

Chapter One: Setting Out

"A journey of a million miles begins with just one hoof fall."

The first step is always the hardest. No matter where you're going or what you're doing, taking that first step towards what you want is always the hardest part. Many times once you take it things simply sweep you up and carry you further than you had ever imagined. Leaving Junkyard for the first time, deciding to try and find more of myself rather than stay there blissfully ignorant forever, was my first step.

At the time it filled me with a sense of dread and wonder in equal measure. I wanted to believe I had been someone worth knowing, that I wasn't a monster of the wastes. But I still had horrible impulses, scattered memories of doing terrible things which danced at the edges of my consciousness. I took that step not out of courage, but out of fear. The fear that I'd never know the truth and that those memories would torment me for all time.

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The charred remains of an ancient forest spread out around me like a great skeleton clutching towards the hidden sun. Blackened boughs and decaying limbs hung upwards against the grey sky of the wasteland, stark even against the scattered sunlight which made it through the cloud layer. Once this place had been lush and beautiful, now it stood seemingly empty of any life at all, devoid of the sounds of birds or the scurrying of beasts.

I had been avoiding following Equestria's pre-war roads during my travels towards the settlement Scraps had told me of. To most ponies I was little better than a monster, like a manticore only worse, and I wanted to avoid any unnecessary attention. Occasionally I had seen signs of a campsite along the road, where the caravans which traveled to and from the junkyard and other nearby settlements stopped, but I hadn't seen any actual living ponies during my walk.

As I headed further on I came close to an area where the road I had been following met with another, leading off towards the horizon. From down that second road I could see a cloud of dust kicked up in the wake of something moving and hear the distant thunder of hoofbeats. Pausing in my tracks I could see a group of ponies rushing down the road towards me. Hiding when you're twice the size of an average pony is not an easy thing, let me tell you, thankfully it didn't seem the ponies rushing down that road were paying much attention to their surroundings.

Six earth-ponies drew carriages in teams of two, each carriage had four more ponies riding along it. All of them looked to have been constructed from cut up remains of old chariots, haphazardly welded together in a way which looked like they should have simply fallen apart, yet somehow didn't. The ponies were clad in similarly makeshift armor, salvaged from many other sets seemingly at random, and every one of them was armed. They rushed past me quickly, heading in the same direction I had been. I was simply happy they had passed me by without noticing me.

I continued onwards in silence, looking in the direction the town which Scraps had directed me towards was supposed to be. In the distance I could see the faint trails of smoke from cooking fires rising above the trees. Not too far from it at this point, and that other group would get there well before I would.

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As I began to draw closer to the town I could see where the tree-line ended, the local ponies having knocked the trees from their burnt stumps to clear space for the beginnings of their town. A tiny makeshift farm was visible near the outer-most walls of the area. The town itself constructed from scavenged wood, metal and concrete from the roads and surrounding ruins. Past the walls of the town I could see a second major road, crossed perpendicular to the road I had followed, also travelled through this tiny piece of civilization. The locals must have built it here as some kind of trading post, it was no wonder the local caravans passed through her regularly. My PipBuck conveniently provided the town a name "South-End Junction".

The sound of gunfire drew my attention back to the present as I looked over the makeshift architecture of the town. I could hear hooting and hollering from within. It was then that I spotted the first of the dead along the road towards the entrance to the town. Two ponies, dressed in the odd makeshift armor I had seen before, had been slain by some unseen opponent. Their bodies left limp in the road in pools of their own blood, partially dismembered by the force of the impact of whatever weapon had done them in. From further within the town I could hear shouting, but it sounded more excited than anything else. Somehow that only seemed to make the sight of the two dead ponies beyond the walls more sickening.

I briefly considered just walking away from the town, claiming it wasn't my problem and that I shouldn't get involved. Several parts of me agreed with that idea, after all I had no idea what kind of ponies lived here! But another part of me dissented, as I could hear chains in the distance which rattled some ancient buried memory. The collar around my neck felt hot and heavy, and somehow I knew I couldn't just walk away from this. It was important to some part of me, and that was what I had left the Junkyard to find.

