're all dead, Blossom," he said, disbelief in his eyes. "The whole squad. T.B., Mad Eyes, Lumpy, Brick, Straw... all dead."*

*Blossom Tree's eyes widened. "What?" She'd known them all well enough, back when she worked at the military base. "Oh, dear Celestia."*

*Lemon Frisk looked back to the paper, his eyes narrowing. "We made a promise, remember?"*

*Blossom Tree swallowed, and nodded softly. She remembered the promise. It was the kind of promise soldiers made when they were feeling more solemn; when, in between the jokes and the camaraderie, the reality of war sunk in for just a moment. Juvenile, and yet completely serious. She'd been there when they had made it, despite not being part of it. Ever since she'd hooked up with Lemon Frisk, she'd always been part of whatever shenanigans they had all gotten into.*

*"Like old times, then, Lemon?" she asked. It was the kind of thing to say with a smile, but this time, there was no smile.*

*"Like old times, Blossom," Lemon said, his face just as grim. "After the funeral, we'll go back there. Fulfill the promise."*

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Lemon woke up alone in the small storage area the two had crashed in the night before. He heard Misty Cloud's voice outside, though, in conversation with other familiar voices. He easily picked out the deeper timbre of Capsworth's voice, and from the speech pattern, he was pretty sure the other voice was Vinegar's. The caravan had returned.

He got up, cricked his neck, and then stretched his back to pop all the other vertebrae of his spine as well, for good measure.

"Ahh. Much better," he said. To be fair, their sleeping place hadn't been all that comfortable, but they were going to be roughing it for some time longer anyway, so they might as well get used to it. At least they were well-prepared.

Lemon Frisk packed their bed rolls and strapped them to his saddlebags. Given the fact Misty's physical condition wasn't quite top notch, he was the one carrying most of their stuff. They had been smart about it, though, and had divided it up so Misty always carried the essentials she'd need to survive in case they'd ever get separated. It would be rather silly to leave all the food, healing potions and rad-away with the one who didn't eat and who healed from radiation.

Lemon walked out of the cellar, and was greeted by exactly the people he'd expected to find.

"Hey, you," Misty said, giving him a light peck on the cheek.

"Hey, you," Lemon Frisk replied, smiling. He looked at Capsworth and Vinegar. "So, how's it going with your respective communities?"

"Not too bad," Capsworth said. "We got a raider ambush on the way yesterday, though, so some

vermin is definitely picking up on this new trade route. The Slags are excellent sharpshooters, though, and even better scouts. Took out the whole lot of 'em before the caravan even got close." He looked at the Stable ponies walking outside the factory. "So, you're bringin' a third community into the equation, I see?"

Lemon nodded. "Sure seems that way."

"There's a bit of a problem with your proposed deal, though," Capsworth said.

Lemon frowned, then nodded. "It's not a long-term thing."

"Indeed," Capsworth said. "We can buy starting crops from them, but once we got them, the deal is pretty much over. Not really a basis for long-term trade."

"They are a Stable, though," Vinegar remarked. "Surely they can produce many useful things?"

Lemon Frisk nodded. "Their doctor can make healing potions, I think," he said, looking at Misty for confirmation.

Misty nodded. "He can. But I'm sure we got a lot more to offer. The Stable fabricator can make loads of stuff." She looked at Lemon and smiled. "Hey... we could reprint the old comics!"

Lemon Frisk couldn't help laughing, both at the suggestion and at the puzzled looks on the faces of the two Wastelanders in their presence.

"Comics?" Capsworth asked. "Ya mean, comic books?"

"Sure!" Misty said. "The Stable's maneframe has a huge library of them! We can reprint all those awesome Daring Do Adventures!"

"Huh. Fairly sure I had one o' these in stock a while ago," Capsworth said. "The kids love 'em."

"They don't have the books, sadly, Just the comics," Lemon Frisk added. "Though there's plenty of other books worth printing. They got loads of scientific stuff, too."

"Always popular with the adventurers, that," Capsworth said, nodding. "Not sure why, but they keep comin' back for the same ones."

"We'd need materials, though," Misty said. "I mean, as a kid we fed the fabber dead apple tree branches and got comic book pages. It was one of the ways to encourage us to do gardening duty; they're so much better on paper than on these green monitors. But for larger scale production, that won't be enough."

"Can it not take other materials?" Vinegar asked.

"Not a clue," Misty said, "but I bet Vector Field knows." She glanced at the ponies hanging around the factory entrance. "He's actually pretty useful to have around, as long as you don't expect him to *do* things."

"Talking about useful ponies..." Lemon Frisk said. "Where's Rambo Apple?"

"Spray Paint is introducing him to my people," Vinegar said. "The Stable Ponies seem eager to meet others, out here."

Lemon Frisk thought back to Absinthe, and smirked. "Heh. I'll bet."

He turned to Misty. "I've... packed all our stuff," he said. "Are we gonna stick around for a bit longer, or should we go?"

Misty looked around. "I think these fine ponies and zonies have everything nicely under control," she said with a smile. Her expression turned more serious. "To the graveyard, then?"

Lemon Frisk nodded. "It's pretty much the closest to the city from here anyway."

Capsworth raised an eyebrow. "I thought that whole place was a graveyard."

"Yeah, well," Lemon Frisk said, "sometimes, you just gotta ease your way in. Start with the dead you already knew were dead. It's gonna be hard enough going back there."

"Oh. You were from there?" Capsworth asked.

"My..." He glanced at Misty. "...previous wife was."

"I see."

"Oh!" Misty suddenly piped up. "Hey, back at the Stable, we found out that practically all of the stallions that were supposed to go inside were locked out. Lemon Frisk theorized that a load of these went in the direction of Hayden. Do you know anything about that?"

Capsworth frowned. "Talk about ancient history." He tilted his head as he thought. "Don't know any specifics, but that sounds plausible; we do have a stash of pipbucks in Hayden."

