

Fallout: Equestria - Rolling Bones

The Road West

“Put one hoof in front of the other and soon you’ll be trotting out the door.”

By the time I snapped out of my thoughts and back to reality the wagons had already made it halfway to the casinos. They’d left me standing there staring at a closed gate like an idiot. Where was Spoon? Shouldn’t he have come back and hit me over the head or something? It was like nopony cared whether I came along or not, as ridiculous as that sounded.

With only two ponies hitched to the front, the wagons weren’t able to move faster than a trot, so it didn’t take me long to catch them up.

Irons sat on top of the last wagon, a rifle of some description floating beside to him.

“...slides back and this part here forces the casing out of the chamber, like this.” The distinct sound of a bolt sliding back filled the air as a stray bullet sprang over the edge of the short wall only to be caught in Irons’ magic. His eyes widened a little as they came to rest on me. “Oh, hi...” The pep in his voice disappeared, “aren’t you supposed to be up with Spoon?”

“Uhm.. yeah...” I said, failing to summon a convincing smile. ‘Still awkward.’ I stepped up my pace and sped past the other Watchers and pull teams without so much as a nod until I caught up with the metal encased stallion.

“Decided to rejoin the herd, eh, Colt?”

“Yes, sir,” I replied quickly, waiting for the inevitable reprimand for falling behind. When it failed to come I got nervous. “Aren’t you going to yell at me about keeping up or... something, sir?”

His lips curled into a little smile. “Nope, and stop with the sir crap. It makes me feel old.”

“But... Oracle said... then you... and...” My mouth continued to open and close without sound until I caught sight of the smirk on his lips, my head dropped in resignation. “I hate you.”

“Aww, don’t say that, you’ll hurt my feelings,” he said, through a stupid grin.

We continued in silence for a time. I was too busy being mad and he was probably too busy focusing on walking.

The streets of Dise were all but empty so early in the morning. A few vagrants could be seen sleeping in the alleys, huddled against and between the run down buildings. The only other

ponies up and about were one or two of the casino gang members patrolling their blocks. It was an odd arrangement. The gangs were hardly paragons of law and order, but they maintained a certain level of peace. After all, why rob ponies on the streets when you could rob them in the comfort of a casino?

As we neared the large fountain, and by extension the casinos, we began to see more ponies. Dise never truly slept. There were places in it that did, and there were times when it was less active, but it never stopped moving. The casinos would never close their doors as long as there was a single pony to throw some dice and as long as the casinos stayed open some pony would be there to throw those dice. I guessed there was some sort of lesson to be learned from that, but I was never much of a philosopher.

The wagons curved their way around the large fountain and turned towards the city gates. I craned my neck to look back at Irons. I could just make out his head and the rifle as he pulled it apart, displaying the dismantled pieces to a sprout of green mane beside him.

“Who’s that up there with Irons?”

Spoon turned to match my gaze before responding, “Who, you mean Carrot?”

“Carrot?” As the question left my mouth a small orange colt bounced up from under the green mane for a brief second before disappearing once again. “A COLT! You’re dragging a COLT through the Wasteland?”

“It’s not like he gave us much of a choice,” he replied defensively. “He wouldn’t stop following us. For the first three months the commander left him with anypony who would take him in. Within two days there he was, back at our camp as if nothing had happened. After awhile we just kinda gave up trying. Grows on you after awhile.”

“So what do you do with him?” I asked lamely, unable to come up with anything better.

“We don’t let him get into the line of fire, if that’s what you’re worried about. When it’s time to get down to business Zefira and Irons take care of him.”

“Sefira? Who’s Sefira?”

“Zefira and she’s...” he paused, seemingly deep in thought, “our matron?” he finished, sounding more like a question than a statement.

“I don’t follow.”

“Well... she takes care of us. Patches our wounds, cooks our food...” he frowned as though the words tasted sour in his mouth.

“Oh, I get it,” I said, an evil grin curving my lips. “She’s your foalsitter.”

Spoon’s face lit up like a slot machine. “What... she... that’s...” His teeth clicked as he slammed his mouth shut. There was a moment of quiet before he spoke in a soft voice, “I hate you.”

The caravan came to a halt as it approached the enormous gates that would lead us out of Dise. My wings twitched at my side with the unease I felt at the sight of the large steel gates. The idea of leaving Dise had never been a happy prospect for me; it’s not that I held any particular love for the place, but Dise was home. It had always been home. From the day I was born till this moment I had never stepped a hoof outside its protective walls.

Before now the farthest I had ever been from the Watchers compound had been Aloe’s birthday. That night she dragged me to ‘The Moon’ seemed forever ago. So much had happened since then, so many happy memories. Now everything was falling apart.

I tried to tell myself that it was an opportunity. That it was a chance to learn and grow as a pony. I had heard a saying once, *Everypony must leave home someday, if only to discover how much they miss it*. That was stupid, the only reason to miss home was if everywhere you went was worse! Anxiety began to play me like a marionette. I couldn’t keep all four hooves on the ground.

The merchant, Caps Worth, stepped forward to speak to the two ponytron guards who stood before the gates. Their confrontation only lasted seconds, papers were presented and inspected before the guards moved aside. Almost immediately the gates began to open. Unlike the Watcher’s gate this one moved with a surprising amount of speed. In a matter of seconds it had opened completely.

The caravan began moving again and my anxiety worsened with every step. Where leaving the Watchers had been distressing, this was closer to terrifying. Not only was I leaving home, but now I was stepping out into the Wasteland! Where a pony is as likely to eat you as say hello! I would have frozen at the threshold if Spoon hadn’t wrapped his leg around my shoulders and nearly dragged me out.

And there I was. Outside. The Wasteland stretched out before me and... I really didn’t see what the big deal was.

++FoE:RB++

The flame maned unicorn poked at my side, so I scooted closer to Nurse Gray. He matched my move and kept at it so I flapped my wing to shoo him away. Nurse Gray was far more deserving

of my attentions. I felt her warm breath on my ear just before she bit at it playfully. My wings flared out.

"OW! What was that for?" the unicorn moaned, a hoof rubbing his nose.

"Sorry," I mumbled, never really taking my attention off the mare laying beside me.

"Come on mister. You need to wake up," the unicorn complained, poking me in the side again.

"Can't you see I'm busy here?"

"Here use this."

"Hmmm?" I moaned.

"Are you sure... okay..." he replied, ignoring me completely..

SPLASH!

"AAAAAAH!" I jumped into the air, water dripping from my soaked face and mane.