I spread my wings wide and kicked off into the air, beating them briefly as I rose towards the walls and over them, onto the top of the nearest building. My landing wasn't exactly stealthy, but with the state of the town no one seemed to notice. Two more of the raiders had been killed during the battle, but I could see dozens of other dead ponies below. Most weren't armed or armored, only a small number actually carrying anything resembling a weapon. Nearer to the walls were a half dozen dead ponies in leather armor, though their weapons were missing, stolen by the attackers no doubt. Once the raiders had overcome their defense they had happily slaughtered all of the defenseless ponies within the walls!

At first this slaughter made me feel more like I should leave. There wasn't anything left to save here, and while I hated to let such horrible things go without punishment I couldn't fight that many well armed opponents at once. Or so many of the conflicting thoughts in my mind told me, others urged me to purge them from the wastes for what they did, and one more only wanted to cry at the horribleness of this travesty. Below I could hear the raiders discussing their successes as I took wing again, traveling to another building, hoping desperately to find someone or something worth saving.

"Hah! What losers! Can't believe how easy that was! The boss was right, taking that one prisoner was totally worth the effort!"

"Yeah! With her, there's no way anyone else is gonna stand against us! I bet even those tight-assed Rangers will be shaking in their boots next time we come around!" A pair of Raiders were standing over

one of the dead guards extolling on their own exploits.

Two others, a unicorn and an earth pony, gathered near the remains of what I guessed was once the leader of the settlement, mocking the corpse, "I told you we'd be back! You shoulda let yourself out to pasture years ago!"

The unicorn wrapped the body in levitation magic, animating it enough to mockingly reply to her friend, "Ah'm not gonna give up ta yer threats! Y'all aint gonna take what's ours from us! Not no way, not no how!" her accent obviously fake as the pair broke out laughing and the unicorn dropped the remains. The display only furthered the feeling of sickness in my stomach.

I trotted as quietly as I could manage across the sheet metal roof of one of the buildings, the sign hanging outside had been shot up so badly I couldn't even tell what it had once been, as I heard a call from one of the raiders in a small circle of buildings, "Look what I found! A little present left hidden under one of the beds!" a green coated unicorn with a mane and tail the color of a bruise stepped out of one of the buildings, the cutie mark of a small pile of skulls on her flank easily visible.

What really drew my attention, though, was what was encased in the pale glow matching the one on her horn. An earth-pony filly with soft light grey coat and shockingly red mane and tail who struggled frantically trying to get free, floated far enough away to avoid being hit by any of her flailing limbs. One of the other raiders, an earth-pony stallion, replied with a sadistic grin, "Oh, Graveyard, you always get me the best presents! I'm really going to enjoy this one!"

In that moment everything about my involvement in this slaughter changed. There was a victim here, someone still alive! But more than that, she was just a filly! Several of the feelings that I should flee this place died in my mind in that second, as they joined the ones which demanded vengeance. But more than that, there was a voice which told me I couldn't leave this filly to her fate. The distant sound of chains returned, sending a shiver up my spine as the collar around my neck practically burned from the illusory heat. It felt as though someone had lit my brain on fire as my rage peaked. I instinctively cast my shield spell, followed by another magic I didn't even know I could cast. The world was swept up in brilliant white light for the briefest moment before it imploded around me.

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The world reasserted itself instantly, but I was no longer on the roof of the building. Instead I stood barely a foot from the unicorn who was levitating the poor filly in the center of the small circle of buildings. I was unarmed, and not a particularly well trained combatant, but fortunately my sudden appearance caught both ponies completely by surprise and in that moment I reared up and bucked the unicorn as hard as I could with both hooves. Without time to prepare herself for the impact, both hooves slammed into the side of Graveyard's face with bone-crushing force, sending her suddenly lax body sailing across the small collection of buildings and impacting a sheet of metal hard enough to leave a small dent. The broken half of her face and the way her neck bent unnaturally to the side made it clear she wasn't going to be standing up ever again.

