

Herein lies recorded the story of brave and foolish ponies who trusted in ancient creatures from long-dead pasts to forge a bright new future. Read and beware.

*TOME
OF
ANARCHY*

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Chapter 1: Omens

The wasteland is a lot of things. Unforgiving. Dangerous. Perplexing. It's not always the best place, but the last year has been... well, worse, actually. Sunlight pouring down from the sky for the first time in centuries notwithstanding, life has been rough.

But change is in the wind. And for three mares who only a day or two woke up in the same bed, cuddled up against a griffon and missing the last fourteen hours or so of memories - and the poor flustered mechanic who walked in on them - life is about to take a sharp turn toward the strange.

This is the Age of Anarchy. Let it begin.

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It's early morning and shreds of cloud drift across a sky still a little pink from sunrise. Already one of the turret banks is chattering at an approaching caravan, demanding books and predicting the value of its cargo. The main square of Dodge 2.0 is already busy with ponies trading, patrolling, and drawing water from the central well. No one seems to notice the small-framed black pegasus with the purple mane, darting about and furtively asking if anyone has seen the newcomers. There are always newcomers, not the least of which being our four mares...

Gearshift flutters nearby the chattering turret, adding to the noise. Mostly trying to help identify scrap and make bets on how much they'll get for their wares.

Sure Fire stares out at the crowds, idly leaning against a piece of wooden fencing.

"...look, I don't NEED you to tell me how much you think my wares are worth," says the caravan leader, a tan-and-brown-paint earth pony. "I need you to let me in the gate so I can sell!"

Gearshift glances at the turret, then the gate, and shrugs. "Don't ask me, I don't live *or* work here. I do follow the rules though. Sergeant is very particular."

"The approximate worth of your scavenged goods is seventeen caps less than the fee to restock water containers at the well," the turret estimates, its targeting laser panning over the caravan. *"But if you insist on wasting your time..."* it says with a droll Manehattan accent... and opens the door. The steel grinds open and the force field flickers off.

The caravan starts inside. The stallion gives Gearshift a dirty look as he walks by. "Well, gee, thanks for nothing."

Silk Rose is spending the morning browsing the market. She's not looking to buy anything in particular, but rather, is scouting out 'just in case'. You never know what you can find. Or what ponies are willing to give up with the right... persuasion.

Sure Fire will eye the black pegasus among the crowds, shifting her slung rifle to a more comfortable position.

The market is a little sparse today, but the regular vendors are still up and running: The Sharpest Tack, Blaze of Glory, the "Brass Lantern Bar and Gril" (one of the neon Ls is flickering out), and even the town's only restaurant are doing brisk business.

Zeroni trots through the busy markets, her eyes gaze around her to see what goods the merchants had on display to offer. Her leather cloak was wrapped around her form and the hood up, a habit of hers when exploring a new town. After a short walk, the zebra mare almost trips over a colt. Wait... not a colt, just a very small pegasus stallion. Young, but small even for his age. He looks up at the zebra with an inscrutable look in his deep purple eyes.

"You," he says. "You're one of them. Here, I have a letter for you, sorry." He unfolds a messenger bag with a wingtip and pulls out a finely-pressed and immaculately clean letter, which seems to be in an envelope composed of four different kinds of paper, seamlessly folded together. He offers it to Zeroni.

Zeroni looks at the letter in confusion and then back at the stallion. "I'm sorry but, one of what exactly?" she asked him.

"One of the newcomers, the ones I'm, uh, supposed to give. Mm. These, to," the pegasus explains, opening his bag a bit farther so Zeroni can see three identical letters in his bag. "The master said. Oh! Um. Sorry, wasn't supposed to. Well! Are you, um, going to take the letter?" He asks, shying away from the scrutiny as if he doesn't like being looked directly at.

Zeroni sighs feeling as she wouldn't really be able to say no and just accepts the letter. "Very well, is there anything else?"

Silk Rose is a bit more interested at the caravan that was just let inside. With a smile, she trots on over to the caravan leader. "Hey there, big guy. Anything good with you today?"

"No! Nope, not at all," the pegasus squeaks. "Thankyouverymuchforyourtimegoodbye." He skitters off rapidly with the assistance of wings, seeking out... well, probably someone else.

Sure Fire watches the pegasus run off, then stands and approaches Zeroni quietly. "What was that about?"

The caravan leader shrugs. "Mostly scraps and some salvaged furniture," he says. "Plus a load of weapons we found near..." He sizes Silk Rose up. "...a place. Yeah. Anyway. Can I interest you in something?"

Gearshift feels a slight and tentative tap on her shoulder. "Um, excuse me miss," says a small voice from a small black pegasus who has somehow snuck up on both her AND the turret (which

still seems to be oblivious to his presence). "I um. Letter. I have a letter for you, if you don't mind..."

Gearshift squeaks at the tap, whirling to find the little pegasus right there. "Oh! Uh..... A letter eh? Huh. Sure, why not. Hope it's not an invoice. I swear that oil spill wasn't my fault..." She extends a hoof for said letter.

Zeroni watched the pegasus run off with a raised brow and frown. She was certain that the sign on his jacket was that of the Ghostlies, a local gang that hide out somewhere north from the town. Before she could ponder more, she was approached by a unicorn mare with a Grey coat, an Emerald shaded Mane and eyes to match it, she had a red crosshair cutie mark so no doubt she's good with a firearm.

The black pegasus, who looks somewhat like a ray of darkness on an otherwise sunny day, quickly hoofs over a letter, the envelope of which looks to be folded very neatly and precisely from four different kinds of paper. "Mhmm. Um, good luck," he says, and buzzes off without so much as a 'how do you do.'

Gearshift looks over to Smartysparks. "Well, that was weird. Know anything about him?"

Silk Rose gives a little hum, looking him over in return. "Weeell, what kinds of scraps and weapons are we talking?"

"I have absolutely no idea," Zeroni replies as she stares at the letter in question. "He gave me a letter for some reason, didn't say much about it though."

The stallion proudly displays... some pretty crap weaponry: dented small-caliber repeaters, a pistol held together with tape, a set of brass shoes that are at least half rust, and some assorted spears made from knives and duct tape. Of slightly more value are some solid chunks of scrap steel, bundles of electronics parts, and an almost perfectly polished toaster, the kind with the internal power cell instead of a cord.

Sure Fire glances at the letter, then back up to meet Zeroni's look. "Odd. Do you plan to read it?"

The turret pans over to focus its laser array on Gearshift. "*Do I know anything about whom?*" it asks, sounding very bored.

Gearshift peers around, trying to spot the kid. "Little black pegasus. Quiet lad. Gonna name him spooky if I can find him. Gave me a letter."

Zeroni shrugs as she goes to open the letter only to stop for a few seconds. "Do you think it's safe?" she asked.

The turret pans around 360 degrees. "*One pegasus detected,*" it says, then dryly adds, "*you. I'm afraid you're hallucinating, madam. Might I suggest you seek medical attention?*"

Gearshift frowns. "Nah, can't be, I got a letter, remember?" She waggles it in front of his sensor as proof.

Sure Fire steps back slightly, a worried look crossing her visage. "Are you expecting something dangerous?" she replies, glancing again to the letter, suddenly wondering if this Zebra is implying that it could be an explosive.

"There is a sixty-two point eight percent chance that you are making this all up in an attempt to test my artificial intelligence engine and targeting parameters," the turret says, and pans back to watching the west entrance. "Please find someone else to bother or I will be forced to notify security and maintenance."

Silk Rose gives a little bit of a frown, quite disappointed in the caravan's 'haul'. "I'm not really sure any of that is quite 'me'. Sorry, hun."

Gearshift sighs and slips the letter into her saddlebag, managing to stuff it between the heaps of junk within. She flutters down to the town center, muttering about moody robots.

Zeroni frowns. "Maybe i'm just being over-cautious about this but I mean it does seem a bit suspicious how he seemed nervous giving it to me and then he runs like a rad bat out of tartarus."

"Fair point..." Sure Fire mutters, "How heavy is it?"

The caravaner shrugs. "Yeah, nothing that would catch the eye of a pretty mare like yourself, I'm afraid," he says with a wink. "Should'a been here three weeks ago, I had a whole dresserful of pretty dresses- hey, squirt, don't bother the lady, I'm talking here." He scowls down at a black pegasus behind Silk Rose.

The pegasus has just raised a hoof to tap Rose on the shoulder, but instead squeaks and darts under the caravan.

Gearshift spots the mares with their letters, and trots over. "Well hi there, I see you got letters t..." She trails off upon reaching them, realizing just where she recognized them from. She immediately goes bright red, an odd feat, considering her reddish pink coat.

Sure Fire looks at the letter from a few different angles, tapping her chin with a forehoof. "Doesn't seem big enough for one. Should be fine unless it's some magic thing."

Sure Fire stops as the mare approaches, seeing her red-muzzled she replies defensively. "No we are not talking about 'stress relievers' before you ask."

Silk Rose glances toward the pegasus when the caravaner speaks to him, then back. "Oh, don't be selfish, hun. You've had my attention, don't you think it would be nice to share? I'm sure he only needs a moment. Then you've got me all to yourself again." She smiles.

Gearshift balks. "I... what? No... I, er.. letter!" She pulls out hers and waves it about.

Sure Fire nods. "We were worried for a moment it could be an explosive device, but it does not appear so."

The caravaner shrugs. "If you say so, Ma'am," he says, and goes back to peddling junk. The small pegasus pushes a finely-folded envelope out from under the cart toward Silk Rose, and zooms off in a puff of dust. The envelope is folded very neatly from four different kinds of paper.

Zeroni opens the letter to see what's inside of it. "Wonder why he was so nervous then."

Sure Fire blinks. "Wait a moment...how many letters did he have?"

Silk Rose watches the pegasus flee, with a frown. Poor little guy. After a moment, she picks up the letter in her telekinesis, and looks it over, to see if there's a sender's name written on it anywhere.

The envelope appears to be four separate pieces of paper, a dusky brick red paper, a gold-leaf sheet, a dense brown cardstock, and a greenish almost scaly paper. It falls apart as Zeroni opens the letter. Inside is the finest, cleanest piece of paper she has ever seen, sealed with a wax seal of some long, serpentine creature swallowing its own tail.

Silk Rose does not find any indication of sender on her letter, either.

Gearshift sniffs her own letter, deciding to see what the others' found before opening it.

There's an abrupt rush of wind and a THUD on Sure Fire's head as a black pegasus zips over, pausing momentarily, just long enough to impale a fourth identical letter on the mare's horn. "Oopssorrygottagobye!" he says as he rushes by, and arcs into the sky, headed northwest.

Sure Fire lashes out with her telekinesis, trying to snag the retreating pegasus, but he squeaks and slips out of Sure Fire's telekinetic sheath, and bolts for the sky, far out of her range in a matter of a second and a half.

Sure Fire huffs. "Damn, bugger got away."

Silk Rose opens the letter once she's sure there's no name written on it. Might as well see what it's about.

"Hmm, four pieces of paper, and the symbol on the seal is one I don't recognize," Zeroni says, examining the contents of the letter. She looks at each page to see what's on them.

Gearshift idly runs a hoof over each piece of paper, feeling the different textures. "Hmm... Gotta have some nice printing tech to make these. Wonder who's behind it?"

Sure Fire watches the retreating pegasus for a few moments before turning to look over the letter with Zeroni.

The letter, finely handwritten (in zebraic cuneiform in Zeroni's case) by a strong hand, reads as follows. Sure Fire's letter is actually written AROUND the hole in the letter, strangely enough.

"Dear wanderers and adventurers. It has come to my attention that you are in need of something gainful to do in this war-torn world. I request your presence for tea tomorrow afternoon at the Ancient Shrine in the Macintosh hills. Please ensure the others bearing copies of this letter join you for this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Cordially yours..."

The letter is signed with the same creature devouring its own tail.

Gearshift ignores the others, pulling out a small can of turpentine. She carefully drips a single drop of the fluid on each section of paper.

The paper reacts much as Gearshift would expect. The foil on the gold leaf curls away and crisps, the redbrick paper darkens, and the others simply become saturated.