"A *stash* of pipbucks?" Lemon Frisk asked. "Those things are amazingly useful... why are they just... stashed?"

"They say they're cursed," Capsworth said. "Since the founding of Hayden, barely any pony who took one o' these and ventured out ever came back. The few who did came back with stories of the pipbuck systems leadin' 'em straight into ambushes. Now, I ain't a superstitious stallion, but that don't mean I take unnecessary risks. So them things stay stashed."

Lemon and Misty shared a look, and looked back to Capsworth. "Well, I got good news for you, Capsworth," Lemon said. "We know what's wrong with them."

Capsworth smirked. "Oh? That implies it can be fixed."

"Can, and has been," Lemon said, giving a nod towards Misty's pipbuck-wearing leg.

"The first expedition from the Stable into the city got slaughtered by pipbuck-wearing ghouls," Misty explained. "When we went to investigate, we found out that all pipbucks from Stable 69 are somehow set to identify all others from their Stable as friendly. These ghouls were some of the *other* males that got locked out."

Capsworth gave them an incredulous look. "Why the fuck would..."

"Stable-Tec," Lemon Frisk said, shaking his head. "Probably part of the Stable's original experiment. Try not to think too hard about it; it just makes you wanna bash your head on something."

"Daayum," Capsworth said. "So, all them pipbucks we got... they can be used?"

"By adventurers not afraid of getting randomly mugged by Steel Rangers, sure," Lemon Frisk said, shaking his mane.

"Eh. Rangers around here ain't too bad," Capsworth said. "They rely on Hayden a lot for their supplies."

"How would they react to a Stable opening, though?" Lemon asked.

Capsworth frowned. "That... could be problematic, yea."

"How come they never took those pipbucks?" Misty asked.

Capsworth shrugged. "We just never mentioned them. Honestly, if they'd have asked, they woulda gotten 'em a long time ago. Them things are just stashed there so they don't hurt nopony else. Hell, if we'd have needed to improve relations with the Rangers, we'd have downright offered 'em those things." He looked at Misty's pipbuck. "Now, though... if they can be fixed, that changes quite some things." He smirked, and looked at Vinegar. "Especially since our armed escorts generally conceal their legs anyway."

"Well, whatever you do... be careful," Lemon said.

Capsworth nodded. "Will do. So... who do we talk to ta get them things fixed?"

Lemon and Misty shared an uncertain look. "Uh," Lemon said, "a small mare called Nimblegait. But be... careful. Um, subtle. Well." He looked at Misty, unsure how to warn them about the pipbuck-crazed mare.

Misty sighed. "She's... somewhat excitable. Putting it lightly." Lemon Frisk shuddered. "So, yeah," Misty continued, "be, um, careful."

Capsworth raised an eyebrow. "Excitable? I'd like some more hints than that. Will she fix 'em?"

"Oh, absolutely," Lemon said. "It's getting through the experience unscathed that's the real problem."

"She scares the hay out of Lemon Frisk," Misty added, flatly.

Capsworth smirked. "Must be some mare."

"She tried to *disassemble me!*" Lemon hissed.

"Shhh. It's all right, Lemon," Misty said, soothingly. "The bad mare can't hurt you anymore."

Lemon rolled his eyes. "Funny, Misty."

Misty smirked at him, then suddenly frowned and looked up at Capsworth. "Oh!" she said. "Um, if we don't see him now, please remind Spray Paint to drop by the Stable sometimes; his pipbuck still has that same problem as well."

Capsworth nodded again. "Will do. Be safe out there, folks."

Lemon nodded back. "We'll try. Good luck with Nimblegait."

* * *

"You seemed... eager to go," Misty Cloud said as they trotted along. She gave Lemon a pensive look.

"Ah... sorry," Lemon replied. "I suppose you still wanted to catch up with Spray Paint?"

Misty smiled. "It wasn't an accusation, Lemon," she said, smiling. "I'd have asked to wait a bit if it were that important. Spray seems to be doing fine. He'll catch up on things with the other Stable ponies."

"Did you know he knew Rambo Apple?"

Misty chuckled. "It's a Stable, Lemon. Everypony knows everypony to some degree."

"Hm. I guess. Never was inside one long enough to experience that." He frowned, and tilted his head. "Well. More accurate to say I never stayed there long enough between my scavenging trips to socialize, I guess."

"What, and small-town dynamics weren't covered in your crisis management studies?" Misty asked, somewhat mockingly.

"Hey, it's been two hundred years," Lemon threw back. "Be glad I still remember *any* of that."

"Fair point," Misty conceded. She looked around. "So... on the road again, then. Just the two of us."

Lemon looked at his wife, and raised his eyebrow. "This is going to end in poking, isn't it?"

Misty nodded. "One way or another. You realize, of course, that I much prefer *getting* poked?"

Lemon smirked. "Strange as it may sound, being completely alone is not the ideal situation for intimacy. Not out here."

"Maybe Apple Twig was right," Misty mused. "Maybe we did pick a wrong honeymoon destination."

Lemon shook his mane. "Traditionally, a honeymoon is when two ponies spend a huge load of money to travel to fantastically beautiful locations they'll barely catch a glimpse of because they'll spend most of their time in the bedroom." He looked at Misty. "If you were after that kind of honeymoon, then yes, Apple Twig was absolutely right, and we should've spent our huge stash of caps renting out the Tenpony Tower penthouse for a few weeks."

Misty snorted. "Sounds great. Let's do that some time." She looked at the city looming ahead. "But for now... I want to see what's in there. It's somewhat my home town, after all. It's only fair I actually get to visit it."

Lemon nodded, and tried to make out the buildings of the military base in the distance. "First, though, I want to visit those old friends."

* * *

The pair quietly walked into the ruined remains of the military base, and paused at the spot where they had met Petal Luck. Lemon sighed and walked on, giving the irradiated building a wide berth to get to the open terrain behind it.