The other raider, momentarily stunned by my appearance, rapidly shook off his confusion as I killed his friend, much as I'm loathe to use that term as it relates to raiders. He kicked a combat shotgun from his

side into the air and caught the handle in his teeth as he turned it on me.

BLAM!*BLAM!*BLAM!

Three shots from the shotgun slammed into my shield. Fortunately the individual pellets were not so powerful as to penetrate even my inexperienced defenses. I reached out with my magic to grab the gun which the unicorn had been carrying at her side, ripping it clear from her remains and pulling it through the air to aim towards my new opponent. I was hardly a skilled shot, but thankfully automatic weapons didn't require a great deal of skill as I reflexively activated the targeting spell of my PipBuck. For a brief moment time froze around me and I expended all the energy of the spell to help me fill the air with lethal projectiles. Nearly a dozen shots rang out in rapid succession, most missing their target entirely. Three, however, connected, two bouncing harmlessly off the earth pony's armor but the third buried itself deeply into his neck as he let out a painful gurgling and collapsed to the ground beginning to bleed out.

The assault rifle gave a complaining whine somewhere inside as I levitated it as best I could. The last two shots had produced a truly horrific sound and looking towards the weapon I realized I had bent the barrel just slightly without even realizing it. While not useless, I wasn't going to get more than a few more shots from the gun. I could hear the other raiders raising their voices, red blips appearing on my E.F.S. compass as they started to close in. I looked towards the filly, who had somehow found herself a place to hide amongst the rubble even in those few seconds and shouted to her, "Run!"

Thankfully I didn't have to tell her twice as she immediately took off towards one of the nearby buildings, the same she'd been dragged out of. I followed behind her, the assault rifle floating nearby just outside my shield, kicking the door closed behind me just as another raider rounded the corner into the cul-de-sac. I wasn't certain I'd be able to hold off more than a few of these ponies, but I wasn't going to just surrender a filly to a group who would be so deprived as to openly mock the dead. I could only imagine what kind of 'enjoyment' they had planned to get from her, and all the answers made me deeply ill.

Outside the building I could tell there were others gathering, four at the moment and probably more following behind them, red lights moving on my E.F.S. Thankfully I didn't think they'd seen which building we went into. Unfortunately I was certain they were aware we were around as I could hear them calling out, a loud female voice penetrating the building, "Come on out, and I promise we'll kill you real quick!" the voice had an edge to it which could have been used to cut your mane.

Frantically I looked around the room we'd fled into. It looked like it had once been a bar, a long counter looping around one side of the room with several over-turned tables as well. A radio behind the counter looked like it had been caught by a blast from a shotgun, possibly aimed at whomever had actually been behind the bar. The filly I had rescued was nowhere to be seen, but I could see a set of stairs leading upwards in the back, hidden behind the bar wall with dozens of broken glasses and bottles on it, and could guess where she'd gone. At the moment I was more concerned with not getting killed as I heard the raiders moving around the outside bucking in doors one by one.

I moved, intent to levitate two of the tables towards the doorway, only for it to burst open moments before I could grab either, that same female voice filling the air, "Hah! Found y-" her voice cut off as she actually saw me. A brief look of panic spread across her face as she grabbed the bit of the battle-saddle strapped to her flanks. I could see now she was an earth-pony, carrying a pair of single-shot rifles. Fortunately her panic made her a poor shot. Unfortunately, I was a large target and those were quite potent weapons.

One of the shells went wide of me, sailing across the room to embed itself into the counter with a 'crunch' of shattering wood. The other slammed through my shield and impacted my flank causing a lance of searing pain. Briefly overwhelmed the magic powering my shield faded as the agony of the impact spread across my body, my PipBuck's medical spells throwing up a few basic warnings but thankfully nothing life-threatening. I responded by bringing the assault rifle around and opening up with it without even the benefit of my targeting spell. While I was a terrible shot, and worse the weapon was beginning to be seriously damaged, in an enclosed space against a stationary target even I couldn't miss. Six more rounds spent before the rifle jammed as one of the rounds misfired and destroyed the loading mechanism.