"HAHAH! See? Works every time!" Spoon laughed, stomping his forehooves.

I floated in the air, gasping as reality crushed the last vestiges of my dream world. I stared down at the brown pony below me. "You...you..." my eyes narrowed, "of course you know, this means War!"

He smiled up at me trying to look as innocent as a newborn foal. "I don't know what you're talking about, Colt. I didn't do anything to you." Spoon stepped back revealing a small orange colt with a poofy green mop of a mane on his head. The colt grinned nervously around the empty bucket hanging from his mouth. "Go on, Carrot, I am sure Locke could use some help making breakfast." Nodding enthusiastically he took off towards the ring of wagons.

The colt disappeared in the wagon circle and I promptly collapsed to the ground in a heap. "That's not fair. Using a colt to pull pranks for you."

"You just wish you'd thought of it first." Spoon continued before I could retort, "The commander wants to talk to you, so get your flank in gear."

A great yawn was the herald of a mass revolt of my limbs as they all stretched out, trying to tear themselves away from the rest of my body. My legs and wings spasmed as they gave up in defeat. My hooves continued to protest with a dull pain that had developed over the long day of almost non stop walking.

We had been on the road all day, but the shadow of Dise was still easily visible in the light of the rising sun. It wouldn't surprise me if we could still see it when we finished this day's trek, too. The wagons made terrible time. Even with the complete lack of progress, I'd done more walking yesterday than I had for the entire month prior.

Being the 'scout', Oracle hadn't lost any time sending me and Knives out ahead of the caravan. For the entire day I was cantering out a good three miles ahead of the wagons before heading back in order to report my lack of finding anything, only to head back out again. This wouldn't have been so bad if I'd been allowed to fly. Oracle had been very insistent on that point. I was not to leave the ground until we were at least a full day out of Dise. I don't know what his problem was. I had flown around the Watchers compound most of my life. As long as I stayed low, I didn't see the problem.

So, of course, the moment I was out of sight I took wing. I skimmed the first stretch of plains quickly and took a break with the time I had bought myself. I don't know how he found out, but the moment I got back he tore into me and threatened to lash my wings to my side. Oracle was beginning to freak me out almost as much as did Cross. Needless to say, I spent the rest of the day with four hooves on the ground.

I moved my hooves back under me and with a grunt of effort forced myself to stand. Loud pops filled the air as I flexed my joints to work out the stiffness from the night before. My wings curled and sent out a wave of cracks in rapid succession. The relief of tension was wonderful. A final pop of my neck sent a shiver down my spine and I looked up at Spoon expectantly.

With a shake of his head Spoon turned towards the wagons and I followed him into the center of the camp. The Watchers were already busy packing everything up or making and eating breakfast which consisted of dry oatcakes and a poor excuse for a salad. I spotted Locke and Stock mixing the skimpy vegetables in a large bowl and adding a small sprinkling of dry seasoning. The little colt had ditched his bucket somewhere and sat eagerly staring at the odd pony making his breakfast. I almost went over to join them, until I spotted the current bane of my existence.

Oracle sat on the other side of the coal pit with a small stack of oatcakes floating around his head. Lounging beside him, Cross had her muzzle buried deep in the pages of a book scrutinizing it as though she could make the words read themselves with a glare. She was so absorbed in her book that when Oracle addressed us she nearly jumped into the hot coals behind her.

"This is unacceptable, Flybuck. Tomorrow you'll be up and ready with everypony else."

I opened my mouth with a witty reply ready on my tongue, only to have the words catch in my throat. Cross was looking at me expectantly, almost begging me to speak out of turn. I bit back

my retort and swallowed my pride. "Yes... sir."

"Good. Until this job is done or we find a replacement, you are as much an Arbitror as the rest of my ponies." I found myself wishing he would speak with some emotion or inflection, his bored monotone was really getting to me. "That means you are a reflection on me and I will not be reflected upon poorly." His gaze was still fixed on the remains of the fire as he took another bite of oat cake.

I nodded slightly as I waited. *'Was that it? Could I go now?'* My stomach rumbled quietly as I watched him chew. Well that settled it, I was done, and hungry, and my jaw still hurt. I turned my head to walk away when Cross spoke for only the second time since I met her.

"Stay." My body froze in mid step. I could not begin to explain the way she said that word, but it carried more weight than most ponies can put into an entire speech.

Oracle swallowed the last of his bite, "You will go see Irons. He has some gear for you. Today you start to earn your keep."

"Yes, sir," I replied; my stomach growled in protest. "Can I at least get some breakfast first? Sir."

"No. You will go without today and if you do not wake up on time tomorrow you will go without then too."

That was total brahmin shit. "Permission to be excused. Sir."

"Permission granted." I turned to storm off, only to have Oracle speak up, "Sevens, Irons is the other way."

I grit my teeth, ignoring the spikes of pain rocketing through my jaw. The ponies milling around jumped to get outta my way as I stormed by. It was only after I made it to the tents that I realized how foalish I was acting. The heat rushing to my face only angered me that much more.

I found a secluded spot between one of the tents and a pump wagon and sat down. Without anyway to vent properly it took a good minute for me to cool down and collect myself. I just had to suck it up and deal with it. It would only be for a few weeks and then things could go back to normal. We would get back to Dise, Nurse Gray would be there waiting for me, I could finally fix things with Aloe, and everything would be fine. Just a few weeks. I could do this.

With my resolve firmly in place I resumed my course to the armory. The sounds of rummaging and cursing drifted from the wagon in question. As I neared I recognized the slightly high pitched voice of Irons. I came around behind the wagon just in time to see the mint green unicon fall out of the back and hit the ground with an audible grunt.

I looked down at the pony laying at my hooves. "Are you okay?"

His legs sticking up in the air, he bent his head back to look at me. "That depends... how many of you are there supposed to be?"

"Uhm... one."

"Then I should be fine. Here, these are for you." A pair of flight goggles dangled from his up stretched hoof. "I meant to give them to you yesterday, but..." His eyes drifted to my Rainbow Dash necklace.

"Heheh... yeah... about that..." I rubbed the back of my head as embarrassment flushed my cheeks, "look, I-"

"Nope, don't say anymore," he said, rolling over onto his hooves, "it's my fault. I shouldn't have tried to take it without asking first. You live, you learn. We all have our little quirks. Forgive and forget, life's too short in the Wastes. So do you want them?" He offered up the goggles again.