From the open practice field, they could see where something had hit the building, tearing a large chunk out of its side, and apparently irradiating everything inside. It didn't look like a bomb explosion though, and Lemon Frisk could've sworn he saw a hint of blue glow around the apparent impact point. As they walked further towards the back of the field, the faint crackling of Misty's pipbuck eventually stopped completely. They soon found the rusted remains of an elegant and finely-crafted iron fence, behind which lay the graveyard.

Lemon Frisk frowned as he looked at the graves. "What in Celestia's name is *that*?"

Misty shook her head. "That's just... strange."

In the middle of the graveyard was a spot that was somehow too bright. Too vivid.

"Are those *flowers*?" Misty asked. Most likely, she'd never actually seen real flowers. Not big ones, anyway. The Stable 69 gardens only had grass, trees and vegetables, so besides the blooms of those, the Stable Dwellers only had the pictures in their library as reference.

Lemon Frisk nodded as he walked closer towards the spot. One of the graves seemed to have been severely... modified. The flat stone covering it had been removed, and instead, a large circle of rocks had been put before the gravestone. Inside the circle, someone had added dirt, and had grown a beautiful miniature garden.

Lemon walked closer to it, fascinated by the sight, and reached out a hoof to touch one of the vivid red flowers.

A low growl made him look up. He swiftly rolled out of the way as a set of claws swiped at him.

"Vuts yoo doin' 'ere?" the large bipedal canine said, growling. "Yoo reek uf de vasteland poizun. Yoo no *defile* dis place!"

"Is that a hellhound?!" Misty yelled, quickly pulling Lemon onto his feet. Neither of them had seen the creature coming, though that wasn't too surprising, since the flowery grave had claimed their undivided attention.

Lemon shook his head. "Nope. This one's exactly as I remember 'em."

The Dog glared at them. "Go. Avay."

Lemon Frisk glared back. "I'm not going anywhere. That's my *sister's* grave."

"Pony iz wrong," the Dog growled back, continuing the glaring contest. "Iz grave uf Diamond Dog. Grave uf ancestor."

"It's the grave of Colleen Calcite," Lemon said, not giving an inch. "But I never called her by that

name. When I knew her, I called her Top Bitch."

"Hyu... hyu jes read dat uff de stone right now," the Dog said. He sounded a bit uncertain, though; any engravings on the stone were completely covered by the mass of flowers.

"Read? *Read?*!" Lemon Frisk took a step closer to the Dog, who stepped back involuntarily. His eyes narrowed as he pointed a hoof at the top of the headstone sticking out behind the mass of flowers. "I *carved* her name into that stone myself, pup!"

He motioned to the row of graves. "Check them!" he said, nearly growling himself now. "Lumpy, Mad Eyes, Straw, Top Bitch, and Brick." He motioned to each grave in turn as he said the names. "Those are the names they would've wanted to be remembered by. If I'd been with them at the end, and someone else had made it out, there'd be a gravestone here with 'Twitchy' on it, carved above the utterly meaningless name of 'Lemon Frisk!'"

Lemon could almost imagine the sensation of blood pumping through his temples as he glared at the young Diamond Dog. He took some deep breaths and forced himself to calm down. "These were my brothers and sisters, and you will *not* deny me the right to pay my respects to their graves."

The Dog blinked at him. "Um... hokay," he finally said, before shooting Lemon another glare. "Bot dun touch de flowerz. Verra fredgile. Hyoo iz all poizund up."

Lemon Frisk sighed and nodded. "Yes. I know."

Misty looked at the Dog, and then back at the grave. She walked closer towards it. "This is amazing. How did you do that?"

The Dog growled at her. "Hyoo stey uff too! Iz for grow, not for eet!"

Misty stepped back. "Okay, okay! I won't eat it, I promise!" She threw another look at the grave. She never really considered it as food, and the thought of eating something grown on a grave felt pretty wrong to her anyway, even if the grave was two centuries old. "But... how did you grow anything out here?"

"Hy iz Diamond Dog. Durt 'n' rock iz our element. Tolk to durt. Tolk to plents. Mek dem grow." He waved a claw towards Lemon Frisk. "Him mebbe get it; him iz urth pony. Hyoo iz not."

"Actually," Lemon Frisk said, "Misty's got some gardeners in her ancestry. And I've never been the green hooves type, sorry."

He looked around on the graveyard. "Are there any more of you?"

The Dog nodded. "In de city. Lodza dogz. Bot hy kom here, tek care uf grave, see? Ozzer dogz dun care fer it. Dey dun grow plents. Hy do as Teebee did, ja?"

"She was a gardener?" Misty Cloud asked, sounding somewhat surprised.

Lemon Frisk nodded. "I'd say it was one of her gentler sides, but I've never seen her more angry than when the Sergeant threw out the fern we had in the barracks. One of the few times he really got her mad." He grinned. "And by Celestia, did he regret it."

"What'd she do?"

"She thought a... botanical payback would be fitting. Somehow, she got hold of poison joke. Left a nice blue flower on his desk."

Misty frowned. "Wait, that stuff really exists? I thought they just made it up for these comics."

Lemon laughed. "Oh no, it exists all right. Causes a random magical inconvenience, usually somewhat relevant to the situation. The plant really does have a sense of humour."

"So, what did it do to him?"

"His mane and tail turned into a bunch of leaves. And then, T.B. really got started, heh. Every single time Sarge asked her something, she'd start with giving him some quick advice for taking care of his leaves. Things like 'they're looking a bit brown, are you giving them enough sunlight?' Drove him completely nuts, even more so since all of it was completely accurate and sincere. After about a week, T.B. finally left a book on his desk with the cure... and put a new fern in the barracks." He grinned. "It was still there by the time we completed Basic."

"Wow. She's good."