Zeroni "No name, just that same symbol again." she comments looking at the page. "This feels somewhat suspicious."

Gearshift taps her lip with her hoof. "Well, that was interesting. Now, lets see what it says." She carefully opens the letter.

Silk Rose reads through the letter, and looks around curiously. Other copies of the letter, hmm?

Gearshift's letter is identical to the others. She ponders. "Hey, guys...? What's tea...?"

"Either this is someone with a sense of humor or we're in for another long night," Sure Fire comments, eyes scanning the writing around the newly made hole in her own letter.

After reading her letter, Silk Rose easily notices a flash of gold leaf, identical to her own letter's, from... well, interesting... from a group of mares she very much recognizes.

"I swear to Luna, if this is R.C.'s doing..." Sure Fire lets the threat hang in the air.

Gearshift blushes again at the mention of R.C.

Silk Rose grins and trots over, inserting herself snugly between Sure Fire and Gearshift. "Well now, would you look who I've found? And it seems like fate wants us together after all!" With this, she reveals her copy of the letter to them.

Sure Fire glances at Silk, eyebrow raised. "You too?...I amend my previous statement: I will DEFINITELY strangle R.C. if he's behind this."

Sure Fire glances back to her own floating letter. "Although... I do sense an opportunity."

Gearshift squeaks at the sudden close contact, then frowns. "Someone went to a lot of trouble to make these. Operable printing presses are hard to come by. Especially for unusual paper like this."

Sure Fire shrugs. "Fair point. Very well, i'll go if the rest of you do plan to."

Gearshift shrugs too. "Sure, I'll go. I wanna see their machines. And find out what this tea is."

Silk Rose smirks at Sure Fire. "If I had to guess at anypony behind this, I'd say it was this one." She nods toward Gearshift. "She's definitely jealous of us, I can tell. Who else would want an excuse to spend some close time with us, after all? R.C. would only need to ask, I think."

Sure Fire gives Silk Rose a look that is simultaneously deadpan... yet tempted.

Gearshift fidgets and goes red. "I.. er, lets get going, eh?"

Silk Rose can't help but snicker at the reactions. "You make it too easy. But, I'm game if you are."

"According to the letters, we need to be there tomorrow." Sure Fire responds, "We can go now but you would have to be willing to camp."

Zeroni "I'm not sure that's a good idea, what if whoever signed these notes are there while we're sleeping?"

Gearshift shrugs. "Well, can't one or two of us stay up while the others sleep? S' what we did back home, lotta nasties crawling round those hills."

"We would sleep on watch, yes," Sure Fire says.

Silk Rose hums quietly. "Well then, why don't we just find something to do to pass the time? There's bound to be something fun we can do!"

"Alright, if we're going to camp then we should just use the essential items, just in case this is a trap and we're outnumbered and outgunned," Zeroni suggests. "Easier to pack up and run."

Silk Rose grins and adds, "We can always visit the bartender again."

Sure Fire gives Silk Rose an eye-roll, but smiles.

Sure Fire "If we end up passed-out for Celestia-knows-how-long, then we'd likely miss our...appointment...So that is a no-go"

Gearshift shakes her head vigorously. "Where I go, my stuff goes. Not leaving any of these bits behind."

Zeroni looks at Gearshift's pack. "You sure you can carry all that?"

Gearshift smirks. "You don't get to be a good mechanic if you can't carry your tools."

Silk Rose glances between Gearshift and Zeroni. "Either way... no need to go there so early, especially if we're worried about safety."

Sure Fire "So shall we stay for a night and head out in the morning?"

Gearshift shrugs. "Whoever gave us these letters wants us alive. Don't think they'd kill us in our sleep."

Zeroni "I suggest camping out there before they get there, so we have more of an advantage if it IS a trap."

Trap or no, there's no point in staying outside the fortress-town when there are roaming gangs of slavers, raiders, and monsters in them thar hills. The loose-knit group finds things to occupy themselves until evening, when they head for the Brass Lantern to rustle up some fresh griffon.

As Sure Fire and the other swalk into the Lantern with the others, there's quite an assault on the senses. The interior of the bar is a little smoky from the oil lamps hanging from the ceiling. A stallion plays the piano in one corner and several rough-and-tumble merc types are enjoying a game of poker in another. A stallion and his colt are enjoying a dinner of fried... uh, stuff? at another table, and at the bar is R.C., jovially chatting away with a pink mare with light blue curls.

"...an' so I says to the lad, tha's nae a griffon, Ah knows a griffon when Ah sees one, tha's a chicken glued tae a cat!" the griffon says, and chuckles with the mare. It's nae unlike your problem, lass," he continues. "Maybe things just are nae the way they seem. But if they are, well..." He polishes his talons on the tuft of brown feathers just below his neck. "...then per'aps ye'd consider goin't on a date wi' wee Randall instead, eh?" He winks. "If ye know what Ah mean."

Zeroni puts her letter on the counter. "I don't suppose any of you recognize that symbol in the letter?" she asks the others.

Silk Rose trots her way over to the bar, seating herself next to the mare that's captured the griffon's attention. With a smile, she says to him, "It's been a little while, hun. How've you been?" She glances over at the mare. "Talking with somepony special?"

Gearshift glances between Zeroni and Silk, then shakes her head. "Weird symbols like that aren't my thing. Why, is it important?"

"Presumably it relates to whomever sent these letters, seeing as it is also their signature." Sure Fire responds, watching Silk.

The pink mare blushes a bit. "Oh, I, uh. Having some trouble with my boyfriend," she says. "I needed a drink and some advice. Randy's good for both, once you get him to stop flirting."

The griffon chuckles. "Aye, that I am, lass, that I am. As I was sayin't, Jes keep an opin't mind wi' poor Scatter," the griffon says, putting a finger under the mare's chin and lifting her gaze to meet his. "If ye can work it oot, ye work it oot. Ah dinnae be wantin't to be the one what ruint a perfectly good relationship. But if ye need sommat of a rebound, look me up, mâ€™kay?â€ He grins and turns his attention back to Silk Rose, and his smile freezes. "Ah, you... again... funny coincidence. Needing a drink?"

Silk Rose gives him a nice un-frozen smile in return. "A drink would be nice. But... there is something I'd like to ask. I'll be leaving tomorrow, and I was thinking about how lonely I'll be... You don't think you'd be up for spending a little quality time with me tonight, do you?"

R.C. refills the other mare's glass with vermillion liquid. "That last one's for courage, on the house," R.C. says. "Knowin't Scatter, ye'll prob'ly need't. Good luck, sweetheart."

He turns back to Silk Rose. "Ah, aboot that..." he says. "You an' your passel are bad news in a bucket. When I spend a night with more'n' one pretty mare, I damn well like t'remember't. Whatever y'drugged me with wasnae any fair, nor any fun a'tall." He scowls. "So if y'do need a place to crash, I'm nae eatin't or drinkin't anything beforehand, an' if I see so much as a syringe, you're out on your tail." His expression softens. "But... seein't how I've got nae other commitments~"

Gearshift blinks, looking between R.C and Silk, not quite sure what they were talking about.

Silk Rose gives a little frown. "It wasn't me who drugged us, hun... I prefer my fun good and clean." After a moment, she smiles again, though. "But, I'm more than willing to make you a new memory, if you like."

The griffon chuckles. "Aye, sounds like a grand plan. I'm off shift at nine, that's... just a few hours." He grins then looks at Gearshift. "Bringin't a newcomer?" he asks. "Well, always up for a challenge. What's your name, sweetheart?"

Gearshift blushes. "Im uh.. Gearshift. Yup." She pauses. "Er... newcomer for what?"

R.C. leans forward on an elbow. "Oh, wait, I do remember you," he says. "Weren't you the one what busted in on us when were were wakin't up all hung over and cuddled up?" He chuckles. "Decided y'want a piece o' that action, eh?"

Silk Rose glances over at Gearshift, and smirks. "She's been following me all day." She omits the part about them being a group. It's funnier and more awkward that way.

R.C. whistles. "I'd follow a fine posterior like that around all day too. Cannae blame th'lass."

Gearshift balks, and her muzzle goes redder. "What? I.. no! I just wanted to ask a question!" She turns an even deeper red and sinks down, until she's peeking over the edge of the counter. "That's not it at all!"

R.C. peeks his beak over the edge of the counter. "Turn any redder an' I'll put ye in a drink as a cherry, lass," he says with a chuckle. "No harm, no foul. Y'want a drink?"

Silk Rose gives a little giggle. "That sounds tasty. Maybe I should give the cherry a little nibble?"

The griffon chuckles. "Not in public. I'm sure there's a health code violation there or sommat."

Silk Rose gives a mock pout. "Aw, you ruin all the fun."

Gearshift squeaks, her ears twitching. "I uh... Yes. I think I need that drink."

R.C. mixes up a drink with some canned juice, some strong clear liquid, and adds a cherry. "There y'go, lass, first one's on me," he says. It smells deliciously fruity. He waits until she takes a sip and chuckles. "It's called a 'Sex on th'Beach.'"

"I'll definitely take one," Zeroni interjects. "Nothing too strong though, need to be up bright and early."

Sure Fire sits at the bar with the others, sliding her letter onto the counter. "I don't suppose you happen to have seen this symbol before, have you, R.C.?"

Gearshift rises up from her hiding spot, and take a sip. Her eyes widen, and she smiles. "Ooh, this is good! Do you think turrets can drink these? Can they even taste? Or get drunk?"

Silk Rose keeps eyeing Gearshift. After a moment, she says, "I think I'll have one of those, too."

Zeroni balks. "...Are you asking whether a machine can taste a drink or get drunk?"

The griffon nods to Zeroni and mixes two kinds of whisky into a glass with a smashed ice cube. "And a Black 'n' White for the black'n'white," he says, scooting the beverage across the bar to her. "Five caps please, as I've nae embarrassed y'half t'death yet today." He turns to Sure Fire and looks at the letter. "Hmmm... I do believe so," he says. "Buy a drink and I'll tell you all about't."

Gearshift takes a few more sips. "....Both? McSparky is real nice to me. I'd like to get him somethin' special."

Sure Fire nods. "Straight whiskey, then, please."

The griffon begins mixing up another fruity drink for Silk Rose. "And I dinnae think th'turrets can get drunk, but I know of a virus that slows computers down. Maybe it'd make him feel drunk if y'took th'hurt off't. Double?" he asks Sure Fire.

Sure Fire shrugs. "Sure."

Zeroni hoofs over five caps to the griffon and nods in thanks as she brings the drink up to her mouth.

Gearshift downs more of her drink, enjoying the warm glow in her belly. "I don't wanna hurt him. Just wanna have some fun. And alcohol always makes things more fun!"

The blend of whisky is very smooth to Zeroni's palate, with a sneaky fire trailing behind it. R.C. pulls a square glass from behind the counter with one hand while he stirs Silk Rose's drink and scoots it over with the other. "Eight caps. An' five from you, Miz Fire."

Sure Fire telekinetically slides caps onto the counter.

Silk Rose smiles and places the caps on the counter, before taking her drink and having a sip.

The griffon sorts the drinks out and then takes a long, hard look at the symbol. "I've only seen this one place," he says slowly. "Two if y'count th'accident." He collects the caps and dumps them behind the register with a clinking sound. "Had a mare used to work here a while back. Got herself blown up pretty badly by a landmine. Synthie patched her up and got her some replacement bits, and she disappeared again. Comes back later, decked out like a raider, covered in blood, with this symbol on her neck like a tattoo."

The griffon scowls. "Turns out she hadnae gone raider. She'd just killed a whole cluster of them over by Pickett Mills, all by her lonesome. Said she was on a mission. Couldn't have happened to a nicer gal." The griffon sighs and pours himself a whisky as well. "Then she disappear't again. Tracked her into the hills. Dead as a doornail, wi' one hoof up on that creepy statue up there as if tryin't t'wake't up."

Sure Fire is a little unsettled by the news. "What did her in?"

Zeroni listens to the story and feels an uneasiness start to creep up.

"Enclave," R.C. growls. "That's m'guess. Looks like she'd been bathed in plasma, shot through with lasers, and had gauss flechettes stickin't out of her like a pincushion. Must have been a hell of a fight, but she always was a fighter." He sighs and slugs back the whisky. "Symbol's on the statue, too, right't th'base. Maybe th'stories about't are true after all."