I took the goggles in hoof and examined them. They didn't seem to be anything special. Just a pair of thick glass lenses inside airtight frames. I slipped the strap behind my head and slid the goggles over my eyes. I had to tilt them back to let out some pressure before replacing them.

I felt a little awkward wearing them. The pressure around my eyes was something that would take some getting used to. A few scratches adorned the edges of the lens, but it was nothing that interfered with my vision. "I think I could make use of them."

"That's good. The last owner definitely doesn't need them anymore." *Huh?* "But that isn't why you're here. The commander wants you 'connected'. Don't move." Irons jumped back into the wagon and resumed his rummaging, "You see, Oracle came up with these nifty little doohickies... did you notice all that stuff he wears instead of armor?"

"Well, you see, he has a knack for electronics, communication stuff especially, and he has this spell that lets him tap into speaker systems. This is useful on its own, but it has its limits. The speaker can only be so far away, it has to be within line of sight, and he can only use one at a time. That device he wears allows him to connect to multiple systems simultaneously and to make and maintain the connections without line of sight. Ah! Here it is."

He stepped out of the wagon with a small box floating in front of him. The lid opened up to reveal a number of small ear pieces. "While he was designing the broadcaster he discovered blueprints for these puppies." I picked up one of the devices. "They're really very impressive."

I lifted the goggles off my eyes, letting them press into my forehead and inspected the odd piece of tech in my hoof. "How does it work?"

“All you have to do is put it in your ear. Oracle does the rest.”

I looked back down at the device incredulously. All it seemed to be was a bit of plastic with a pin hole drilled in it. I couldn't help being more than a little skeptical, certain that this was some prank and I was due to play the fool. I looked back at Irons and his encouraging smile. I didn't really have a choice did I? The device slid comfortably into my left ear.

“YOU ARE TAKING WAY TOO LONG, FLYBUCK.”

“GAH!” I screamed, flinching away from the device in my ear.

“TELL IRONS TO HURRY UP. WE LEAVE IN TEN.”

“The commander ‘ave orders for us?”

“Celestia's tits, that's loud.” I rubbed at the device to sooth the ringing in my ear. “Is there a way to turn the volume down a touch?”

“A DOWNWARD SWIPE WILL LOWER THE VOLUME.”

As I followed the instructions the earpiece made a flat tone that became quieter with each swipe. “Will he be able to hear everything I say?”

“Only when you are pressing on it, but as long as the gem holds out he'll be able to call you at any time.”

“Wonderful.” I sighed, “Just wonderful.”

++FoE:RB++

I had finally found it. The one thing that had been missing from my life. I reveled in it now. Everything before had been a poor substitute, a mockery, painted up to try to fool me. I finally saw them now for the lies they had been. This was what life was meant to be. No restrictions, no limitations, just pure unadulterated freedom.

The joy. The exhilaration. The wonder. It was like my first time all over again, only now I knew what I was doing. I didn't fumble around blindly, afraid of making a mistake. I had the knowledge and experience to truly enjoy it this time. With a slight twist I was on my back staring up at the cloudy skies. I stretched out a hoof as though to touch the white puff.

My eyes widened in shock as I pulled my hoof back and brought a clump of cloud with it. It was fluffy, kind of soft and springy. At the same time it was squishy and almost moist, like fresh mud or clay. A smile crept across my face as I played with it, a thousand ideas began storming my brain all at once.

"What are you doing?" an angry voice whispered in my ear, pulling me back out of my head.

"Uhm... nothing," I replied, as I pressed a hoof to my ear.

"And what are you supposed to be doing?"

"Scouting the trail ahead for any signs of danger," I responded, letting the bit of cloud go and turning back over.

Down below me I could see the caravan as it slowly trudged along the old railway tracks. Two or three ponies stood on the backs of the wagons while the rest trudged along side. Everything looked so small from up here. I had to squint to make out Oracle standing on top of the middle wagon staring up at me.

I twisted around and turned into a dive. With my fore-hooves stretched out before me and my wings folded back I began to shed altitude. The wind whipped by me, tugging at my mane and tail as I rocketed towards the ground. I struggled to keep my lips closed against the onrushing air. I'd never moved so fast in my life. I silently thanked Irons for the goggles; without them I would never have been able to reach these speeds.

The bug came out of nowhere and slammed into the soft spot of my jaw. I don't know how long I blacked out, but when I came to the ground was rocketing towards me. In a panic my wings flared open, the passing air tearing at my feathers and straining my muscles. I screamed into the wind as it tried to rip them from my back. I still wasn't slowing down enough.

I fought the air currents and strained with all my strength to pull up. Slowly, my flight path began to turn towards the horizon. It wasn't enough, I had lost too much altitude. The ground was approaching too fast. I wouldn't be able to level out before I became nothing more than a stain on the ground. 'Horse Apples!'

I squeezed my eyes shut in preparation for the end. I had enough time to wonder what it would feel like. Would I even feel anything or would I be dead before I had a chance to realize it?

I felt the air shifted underneath my wings as I tensed for impact. The wind continued to blow past my ears. I opened my eyes to see the ground speed past not a hoof from my nose. I blinked in surprise and raised my head. 'Pony Feathers!'

Twisting to the left I narrowly avoided the last wagon in the caravan and barely pulled up in time

to skim over the head of Echo as he dropped to the ground. I am sure he had a few choice words for me, but I was already past the lead wagon and regaining altitude before he could stand up.

“That was a stupid stunt, Flybuck.” I ignored the annoying voice in my ear as I rubbed my sore mouth. It wasn’t like that’s what I’d meant to do.

The realization that I had, in fact, not died began to sink in. There was no way that I could have made that. I should have been a pile of flesh and bone in the center of a small crater right now. With a shake of my head I cast out the images and tried to focus on the task at hoof. I allowed my speed to bleed off, my whole body shaking as the adrenaline leaked out of my system.

“There are some hills about a mile or two up ahead. Go check them out. They would make a great place for an ambush.”

“Ten... Four... boss.” I replied between heavy breaths. With a great deal less gusto than before I pumped my wings and rose back up into the air.

++FoE:RB++

From my vantage point in the sky I could see the hills Oracle had mentioned long before I got anywhere near them. The tracks we were following cut between them, proving once again that ponies have always been lazy. An entire battalion of raiders could hide in the scrub brush that covered those hills. Fortunately for me, E.F.S. made such things as concealment a moot point.