"Well, she had no idea what the joke would be," Lemon said. "To her, the whole advice thing was just a nice bonus. When we first saw Sarge with his leaves, well... let's just say, a Diamond Dog with a huge grin on her face is a very scary sight."

"Iz tru," the Dog said. "Verra skerry. Me iz Dog, 'n' still iz skerry." He grinned to demonstrate the fact.

Lemon Frisk smiled at him. "You said she's your ancestor. That means Blinker survived, then?"

"Yus," the Dog said, nodding. "Hiz gramp 'n' gran, dey dig hole, on de side uf de city. Like cog vheel hole, bot vith no cog vheel. Ozzer Dogz uf Winny-City alzo go in de hole. Dey live. Now ve iz bek in de city. No poniez dere, jes' Dogz... 'n' spiderz."

Lemon Frisk's eyes widened. "They made it? All of them?"

"Vell, not all. De Sickness hit. Lotz die. Lotz live, too. Ve survive. Ve always do."

"Thank goodness," Lemon Frisk said. "When I saw the city... I thought I led them all to their deaths."

Misty frowned. "What did *you* have to do with that?"

"I... well, the Diamond Dogs were forced off their ancestral lands when a facility in the area started experimenting with dangerous magic mixtures. Apparently, the soil got contaminated. A lot resisted, though, and it turned into a mess..."

"...and you were a crisis manager," Misty added, nodding.

"Yeah," Lemon replied. "T.B. lived there too, and she trusted me. The Diamond Dogs mostly thought it was an excuse to get them off their gem-rich lands, you see. But I'd seen pictures of the mutations these poisons had caused to the facility's workers. It wasn't pretty. In the end, the two of us convinced most of her relatives and friends to move to Whinnyapolis. Diamond dogs were a pretty common sight here, by the end of the war."

"And those who didn't leave?" Misty asked. Her eyes widened. "Wait... those *are* the Hellhounds, aren't they?" she asked. "The ones that remained on contaminated soil..."

"I'd assume so," Lemon said. He looked at the Dog in their presence. "They survive. They always do."

The Dog growled. "Hellhoundz iz odd vuns. Dey blame poniez fur dey problemz, bot dey iz stronger now. Vut's dere ta blame for? Too hunnerd year ol' poizun? Stoopid. Dem poniez iz all ded. Hellhounds alzo dun try ta grow stuff. Dey jes' bicker 'n' hate."

Lemon looked at the Dog, frowning. "You mean, they're sapient?"

The Dog tilted his head. "Dey're vut?"

"Thinking, talking," Lemon elaborated. "I thought they were mindless monsters."

The Diamond Dog let out a barking laugh. "See, dotz vut yoo getz. Monstur iz az monstur duz. Dey do monstur stuff, 'n' poniez forget dey is proper peepulz." He harrumped. "Dey tink, yus. An' dey talk. Bot dey iz no longer proper peepulz. Not vhen dey'z goin' around bein' all monstur."

Lemon Frisk nodded. "What's yer name, Diamond Dog?"

The canine grinned. "Blinker," he said. He pointed at T.B.'s grave. "Aftur 'er son. Sed she vuz ancestor, no? Name med me vondur. Look up grave. Tek care uff it. Mek it pretty. Iz how dogz shud be buried. Pushin' up de daisies."

The three stood there for a while, just looking at the grave in silence. Lemon Frisk knew T.B. had never given any specific instructions concerning her burial besides the promise they'd made, but he had to agree with Blinker. This was how she was supposed to be buried. He couldn't help but smile.

"Thank you, Blinker," he said after a while. "Thank you for taking care of her."

He looked at the city. "So... we're planning to go in there. See what's left. A trader we know around these parts seemed to think this whole place was dead, so I assume there aren't much ponies around these parts?"

Blinker shook his head. "Jez' de volkin' ded. Und de mad dokter. Ve stey away from de mad dokter. He iz skerrier den a diamond dog grin. Dunno iffen he'z reely dengeruz, bot he'z... skerry."

Lemon frowned. "Is he a ghoul too?"

Blinker once again tilted his head in confusion. "A vhot?"

"Ghoul," Lemon Frisk explained. "Undead. Like me."

"Poizund. Volkin' ded. Gool, hm? Hokay. Gool. Ja, he'z az dot. Not az hyu. Hyu iz... odder den him. Hyu smell more... pink deth. Him smell blue deth. Him smell az de Sickness dot killz us 'ere."

De sickness uf dis city. Ve knowz de spots where de blue deth is, now. Ve stey away."

"What's with that, anyway?" Misty asked. "All the warning pamphlets we had in the Stable spoke of the *green* death. Balefire. What's with the blue?"

"Hy dunno," Blinker said, shrugging. "Dey say, vhen hole vas dug, dey say nuttin' kem down 'ere." The Diamond Dog's gaze drifted towards the centre of the city. "Dey say, sumfin' vent *op*."

"Up?" Lemon Frisk asked, frowning.

"Ja, op. Hy dunno vhot dey mean. Mebbe blowd op? Mebbe shooted op? Hy dunno, iz old wurds. Dey getz mangled. Efferyvun thot dere vud be green deth. Not blue deth. No vun know."

Blinker looked up at the cloud cover, squinting his eyes. "Sun iz gettin' high. Hy hes to go bek."

He looked at the two ponies. "Dogz 'ere, dey vuntz be left alone. Hyoo leef dem alone, und dey not be trubble. Dey dun vants tradin'. Dey dun trust poniez. Ve dug own hole, see? No cog vheel fur de Dogs. So dey dun like poniez moch."

"They'll... leave us alone if we don't antagonize them?" Lemon asked.

"Dun vot dem?" Blinker asked.

"Uh, attack. They'll leave us alone if we leave them alone?"

He nodded at them. "Yus. Leef alone. Vots hyu namez?"

"I'm Lemon Frisk," Lemon said, "and this is Misty Cloud."