Sure Fire is a little relieved to hear the death was not mysterious in nature; as far as wasteland deaths go.

"Either that or those bastards up at Rangetop," he adds. "Those steel bastards aren't known for bein't th'kindest sorts, but my guess is Enclave, or there'd be some dead Rangers lyin't about too. Not so much if they just stayed in the air an' took potshots at her." The glass cracks in his hand, and he relaxes. "...damn, sorry 'bout that. Be right back." The griffon heads into the backroom for several minutes.

Gearshift quietly finishes her drink, the warmth spreading through her body. She feels a little fuzzy around the edges.

One of the mercs from the next table over gets up and walks over to the mares. "Say, you weren't talking about that statue up in the hills were you?" she asks.

"What's it worth to you?" Sure Fire responds, taking a drink.

"Oh, well fuck you too," the yellow earth pony mare says to Sure Fire, and glares.

Silk Rose feels a bit uneasy about that story. She glances over at the mare who just joined them, and says, "Listening to a story, yes. Why, do you have one to add?"

The mare flips her short and close-cropped pink mane. Her cutie mark is a spiraling missile. "Just thought I'd offer you a piece of info," she says. "I had the weirdest dream when I camped up there, on a dare." She jerks a hoof at the green unicorn stallion still at the table. "Never bet a dare when gambling with that one. Yeah, weird as all hell... Dreamt I was a mouse, trying to get out of a huge ball of cotton candy. No matter how fast I ate it, it kept growing. Delicious, but frustrating." She snorts. "Felt like I was being watched the whole time. Felt the same way when I woke up, so I left and ain't been back."

"Interesting. We'll keep it in mind; thanks," Sure Fire responds, giving the merc a smile.

The mare nods. "No problem. 'Specially if y'all keep coming around." She smirks at Silk Rose and Gearshift. "We could use some more pretty faces around here. Ciao." She stalks back to her table, tail swishing behind her.

Gearshift blushes into her empty cup.

Session 2 - A place to rest your head

It's not easy being strangers in a strange town. Heck, it's not easy being intimate with someone without really knowing them. Or even knowing for sure if you were with them at all... hence the predicament of some of our fine mares at the Brass Lantern in Dodge .. Despite some strange and disturbing stories, the lure of the statue on the hill is undeniable. What exactly will they choose to do about it? Find out now, in the Age of Anarchy!

R.C. returns from the back room, looking like he has just dunked his head in water and combed his feathers. "Sorry 'bout that," he says. "Nae, can I get anyone another delicious an' cuddly beverage?"

The piano player takes a break, ending a slow paced instrumental number to wander back behind the bar and retrieve a black bottle with some kind of arcane eye and black tentacles on the label. The music soon resumes, as a pair of earth pony mares, grey with shockingly blue manes, begin a folk song duet in song and violin. Something about a diamond dog and a priest.

SureFire finishes off her whiskey, giving a shake of the head. "No thank you, that's enough for me. Mind letting us stay over for the night?"

Silk Rose grins at SureFire. "Oooh, so you want to join us? We can stage a re-enactment to jog our memories..."

The griffon shrugs. "Well, Miz Rose already asked t'stay over, an we're nae exactly plannin't on bein't quiet," he says with a chuckle. "So unless y'care t'join th'fun it's pry nae a grand idea~" He tips the unicorn a wink.

Silk Rose adds, "Though we'd need the other two, too, for it to be a perfect re-enactment." She eyes the others as well.

"Nae so much," R.C. says, looking at Gearshift. "She only wandered in in th'mornin't, if y'recall."

SureFire rolls her eyes. "Do you have a sofa or something for the rest?"

Gearshift smiles. "I'll have to pass. I saw more than I wanted to last time."

Zeroni, meanwhile, has wandered over to listen to the musical mares, and gently taps a forehoof to the bouncy beat of the folk song. Something something, 'if y'dont come up and see the sun you'll never know when the day has begun.' Huh.

R.C. makes a pouty face. "Eh, pity," he says. "Yer loss, lassie~" He turns back to SureFire. "No, I hae a washstand, a bed, an' a closet. You saw m'apartment. I'm nae exactly a Tenpony foundin't member, y'know."

The griffon stops for a moment. "Wait, why're y'not headin't for Faith's? She runs a clean board there, no fleas, an' mostly quiet... Shy on caps?"

Silk Rose snickers. "I think she just likes to watch."

The griffon stifles a chuckle. "At that point we'd hae t'start chargin't."

Gearshift flails and knocks over her cup, hastily righting it. "I do not! I just wanted to ask a question!"

R.C. spreads his... actually rather magnificent silvery wings and leans on the bar. "Oh, a question is it, lass?" he says. "Well, ask away, but I charge five caps a minute if y'want me t'talk dirty~"

Silk Rose glances at Gearshift with a grin. "We weren't talking about you, specifically. But if you have such a guilty conscience..."

Gearshift whines and looks down. "Nothing like that! I just wanted to get something nice for the turret to share."

The griffon shakes his head. "Another machine fetishist," he says sadly. "Well, talk t'Geyser, she's the mane mechanic 'round these parts. I'm sure she can hook y'up wi' sommat, but b'careful. She's..." He struggles to find a word. "...testy when it comes t'her machines, and may nae take too kindly t'another mare sniffin't about them."

SureFire chuckles. "Or whatever takes place instead of 'sniffin about'."

Gearshift blinks a few times. "Machine.... fetishist?" She goes beet red as she realizes what he just implied, and hides her muzzle in her hooves.

Silk Rose snickers again. "Don't worry, hun, I don't judge. Besides, it's fun to try new things..."

R.C. can't contain his guffaw this time. "Lass, oh dear me, y'make this too easy. It's nae shootin't fish in a barrel, it's droppin't a balefire egg in a bucket of carp," he says. The griffon lifts her chin with a talon. "Y'better stop that or your face's goin't t'turn tha shade permanent-like. Ah promise Ah'll lay off, ai'ight?"

Gearshift peeks up and nods slowly. "I dont even know how that'd work..." She appears to be lost in thought.

The griffon grins. "Ask Geyser. Bet y'twenty caps that SHE knows," he says with a wink.

"I'll call and raise you." Surefire giggles.

Gearshift nods slowly, still muttering to herself about mechanical stuff. "Yeah... I'll do that."

"Oh, bettin't against me now?" R.C. says. "Well, what's the wager, then?"

Silk Rose grins at Gearshift. "You should invite me along, I'm always up for learning some new... tricks."

"Ey, now, you can lay off too," Randall chides Silk Rose. "She's obviously nae enjoyin't this as much as you an' me."

Gearshift starts counting on her hooves, completely oblivious. "No, that wouldn't work. Would need a way to inhibit polarity reversal, that'd be painful..." She looks up at them. "Eh, what's going on now?"

Silk Rose gives a little pout. "Aw, but I wasn't trying to for that one! I'd really like to see what I can learn."

SureFire rolls her eyes again. "Perhaps another day, but we have a trip to make early tomorrow."

R.C. shrugs. "Look, are we makin't a bet, or not?" he asks. "Because if you're goin't to ask, I at least need to know which direction th'gunfire's comin't from so I can take cover."

SureFire shakes her head. "Nah, was just being playful~" she responds with a wink.

Gearshift frowns. "Bet? What bet?" She stares beadily between the three. "What are you planning?"

The griffon gives a disappointed flap and then folds his wings. "An' here I was thinkin't to make some easy caps..." he complains. "Was bettin't that Geyser knows a few things about gettin't cozy wi' machines," he explains to Gearshift. "But no bet, apparently. Skinflint." He grins at Silk Rose.

R.C. turns back to SureFire. "Well then y'better hit up Faith's," he says. "Comfiest bed in town that dinnae come wi' me included. If you're a bit cap-shy, tell her y'want the 'Randall Special,'" he tells her, and winks. "Nae innuendo. Just a deal we have worked out, me an' her."

SureFire sticks her tongue out at R.C. playfully. "Oh, I'm perfectly willing to join you two here. Just felt our compatriots werent feeling so...confident in their preformance." She giggles.

Gearshift tilts her head. "Who's performance where?"

The griffon puffs out his chest and chuckles as he can't keep the ridiculous pose. "Same goes for the wee pegasus. Tell Faith y'want th'Randall Special an' she'll cut y' a deal," he says. "Looks like the zebra's nae t'interested either," he adds.

R.C. shoos Gearshift away from the bar. "Nothin' y'want tae hear, lass, get on and talk t'Geyser or Faith or whoever."

Silk Rose smiles at Gearshift. "See you in the morning, hun. Remember to knock this time."

Gearshift nods and stands, stretching. "I'll do that." She makes her way towards the door, then pauses. "Uh.... where's Faith or Geyser?"

"Faith's at the inn, cannae miss the sign that says 'Flophouse' an Geyser's probably at the maintenance office, south side o' town in th'buildin't with th'antenna array on top," R.C. offers.

Gearshift nodnods. "Alritey, thanks. For the drink, too. S kinda warm. I'mma go get some shuteye then. "See y'all tomorrow!" She trots out the door, her pack rattling as it brushes the doorframe.

R.C. watches her go. "Hmm. Bit on th'skinny side, but if she'd loosen up a bit..." He shakes himself and then turns back to the other two. "Well, like I said, I'll be done here 'round nine ish, so feel free t'come back then. I'll pick us up some snacks and we'll meander on home, eh?" He grins.

Zeroni laughs as the two mares sing something about 'and then he ate the priest.' Zebras and their sense of humor...

Silk Rose grins right back. "I wouldn't miss it."

"Give me that back," Randall says, just now noticing the piano player with the bottle with the creepy eye on it. He snatches the bottle and puts it back under the counter. "What'd I say about free drinks? That there weren't any?" The stallion mutters something under his breath. "Nae

you're not pretty enough," Randall says with a frown. "Shower, shave, bathe, an' find a hat what dinnae look like a smashed badger, and we'll talk."

The griffon turns back to SureFire. "Alright, see you two roundabouts nine," he says. "Feel free to stay here, or wander th'city. It's a nice place, all things considered."

Silk Rose is content to stay here and hang around for a while. The music is decent, and the company is nice.

After enjoying several more musical performances, the two mares and R.C. head off for the night. The griffon is... quite talented, despite anatomical differences from ponies. Ridiculously talented, in fact. The only thing that's missing is any kind of passion. He's apparently had a lot of practice. Exhausted and satiated, the three sleep deeply and soundly until the next morning.

* * *

Gearshift trots idly through the town, deciding on a whim to head over to Geyser instead of the flophouse.

The maintenance building is just as R.C. described. It's plain and grey, armored in sheet metal just like every other important building - except, oddly, the hospital - in the town. From the roof branches an antenna array that looks like a mad science project, cobbled together from TV, Radio, and broadband antennae and mounted on a rotating platform. It rotates smoothly without any sound of grinding. The plaque next to the door says "Maintenance Office" and underneath, hoof-painted on another bit of steel, "If it's not an emergency, go away."

Gearshift lifts a hoof to knock, and pauses upon seeing the sign. "Hm."

"I wouldn't if I were you," says a stallion as he walks by Gearshift and the office. He's green with a lighter green mane that seems to wisp and disappear at the ends. "She's cranky. I mean, knows her repairs and machines in and out, but. Yikes."

Gearshift starts, almost falling against the door. "Cranky? Aww. Even if I just wanted to talk machines?" She eyes him politely, looking mostly at his mane.

The stallion shrugs. "Well, I don't know. She's just one of those folks, you know? Perpetually cranky, just looking for a reason to snap at ponies," he says. "Defense mechanism of some sort, I'd bet. Speaking of defenses, none better than a good offense. I'm Plasma Burn," the young stallion says, offering a hoof. "I run 'Blaze of Glory' around the corner. And feel free to stare. It doesn't stop doing that, ever," he adds, gesturing at his mane.

Gearshift reaches out a hoof, just barely stopping herself from touching the mane and shaking his hoof instead with a warm smile. "Plasma Burn eh? I'm Gearshift, nice to meetcha."