I coasted in and made slow circles of the hills. With each pass I bled some altitude, drawing closer to ensure that I didn’t miss anything. I sighed when I realized that my E.F.S. was clear and no matter how hard I looked I wasn’t going to spot any raiders hiding on those hills. For as much as I didn’t want a fight, I was expecting one. This was the Wasteland after all and the most dangerous thing I had run into so far was that bug that almost turned me into pony paste.

I touched down on the summit of one of the hills and promptly collapsed. Just laying there I let myself relax for a minute. With a contented sigh my hoof pressed the device in my ear. “All’s clear up here. Not a raider in sight.”

“Copy, no raiders.”

I rolled onto my back and relaxed. The caravan would take a good thirty minutes to catch up and I needed my beauty sleep. ‘Aaah, thirty minutes of peace and quiet.’ I worked my back against the ground, pushing small rocks out of the way, and inhaled deeply.

When the ground gave way I didn't even have a chance to curse.

The fall was a short one but enough to knock the air from my lungs. I wheezed struggling for breath. I hacked and coughed on the dirt and dust that filled the air around me. It began to settle and I rolled to my hooves.

The cave was completely dark except for the spotlight pointing down on me from the ceiling. The only thing that I could make out was the tall spike of stone barely an inch to my left. With a snort of frustration I began to wipe the dirt from my face and chest.

I imagined that some ponies would've been driven by curiosity, or lack of flight, to find out what might be hidden inside a place like this. Those ponies are idiots. I turned my attention to the hole over head. I must have reactivated my E.F.S., because just as I was just about to take flight I noticed a red tick popped up at the bottom of my vision. My legs straightened as I looked around. 'A red tick? Right, a red tick was a hostile. Nothing to worry... aww, pony feathers.'

I don't know why I didn't take off right at that moment. I *really* don't know why I didn't move when I turned to see the other four ticks pop up. It wasn't until the faint buzz filled the air that realization dawned on me like a sledgehammer to the face.

I didn't bother to wait to confirm my fears. With a mighty jump I launched myself at the opening, for all the good it did me.

I broke into the beautiful light of the afternoon, and had the situation been different I may have even basked in it. As it was my entire body moaned from the earlier traumas as I sped through the air. Then I did something really stupid, I bent my neck to look behind me.

Following not three pony lengths behind me were five very large, very angry, very ugly, Cazadorables. The closest pulled up slightly to display its wings and I quickly looked away before I saw anymore. My wings beat as fast as I could make them go and I tore across the sky back toward the caravan, the bugs in hot pursuit.

Tracker only had two rules about the Cazadorables. Rule one, don't look at them. Rule two, run as fast as your legs will carry you. When I had asked him about killing them he told me to reference rule one.

I felt the first bullet pass by my head and heard the small explosion of exoskeleton before its report reached my ears. Resisting the urge to look as the sound of the second shot filled the air I sped on.

I cried out at the sudden tug on my tail. Without thinking I turned to see one of the bastards hanging onto the hairs streaming behind me. It stopped flying and flared out its wings. The extra drag pulled hard and slowed me down. I began losing altitude as it clambered up my tail, its legs

tangling in the hairs. The other two zoomed past me intent on the caravan still rumbling slowly forward.

I panicked as I felt it bite at my armor on my back and fumbled for my pistol. Just as I drew it out of the holster a sharp pain shot through my back and I gasped. The pistol tumbled from between my teeth. I could feel the mandibles tear through my flesh and chomp at the base of my spine. My wings spasmed and we began to fall. Somewhere in the distance I heard a racket of gunfire.

We tumbled through the air and I fought desperately to dislodge the creature from my back. I bucked and twisted as much as I could, but it was out of my reach. Gripping my flanks with its legs it pulled itself farther up my back.

It was sheer luck that when we hit the ground I was on top. There was a satisfying crunch as its carapace gave way under my weight. Unfortunately, its stinger was made of tougher stuff.

Pain burned away all thought, all emotion, all sensation. I screamed. The world went black, and I screamed. The ground dropped out from under me, and I screamed. I screamed until my voice broke, and I screamed. Somewhere behind the pain coursing through me there was the smallest prick and a moment later everything faded away.

++FoE:RB++

“...een it spread that fast. WHERE’S THAT ANTI...”

“...ut it out. Scalpel.”

“..ble venom has always been deadly, but...”

“Where is that drip?”

“Goddess, the venom is the least...”

“Damn it, if he dies on me Gray...”

“...draining the infection...”

++FoE:RB++

I woke up moaning, everything hurt. Stuffing filled every corner of my mind and made it

impossible to form coherent thoughts. My hooves caught on something when I tried to raise them to comfort my head. A wave of nausea and dizziness washed over me as my head shifted to the side. I whimpered through a parched throat.

A mare's voice forced its way through my clouded mind. "Ah, I see that you have finally woken. How are you feeling?"

I tried to respond, but something was bound around my muzzle holding it fast. I barely managed to force out a moan.

"You will feel the nausea for some time yet. It would be wise of you to rest. Your injuries were quite severe and your body has yet to heal fully." Two hooves touched my face and pulled my eye open. Even through the fog in my mind I still managed to feel surprised at seeing the stripes of a zebra looking down at me. Unlike Knives, hers were lighter, more grey than black, and her mane hung about her face in a mass of tightly wound braids filled with beads and bits of jewelry.

I moaned again as she lifted my head up. "Truly, you are lucky to be alive. The infection in your mouth had reached into the bone of your jaw. A few more days and it is very possible that you would not be amongst the living."

Bile burned in my chest. I tried to ask for water, but the only managed a hacking cough.

"I have a draught that will help ease the pain and help you slumber."

I tried to say 'no' and shake my head, but the only thing that came out was another moan.

The zebra seemed to take this as consent and disappeared from view. When she came back she was holding a small glass vial sealed with wax. Using her teeth she pulled the wax off and spat it onto the floor. With one hoof holding my head up she put the vial to my lips. "Drink, my little pony, this mixture will buy you some peace."

I tried to pull away but lacked the strength. As the vial tipped up I sealed my lips. The vile smelling substance spilled along my lips and dropped down my cheeks and into the bandages wrapped about my muzzle.

Seeing my reluctance she pulled the vial away. "What is the meaning of this behavior? Do you not wish to have your ills to be set aside?"

"Wahdah!" I managed to rasp.

The mare smiled kindly and once again left my sight only to return with a canteen hanging from her neck. I felt a hoof lifting my head. The smallest drops of water played across my lips as she allowed the liquid to drip from the flask. I licked at them, savoring the moisture. The canteen

returned to deposit another dripping of the precious water on my cracked lips. She continued to tease my lips with the water for a time, never more than enough to wet them.