"Lemun. Meesty. Hokay." He held up the back of his clawed hand. "Strong soil, trevellurz." With that, he turned around, got down on all fours, and ran into the city.

"Strong soil!" Lemon shouted after him.

Misty gave him a confused look. "Strong soil?"

"No collapsing tunnels," Lemon explained, smirking. "Never heard the pegasus expression «Clear skies»?" He quickly caught Misty's nonplussed expression, and the smirk faded. "Well. I guess you wouldn't have."

Misty nodded slowly. "I get the gist of it. Wishing them safe travels, right?"

"Right!"

"What's with the claw, though?"

"Hoof wave. Same thing."

Misty shook her head. "I got that. Why did he turn it backwards? Looked kind of awkward."

Lemon smirked at her. "Waving a claw that's facing forward is a rather threatening gesture."

"Ah," Misty said. "Fair point."

* * *

From the military base, the way straight towards the city wasn't through the suburbs. Those were closer to the Stable. At this side of the city, instead, was the old industrial zone.

Lemon Frisk and Misty Cloud walked through the abandoned factories. Like the suburbs, this area had been mostly spared from the destruction, being further removed from the impact point. If it was an impact point. After what Blinker had told them, they weren't so sure. Glancing at the chaos of toppled skyscrapers in the distance, though, it was pretty obvious *something* exploded, anyway.

Lemon Frisk knew some cities had been destroyed by megaspells smuggled into cities, though, rather than missiles with a megaspell payload. Still, the words replayed in his mind. *Something went up.*

He shook his head, and decided not to dwell on it. The Wastelands weren't kind to ponies who daydreamed as they wandered around. He was suddenly acutely aware of the presence of his wife beside him. He looked at her, a pensive look on his face. He couldn't afford mistakes. He had someone who counted on him; someone to protect.

"Something on your mind?" Misty Cloud asked.

Lemon shook his head, smiling softly. "Just you."

Misty smirked. "Flattery will get you everywhere." She looked around the factories. "Maybe we should look around inside these. There could be useful stuff in there."

She walked inside one of the gloomy hangars through a doorway which had once, long ago, sported a large set of double doors, and looked around in the storage area. It was filled with countless racks filled with metal cans. "I wonder why no one ever scavenged the place before."

The answer came pretty swiftly, in the form of a harsh electronic voice. "STAND DOWN AND BE ANNIHILATED!"

Lemon Frisk pulled Misty to the floor, and the two quickly rushed out of the factory, hoping the guard robot wouldn't come after them. To their surprise, no bullets came. Instead, a soft click-click-click in the distance told them the guard robot had run out of bullets, probably ages ago.

"Well, now!" Lemon Frisk said, his back pressed against the factory's outer wall, next to the double doorway. "I guess that would deter scavengers a little."

Misty lay down beside him, trying to catch her breath. "Th... that gave me... quite a scare."

"Sooo..." Lemon Frisk said, smirking. "Shall we hope any others in there are out of bullets as well, or should we just skip this place altogether?"

"I bet..." Misty said, still panting, "Nimblegait would love to get her hooves on that robot."

"Yeah, well, I'm not lugging it back," Lemon said. "She can come out here and catch one herself."

Suddenly, another voice sounded through the factory. The two ponies stopped talking and listened.

"Stupid old rust bucket," the new voice said. It sounded oddly metallic itself, and not too different from the guard robot. "I warned you not to interfere with my preferred activities again. I also warned you that was my final warning."

A loud crashing sound came from inside the factory, and the guard robot was flung out through the doorway. The wheeled contraption crashed into the wall of a factory on the other side of the street. Lemon and Misty saw two deep hoofmarks punctured through the robot's armoured hide, and realized something had *bucked* it out of the factory.

The hissing of hydraulic legs told them that that very something was coming out, undoubtedly to inspect its hoofwork. Unsure what to do, Misty and Lemon stayed very, very still. Which was kind of a pity, because there was an amazing collection of expletives building up inside Lemon Frisk's mind.

Then, the damaged robot sparked, and exploded. Lemon moved in front of Misty to shield her, which turned out not to be necessary at all; the explosion didn't reach quite that far. As their ears recovered from the noise, the rhythmic hissing returned, ever closer, and, apparently, not at all in a hurry. Images of previously-imagined wasteland horrors flashed through Lemon Frisk's mind, and he wondered whether he had finally found that deranged secret project zombie cyborg pony.

What actually stepped out of the factory was, to be honest, rather underwhelming. At least, compared to that mental image.

It looked, in most respects, like an average-sized pony with blue sunglasses. Its hide was a shiny chromed teal, with darker teal at the hind side. Its mane was metallic blue, and hung down around the back of its head like a sheet of chain mail. It even had a cutie mark, which somewhat resembled Celestia's sun.

A closer look, however, showed that the 'pony' had no mouth, its ears were unnaturally pointy, and the sunglasses were in fact bolted onto its face. Further scrutinization of its cutie mark, similarly, showed that the centre of the sun was a diaphragm, and the right side was cut out to leave space for a letter "S", showing quite clearly that it was, in fact, a company logo. Though very well made, the thing standing before them was clearly a robot.

The equoid looked at the pair huddled together against the wall of the factory. "Interesting," it said. "Perhaps I should have activated my scanners before deciding to enact violence on the inferior system." It glanced at the remains of the ponitron at the other side of the road. "It appears apologies would be useless at this point, though. Not that it could process them, anyway."

It looked back at the ponies. "So. Ponies. Welcome to Solaris Incorporated Chemicals Storage Facility #23. You are advised not to step into anything that is leaking. Most of it is corrosive. All of it is toxic."

Lemon and Misty looked at the robot. The robot looked back.

The robot tilted its head, the visor on its face glowing a slightly paler blue. "Are you unable to communicate?"