Plasma Burn shakes her hoof and smiles. "Yeah, figured you were new in town," he says. "If you ever need high-energy death delivered from a distance, look me up."

He pauses. "Say... your name... you're not from Stable 38, are you?"

Gearshift nods. "Stable 39, yup. Decided to look about the world now that the sky's open. And I don't really do the fighting thing much, I prefer fixing stuff. My laser pistol gets the job done."

"Oh, , pegasus, should have figured," Plasma Burn says. "From your name, I figured you were from 38. Lots of gearheads and motorwagon junkies out that way, y'know?" He chuckles. "Yikes ... a bit of a ways from home, aren't you... well, good luck with whatever you're up to. If you decide you need something with a little more oomph than an an MEP, be sure to look me up, 'kay?" He smiles.

Gearshift smiles back, nodding. "I'll do that for sure."

"Ciao then," he says with a wave, and trots off about his business.

Gearshift waves after him, and resumes pondering the door.

The door, unsurprisingly, does nothing, as it is a door.

Gearshift shrugs and trots off, taking Plasma's advice. She heads off in search of Faith

Faith's Flophouse isn't very well lit, but that's possibly because ponies are only meant to sleep there. An older mare with a tan coat and a green mane is behind the counter and smiles as Gearshift comes in. Her cutie mark is a steaming bowl of soup. "Hello, dear," she says kindly. "Can I get you a bunk for the night?"

Gearshift nods happily. "Yes please. Oh, and I was supposed to mention the 'Randall Special', or something like that."

The mare chuckles. "Oh, Randall, that scamp. Always sending folks my way," she says. "Would you believe that rascal tried to hit on me when he first showed up a few months ago? And goodness, if I wasn't twice his age..." She shakes her head in amusement. "Anyway, yes. A bunk's yours if you don't mind sitting for a spell and telling me all about yourself. I like stories just as much as I like bottlecaps." She pats a chair next to her behind the counter. "If it's good enough, you don't owe me a wooden bit."

Gearshift hmms, then plops her stuffed saddlebags down next to the seat, getting comfy in it. "So, what would you like to know...?"

"Where'd you come from, what's your family like, what would you like to grow up to be," Faith says, and leans on the counter. "Hopes and dreams are the stuff the future's made of, little lady. I like hearing 'em from others. Makes me feel like the world might come to something after all..."

Spinning a few tales of home and of castles in the sky, Gearshift tells Faith about herself. Satisfied and amused by the stories, and a little sad, the mare shows Gearshift to a bunk in the corner that's a good distance from the other slumbering ponies in bunks, so it's even relatively free of snoring. The mattress is old, but clean and well-kept. While it's not as good as a cloud, Gearshift sleeps quite well, better than she has in a while.

* * *

The morning breaks clear and a little chilly. It is a.m. and the ponies have begun the bustle of the day. Some are worried that a scheduled caravan hasn't come in, others are haggling in the makeshift market. Seems like a good day for a hike to the hills.

Gearshift rolls over in her bed, though it's not nearly as wide as her sleeping mind expects, and she falls out of it with a thud. "Hubwhza?!"

SureFire is already out of bed, giving her mane a quick comb-through before taking some time to maintain her rifle.

One of the other ponies who had slept in the Flophouse chuckles at Gearshift and goes back to packing his saddlebags back up.

R.C. is still lying in bed, a smile pasted on the corners of his beak as he dozes lazily, enjoying the chance to sleep in.

Gearshift grumbles to herself, embarrassed, and gathers her saddlebags. She trots out of the flophouse, yawning and stretching her wings.

Silk Rose did quite a bit less sleeping than most, but by the morning she's had a decent bit of rest, and is ready for the day ahead. But first, she needs to make herself presentable. She takes her time combing her mane and tail while sitting on the bed, being careful not to wake the bed's other occupant.

It isn't Silk Rose that wakes R.C., it's SureFire, as the snap of her rifle bolt wakes him up immediately, and he sits up like a shot, reaching under his pillow for something, then relaxes. "Oh, g'mornin't," he says with a grin. "Sleep well?"

SureFire nods, not taking her eyes off of the dismantled action of her rifle while she cleans each individual piece. "Very. Thank you."

"Nae, thank you both of you," Randall says, stretching out his limbs and wings. "I've nae slept that well in weeks. So you're headed off t'see th'creepy statue today?" he asks, sitting up next to Silk Rose. "Leavin' right away, or waitin't around a wee bit longer~?" he says, nibbling on Silk Rose's ear.

Gearshift yawns as she walks towards the bar.

Silk Rose gives a happy little smirk, and swats at him lightly with her tail. "As much as I'd like to... I think we're better off heading out early rather than late."

"Yes, I would like to watch the site for a short while before our approach." Surefire interjects, wiping one of the lenses of her rifle's scope with a cloth.

R.C. chuckles. "Arright, arright. But if you're back in town and need a place to crash," he says with a smirk. "And... it's nae a tuesday, and is after seven on Saturday, then feel free t'look me up," he adds. "Best of luck in the hills, though. An' be careful, ai'ight? It gets weird up there sometimes."

Silk Rose gives a curious little hum. "What's so important on Tuesdays and Saturdays that you couldn't find a spot in your schedule for little old me?"

"Tuesdays are m'day off," R.C. says. "Spend it out in the wastes. Recreationally." He looks away. "Dinnae fash. Just nae available. And this saturday, Sweet Heart said she'd get back to me about that tussle wi' Scatter. If they didnae patch up, I'm volunteered t'be her rebound." He chuckles. "Really kinks th'schedule bein't so popular an' all."

SureFire re-assembles her rifle and slides it into the long holster along her right side, checking the harness' straps around her barrel and chest before standing. "Well, shall we be off then, Rose?"

Silk Rose nods and retrieves her belongings, taking the time to dress before they go. She smiles at R.C. "If I'm in the neighborhood, I'll see about paying you a visit." She then turns back to SureFire and trots over toward the door. "Shall we?"

SureFire gathers her gear, nodding to Silk as she opens the door and trots down the stairs.

"G'day, bonny lasses," R.C. calls as they leave. "Dinnae forget you're always welcome." He sighs, flops back down on the bed, and kicks the door closed again behind them.

The bar is unsurprisingly empty at this juncture, with only one grizzled stallion drinking this early. His eyes are white and the set of his jaw speaks of deep anger. Probably best to avoid that table. Behind the bar is a very short stallion, not much bigger than a colt in his teens. "Okay, no," he says as Gearshift walks in. "You are way too young to have problems big enough to start drinking at eight. Get outta here."

Gearshift squeaks. "I'm not eight! I'm seventeen!" She ruffles her feathers indignantly. "Besides, I'm not here for a drink, I'm here for my friends."

"I meant eight a.m., dipshit," the stallion says with a roll of his eyes. "Well, unless your friends are Honesty over there or the two floozies who shacked up with Randy last night, then you're shit out of... luck. Oh wait, they-" He looks at Gearshift and then up the stairs. "Yeah, not gonna touch that one."

SureFire gives another obligatory eye-roll.

Gearshift blanches. "Oh dear. Uh, yeah. The 'floozies' are my friends." She takes a seat at the bar, and pulls out a hooffull of scrap electronics, fiddling with them to pass the time.

The diminutive bartender goes back to awkwardly polishing glasses, not saying another word to Gearshift.

"You, uh, want me to go get them?" the bartender asks Gearshift. "Wouldn't want someone walking in on them, but I've done it before. Better me than you."

Gearshift blushes, her screwdriver slipping out of her hooves. "Uh... I kinda already did that. I'll just wait here."

"Oh geez, I'm sorry. I'd need a drink at 8 a.m. too," the stallion says with a chuckle. "Well, sounds like they're headed down, at least." He looks over his shoulder at the sound of hooves on stairs.

SureFire emerges into the bar, both her guns loaded and holstered at the ready; giving off an aura of confidence. Quickly spotting Gear, she will approach. "Good morning, dear pegasus. Slept well?"

Gearshift nods at the bartender. "Need to fly though. Goin to a tea party later." She looks up from her scrap and spots the surprisingly undisheveled mare. "Yeah, think so. You?" She blinks. "Scratch that, don't wanna know."

SureFire rolls her eyes again; this is becoming a constant already. "Are you ready to head out?"

Silk Rose smirks at Gearshift, as she trots downstairs behind SureFire. "I for one slept very well."

Gearshift opens her bag and sweeps the scrap into it with a wing. "Yup. Ready to go." She smiles at Silk Rose. "S' good I guess."

SureFire will gives Gearshift an eyebrow raise at her display of organizational ability, but will soon turn and head towards the door. "Then let us be off."

Zeroni is waiting for the three outside. She seems to have slept very well also. Perhaps not as well as the others, though.

Gearshift ruffles her feathers contently.

The four mares head off out of town to the hills in the east. The terrain is mostly flat and dusty this close to the San Palomino, but off to the west they can see the shimmer of a river at the base of a mountain, and possibly some kind of farms to the west and northwest. Farther northwest are some low rises, and the road trails on northeast.

Chapter 3: The Tea Party

Gearshift frumps, realizing that they keep getting a little lost. With a huff, she flaps up into the air, trying to see if she can figure out where everything is. If only she had magic for a big red arrow, but directions will have to do...

A few times, Gearshift can spot a cluster of what looks like healthy trees amidst the blasted landscape of the mountains. There must be SOMETHING there. Perhaps it's the shrine! She directs Zeroni and the group that direction.

As the group treks in and out of mountains, across wasted terrain, they come around the corner of an old washout that hasn't contained water in more than a century. Everyone but Zeroni immediately spots something that looks very dangerous indeed. A large, mountain-lion-ish thing that seems to be made entirely of boulders. Glowing blue eyes are the first sign as it turns and looks at Zeroni, first with interest, then with... something else. It bares its diamond-like fangs and growls menacingly at the zebra. It sounds like a small rockslide in the thing's stomach. It begins stalking toward the group very slowly, keeping its body between the group and... miniature versions of itself. Two of them, playing in and eating the carcass of a dead elk.

"Let's back off and keep our distance," Sure Fire whispers to the zebra. She levitates her rifle out slowly, keeping it pointed at the creature as she backs away.

"Good idea," Zeroni responds, trying to back away from the beast and its young.

Silk Rose stays ducked behind some nearby rocks, out of sight of the beast!

Gearshift tiptoes through the air, following the others until they're safely away.

The lion-creature stops, tail swishing slowly as it watches the group. It doesn't seem particularly hungry. But if you'd just eaten half an elk, you wouldn't be either! It goes back to paying attention to its cubs as the party tries to find a way around.

And they move on. Through rocks and small hills and higher crags... there's no real path, even though Gearshift flies up to look at the area from time to time.

Gearshift grumbles at the surroundings and lands amidst the group, ruffling her feathers. "I got nothin. All looks the same to me."

It DOES all look the same, sadly. The group gets turned around a bit before finally encountering the first signs of living vegetation to their south. The trees actually look healthy here. A little scorched perhaps, but with evergreen pine needles on them, like the pictures of Hearth's Warming trees. They thicken as the area leads south. The trees cool the desert air refreshingly.

Soon, the group comes across another group of creatures, but this time... they all know what they are. Everyone has heard the tales, the scary legends. Lupine creatures formed from dead

trees, with splintering fangs and howls that sound like the wind in a forest. Timber Wolves. Five of them sit in a circle near a flat stone, peering down at it curiously.

Gearshift and Sure Fire notice something else, though. On the flat stone... are playing cards. The wolves each seem to have a hand of them. The biggest wolf looks up at the group, and staggeringly, for SOME reason, is wearing the plastic visor of a card dealer.

The other wolves look up briefly before growling and looking back at the stone.

Gearshift pauses and blinks. "Uhh... are they here for the tea party too?" She rustles her wings nervously.

"I was expecting tea, not prodger," Sure Fire says.

The 'dealer' stares at the group for a few moments, before catching the wolf on his left trying to conceal an Ace of Spades beneath his paw, and bites him. Whatever these timber wolves are doing... playing poker, perhaps? It isn't the tea party you're looking for.

Zeroni blinks at the sight. "...How do they know how to play cards?"

Sure Fire shrugs. "Luna knows...It's the wasteland."