Unfortunately, those six rounds weren't enough to kill her, well not completely. The wounds to her forelegs and torso were enough I didn't think she'd last more than a few minutes. But a few minutes of being shot at with those rifles of hers seemed like an absolute eternity at the time. I jumped slightly to one side as she fired again, one of the bullets grazing along my wing and tearing a few feathers loose. The pain was nothing compared to what I was feeling in my flank at the time, but without my shield up a direct hit from one of those rifles was going to mean serious injury.

Rather than take the chance she might get lucky, I drew the assault rifle up closer and swung it around as hard as I could wrapped in my levitation field. The resounding crunch of metal on flesh filled the empty bar, bending the weapon even worse than it already was. A second swing, and a third, and a forth, before even the stock of the weapon was giving up and the gun practically fell to pieces still encased in my magic. Thankfully, somewhere between the second and fourth hit I'd managed to do enough damage that my less than pleasant guest passed out, the red marker on my E.F.S. going dark.

A brief moment passed as I got a chance to breathe, dropping the broken remains of the assault rifle to the ground and immediately concentrating to re-cast my shield. The other three red dots on my E.F.S. were growing closer, quickly, I had barely a few seconds before they'd be into the room with me. Flipping on my inventory management spell I pulled one of the precious few healing potions from my saddlebag and downed it quickly. Had we the time I would have preferred to use the bandages, but at the moment my concern was living long enough to care about wasting supplies.

I couldn't fight three more ponies armed with something like those rifles, and with the way that the earth pony raider had them hooked into her battle-saddle I couldn't easily pull them free with my magic without seriously damaging them in the process. Frantic, I cast my eyes around the room looking for anything I could use to stop them, spotting the grenade pouch the raider was carrying just as the first of her compatriots came close enough for me to spot him. Another earth-pony, this one larger than the one with the shotgun, wearing a pair of wickedly spiked shoes and carrying some kind of heavy pistol in his teeth. He fired a single shot at me which thankfully passed my cheek with a near miss. In a panic I grabbed the grenade pouch on the dead raider and ripped the pin from one of the grenades, tossing the whole bag towards the cluster of three red dots before hurling myself across the bar and hunkering down as low as I could manage.

The explosion from outside the door was loud enough to leave my ears ringing despite being inside a building and well out of immediate danger range. The two windows in the front side of the building burst inwards from the shrapnel, spreading shattered glass across the already ruined floor. The three red blips on my E.F.S. winked out instantly, caught up in the hurricane of destruction. Slowly, I climbed back to my feet and back over the bar, hooves clicking slightly against the hard tile floor as I could see others approaching the area. Six raiders slain, four more killed in taking the town, that left eight more alive.

Assuming I'd seen all of them on the road into town, at least. The pain from my wound had died down, at least, the healing potion was doing its job. But I knew better to believe I could take all eight of them out like I had those six. Surprise and luck weren't going to keep me alive much longer. But maybe something else could instead.

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In the time it took the remaining raiders to finally make their way into the circle of buildings I had levitated the corpse from the door-frame and gathered up the remains of the four who had been blown to pieces. I had laid them out on the ground around me, so it might appear that they had fought me as a group and been blown to pieces as a result. Doing my best to cover over the specific nature of their deaths, so as to make it less likely that the remaining raiders would believe I had killed them with their own weapons. The shocked reaction of the raider upon spotting me before had given me an idea.

My shield and horn filled the surroundings with dark purple as the eight remaining raiders finally approached, slowly enough I was certain they were thinking carefully about whether they wanted to try fighting me. I flared my wings outwards to make myself look as large and imposing as possible, straightening up until I stood nearly twice the height of a normal pony. They trained multiple weapons on me, but most of them seemed to be lighter guns, with only two carrying long barreled firearms. Together they looked horrendously dangerous and I did my best not to show any sign of the nervousness which ran through my mind, many of the conflicting voices urging me to teleport away and run.