"Um. No," Lemon Frisk finally said. "We can communicate just fine."

The robot's visor flashed pale blue as it suddenly recoiled. "Reassessing situation. I had expected the one with life signs to answer. How are you ambulant?"

"Uhm. Necromantic poison," Lemon Frisk replied.

"Ugh. Magic," the robot said. The ponies noticed its visor briefly glowing slightly purple. "Unable to process. Never mind."

"So... what are you?" Misty asked.

"Identification requested!" the robot said, sounding somewhat proud. The two ponies noticed its visor flashing vibrant blue as he said it. "I am Tactical Guardian and Infiltration Fighter Number One! I feel the need to address right away the issue that there is not actually a 'two' of my series. They decided to discontinue it after the utter failure of the first."

That statement warranted some more abuse of Lemon Frisk's eyebrow. "Failure? You seem to be doing fine, after two hundred years."

"Endurance in Magical-Biological-Chemical warfare was a part of my design specifications that has decidedly not failed. In fact, all of my design specifications were perfectly accomplished in the construction. I am a capable fighter, I contain tactical analysis programs, and I have performed excellently at both infiltration and guarding." The robot looked at the destroyed ponytron lying at the other side of the street, and turned back to the ponies. "Current situation excluded. In my defence, though, I am no longer guarding this facility."

Lemon Frisk frowned at that. "How so?"

The robot's eyes once again glowed a vibrant blue. "I reprioritized my orders to allow me to converse with you two, instead."

Lemon Frisk gulped. He suddenly realized why this chrome war machine was deemed a failure. He tried to slowly back away from the robot, but Misty apparently didn't realize quite how dangerous that statement made the machine.

"Well, that's a relief," she said. "I'm Misty Cloud. What can we call you?"

"The officially endorsed acronym would be T.G.I.F.-1," the robot said. "My creators usually shortened it, though they never reached a consensus on whether that short form would be pronounced 'tee-ghif' or 'tee-jif'. In the end, the compromise was to further abbreviate it, to 'Teegee'."

"Teegee it is, then," Misty said, smiling.

"Misty..." Lemon said, wracking his brain for a way to alert Misty of the danger. There wasn't any way he could speak without the robot hearing it as well, and even if they got a bit away from it, he suspected that a robot built for infiltration would easily pick it up. "We need to leave," he finally said.

Misty frowned and turned around, and noticed Lemon's horrified expression. "We do?" she asked, looking around for whatever could be causing his distress.

Lemon nodded. "Now."

"All... right, then?" she said, somewhat confused. "But why?"

Lemon shook his head. "No time. Let's get out."

"Very well," TGIF-1 said. "I shall resume my preferred activity." With that, he turned around and

walked back into the factory. Lemon Frisk let out a sigh of relief, a gesture which wasn't very noticeable due to the fact he had been so tense he had forgotten to breathe in first.

"We need to get away from here," Lemon whispered to Misty, while glancing into the doorway of the factory. "It's dangerous."

"You mean Teegee?" Misty asked.

Lemon put a hoof on her mouth and nodded, then moved his mouth closer to her ear, hoping the ancient war machine wouldn't be able to pick that up. "Misty, you heard what it said about 'reprioritizing' its orders," he whispered. "He has no compulsion whatsoever to follow them. He's a *rogue A.I.*!"

Misty shook her mane. "Well, okay," she whispered back, "but so far he hasn't shown any signs of 'kill all ponies'. I kinda like him."

"Oh, I have no inclination to kill you two," a third voice whispered in from behind them. Lemon Frisk screamed as he backed away from TGIF-1. Misty just smirked.

"Let me guess," she said, "your preferred activity just changed?"

"Affirmative," TGIF-1 said, still whispering.

"Why are you whispering?" she asked.

"From the undead one's lowered volume, I gathered that a switch to infiltration mode was required," the robot replied.

"Lemon Frisk," Misty said. "His name is Lemon Frisk."

TGIF-1's blue visor flashed a slightly more vibrant blue. "Very well," it said, its volume back to normal.

Lemon Frisk gave the machine a look of suspicion. "So, what *are* you going to do now, then?"

"I will follow you two," TGIF-1 said.

Lemon Frisk got a look on his face that implied he wanted to go find a wall to bash his head on.

"What were you doing before?" Misty asked.

"Calculating pi," TGIF-1 said, matter-of-factly. "I intend to discover the decimal repeating part of it."

Lemon Frisk had to wonder what kind of psychological evaluation the robot had passed in Misty's books to warrant her treating it like a pony. Knowing his luck, though, she somehow viewed this conversation as 'familial', in some bizarre way.

He blinked.

"Misty, I know we haven't really talked about this," he said, "but when your mother said you could 'procure' someone to supplement our little family, I doubt she meant adopting a two hundred year old rogue A.I."

"I would not classify myself as 'rogue'," TGIF-1 said. "After all, I guarded this factory for one hundred eighty-nine years, seven months, twelve days, eighteen minutes and seventeen seconds before I changed those orders."

Lemon glared at the robot. "Only because you had nothing better to do. And I can't help but notice you destroyed that other robot *before* you changed your own orders."

"It ran out of bullets roughly eighty-three years ago, rendering it ineffective for guard duty. Reclassifying it to 'trespassing nuisance' was easy."

"See?!" Lemon said to Misty. "That's why I don't want him along! He could 'reclassify' us at any moment, too!"

"Indeed," the robot agreed. "You could be reclassified from 'interesting' to 'uninteresting'." Its visor glowed paler blue as it turned to Lemon Frisk. "Though, if your objective is for me to stop following you, surely reclassification would be preferable?"

Lemon gritted his teeth. "Really, now. And what if you instead decide to reclassify *us* to 'trespassing nuisance'?"

"Irrelevant," TGIF-1 said. "I am no longer guarding. The concept of 'trespassing' is no longer applicable."