Gearshift shrugs and tugs Zeroni along with a wing. "Best not to ask questions. I don't think we'll like their answer."

The Timber Wolves appear to be betting with chunks and fragments of bones. If you had to guess... no you don't have to guess, that's a pony skull. Probably pony bones all around.

Sure Fire grimaces. "I'd ask to be dealt in but, I don't feel like betting on myself."

Zeroni nods. "I think NOW would be a good time to leave and let them continue playing."

Silk Rose gives the timberwolves an odd look, and frowns. "I was gonna ask if they'd deal me in... but I'm not so sure anymore."

Gearshift shrugs. "We should keep moving, before we end up being their snack tray."

Sure Fire looks around for the shrine with her scope, and spots something in the cluster of trees directly to the south. It looks like a statue of some sort. She lowers her rifle and nods in the statue's direction. "I think I see the shrine that was mentioned." She begins trotting that way.

Gearshift ruffles her feathers happily and follows, feeling tired after the day's trek. A nice sit down would be wonderful.

Silk Rose follows Sure Fire, giving the wolves a wide berth.

Zeroni follows the others hoping they finally did reach their destination.

The woods here are pleasantly cool, and the smell... that's fresh grass, trees, real live trees! There's even the elusive scent of flowers here and there. At the center of a clearing in the woods

is a statue, taller than four ponies, of a strange serpentine creature that seems to be an amalgam of more than one thing. Goat horn, hoof, tufted tail. Scaly dragon leg, pegasus wing, bat wing... It's... eerie. The statue's one-fanged maw leers down at the group with an expression of sinister malice as its sharp stone claws loom over them. Whoever made this statue must have been in equal parts awe and terror...

Sure Fire stares at the statue. "Well; I've not seen a more appropriate creature to hold the title 'Discord'. I presume this to be the place."

Gearshift blinks and stops short at the sight of the statue. "Uh... huh. That's only a wee bit odd." She flies up to it and looks real close at it's face. "This doesn't look like tea to me."

Silk Rose trots up beside the statue and gives it a look over. "Whoever carved this must have been *really* good at it."

Zeroni gives the shrine a wary glance. "It's emitting spiritual power, it's power is clouding my mind for some reason." She looks away with a shake of her head.

There's a gentle 'clink' of fine teacups from behind the group. Spread out behind them is a red and white checkered tablecloth with a tea set spread out on it, the teapot emitting gentle wisps of steam. Slices of lemon, a bowl of sugar cubes, and a pitcher of... cream? Sit on the cloth next to a picnic basket. Zeroni notices that it *MIGHT* not have been there right when she looked at it, but the moment she blinked...

Gearshift eyes the statue carefully, she gives the nose a lick. Mulls the taste over in her mouth. "Hmm. Granite. Lotta basalt. Came from somewhere volcanic."

Zeroni stares. "...That wasn't there before...right?"

Sure Fire turns and eyes the settings. "That certainly was not there prior." She glances around briefly, "There's definitely magic of some sort."

Gearshift blinks, looks around. "What wasn't there bef-" She cuts off at the sight of the tea set. "Uh. Ok. So. Where did *that* come from?"

The tea smells fresh and delicious. There are lemon wedges. *REAL* lemon wedges. What is going on here...?

Sure Fire approaches the tea set; eyeing it closely. "Could have been a unicorn nearby; or perhaps some automated spell matrix." She frowns. "Making a spell to set lunch up at a place upon the arrival of guests would certainly be within the bounds of reason."

Silk Rose turns around to look. "Hmm... Well, at least we know this is the place for sure now, then?"

Sure Fire shrugs, laying down on the blanket, and checks the radiation meter on her PipBuck. The pipbuck doesn't register any radiation at all. Not a trace, in fact. "Seems clear of radiation...unusually so, given the wasteland. Might explain the trees though."

Gearshift lands with a small rattle of junk and shrugs. "Guess so. Maybe if we all sit down, our host will arrive? Idunno, magic is weird."

"Could be part of the spell; worth a try," Sure Fire says. "Either way, I didnt march through mountains to become unnerved by tea."

Gearshift blinks. "It'd take a pretty strong poison or some crazy magic to remove all your nerves."

Sure Fire rolls her eyes. "It's a euphemism, dear Pegasus."

Gearshift trots over and flops down next to Sure Fire. She yawns and preens a wing.

Silk Rose nods, and trots over to take a seat in front of one of the teacups.

Zeroni eyes the blanket. "Are you sure it's still okay to drink?" she asks looking at the tea warily. "What if it's spiked?"

Gearshift blinks. "Oh."

Silk Rose smirks. "If it's spiked, then we're gonna have another wild night."

Sure Fire shrugs. "Just sit down and we'll determine the drinkability later."

Zeroni sighs as she sits down.

As the last of the mares sits down, a squirrel with tiny antlers jumps out of the picnic basket, clutching a piece of four-colored paper. It chitters at Zeroni and drops the paper in front of Sure Fire before scampering off and disappearing into the trees.

Sure Fire raises an eyebrow, lifting the paper up.

"Dear guests," the paper reads. "Please do help yourselves, and I will be along shortly. Sincerely..." and the symbol again of, well actually, it's Discord, eating his own tail, again.

"I wonder what his tail tastes like; he seems to enjoy snacking upon it." Sure Fire comments.

"....Squirrels don't normally have antlers right?" Zeroni asked, staring at where the squirrel scampered off. "I'm not the only one that hasn't seen one with antlers before right?"

Gearshift frowns. "Well, what did the paper say?" She turns to Zeroni. "You do remember that rockthing we saw, right? Who says squirrels haven't grown antlers since then? And I've never seen a squirrel before outside of a book."

Sure Fire passes the paper along for the rest to read if they so desire. "Well, I suppose I'll bite the bullet." she speaks, prepping herself a cup of tea.

"The rock things, which kind of looked like panthers to me, the timberwolves playing poker, the sudden appearance of the tea set and a squirrel with antlers carrying a set of papers." Zeroni shakes her head.

Gearshift shrugs. "Weird things happen."

Sure Fire's tea smells delicious, and ends up the perfect temperature for drinking, with a bit of sugar and a bit of lemon.

Zeroni frowns. "Once in a while, but there's something about this area that's a little...off compared to the rest of the world from what i've seen."

Silk Rose reads the note for herself. "Well, we've come this far, right? Might as well get it over and done with..." Once Sure Fire is done, she pours herself a cup as well. "Besides, this isn't the strangest thing I've seen."

Gearshift peeks in the basket, curious about food within.

"Well unless these are magical cups of 'get shot to death by Enclave Pegasi'" Sure Fire glances to Gear, "No offense." she turns back to her cup, "We'll be fine." She takes a cautious sip of her tea.

Gearshift pouts, face still peering into the basket. "I'm not enclave, never was."

Zeroni looks at Sure Fire for a reaction. "Well?"

The tea. Is. Delicious. This isn't 200-year-old tea. This is fresh dried tea, less than a few days old.

Another squirrel, this time with tiny goat horns, offers Gearshift a plate with four small yellow tea-cakes on it, each with the words "eat me" on them in strawberry icing.

Sure Fire shrugs. "Well, bullet holes aren't appearing all over my body, so I'd say it's pretty damn good. Tastes fresh." She glances to the plate. "Ok...now this is getting downright fairy-tale-ish"

Gearshift blinks at the plate. "Why thank you little basket squirrel!" She noms one of the tea-cakes.

The squirrel chitters happily and closes the lid of the basket.

Zeroni raises a brow at the tea cake and the message on it. "Why does that seem so familiar to me?"

Gearshift swallows. "Idunno, but it was delicious."

The cake tickles a little bit, but it is sweet and delicious! It makes Gearshift's tummy happy.

Zeroni takes a sip of her own tea and is pleasantly surprised to see that it was indeed delicious. "Hey it IS fresh, can somepony pass me the cream?"

Gearshift pours herself half a cup of tea, then busies herself filling the remainder with lemon and sugar. Welp. That's the best-smelling cup of sweetened lemon juice that was ever adulterated with tea. She uses up all the remaining lemon wedges. The pegasus sips her lemony sugarstuff and smiles. "So. Soooooo. What now?" She looks around and ruffles her feathers impatiently. "This waiting is making my wings itch."

Silk Rose is enjoying her tea. "This hasn't been too bad of an outing. If nothing else, we've spent a nice day together." She glances over toward the statue. "But, I am a bit curious about who we're supposed to be meeting."

Zeroni takes a bite out of her tea cake with relish. "Wow, this is really good, and it's so fresh compared to what we usually have."

The tea cake is delicious and tastes a little bit like the sweetcakes from home.

Sure Fire will try one of the cakes. "Indeed; especially if they're signing letters as if they're discord."

Sure Fire looks angrily out of the basket as Sure Fire opens it. "Stop that," she says, and closes the basket.

Sure Fire stares at the basket. She shifts away from it slightly. "...Ok, NOW I am slightly unnerved."

Shortly, another squirrel (with a unicorn horn!) pops out of the basket and leaves a tea cake for Sure Fire, then hops back into the basket and closes the lid.

"Waitasecond..." Sure Fire mutters

Gearshift ponders for a moment, then picks up one of the used lemon wedges, and attempts to slip it into the basket.

The lemon wedges fall into the basket... and Gearshift doesn't hear them hit bottom.

Sure Fire glances back up at the statue, then back to the basket. ~Wings...horns...~

Gearshift blinks, and tries to peer into the basket.

The basket is full of stars. Oh wait, no it's... dammit, shouldn't have blinked.

Gearshift stares. "Helloooo~?"

The basket's empty wicker interior says nothing, as it is a basket.

Sure Fire taps on the basket. "OK, quit fooling. I know you're either some unicorn screwing with us or some magical creature. Come out of there."

Zeroni begins seeing traces of light in the forest, and a feeling of warmth and safety fills her. The tell-tale orbs of light that are Spirits of Hope, and the lion-like golden spectres of Spirits of

Courage, of all sizes, begin gathering in the treeline. The zebra has never seen this many spirits at once.

After the tea begins to settle, and despite the screwiness of the basket, a slight drowsiness overtakes the four mares. Not enough to be alarming, and certainly not the heavy-handed blackout of a drug. Just a pleasant 'need a nap' feeling.

The basket's empty wicker interior says nothing, as it is a basket.

"Sweet Gaia above," Zeroni exclaims looking at the spirits in awe.

"Fuck...that hike must have worn me out more than I thought..." Sure Fire speaks, rubbing her head with a hoof.

Gearshift yawns and flops over. "Ugh. So boring." She leans up on her elbows. "Eh? Whassat?"

Sure Fire sighs, laying down and closing her eyes. "Well if a unicorn is just going to mess with us I'll just snooze until they work up the courage to show themselves." she mutters

Zeroni stifles a yawn as the feelings of warmth and safety along with the sleepy feeling makes her feel more and more drowsy. "I'm just gonna rest my eyes a little, just for a yawn minute or two." she rests her forehooves in front of her and lays her head down, her eyes close.

Silk Rose lies down, not resting her head, but at least settling into a much more relaxed position. "I hope it's not going to be too much longer."

Gearshift sighs. "What, we're all just gonna sleep? Eh, fine. Nothin to do here anyways." She glares at the boring old statue and closes her eyes.

The statue... is almost smiling. Maybe.

Silk Rose watches the others for a few moments before resting her head in her forelegs. She isn't sleeping, for the moment, but she's at least resting.

Watched over by the warding spirits, and by the ever-careful Silk Rose, three of the mares drift off to sleep, the little half-dreams that pester naps strangely absent. Instead, there's something else...

* * *

In a checkered field of pink and white grass, the three mares find themselves standing in a cold wind. Before them is the statue, glowing and pulsing, just as Zeroni felt before. But now, light glistens through cracks in the stone. It beats, almost like a heart.

Sure Fire hums, standing in the dream.

Several minutes pass for Silk Rose. Nothing seems to be happening, really. The other three are asleep, their sides rising and falling gently as they nap.

Gearshift shivers and flutters up to the statue. "This day just gets weirder and weirder," she mutters as she inspects the glowing fissures.