Finally, after several long seconds of stand-off their leader, the unicorn who had been toying with the body of the town's leader, who I could now see had bloodshot eyes which seemed to suit her bloodstained white coat and purple and magenta mane, stepped forwards as she looked me up and down, "I didn't think we'd find something like you here." she glared up at me with a look which seemed more curious than angry over the death of her fellows, "What would one of you 'goddesses' be doing way out here?" somehow being referred to that way filled me with shame and anger, as though she had just slung some mortal insult at those who rightfully deserved the title.

I paused briefly as though only just then registering their presence, or so I hoped, "My business here is my own! You will leave now, or all of you will die!" my horn glowed brighter, briefly, as my voice was raised to the fullness of its volume, echoing off the surrounding buildings.

For a long moment the raider leader simply stared at me in some disbelief. I stood impassive and simply looked back down at her with the best dismissive appearance I could give, given that my mind was currently awash with the desire to be anywhere but where I was. Finally she furrowed her brows and backed up, calling out to the others, "Let's get the buck out of here. We already got everything worth taking anyway. No point in getting killed over worthless wreckage." snorting and turning to leave.

I gave a silent prayer of thanks to Celestia that she'd believed my bluff, at least now I didn't have to fight them all at once. I still hated the idea of letting a group like that simply gallop away with whatever they had taken, after wiping out an entire settlement, but at the moment I wasn't in any position to stop them and had no idea how many more might be left wherever they came from. Silently I waited until all of them had left and I could hear them galloping away with their wagons, the red dots in my E.F.S. vanishing, before I allowed my legs to collapse out from under me and my shield to dissipate.

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Climbing the stairs within the broken bar, I found that the second floor had two doorways on opposite sides of a short hallway. One sat open, a brief peek inside revealed it to be a decently large room taking up most of the second floor containing a bed large enough for two ponies to share. There were no signs of the inhabitants, and I could safely assume they were amongst the dead outside.

Across the hall, the other doorway looked in much worse repair, owing mostly to the way that the top left corner of the door had been bucked in completely. It had clearly been forced out of its frame and now hung unlatched but closed. The unbroken section of door had the word 'Requiem' stenciled onto it, having been carefully painted by somepony with obvious care. Gently, I nudged the door open, causing it to creek on its hinges.

The interior of the room was not in dramatically better shape than the door was. It appeared that the raider unicorn, Graveyard the other had called her, had ransacked this room first and returned outside before disturbing the other. Picture frames sat shattered on the ground, the smaller mattress in the corner torn up as though to check whether someone had hidden something inside, dozens of weathered books were torn from a small bookcase in the corner and flung around the room. I couldn't imagine what the raider had hoped to find in what was obviously a filly's room, judging by the mangled stuffed pony sitting on the ground in the corner.

There was no sign of the filly from outside at first, then I remembered what the raider had said about hiding under the bed. Carefully I reached out with my magic to lift the mattress from the bedframe and looked beneath. I could see the form of the small grey filly crouched in the furthest corner behind the bed, utterly silent in the relative darkness of the room. Getting a better look at her at this distance made it obvious that her mane and tail were naturally straight, her coat a soft grey the color of clouds and upon her flank was emblazoned an empty musical scale. Giving a nervous smile I spoke quietly and as gently as I could manage, "They're gone now. You can come out. I won't hurt you." hoping she would recognize that I'd saved her enough to at least come out from under the bed.

Several long minutes went by as I spoke quietly to her, trying to reassure the filly that she wasn't in danger, before she very slowly crawled out from beneath the bed and began nosing around the room as though searching for something. I stepped backwards and turned around, to find myself staring into a large mirror which had been struck hard enough to fracture it. Despite the breaks the mirror provided a decent enough reflection, the first time I'd seen my reflection since waking up, the reflection seemed somehow wrong though I couldn't put my hoof on why.