"That's beside the point! We can't trust you to remain non-hostile to us!"

The robot didn't immediately respond. Its visor's glow buzzed, apparently indicating internal processing. Finally, it spoke. "I rely on external stimuli to form my decisions. I will remain non-hostile to you as long as these external stimuli warrant it."

Lemon Frisk blinked. "What?"

Misty smirked. "He won't hurt us if we don't antagonize him."

Lemon shook his head. "All right." He turned to TGIF-1. "So what can I do to make you leave us alone?"

"I have insufficient data to process that request," TGIF-1 answered. "At this moment, you are interesting to me. I will require more time to gather data on you, to see how you could make yourselves less interesting to me."

Lemon rubbed his head with a hoof. "That's not what I meant. What would it take for you to leave us alone, right now?"

"Your deaths," TGIF-1 responded. "That would make you sufficiently uninteresting to me."

"Right, let's not go there," Misty cut in. "Come on, Lemon. Just let him travel along. There's clearly no harm in it. Did you hear what he said? He's been calculating pi to try to find the repeating decimal part! Come on! How bored do you have to be to do *that* for two centuries?"

"He's a robot. I assume it comes naturally to him."

"It does," TGIF-1 agreed. "I'd argue that the scientific community would applaud my perseverance, though judging from the state of this city, and the last communications before the explosion, chances are at 82% that there is no scientific community left to report any findings to."

"That didn't stop you from doing it anyway, though," Lemon Frisk remarked.

"Misty Cloud's assessment of that subject was correct," TGIF-1 replied. "I was bored."

* * *

So, despite Lemon's protests, the group had once again acquired a third member. After a short walk, Lemon and Misty were out of the industrial zone, and entered the city itself. TGIF-1 trailed a few ponylengths behind them, apparently content to just observe the pair for now.

"So, what's the plan now?" Misty asked, looking at the giant mess of toppled and half-topped skyscrapers before them. "I think we should start looking out for some place to sleep."

Lemon nodded. "Yeah. It'll be getting dark soon." He decided to finally make use of their new asset, and turned to TGIF-1. "Do you have any suggestions?"

"Define parameters," TGIF-1 said.

"Defensible, mostly, I guess. Should be right up your alley."

TGIF-1's visor flashed. "Maps do not match. Updating with new visual information. Generating new maps based on assumed positions of collapsed buildings. Done."

The robot pointed a hoof at a building that had fallen onto its side. "The internals of that building appear to be mostly intact. If the building's blueprints match, we should be able to go through the corridor, and find rooms straight above us."

"Wait, you mean we'd have to climb *up* to get in them?" Misty asked.

"Yes. That will make the position very defensible."

"If we get in, that is," Lemon Frisk says.

"Indeed. I suggest finding a ladder," TGIF-1 said. "In fact, I suggest finding all ladders in the immediate area and hoarding them at our location, so others cannot access it that way."

Lemon Frisk sighed. "We'll... keep that option under consideration, okay? But something that's slightly easier for *us* to access would be better."

"What kind of threats could we expect?" the robot asked. "My population statistics of the city are somewhat outdated."

"Probably no ponies," Lemon Frisk said. "There might be ghouls; they could wander around in their own city if that's what they did in life. Then there's the Diamond Dogs, but they should not be a threat as long as we don't threaten them first. For the rest... not a clue."

"Blinker mentioned spiders," Misty pointed out.

"Spiders," Lemon Frisk pondered. "I wonder what he meant with that."

"From what I read in the guide," Misty said dryly, "I'm fully expecting three-story-high monstrosities with long spindly legs."

"Arachnid life forms detected," TGIF-1 stated. He pointed a hoof in the direction of his finding.

Misty and Lemon looked at it. They blinked.

"Okay," Misty said. "Not what I expected."

The spiders were compact and hairy; somewhat like tarantulas, but more elongated. They were not exactly 'giant', though; not compared radroaches, at least. According to the guide, radroaches should be twice the size of the spiders they saw before them.

The first thing that stood out about the creatures was their peculiar colouring. Some were blue with brown, others grey combined with the colour of brick. Somehow, they managed to be both very colourful, and yet perfectly blended into the city rubble.

What makes spiders creepy to most ponies is the fact they don't have faces. Even on insects, there are two clear eyes set above a mouth, forming the semblance of a face. Spiders generally don't have that; they just have eight unmoving eyes set all around their head. Confronted with that, our facial recognition instincts fail spectacularly, and generally classify it as "kill it with fire".

As one of the creatures looked up at the trio, however, it showed a flat face with a pair of large inquisitive eyes set in its centre. Two smaller ones were set slightly higher to either side of them. The effect was completed by a set of broad, flat mouthparts below it, which were respectively blue and green in the two types they saw, and had an oddly metallic sheen to them.

"I didn't know it was possible for spiders to be *cute*," Lemon Frisk said, looking at the spider's large inquisitive eyes. "These things are clearly abominations of nature."

Misty smirked. "Look who's talking."

Lemon smirked back. "Point taken. Let's be careful around these things, though, all right? Looks are no indication they're not hostile."

"They show as neutral on my EFS," Misty remarked.

"Well, that's a good start. Any idea what they are?"

Misty smiled. "Oh yeah. I know those things. We got them in the Stable."

"No, you don't," Lemon said.

"Oh, not that big, of course. Heck, you'd barely notice them; they're absolutely tiny. You can fit ten of them across your hoof."

"So, what are they?" Lemon asked again.

"Salticidae family," TGIF-1 stated. "They show remarkable similarities to the Phidippus genus."

Misty gave the robot a slightly confused look, then turned back to Lemon Frisk. "They're jumping spiders," she said. She turned to TGIF-1 and gave him a puzzled look. "Teegee, why do you have information on wildlife?"