The glowing fissures DO beat like a heart. In fact, as Gearshift approaches, it slows to match hers exactly. She begins to hear the faint beating of a heart as well... Oddly, there's a light pink mark on the statue where Gearshift licked it earlier.

Sure Fire glances at Gearshift in an odd manner. "Figment of my mind resembling Gear, please stop narrating my dream."

Silk Rose, seeing nothing really of interest, lays her chin on her hooves and watches the others. They're so peaceful. Hard to believe it's that easy to find peace in the Wasteland. Why if it were that easy, she'd be... yawn asleep by now already... ZZZZZZ

Gearshift glances back at Sure Fire. "Your dreams? No, this is *my* dream." She returns her attention to the statue, catching sight of the pink mark. "Huh." Shrugging, she licks it again.

Sure Fire stares at Gearshift, opening her muzzle to reply, but pauses and scrunches her face instead in frustration. "This is going to be one of those dreams then...we'll see when I awaken."

Sure Fire turns back to the statue and looks it over some more.

The statue tastes like strawberry ice cream! And then it melts, just like the same. The basalt flows like lava, revealing the creature beneath. The serpentine, goat-headed, dragon-scaled creature roars at the sky, and the clouds and blackness flee as if chased by Celestia herself, replace by a starry night sky. "Oh goodness GRACIOUS me," the creature says, stretching and unceremoniously scratching his bum. "That certainly took you long enough." He looks around, his yellow eyes beholding only the three of them. "Hmm. This won't do at all. Come here, dear Rose, it's not that terrifying in here." He snaps his fingers, and in a flash of light, Silk Rose joins the others.

Sure Fire jumps back and telekinetically reaches for her rifle in surprise, but quickly realizes that won't work in a dream. She gathers herself for a moment and huffs. "I presume this isn't simply a dream then...or that tea *was* spiked."

Gearshift blinks. "Huh. You don't *look* like strawberries. Why do you taste like them?" She turns to the other mare. "Sure Fire, honey, I don't think it was the tea. Look at him. Do you really think he needs tea to get things done?" She pauses, then flutters down between his legs. "You are a he, right?"

Sure Fire stares at the creature, but quickly shifts her gaze to Gear. "uh.....Gear dear..."

"Oh no, of course not, this is a dream," the figure says, coiling up on himself and leaning on his elbows, giving Sure Fire an amused grin. "But as to WHOSE dream it is, well, I can't tell you that. That would spoil all the fun!" He reaches into his ear and retrieves a blooming sunflower and hands it to Gearshift. "For the same reason that you can't always remember a dream after you wake up."

Silk Rose looks around, a little muddled. Eventually, she lays her eyes on the living form of the statue, and simply says, "Oh. So, you're our host?"

The creature spreads his griffon's claw and lion's paw. "Oho, and now you have me. I am Discord, lord of chaos, master of the realms of insanity, part time pastry chef. I assume you've heard of me?"

"We have heard rumors." Is all Sure Fire says.

Zeroni is keenly aware that this is the most powerful Spirit of Chaos that she has ever encountered, by a factor of ten. It might be THE most powerful chaos spirit.

Gearshift peers at Discord, then the sunflower. She nibbles it cautiously. The sunflower tastes like cotton candy.

"Well then, welcome to the tiny scrap of my world, that I protect," Discord says with a jovial grin. Each of the mares now has a balloon with a happy face on it, tied by string to their right forehoof. "I do hope the tea was all right. I wasn't entirely certain those squirrels could fix a good cuppa. I know they're terrible with the joe..."

"Oh I know about you alright," says Zeroni. "I have heard many things about you from some of the other spirits, you have a knack for mischief if what i've heard is true."

Discord bows to Zeroni. "Ah, my reputation precedes me, then. Eeeexcellent." He taps his fingers together mischievously. "But I'm afraid I haven't called you here to play pranks. Well, not ENTIRELY to play pranks," he says innocently. "No, you see, I am very much in need of your help."

Silk Rose uses her hoof to bounce the balloon a bit, then smiles. "You need our help?" The balloon giggles as if it has been tickled.

"What could the Lord of Chaos need our help for?" Zeroni asks.

"I hope this help is something not directly related to calling four lovely mares to a secluded mountain shrine; then serving them tea to put them to sleep and possibly screw with their memory." Sure Fire snorts.

Gearshift eyes up Discord. "Well, better than the turret, proly...." She blinks and blushes, realizing what she'd just said.

"Yes on the help and no on the memory," Discord says, curling back and leaning against the pedestal he had been standing on not long ago. "While it wasn't always true, I have more respect

for ponies than I once did. You haven't stopped being fun, but I've ceased seeing you as toys." He snaps his fingers and is wearing a plush bathrobe, smoking a pipe, and has a large book labeled STORIES in his off-hand. "Would you like to hear a story?"

Sure Fire snorts. "I have a feeling you'd tell us anyway."

"Tarp as a shack, that one," Discord says in amusement, gesturing at Sure Fire. "Yes, I'm going to tell you anyway, but if you find it boring, feel free to pinch yourselves and wake up. I didn't kidnap you to the dreamscape, you came here by yourselves."

Gearshift flops down in front of Discord, nibbling her tasty flower. "S' not like anything is happening out there. Your basket got boring."

Sure Fire sits; not having come all the way up here just to bail out on a story.

The great chaos spirit leans back and his tail curls the four mares up around him like fillies in their grandfather's armchair. "Once upon a time in the Magical Land of Equestria, ponies and zebras forgot the meaning of friendship..." The book opens to a world atlas, but on closer inspection, it's easy to see even individual ponies treading on the landscape, riding unicycles, building railroads. "They got very angry at one another over rocks in the ground and mistakes in the past," he continues, though where he's actually reading from remains a mystery.

"I could swear I've heard this one somewhere before..." Sure Fire deadpans

"One day they all decided that they had had enough trying to get along, and threw great fires and weapons of war at one another, not caring whom they hurt." The atlas erupts in white flares and green billowing mushroom-shaped clouds. "A staunch hero kept his promise to help the land of his friends," Discord continues, as a very recognizable serpentine figure clad in ridiculous heroic armor steps up to the clouds and begins swatting them away with a tennis racket. "But there was too strong of magic, and too much hatred for the brave hero to stop it all, and so he burned away with the land." The armor melts, and the figure crumbles to ashes that discord then blows off the page.

Sure Fire raises an eyebrow, amazed.

"His very spirit burnt, the Hero hid for a time in a refuge made for him long ago, until a time that he could return and repair the world that his friends had asked him to protect long ago." Discord wipes a comically-oversized tear from his eye. "When he awoke, the brave hero chose a champion to help him. But his first champion didn't know the meaning of friendship, and tried to do her job alone, and was killed by other ponies." An armored mare in the center of the map is struck down by black pony-shapes in the sky, and Discord sighs. "Friendship is what made Equestria great, the Hero realized, and decided that he must have not one champion, but a group of friends."

Discord closes the book. "And the rest of the story isn't finished yet," he says softly. "I was hoping you four could help me write it."

Gearshift blinks, opens her mouth to say something, then closes it.

Sure Fire hums. "I had no idea you had attempted to stop the megaspells. I am willing to help you, as long as the cause is good."

Zeroni frowns in thought. "So you wish for us to become your champions, but how would we go about 'repairing' the world?"

The great serpentine creature chuckles. "Oh, I don't expect you'd be able to repair the world," he says. "I simply need my power back for that. If you can help collect it for me by directing a few events, I'll have this burnt-up world good as new in no time flat. Or perhaps better than new. I always thought more creatures should be able to dance the ballet..."

Sure Fire gives the Lord a look. "What do you consider 'Good as new'?"

Gearshift shrugs. "Short of killing us all off, it can't get much worse."

Discord nods to Sure Fire. "I couldn't have them burning up my friends, now could I? My very first friends ever?" He sighs. "But there's only so much a near-omnipotent and charming demigod can do against a full-scale war." He gestures at the expanse of Equestria, which now lays out before them all like a giant map.

"As for 'good as new, well, all of it, of course. That half-pint unicorn and her friends cleared the sky up, but there are still warring gangs, poisoned water, rampant spirits, you name it," he says. "Such a very broken world. Can't paint a little chaos on such a messed-up canvas now, can I? It's time to bring the normal back first. How Equestria used to be."

Silk Rose gives a little hum. "That's an awfully big thing to ask us."

"While how Equestria 'Used to be' may have been good...it still led to how it is now..." Sure Fire replies. "The wasteland needs to be built into something better."

Discord nods, for the first time looking entirely serious. "Yes. I know. And I don't ask you lightly, nor to do it for free, or even for the pleasure of being the four mares who save Equestria. Er, again, I suppose the half-pint already did, sort of." He gestures at the landscape. "My gifts are already out there for you to find. Do what I ask, and you'll certainly find them." He turns to Sure Fire. "Well, it's not my land, miss," he says. "Equestria belongs to ponies. All I want to do is set it right again so you can all begin again and build it yourselves. I ruled Equestria once, and ponies didn't much care for it." He rolls his eyes. "Just because some ponies like gravity to be a constant direction..."

"Well then I am in agreement." Sure Fire nods, "Where do we begin?"

Zeroni nods. "I agree, this world needs change, and I will help as well."

The great creature looks at the four and almost looks like he's going to tear up again, but instead he pulls out a handkerchief and blows his nose. Twittering birds fly out the back of the hankie. "And you two? Builder and Shaman?"

Gearshift sighs. "All I'm really good at is fixing machines. But there's nothing for me to do beyond that. So sure, I'm in."

"You'd be surprised what talents you really have when you have a task before you," Discord says. "Trust me, I've seen first hand what determined friends can accomplish."

Silk Rose smiles. "Well, I'm always up for an adventure... so I don't see why not."

The starry sky crackles ominously and Discord... looks afraid. "Oh no," he says. "She's coming."

Sure Fire blinks. "She?"

Silk Rose frowns and looks around cautiously. "Who?"

"The Nightmare," Discord says, his hide turning to steel as he draws a very fearsome toothbrush. "All of you, wake up as quickly as you can. Go northwest, go to the Ghostlies, and find the one they call Inkblot. You'll know him when you see him, you've met him before. Now GO!"

Sure Fire nods. "I hope you have other ways to contact us." She telekinetically pinches her side.

The sky blackens off in the distance and reality begins to fracture.

Sure Fire quickly wakes up... stands and shakes herself off, before turning and giving each of the other three a firm shake as well.

Gearshift whines, not liking the turn of events, and slaps herself. She quickly wakes up as well. The mechanic mare groans and sits up. "Today has been.... I don't even know."

Terrible winds pick up around the remaining two and Discord, filled with screaming and incomprehensible angry shouting. "No! Stay back!" Discord yells back. "I'm fixing it!"

The shrieking fills the air. "THE DREAMS ARE MINE, MEDDLER! NOW YOU WILL PAY!"

The other two mares wake, and suddenly, all is calm. The dream was just that. Now the four mares find themselves back in the clearing, but now it is filled with silly, even more than before. The trees sprout bunches of cotton candy, the squirrels skitter about on the fearsome statue, and large mushrooms of polka-dot colors have sprouted in the clearing. The grass shimmers pinkish blue.

"I've heard stories when I was young. No clue if he was speaking of the same thing." Sure Fire glances to the statue. It gone?

It is still there, though its surroundings are strange indeed. What have the four unleashed...

Well, you've met with an interesting fate, haven't you... Our four exploratory mares trekked up into the Macintosh Hills to find something unusual, and found it in spades. And hearts. And a Mages of the Vinyard from Magic the Gathering, and a Draw 4 from Uno. But being a champion of chaos is better than it controlling your life, so the four now head to Ghastly Gorge, home of the semi-infamous Ghos

tlies. What will they find there? Stuff, probably! Weird stuff. Welcome to the Age of Anarchy!

====Chapter four: Go west, young mares=====

Gearshift yawns, scratching her nose with a pinion. "So, where were we headed again?"

SureFire stretches a bit before picking up her bags. "We'll head up the road to the gorge. Perhaps we'll check out that abandoned windmill I've heard about on the way."

The cotton candy glistens pinkly in the trees, and a robin in a tiny mask steals money from a thrush.