The fog in my mind cleared as the moisture slowly returned to my mouth and throat. Memories began to find their way to the forefront of my mind. The pain of the Cazadorable biting through my armor and grinding against my spine brought a wave of panic. My relief was palpable when my hind legs kicked out in reflex. My breathing relaxed until I remembered crashing into the ground, the stinger biting deep into my shoulder.

The zebra was quick to release the bindings on my left hoof, allowing me to lean over the side of the bed. I had to fight past the bandages wrapped around my head as the vomit forced its way out of my mouth. Spitting out the bile covered bits of half digested food sent spikes of pain through my jaw.

I lay there, head lolling over the side of the bed, too tired to move. My stomach roiled as it tried to expel the drugs that had undoubtedly been used by the surgeon. I struggled to focus on something other than the nausea. I wondered what drugs they used and at what dosages. Med-X was a given- the dry mouth was a dead giveaway. An antivenom for the sting...

A sudden jerk of movement sent another wave of dizziness through me. I could hear the grind of the wheels as they began to roll beneath the wagon. The caravan was moving again.

"What happened," I hissed in pain as I rolled back over, "to... my face?"

"When your doctor checked you for injuries he discovered an infection deep in the bone of your jaw. He had to cut deep and remove parts of your jaw in order to drain it completely. If this had gone untreated much longer it could have traveled along the bone and found its way to your brain."

"Removed?"

"Yes, it took many hours to ensure that it they had completely excised every trace of the infection. I am informed that he had to use bits of metal to replace what would not grow back even with his magic." I gasped at another spike of pain. "If you would allow me, there are some syringes of Med-X that would lessen your agony."

"No," I sighed, exhaustion finally taking hold and pulling me back under.

++FoE:RB++

A soft tap on my cheek brought me out of my dreams. I hissed sharply as the pain reasserted

itself.

Blinking away some tears I saw the smiling face of Zefira looking down at me. "It is time for your supper. You must eat to regain your strength."

I nodded softly and struggled to rise, but the restraints binding me to the bed were still in place. Before I could say anything Zefira went to work releasing me. "The venom of the Cazadorable caused your muscles to convulse," she said, in way of explanation. "The sedatives your doctors used did little to assuage them."

The last restraint slipped from my hoof and I tried to sit up. A wave of dizziness assaulted me and I had to rest my head against the metal wall of the wagon.

A spoon carrying a small carrot in a pool of liquid moved to my lips. Opening my mouth as far as I could she pushed the bit of food in. Flavor and pain exploded in my mouth and I swallowed them down in equal measure. I could identify all the spices used and I knew it wasn't anything special, but hunger raised the meager soup to that of a grand meal.

All too quickly the bowl came up empty, leaving me almost as hungry as I had been before we started. Zefira smiled, "I shall retrieve you a second bowl." She disappeared out of the back of the wagon and left me to my thoughts.

I unconsciously reached for the ever present figure that hung from my neck. I pawed at my collar a few times before panic kicked in. My chest tightened and breathing became difficult. I frantically searched the inside of the wagon from my cot. I couldn't see her anywhere. I began to feel faint.

The back door opened to reveal the miniature cyan pegasus floating just behind it. Relief washed over me until the unicorn carrying it came into view. Echo stepped inside behind the doll with a bowl of soup resting on his back.

"And how is the patient feeling?" It is difficult to glare with bandages wrapped around your face, but I sure tried. "Oh come now, Mr. Sevens. Is that how you greet the pony who saved your life?" Nonononono! I do not owe my life to this... this... "Look I even brought you your favorite doll." Dash landed softly on my stomach where I quickly snagged and held it close to my chest. "I see your facial muscles are still operating properly, I was worried about that. Have you noticed any numbness in your chin or jaw?" I continued to glare at him coldly as I squeezed the doll. "You're an ungrateful tit, you know that." A pair of scissors lifted out of a bag beside the cot, "Hold still, I need to check the sutures."

As the scissors neared my muzzle I tried to back way only to press myself up against the wall. The cold blade slid between my cheek and the bandages, cutting them away with care. Each snip loosened the grip on my muzzle. When they finally fell away I worked the muscles of my

jaw in relief, until Echo scooted closer and took my muzzle in his hooves.

He twisted my head around, moving it so that he could examine the results of his work. I held my tongue as he mumbled to himself. As much as I disliked him I couldn't deny his skill as a surgeon.

I winced as he probed along the bottom of my chin with the dull end of a scalpel, "You really don't know how well you live up to your name do you?" When I tried to protest he jabbed harder. "I wasn't done." He let go of my muzzle and turned to the bandages wrapped around my shoulder. "If the good Dr. Humors had been here you would be fortunate to just be alive, much less still have feeling in your jaw." The bandages pulled up, peeling scabs and dried pus away from the naked pink flesh.

"If it had been -AH!- Humors," I paused to suck in a breath, "I would have had -AH!- gone to him sooner." I hissed as he cut away the pus and dead flesh.

"Of course," he said condescendingly, "because there aren't two other doctors here that you could have seen days ago, and that zebra shaman could have done something I am sure."

"I'm not here to listen to you lecture at me!"

"No, you're here because I saved your waste of a life," he emphasized this by cutting away a little more skin than was strictly necessary. "So you are going to listen to my lecture and if you have half a brain you will pay attention and maybe learn something for once."

There was quiet as he finished cleaning out the wound. I couldn't exactly leave, so I was stuck waiting for him to start talking again. Without any warnings I felt the cool tendrils of his magic course around my shoulder.

The cold sensation began to burn. My back arched from the almost pain of the wound being closed by magic. I instinctively bit down and grit my teeth sending very real pain through me. The moment my mouth opened to gasp for air a wad of bandages filled it and stifled the scream. Tears trickled out of the corners of my eyes as I whimpered into the cloth.

"I would offer you some Med-X, but I know better."

"Mmhhhmmhhmmhmmh!"

He smiled cruelly. "As a reminder. So that you never forget the price of your arrogant pride. Nurse Gray isn't here to coddle you. You will learn that there is a price to pay for every choice you make if I have to cut it into your hide myself."

"Mhmmmmhmmmm!"