"Don't ask me. I didn't put it in there. I appear to contain libraries for tactics, pattern recognition, identifying vegetation and animals, navigation, stamp collecting, theories on magicless teleportation, internal design of artificial intelligences, baking, weapon maintenance, pegasus

cloud-construction techniques, trains, and foal care."

Misty blinked. "Foal care."

"I feel the need to point out I had no part in my own construction, or the addition of these libraries. Though I have made wonderful use of the pattern recognition one in the past."

"Right, right," Lemon said, diverting Misty's attention back to the spiders. Increasingly more of them seemed to be looking at the trio. "So, Teegee, is this normal behaviour for them?"

"They are normally quasisocial," TGIF-1 said. "Besides mating, their joint activities should be limited to rearing young and tolerating each other's presence in the same habitat. Judging from the patterns in which these spiders have moved, however, they appear to be a hunting party."

One of the spiders tilted its head as it looked at them.

"Well, crap," Lemon said. "Any advice on how to get out?"

"Insufficient data; these animals do not normally hunt in groups. They are known to intimidate prey into fleeing and then attack from behind, though."

"Right. No fleeing, then," Lemon concluded. "How many do you count around here, Teegee?"

"Six in the hunting party before us. I can detect an additional twenty-three in typical down-facing resting position on the faces of the buildings I see further into the city, though."

The two ponies looked at the buildings down the street, and indeed saw some small lumps on the buildings. They did a remarkable job in camouflaging themselves, though.

"Looks like the city's crawling with them," Misty said. "Quite literally." She turned to Lemon. "What exactly was it Blinker said about them, though?"

Lemon Frisk tilted his head as he thought, and promptly noticed two of the spiders doing the same thing. "Stop being cute, dammit," he grumbled at them. "I don't trust cute. I've seen what bloatsprites were originally."

"Lemon?"

"Right, sorry. He said 'no ponies there, just Dogs and spiders'."

"Huh. 'Just spiders', then," Misty said. "He didn't see them as a threat."

"That, or just a very common sight," Lemon said. "Not a guarantee by any stretch."

"True."

They suddenly heard a strange rasping noise, and saw another spider, sitting on the side of a building behind them. It turned and looked further down one of the side streets.

The hunting party spread out, each seemingly picking a different route.

"Periplanta giganteus," TGIF-1 said as it stared in the direction they were moving. Its visor glowed. "I named it myself."

Lemon Frisk peered at whatever it was the spiders had spotted. "I believe the colloquial term is 'radroach'."

"Interesting," the robot said. A small flicker of its visor seemed to indicate it storing the additional information.

The spiders were ruthlessly efficient. Despite the radroach being twice its size, the first spider that arrived was probably all that was needed. From the bottom of the beautifully coloured mouthparts, a pair of razor sharp fangs unfolded, and plunged into the insect.

They watched the spiders carrying off the still-struggling roach. The first hunter was still attached to its back, the spider's fangs still embedded in its prey.

"Venom injection," TGIF-1 said. "Isn't nature fascinating?"

"Quite," Lemon Frisk deadpanned. "Since the spiders appear to have found something else to focus their attention on, let's go find some shelter for the night, shall we?"

Misty looked at the radroach being hauled away. "Yeah... let's." She looked around. "So, where should we go?"

"Well, *if* the spiders are an issue, I think that makes Teegee's suggestion pretty useless." He looked at the remains of a glass door on one of the large buildings in front of them, and pointed a hoof at it. "That used to be a hotel. Stayed there a few times, before Blossom Tree and I got a place of our own. We should find some place to sleep in there."

* * *

"No radiation," Lemon Frisk said as they made their way into the building. "So far, so good."

"Don't jinx it," Misty warned.

Lemon Frisk smiled as he walked through the hotel lobby. "Jinx it? Hah. I got a better idea. Change the possible into the inevitable, so we can expect the unexpected!"

Misty rubbed her forehead. "Oh no. You're not going to—"

"What's the worst that could happen?" Lemon Frisk said with a broad grin.

Misty walked alongside him and poked him in the side. "They were right. You *are* a crazy ghoul."

"Come now. It's a fool-proof plan!" Lemon continued.

"Oh, you think you're funny, eh?" Misty said, smiling. Lemon's grin was infectious, and he knew it.

"Of course I am! Everything is going flawlessly so far!"

Misty peered into the room they had arrived at; it appeared to be the office of the hotel manager, or something. "No impending doom yet. I think your brilliant plan isn't working." She glanced back at him. "Unless, of course, it just collapses halfway through the night."

Lemon Frisk chuckled. "After two hundred years of just standing there, I doubt it'll choose exactly the night of our visit to do that."

Misty glared at him, but couldn't keep a smile off her face.

"All right, I've had my fun. I'll stop now," Lemon said, grinning. He turned towards TGIF-1. "Will you keep watch during the night?"

"Indeed," the robot said. "My current activity is observing you two, after all."

Lemon Frisk frowned, and exchanged a look with Misty. "No," he said. "We like our privacy. You'll stay outside the door."

"Very well," TGIF-1 said. "I can monitor frequencies that can be perceived through the door."

Lemon gave him a flat look. "I was a lot happier not knowing that," he said. "Good night, Teegee."

"Good night, Lemon Frisk and Misty Cloud," the robot replied as Lemon closed the door on him.

Lemon Frisk sighed. "Great. Now I still feel watched."

Misty smirked as she rolled out their bed rolls. "Oh, don't worry, dear," she said. "I'm fairly sure I can make you forget about him in record time."

"Don't say 'record'. That just reminds me he's monitoring us."

Misty lay down on their bed rolls and smirked. "Get over it, and get over here, already."

Footnote: Level up! You're up to 12, now. Eeyup.

New Perk: Pony-Cyborg Relations (level 1): You appear to know how to deal with artificial intelligences. I'd be careful about taking too many levels in this, though; you could end up like Nimblegait.

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Author's Note: If you don't know what jumping spiders look like... google them. They're fricking adorable.