Silk_Rose is a little less... excited than the others. Whatever was happening before they were ejected from the... dream... is bothering her. "Does anypony have any idea what was going on at the end there? It was more than a little ominous..."

SureFire Bot!Zeroni remains ominously quiet, somewhat spooked.

redact, and please don't do that again]]

Zeroni snorts and looks around the now stranger glade. "No.. but I am not exactly keen on sleeping anytime soon, despite what time it is."

Gearshift shrugs. "S' not my place to figure out spirits of chaos and such."

The pipclock beeps quietly on the half hour. Five-thirty PM. Only a few hours of light left.

Zeroni looks a bit absent. "Perhaps. Perhaps that was the ghost of Nightmare Moon," she says. "She was supposed to be a tale to frighten foals in my village, but..."

Silk_Rose is still worried either way, despite Gearshift's carefree attitude. Zeroni's suggestion isn't helping her feel better, either.

-->| Zeroni (eqyfbjnhowo@Pony-jrlm9g.fl.comcast.net) has joined #anarchy

Shrugging off the feeling of impending doom, the group moves northward. The glade is... surprisingly helpful. They soon make it to the north edge of the Macintosh Hills, back to the dried-out plains that are ubiquitous in Equestria. It is now seven-thirty PM, and is beginning to get dark.

Zeroni "We should set up camp or find shelter, i'd rather not tangle with any potential wild beasts in the dark." she said looking at the sky.

SureFire "We'll stop soon and rest for the night."

Gearshift peers at the dimming sky. "Alright, if you say so." She shrugs and turns to look at SureFire, wiggling her feathers at her.

Silk_Rose nods. "I don't want to have to go head-to-head with anything dangerous."

Gearshift frowns. "I'll go take a quick peek then. Be back in a mo'." She takes off, circling around the group and keeping an eye out for anything dangerous or gross.

Gearshift's aerial search reveals... that this area is actually pretty safe, all things considered. For kilometers in every direction, there's no sign of dangerous wildlife or hostile ponies. The area is deserted, save for a single caravan trundling across the plains a short distance away.

SureFire takes a look through her scope at the surrounding land, looking for anything of interest.

Zeroni "I'm gonna see if I can find anything to eat, maybe some edible plants will do."

Zeroni goes in search for some edible plants to eat for the group.

Gearshift lazily flaps her way back to the group, and drops down in the middle of them. "Welp, nothin' bad around here except a caravan, bout.... couple flaps that way ish." She waves a wing in a direction that doesnt even come close to the caravan.

Using her telescope, SureFire scans the area from the ground. Soon enough she spots a protrusion of rock that has what looks like some graffiti spray-painted on it a few hundred meters away. It looks like a falling bomb with a red NO sign across it. Strange...

Silk_Rose spends the time setting up the campsite. Somepony has to make sure everything's all set up, after all.

SureFire hums. "Come with me for a second, Gear." she starts, walking over to the protrusion.

Zeroni doesn't find too much edible, but enough to feed two ponies for a day. In addition, she finds four clusters of agave, useful for making healing potions or alcoholic beverages!

The protrusion is exactly that, a big chunk of rock jutting up from the ground, with graffiti on it. But... something else is off about it. It seems a bit out of place, and the ground around it doesn't feel right.

SureFire checks around the rock for any signs of disturbance on the ground, perhaps signs of dragging or digging.

Gearshift looks over the rock, and walks up close to it, staring intently. She frowns, and licks it.

Zeroni "Well it's not a haul but it'll do for now I suppose," she says putting her scavenging sack down and brings out the items of food she found, two ears of fresh corn.

The rock is dusty, and tastes faintly coppery.

As SureFire examines the area, she spots what looks like a corner of a dusty tarp sticking out from under the dirt, anchored with a rock.

Gearshift frowns. "This thing tastes like blood. Ew." She backs up and makes a face.

SureFire will try and clear what dirt she can off of the tarp; but if all else fails will simply pull it out.

It's a tarp all right, ragged and ancient. It practically comes apart as she pulls on it. Beneath is a rusted steel door in the ground, leading beneath. It is clearly marked " GEN Y FALL S E "

SureFire "uhhhhhh...."

The letters are faded and some are missing, but there it is, tucked into the base of the rock like it belongs there.

SureFire "Gear, get the others, I appear to have found a shelter or something." Surefire announces, attempting to open the door.

It's a square door that seems to open outward, more cellar door than bunker door.

The door is rusted shut, but SureFire puts her back into it and it opens with a screech of protest. Beneath, rusted stairs lead down into darkness. How ominous.

SureFire brings up her EFS and flicks on her Pipbuck light, drawing her revolver.

The Pipbuck remains calm, and EFS detects only the friendly tics of the other mares in the group.

SureFire turns and gives a motion for whoever desires to follow as she descends into the darkness.

In the darkness, it is... dark. Pitch black and impossible to see.

Zeroni follows behind with her Brass Shoes on and ready to strike.

redact my idiocy]]

Gearshift whistles. "Hey! You two? We found a funhole!" She frowns and begins searching through her magic picnic basket, searching for a candle. "S' dark in there."

SureFire nods, letting the light from her pipbuck shine brightly as she descends the steps.

The soft glow of the pipbuck light illuminates an underground shelter as SureFire and Zeroni enter. Now clearly marked is a sign with a radiation symbol and emblazoned with

"EMERGENCY FALLOUT SHELTER" on the far wall. The interior space isn't huge. Perhaps large enough to shelter a family of six for a few days. There may have once been six beds down here but now only four remain, one extra...

...large, stitched together from others. Empty shelves and steel cabinets line the walls, and empty whiskey bottles litter the floor. A single pony skeleton is curled around one of the bottles, lying on the oversized bed. A terminal glows dully from a desk in the corner. The air smells of must, dust, and unuse.

Silk_Rose makes her way over to where the others are when she hears Gearshift shouting. Once she gets there, she says, "That's nice, hun, but what you and SureFire do in the privacy of the open wasteland is between just the two of you. Unless you're inviting me to join you, that is." She snickers.

SureFire "Guess only one pony made it down here during the strikes." Surefire mutters.

Gearshift does not find candles. However, a friendly squirrel wearing a motorcycle helmet offers her a fresh carrot.

SureFire begins rummaging through cabinets for stuff. "Mind checking the terminal, Gear?"

Gearshift shrugs, takes the carrot. "Thank you, basket squirrel!" She promptly lights the stem on fire with one of her lighters. She calls down from the entrance, "Just a moment! Trying to make a carrotcandle!"

Zeroni "Looking at all the Whiskey bottles, he must've died from Alchohol Poisoning or Withdrawal." she comments looking at all the bottles.

SureFire rolls here eyes.

Zeroni "Carrotcandle?" she says raising a brow.

Gearshift snickers. "Yeah, the basket squirrel gave me a carrot. Tryin' to see if its flammable enough to make a candle."

SureFire shrugs. "Perhaps knew the outside was unlivable and drank themselves to death."

The carrot candle burns very poorly, being mostly carrot and not at all candle.

Silk_Rose rolls her eyes at Gearshift and lights up her horn. "Maybe I can help."

Zeroni "That's one theory, wonder if there's anything of use down here though."

SureFire finds a worn 10mm pistol and a partial box of spare ammunition, 27 more rounds, to be precise, along with a patched radiation suit and a small clay bottle labeled 'antivenin.'

Gearshift pouts and eats the carrot. "Stupid cheater magic, getting in the way of innovation." She continues muttering about carrot candles and revolutionizing the wasteland as she enters the shelter.

As Gearshift wanders in, she easily notes that the shelter can lock from the inside. It just... wasn't. Apparently the last occupant had stopped caring.

SureFire digs out the various pieces of loot. "Found a pistol and some ammo, along with a rad suit...looks a bit damaged though."

SureFire "I figure that terminal may tell us more about the occupant."

Gearshift glances at the locks. "Odd. Hm... Anyways, you mentioned somethin' bout a terminal? Hope it' not broken!"

SureFire ndos to the terminal.

SureFire nods*

Silk_Rose takes a quick look around, in case there's something they've missed, while Gearshift checks the terminal.

Zeroni "What about that clay bottle?" she says looking at SureFire

Gearshift sits down in front of the computer in question and taps her forehooves together. "Now, lets see what secrets you hold." With much flourish, she begins tapping buttons.

SureFire "Antivenom I think."

Zeroni perks at this. "That'll come in handy if we run into any venomous creatures in our journey."

SureFire gets to work rummaging through the desk.

The terminal yields its secrets fairly easily. It has a pair of games installed, pinball and some game where a tank shoots at falling watermelons. Both high scores are into the billions. Also are some journal entries, apparently, and a sysop command to lock or unlock the shelter door.

The desk contains a bag of 250 bits, and a smaller bag of 50 bottlecaps. Also inside is some faded stationary for "Canterlot Estates" and an old letter from Stable-Tec, beginning with a heart-sinking "Dear Mr. and Mrs. Mustard, we regret to inform you..."

Silk_Rose finds some assorted clothing in the other cabinet, along with 5 bottles of water, apparently pure, and an old map of Equestria.

Gearshift whistles at the high scores, and immediately begins playing the pinball game.

The pinball game is surprisingly difficult, but the score seems to scale with the difficulty. To get that high score, you'd have to play on the hardest difficulty for HOURS, with the game actively cheating to make you lose. Yikes.

Gearshift quickly loses, having rather poor reflexes. Huffing, she closes the game and idly taps the lock command.

SureFire places the caps and bits in the loot pile to be divided in a bit. "Any logs on the computer Gear?"

Silk_Rose sets the water down momentarily, looking through the clothes. She picks out anything that looks halfway decent, before moving on to check the map.

Gearshift blinks. "Hm? Oh, right. Yeah, there's a few. Have at em'." She steps away from the terminal, glancing at it then busying herself by digging through the basket randomly.

There's a harsh CLACK as the shelter door slams shut and locks.

SureFire winces at the noise. "Dammit Gear, was that your doing?" She asks aloud, going over to take a look at the terminal. Once on the main screen, she'll activate the unlock function. "...Of course."

Silk_Rose nearly jumps and turns to look at the door. "What did you just do!?"

With an equally loud CLACK and a squeak of rusty metal, the shelter door opens again.

The basket is entirely empty, actually. Just wicker.

SureFire "Just the door locking mechanism. Don't worry." Surefire replies, "Gear, dear, please don't lock things that may not be unlockable again without good reason..."

SureFire will open up the logs.

The logs start in October, and go on through another year. It starts with 10/24... a date familiar to students of history as the day the balefire burned Equestria.

The first entry blinks "READ?"

SureFire gives confirmation.

>> 10/24 - Made it into a shelter, finally. Thank Celestia for some folks being prepared, even if Stable-Tec didn't see fit to let them in. And were foolish enough to leave their shelter unlocked! Suckers!

SureFire frowns and checks the next log.

>> 10/25 - Someone's banging on the shelter door, cussing me out for stealing their shelter. You snooze, you lose, bucko. I don't care about your damn kids. I got enough whiskey and baked beans down here to last me half of eternity.

Gearshift frowns, sticks her head entirely in the basket. She tilts and looks over at SureFire, basket on her head, and smiles. "No fun at all."

Zeroni looks at the terminal as well to read the logs. "Well this pony certainly had a nasty personality." she said frowning.

SureFire "I was expecting a sob story about some husband losing his wife on a scavenging run and drinking himself to death in the shelter. I did not expect some random shelter-stealing dick."

Silk_Rose frowns and returns to checking out the map.

SureFire and Zeroni read the rest of the logs...

>> 11/1 - I still have enough whiskey and baked beans down here to last me for eternity. I'd kill for a carrot. Sky's still burning to the northeast. Glad I wasn't in Dodge or Appaloosa. Woohoo camping, right? Happy fucking new year.

>> 4/24 - Saw a stranger out there today, sifting through rubble to add to his cart. Big guy at that, made me feel all buttery just looking at him. Can't trust him, though, might want to steal my shelter. I'll watch him for a couple days.

>> 4/30 - Holy fuck, he took on three of those scorched scorpion things by himself and stomped them to a pulp! Looks like they killed him, though. He's just lying in the wreckage and bug guts. Maybe there's something decent in his cart.