"I earned my pride, colt. I spend all of my free time making sure that I'm the best I can be. Everything I have is bought and paid for with my own blood and sweat. Everything you have has been hoofed to you on a silver platter. You haven't had to work for a Celestia damned thing in your life!" he seethed for a moment before taking a number of calming breaths. "Now roll over."

It was a struggle to turn over onto my stomach. My legs felt like they were made out of jelly and barely held my weight long enough for me to flip over. I dropped back to the cot hard, the thin padding doing little to soften the fall. I stared at the wall of the wagon as Echo examined what was left of the wound on my back.

He sighed, "Why do you have to be so difficult? I've watched you, you know. You have so much talent... but talent doesn't mean shit if you aren't willing to put at least a modicum of effort into something."

Everything had been hoofed to me? What did he know? I never asked for anything that I wasn't due. Just because I didn't have to work at things and he did. Jealousy, that's what his problem was. Couldn't handle the fact that I was just naturally better than him.

I squirmed under his ministrations. Had it been any other stallion I might have enjoyed it. The bite had dug deeply, beyond that it was relatively minor. Some disinfectant and a healing potion or two applied directly to the wound had been enough to close it. Once he was satisfied that it wouldn't reopen on its own he stepped away.

He stood quiet for a time as I continued to stare at the steel wall of the wagon. He finally turned to leave only stopping at the threshold for a second. "Your soup's getting cold."

It took me an hour to get the bandages out of my mouth.

I spent the rest of that night in the medical wagon falling in and out of consciousness. Each time I woke up I had to struggle against the last vestiges of my dreams and the sudden onset of pain and nausea that had been forgotten during sleep. The disorientation only lasted moments, but the pain was constant until I fell back to into unconsciousness. That I managed to keep down my dinner was miraculous.

Wakefulness only lasted minutes before I returned to the land of the dreamers. More often than not my dreams were nothing more than reliving my flight of terror from the Cazadorables. These all ended the same way, crashing into the ground and waking up in a cold sweat. The other dreams... the other dreams weren't so pleasant.

++FoE:RB++

We made our way down the dirty streets of Dise. I pressed myself firmly against her leg as she draped her good wing over me. I peeked through her feathers at the ponies lying in the gutters, inhalers and syringes littering the ground at their hooves.

We turned a corner and my heart skipped a beat. There, at the end of the road was the general store! Mommy was going to buy my birthday present! I could barely contain myself as we slowly approached the shop.

The shiny mare behind the counter waved us over with silvery hoof. Mommy lifted her wing from my shoulder to wave back. The shopkeeper seemed to notice me for the first time, her lips pulled back in a smile that made me cringe.

I tried to hide behind mommy's leg, whimpering at the scary pony behind the counter. The sick smell of rot assaulted my nose causing me to gag and cough. I looked around to find the source, but there was nothing to see.

A loud click drew my attention up to the counter where I saw the most amazing pegasus doll ever. Ignoring everything else I took off and snatched it up in my hooves. Hugging it to myself I turned to mommy to beg her to let me keep it.

The shopkeeper tapped a hoof on the table expectantly. Mommy looked sad as she picked up a knife. She turned up to me and did her best to smile as she rammed the blade into her chest.

I did nothing as blood began to leak from her mouth, instead flitting about with the rainbow maned doll. She moved the knife in a circle, slicing away flesh and bone with ease. Blood flowed down her coat and dripped loudly on the floor at her hooves.

The unicorn motioned greedily with her hooves for mommy to hurry up as I landed in the expanding pool of blood. Laying down I curled up around the doll, hugging it close to my chest.

With one final jab the knife clattered to the floor next to me. Reaching into her own chest mommy pulled out her still beating heart and dropped it on the counter.

The ground fell out from under me.

++FoE:RB++

CRACK!

The back of my skull bounced off the metal floor. I gripped my head with my forelegs as I rolled

around on the ground cursing. My dreams were left forgotten in face of the pounding in my skull and the return of the dull ache in my jaw. What a wonderful way to start the day.

Once the pain began to recede I rolled to my hooves. With a yawn I reared up and stretched my legs and wings. The quiet ache of disuse seeped out of my limbs; spending an entire day in bed sounded good in theory, but even I had to admit that it didn't work out so well in practice.

Falling back to all four I rubbed the sleep from my eyes. The wagon was lit by the slivers of light slipping in around the edges of the doors. Crates and boxes filled most of the space inside except for a thin aisle that divided the wagon in half and led to the back door. The only open space was where I stood, surrounded by three cots attached to the walls.

The rumble in my stomach reminded me just how hungry I was. With any luck somepony would already be making breakfast. I pushed open the door letting the pre-dawn light wash over me and stepped out of the wagon.

My ears twitched toward the sound of ponies and the click of metal and wood. I decided that if there was any food to be had it would be there. On slightly wobbly legs I made my way to the orange glow of the coals.

Five ponies were busy throwing together the salad that would make up the morning meal once everypony woke up. It was little more than lettuce and chopped carrots mixed with just a hint of onion and radish. My mouth watered- I couldn't imagine a grander feast. One of them noticed me and waved to me in a friendly way, Rose Blossom I think.

"Hey Sevens, I'm surprised to see you up so early." Her face fell as I stepped closer. "Your face... did we run out of potions?"

"Huh?" I reached a hoof to my face and ran it along the stitches, "Oh. No, this is Echo's idea of a joke." I brushed it off and tried to smile, but that pulled on the stitches, "I don't suppose it would be possible to get a bowl of that delicious looking salad there, would it, Rose?"

Her easy smile returned. "Sure as sugar," she chimed happily.

I watched in disbelief as she spun with an energetic twirl back toward the salad bowl; it was way too early in the morning for anypony to have that much energy. Picking up a set of wooden tongs she began dishing out the salad into a smaller bowl. Was she... she was humming. She danced back around to face me with the now filled bowl on a small plate in her mouth. I took the bowl from her and carefully placed it on my back.

"If you don't mind me asking... why are you so... so happy?"

"Heeheehee," she giggled, "is there a reason I shouldn't be?"

I blinked and looked down as though I could find the answer in the ground at my hooves, “Well, no, not particularly, but...”

“Well, when you find one you let me know, okay?” I opened my mouth to respond, then closed it. Then opened it again, only to close it without saying a word. She giggled again, “You’re silly. Well, I have to get back to work, see you around.”

With that she returned to the mixing the vegetables along with the other four ponies. I shook the words ‘ponies are weird’ out of my head.

Retrieving the bowl from my back, I moved over to the fire pit and settled down to eat. Before anything could hope to delay me I stuffed my muzzle into the bowl and began to chomp down on the leafy greens as greedily as my tender jaw would let me.