My body was a dark purple bordering on black. My mane was long, nearly reaching the floor even when sitting fully upright, colored a matching dark purple with similarly dark green stripes and a strong wave to it, tail matching my mane. My eyes were a brilliant crimson, complementing my dark coat with surprising effect. Something about the image staring back at me seemed distantly familiar but not at all like it should have looked. Just looking at that reflection made me feel *wrong*, a sick churning feeling in my stomach as I was reminded somewhere that I wasn't what I should be. Unsettled I turned away from the mirror and did my best to put the feeling out of my mind.

By the time I finished my self-inspection the filly I had saved had finished her own time around the room. She'd gathered a small number of photographs and a single book into a small bundle tied together with what looked like a bandanna, dropping it at my forelegs as she looked up at me sadly. When I looked back down she seemed to scoot away from wherever my eyes were pointed almost by reflex, until I finally just trained my eyes upon the package and asked quietly, "Is this all you're taking?" she nodded her head slowly and gently picked it up in her teeth. I wanted to cry, to take righteous vengeance against those who had stolen this filly's family, to do anything other than sit there uselessly, but at that moment it was all I could do, "I'll carry it for you. It's only fitting if we're going to be traveling together." she at least caught on fast, that she couldn't stay here alone and seemed a little more relaxed and happy when I proposed us actually staying together.

Carefully I levitated the package up and tucked it into one of my saddle bags still tied up, my PipBuck chirped as it registered the entire bundle as a single object. I stood and moved to the doorway, careful not to look directly at the filly. She moved with a silent grace, such that I could only barely hear her hoof-falls upon the hard flooring as we made our way outside. If I hadn't been so close to her I easily would have missed even that. Briefly, I checked the one intact object in the bar, the large refrigerator behind the counter. Inside I found a few bottles of purified water and some oddly shaped fruits resembling what was being grown in the farm outside town. Somehow taking from the dead of this place felt wrong, but at the same time Scraps hadn't given me any food or water, and while I might not need them the filly did.

As a final gesture to the dead of the town I gathered up some of the wood from the shattered remains of the doors and started a bonfire, carefully moving the bodies of the deceased villagers into it. I didn't have time or energy to give them a proper burial, but at least I could avoid leaving their bodies to rot beneath the dreary clouds of the wasteland.

When the time came to leave town I was carrying the filly, whom I had chosen to call Silent Requiem based on the name on her door and the way she never seemed to make even the slightest sound, on my back. She had been so exhausted, physically and emotionally, by the day that she could barely walk now. I could feel the warm wetness of tears on my coat as she clung to my neck with her forehooves. Even as she was crying over all she had lost that day she never made a single sound. Finally, as the sun began to set behind impenetrable clouds, we walked south along the road. I wouldn't feel right until I found the raiders who had done this and ensured they would never do it again.

Notes:

Aurora Borealis (Level Up! - Level 2)

New Perk: Swift Casting - Speed is a necessity in battle, especially when utilizing complex magics. You manifest spells 25% faster than normal.

New Spell: Twilight Bridge (Rank 1) - A gift from the creator of I.M.P., you can instantly teleport yourself across short distances so long as you can see your target destination or have been in the location you are teleporting to. Small objects near your arrival point may be displaced, but larger objects may be hazardous. Be careful!

Silent Requiem (Level 1)

Trait: Foalish Build - Thinner and lighter than an average pony, you gain +1 to your Agility but take 20% more damage to your limbs from all attacks. Stay away from explosives!

Trait: Picky Scavenger - You have difficulty carrying as large of loads as most ponies, reducing your carry weight to $100 + (\text{Str} \times 5)$ pounds, however this has lead to you being exceptionally good at picking the best objects to take with you. Objects you loot are in better condition than normal and you have a chance to find peculiar treasures others would overlook.

Origin: Wipe-Out Survivor - Your home was wiped out by a hostile force, killing everyone else you knew. You only survived through your superior ability to avoid being detected by anyone, but this experience has left you scarred and possibly permanently nervous about those around you. You gain +15 to your Sneak skill and opponents are considered to have 1 point lower Perception for purposes of detecting you while sneaking, however you suffer -5 each to your Speech and Barter skills and a permanent -1 to your

Charisma. Needless to say, you don't talk (or make any other noise!) much.