>> 4/30 - He's still alive. Poisoned as fuck, but alive. I dragged him back here to treat him with antivenom, stupid mare, not thinking before you compromise yourself just because he's... well, hung like nobody's business and looks like he could go for HOURS. Dammit, getting ahead of myself. Must be getting lonely.

>> 5/4 - He finally woke up. His name's Wedge, from Appaloosa. Farm boy. Lucky me. <3 Naive as shit, looks like I have a new protector and fuckbuddy if I treat him just a little nice. Putting a simple password on here, and he lacks the brains to figure it out. I've told him it's MY shelter and always has been. Good thing I cleared away the bones of the REAL owners.

>> 6/1 - He can cook, he stomped some punk with a gun flat, knows how to hunt, and talks about farming and his dreams of starting again once the radiation cools down. I hope he doesn't mean kids. I can't stand kids. But my implant's got another year on it, give or take. And I'm making the most of it, hoo boy. Guy was lonlier than me, so it didn't take much, and we've been BUSY. Hence the...

...neglect, old terminal. No regrets!

>> 5/12 - Yep. A year. Yep. He was talking about kids. And fuck everything, I'm pregnant. What the fucking hell business do I have getting pregnant when Equestria's a smoldering crater? Fuck.

>> 1/14 - Sick. Wedge went out to find help. Told him not to go, that we'd be fine, but he insisted he didn't want to lose me. He... turns out I underestimated him. Told me before he left

that he cracked my password months ago, read all this shit... love me anyway. Don't know what to say. Can't say anything. I don't deserve him or this kid. Should have died

>> 1/21 - He's not back. Feels like I've got a ball of fire growing in my belly, can't keep anything but water down. If he's not back soon I'm going to try and go after him.

>> 1/24 - Dead. Fuck. Shit. FUCK CUNT FUCK SHIT ASS COCKSUCKER PIECE OF FUCKING SHIT I KNEW I DIDN'T DESERVE ANY OF THIS, KARMA IS A BITCH AND NOW IVE GOT MINE

>> 2/1 - Cleaned up. Buried Hope. Had to let her go. I have a feeling Wedge isn't coming back either. looks like I got mine. At least I have some whisky left to forget all this with.

>> 2/8 - dneedmor swa whisky,almst out, whwers the buttfor mor shiwky

>> log ends

SureFire sighs. "Well nevermind, got what I expected, just not quite the way I expected it."

Zeroni "Wow." she says as she finishes reading the logs.

SureFire stands and gives the bed a short search for good measure. "Just more lost hope among a melting pot of it."

The beds are still serviceable, though the big one has apparently seen a lot of use, centuries ago. Nothing much else in here but regrets and empty bottles. But it's a safe place to spend the night for now, and maybe again if the group happens by this way again.

SureFire "Looks like a good spot to rest at least; even has a lock."

The map Silk_Rose found is old, still marking the locations of places that everyone knows aren't there anymore, like Cloudsdale and Stalliongrad.

Zeroni "Well, at least life is improving with time, it's a slow process but at least it's showing some progress."

Gearshift peeks out from under the basket. "Anything fun on the terminal?"

SureFire "Not particularly."

SureFire will head out a few times to bring their stuff inside. "Let's get some rest."

Silk_Rose trots over to the others with the map, and the water. "Anypony else find anything fun?"

Gearshift takes the basket off and frowns. "Nope. Basket is empty, by the by."

Gearshift yawns and crawls into one of the empty solo beds, curls up. She idly watches everyone from her chosen perch.

The beds smell musty and old, but they're still serviceable, hardly used at all for the most part. Whoever takes the big one gets the unpleasant task of moving all the whiskey bottles and the skeleton, AND finding a place with no stains to sleep.

SureFire divvies up the loot, brushes the bottles off one side of the bed and shoves the skeleton over before lying down to sleep.

Silk_Rose would rather have one of the small beds. She goes to sit down on one.

Silk_Rose looks over to SureFire, and offers a smile. "If you'd rather sleep someplace clean, hun, you can squeeze in with me. I don't mind." Her smile turns to a playful smirk. "Not one bit."

Zeroni heads to one of the beds, making sure to clean it off before sitting on it, her bag sitting next her.

SureFire rolls her eyes, but grins, getting up and moving over to lay with Rose. "I doubt the skeleton would have minded much either, but cold bones aren't much of a snuggle buddy."

Gearshift tugs her electrician cloak over herself and snuggles into a ball under it, using her saddlebags as a pillow.

Zeroni "Not to mention she was straight." she quipped before going to her bag. "Oh I found some corn on my scavenging, not much but I have some other provisions if anypony wants."

Silk_Rose giggles a bit at SureFire. "No, but I'd definitely feel weird about sleeping in a bed with a skeleton... even after getting rid of it." She turns to Zeroni, and smiles. "I've got my own, so you can keep them for now." And with that, she retrieves something to eat from her saddlebags.

Zeroni shrugs. "Anypony else want corn?" she asked the group.

SureFire nods. "Yes please."

Gearshift peeks out from under her cloak and nods. "Yes'm"

Zeroni gives the ears of corn to SureFire and GearShift. "I only found two, and they're fresh so you should eat them while they're still fresh."

SureFire nods, replying with thanks. She eats rather quickly and soon lays down to rest with Rose.

The group consumes a small dinner, then heads to bed. The tomb-like atmosphere of the shelter is a bit unnerving, but the gentle breathing of other sleepy equines is enough white noise to put that to rest. The group sleeps until the next morning. SureFire's Pipclock beeps at 7 AM. Time to start a new day.

SureFire wakes early before the others, exiting the shelter with the skeleton in tow to bury it outside; after which she returns inside to begin prepping her gear and cleaning her firearms for the day.

Gearshift snores from under her cloak, not loud enough to wake anyone.

SureFire begins waking the others once she is finished cleaning her rifle.

Silk_Rose is woken up when SureFire untangles herself from their snuggle-fest. While SureFire buries the skeleton, she stretches a bit and takes care of general morning business.

After morning rituals, including rousing the sleepy Gearshift, the group packs up and heads west, back toward Dodge 2.0.

The journey starts uneventfully, but soon SureFire spots a few ponies not too far away, coming down out of the hills. They appear to have spotted the group as well, and are closing the distance between the two groups.

SureFire draws her rifle and peers through the scope at the group.

Zeroni "What do you see SureFire?" she asked.

The group is... uncouth and ragged. They don't have the crazed look of raiders about them, but they're filthy, and twitchy. Junkies, by the look of them. Armed and armored junkies. Not very well equipped, but tweekers can be dangerous even unarmed...

SureFire draws her revolver and puts a shot into the air as a warning. "We may have trouble."

Silk_Rose frowns at SureFire's warning. "Who is it?"

Zeroni sighs as she equips her brass shoes. "Be on guard."

SureFire "Seems like transients. Probably addicted to every drug in existence."

The ragged group draws closer. Even from this distance, the group can tell the ponies look... unstable. Three stallions and a mare, wearing ragged but identical leather jackets of some kind. Part of a gang, possibly?

Silk_Rose thinks for a moment, before casting her Soft Light spell on herself. Just in case they can get by without a shootout. "Alright then... shall we go talk?"

SureFire "If they wanted to talk they'd have stopped with my shot."

The group does seem to have slowed down, and is approaching cautiously rather than at full-tilt, but SureFire DOES have a point...

SureFire "I'd prefer not to let them get close, but if you feel it a good idea to talk, I'll let them."

Silk_Rose frowns. "Just... don't look /too/ threatening. We can always go to plan 'B' if we need to." She trots forward just a bit ahead of the others (Not much, but enough to be in front!), and calls out as she walks, "We mean no harm! We'd like to talk, if that's alright?"

Gearshift hunkers cautiously near the back of the group, making sure her wings were tucked under her blue electrician cloak. "I dont like fighting."

SureFire draws a bead on the mare and waits.

The group pulls to a stop just out of accurate pistol range, and the mare, wearing a horned helmet, trots a bit toward Silk_Rose. "Heeeeyyyy, what's happening?" asks the mare. Her eyes are a bit bloodshot, and she twitches a bit. "Nice to see some other... ponies here on the road." Twitch, twitch.

The mare's addicted to something, and in withdrawal, but as to what, Silk_Rose isn't certain.

Gearshift hunkers down further behind SureFire, scratching at her holstered pistol nervously.

SureFire gently holsters her rifle, keeping her rifle up at the ready.

Silk_Rose gives the mare a smile. "Not much... we're just heading back to town after a quick outing." After a moment, she adds, "What brings you out here? We haven't been able to find much."

SureFire holsters her revolver*

"Hooking up with a seller," the mare says, trying to look nonchalant and failing at it. She looks VERY chalant. Twitch. "It didn't pan out. In your outing, you uh, find any Dash?" she asks, looking back at her cronies. "Strife could use a fix. And me, well, I know Flash is hard to find, but Beaker won't cook me any more and I'd be willing.." twitch twitch "...to pay top caps for it, I mean..."

...TOP caps, yeah?"

Silk_Rose frowns a bit, and shakes her head. "Not as far as we could find, no. Sorry. That kind of stuff isn't exactly easy to find..." She glances between them, and adds, "Is there anyplace you'll be, in case we find some?"

The mare glares at Silk_Rose, her mood instantly souring. "Yeah, we'll be playing harps with Celestia above the clouds later," she snarks. "If you're holding out on me, Strife's gonna be wicked pissed, yanno? And you would rather he not get angry. He gets a little MORE antisocial when he's angry."

Silk_Rose shakes her head again, a bit nervous. "Believe me! If we'd found any, we'd be more than happy to sell. None of us have any use for the stuff, we don't use."

"Fffffffuck," the mare says, and spits on the ground. "Alright, fine." She nods to the others, and they slowly begin approaching. "You got anything that makes a good breakfast? 'Cuz, without a fix, we get hungry, dig?"

SureFire casts combat precognition, keeping her aim steady.

Gearshift shrinks further behind SureFire as they approach, trying to hide herself as best she can

Silk_Rose forces another smile. "I'm sure we can help you out a bit..." She glances back toward the others. "What do you think?"

SureFire "What do you consider a 'good breakfast'?" Surefire asks, rifle unmoving.

"Food, dipshit," the mare snarls at SureFire. "I ain't talking to you. Anything that's not irradiated enough to burn a hole in the floor, sweetheart." She grins, and her teeth show signs of acid degradation. "We aren't... picky." Twitch twitch.

SureFire "Your call, Rose."

Silk_Rose frowns and says, "All right, all right, just, give me a second." She turns her head toward her saddlebags, opening them to take out some food. "Enough to share."

The other ponies stop a short distance behind the twitchy mare as she collects the offered food with an absolutely starved gleam in her eyes. "Hehehe, okay, now THIS is more like it," she says with another burnt grin. "It's no rush of Flash but a girl's gotta eat!" She chucks the other food at her cronies, who immediately devour it. She swishes her tail. "You know, for pointing a gun at my...

...head this whole time, you gals aren't too bad. You ever pick up some juice, we'll be around to buy. Just moved in near Pickett Mills. Tell 'em Misty sent you."

Silk_Rose keeps up her smile, and says, "Glad we could help... If we come across anything you'd be interested in, we'll be sure to stop by."

The mare nods. "Hell yes! Arrright you douchebags, let's get going," she yells at her associates. "Gotta find something good today or Menace is gonna kick our flanks to Tartarus and back." The four turn tail and head more northeast, away from Dodge 2.0.

Silk_Rose waits for them to be out of sight, before giving a relieved sigh.

Gearshift peeks out from behind SureFire. "Is it safe?"

SureFire watches them leave through her scope, stowing it when they are a ways off. "It's safe." she replies, trotting over and giving Rose a nuzzle.

Zeroni "They didn't seem too bad for addicts, usually you see them try to tear somepony limb from limb for chems or caps for their next fix." she mutters.

Silk_Rose returns SureFire's nuzzle. "I was definitely a little worried, there... But it turned out alright in the end."

The pugilistic ponies pacified, the group continues west, headed for the next adventure, hopefully less full of strung-out gangbangers. They have found a safe place to return to if they choose, and made friends with addicts. Yay? We'll see next time, in the Age of Anarchy!