It was as I held the bowl up to my face and licked the last bits of onion that my ears perked up; somepony was standing behind me. I ignored them, focusing instead on making sure that my bowl was well and truly empty.

“I don’t remember giving you permission to have breakfast.”

“I don’t remember you being awake before me.” I quipped back. I wish I could have seen his face. As it was I put the bowl back onto its plate and heaved myself back up on all fours. Taking the plate in mouth I trotted, perhaps a little too merrily, back to the ‘kitchen’. I couldn’t explain it, but I suddenly felt rather good. Maybe it was finally mouthing off to Oracle, or just having food in my stomach, or the fading effects of the drugs. Either way, I gave Blossom a big smile as I dropped off the dishes and even flourished a bow while thanking her for the wonderful meal. Today was going to be a good day.

++FoE:RB++

My wings ached as I floated above the immobile wagons. Laying in bed for an entire day hadn’t done me any favors. I let myself drift on some thermals and watched the ponies below me as they packed up and prepared for the next day of walking. When I spotted Irons jump into the armory I realized that I wasn’t wearing any of my gear. My armor, goggles, saddlebags, and... oh... oh crap...

I swooped down towards the wagon. Lacking eye protection, and still being a little unsure of myself after the previous day, I held back on the speed. My wings flared out as I neared and I made a nice soft landing just behind the wagon.

"I had to spend most of the day fixing that gash in your armor," Irons said, from inside the wagon.

"I hope it wasn't too much of an inconvenience for you." I deadpanned. "I'm fine by the way, thanks for asking. Di-"

"You've been spending too much time around Spoon." My saddlebags floated out of the wagon and dropped unceremoniously to the ground. "Here's your stuff... unless you need help getting dressed."

I tilted my head at the unicorn barely visible inside the armory wagon but said nothing. My saddlebags opened to reveal the dark green plates of gator hide that served as my armor. The leg plates came out first, neatly stacked one atop another. The chest and back plates were rolled up in the other side. I breathed a heavy sigh of relief as I lifted the last piece and found Tracker's pistol at the bottom of the bag. Pulling it out, I sat down and held it in my hooves to examine it. I let out a groan at the sight of a small dent in the side.

"Hey, Irons, cou-"

"Little busy here, colt," he replied curtly.

"But-" The door slammed shut. "Fine! Be that way," I grumbled, before turning back to the armor laying across the ground.

I soon discovered one of the main reason why I, or any other non-unicorn for that matter, didn't wear clothes on a regular basis. They are a pain in the flank to get on. I had to buckle the chest and back plate together at the shoulders before slipping my head through, this was something I learned only after a few minutes of trial and error. After that I had to use one wing to hold the chest plate up and the other plus my teeth to work the rest of the buckles together. I don't know how an earth pony would have managed. The leg plates were no better. I ended up tying them loosely and slipping them on before tightening the straps and attaching them to the other pieces.

"Oracle wants to speak with you," a harsh voice spoke behind me.

My neck popped as I snapped my head around to see the menacing red unicorn standing directly behind me. "GAH!" I jumped away almost running into the wagon. "Horse Apples, you scared me."

The corner of her lips twitched up for a fraction of a second. My eyes were once again drawn to the metal that ringed her neck. The thick silver collar appeared to have some electronics attached to the front. Before I could study it further she turned and began walking back to the center of the camp.

With a grunt I reached down, picked up the saddlebags in my mouth, and followed. Without thinking my eyes lingered on the mare leading me. The mental image of waking up minus body parts quickly convinced me to find somewhere else to look. Rose Blossom smiled at me and waved just as cheerfully as before when we walked past. I returned the gesture with a wing only to bump into Cross.

“Oof.” I bounced off her flank. Ah, Pony Feathers.

She twisted her neck and eyed me coldly. I smiled weakly around the bags still hanging from my mouth; she didn’t. I couldn’t pull my eyes away from hers as they bore through my head. I swallowed back a lump in my throat.

“Ahem.” We both turned to face my savior, Oracle. He was frowning at both of us. “If you two are done making eyes at each other?”

“I... but... we..” I stammered, Cross said nothing.

“Cross, I believe that Zefira would like some assistance. Would you mind helping her?” She bowed her head and muttered something under her breath before walking away. Oracle frowned at her as she left. With a slight shake of his head he turned back to me. “I guess these Watchers really know their stuff. I didn’t expect to see you on your hooves today.”

“I-”

“If you think you are up to it we could use you up in the air, Sevens.”

I blinked. Was... did he just use my name? I blinked again. “Ye... yeah, I could do that...”

++FoE:RB++

“Tschhzzzz-vens. Tschhzz.”

I ignored the buzzing in my ear. I don’t know why Oracle was bothering me. I had already called in the all clear. I wiggled deeper into the makeshift bedding. There was nothing around those tracks for miles on either side and it would be hours before they got anywhere near as far as I had already scouted. I stretched out all my limbs at once as I yawned before letting everything go and relaxing into the white fluff. Never before had I found such a wonderful bed. It was like sleeping on a cloud, mostly because I was sleeping on a cloud.

After scouring the area for raiders and dangerous wildlife I had taken an updraft to the bottom of

the cloud layer. Taking hoof-fulls at a time, I collected a sizable ball of cloud. Experimenting, I found that it bent to my whims with incredible ease, not unlike clay in my hooves. It was with some trepidation that I first put my weight on what should have been nothing more than loosely compacted water droplets. With tense and ready wings I dropped my weight on it and for a brief second it seemed to give way, only to spring back. I couldn't suppress the giggle that bubbled up in my throat.

I pranced around happily on my little cloud, each step bouncing back. With a final laugh that was more sigh, I fell back against the cloud. It was wonderful. The earth and all its problems seemed miles away. For the first time I relaxed, really relaxed. I let my wings go slack and they sunk through the white fluff, swaying loosely in the breeze. My eyelids slid down as I drifted off. I was in heaven.

There are many enjoyable ways to be woken: A lover's kiss, the soft sounds of morning birds, the smell of breakfast being prepared, even the light of the sun can be pleasant in its own way. A slight tug of the tail and the thunderous crack of a high powered rifle are not anywhere to be found on that list.

I tumbled out of my bed without thinking. My scream of panic stricken terror was lost to the wind as I began tumbling to the ground. I fell a good thirty meters before my brain kicked in and I remember that I had wings. Flaring them out and catching the air sent me coasting through the sky. Taking evasive maneuvers, I searched the ground for my attackers.

It didn't take long to spot the caravan of wagons moving slowly below me. I saw the two headed pony sitting atop the lead wagon. Locke waved a hoof at me apologetically while Stock just glared as his wing pulled back the bolt of his rifle, sending a brass casing into the air.

"Did you enjoy your nap, Flybuck?" the slightly electronic voice asked in my ear.

"The nap was wonderful. The wake up call could have been more pleasant."

"I'll keep that in mind. Now get your flank out there and do your job!"

I saluted in the general direction of the wagons. "Aye aye Sir!"

A flick of a hoof dropped the goggles in front of my eyes. With a twist I let myself drop towards the earth. Reaching speed my wings flared and I leveled out speeding ahead of the wagons and regaining some altitude. The ground sped by under me.

Great swaths of scrubland stretched out before me. Small hills and a lone plateau provided the only real topography. Were it not for the railroad tracks that the caravan followed it would be incredibly easy to turn a few degrees and end up miles away off course. Mountain ranges on the horizon provided the only useful landmarks. The limited plant life were sporadic patches of stiff,

nigh inedible, grasses and an occasional cacti sticking out of the ground. In a pinch a skilled pony could survive off these for a time. Though at that point it might be preferable to just lay down and die.

“There’s a pack of Radhogs off to the right in about a mile, though they should be far enough away to not be a problem.”

“Copy, Radhogs.”

I sped on, keeping my eyes on the ground below me. The utter emptiness was disheartening and a little disconcerting. Tracker had told me a lot about the Wasteland and its desolation. But flying through the air and seeing so much of it at once really put it in perspective. I couldn’t help but wonder what it had been like before the war. Tracker spoke of verdant grasses and lush forests of trees. The only trees I ever saw were scrawny solitary things that looked more like large brown wing bones sticking out of the earth than flora to be admired and the grass was barely green, much less verdant.

Turning my attention back down the tracks I noticed something odd about the plateau. With nothing better to do I decided to check it out. As I flew on it became more and more obvious that it was not a plateau. Straining my eyes to see better I caught a glint off something metal.

I pulled up short and put a hoof to my ear. “Hey, Oracle, I think I see the station.”

“Tschhhhhzzzzzz.”

“Damn,” I muttered as I turned back to the caravan.

++FoE:RB++

Night began to fall and the Watchers called a stop to the days travel. We were only about four hours short of the train station, but it was getting dark and the risk of a broken leg or axle was too great.

I watched from the sky as the pull teams began to circle the wagons. Due to their size and limited turning capacity it wasn’t as simple as forming a circle. After completing three full rotations they pulled to a stop. Two ponies moved to either side of each wagon to act as guides as they began backing up and closing the gaps between the wagons. When all was said and done they formed an interlocking ring with the hitches on the outside and the backdoors inside. It was as they came to a full stop the real activity began.

The guards and pull teams began swarming the now surrounded campsite. Tents were dragged

out and staked, combustibles were piled in the center and a fire started, and the guards and members of the Arbitrators set up their watch posts. I watched it all with interest. From my vantage point it was difficult to tell any one pony from the next; all I could really make out were the colors and movement as they went about their work. The shift and flow were almost mesmerizing, like a living kaleidoscope.

The night darkened, the light from the fire grew, and everything began to cast shadows along the ground and up the metal walls of the wagons. My eyes were drawn to the center of the fire; everything else dropped out of focus and the chaos of colors seemed to melt together into a shifting pattern. I blinked and it was gone.

Once the tents were all raised everypony began to line up for supper. I spotted my first target. His attention was locked on the front of the line and the food being dished out. With my package in tow I flew towards the camp, making sure to stay out of his line of sight. I landed softly behind a tent and peeked over the top to check on him; he was just picking up his bowl. Barely suppressing a fit of laughter I stuffed my present into his tent. With a little molding it fit perfectly along the ceiling. With one last look, to make sure he didn't see me, I trotted over to the impromptu kitchen and stood in line for some food.

The line moved quickly, everypony receiving their bowl of vegetable stew and moving on. I smiled at Echo as he walked past carrying his bowl with his kinesis. The smile he returned me was weak and nervous, which only made mine that much more genuine. I turned back to the line and found myself muzzle to muzzle with the maroon Rose Blossom.

"Hey, Sevens," she almost giggled.

"Blossom, just the mare I wanted to see. Would it be possible to get some chili powder for my stew?"

"Sure thing!" she said picking up the shaker.

"Could I just borrow the shaker?" I asked, before she could put any in. "That way I can get just the right amount without going overboard."

Her smile faltered for a second, so I turned on my best smile. "I guess," she finally answered, setting the small shaker on the edge of the plate.

"You're a real doll. I owe you one." I snagged the plate and bowl, making my escape before she could change her mind. Now to find my next target.

"Just be sure to bring it back when you're done," she called after me.

Finding a secluded spot I put the dish on the ground and used a wing to shake the chili powder

into the bowl. Tiny flakes of red fell from the holes at a distressingly slow pace. I frowned at it for a moment before smiling and unscrewing the top.

I dropped the, now half empty, container of chili powder into my saddlebags. My nose wrinkled at the smell of spice wafting from the bowl as I retrieved it from the ground. I would just have to hope that Spoon didn't notice until it was too late.

"Flybuck! You have third watch tonight. I suggest you get some sleep. And don't be late!"

My ears drooped as a groan forced its way past my teeth. My gaze drifted up to the cloud filled sky. I still had some daylight left.

I ended up circling half the camp before I spotted Spoon sitting on his flank and staring out into the Waste. He turned his head at my approach and nodded before turning his gaze back to the expanse of darkness that surrounded the camp. Without a word I trotted to his side and set the plate and bowl on the ground before seating myself next to him. We sat there for a bit, neither of us saying a word.

"Can I ask you something?" I asked, finally breaking the silence.

"You just did, Colt."

"Har har," I said, unable keep the smirk off my face at the tired old joke. "Seriously though, does Cross hate everypony or is it just me?"

The corner of his lip curled down into a small frown. "Cross... Cross is not like other ponies." His eyes seemed to lose focus as they stared out into the gathering darkness. Seconds passed before he continued, "The Wasteland is full of evil ponies, Colt. Evil ponies who do terrible things to other ponies."

"Dise-"

"Dise has rules! There are bad ponies in Dise, but they are kept in line by the casinos. In the Wasteland the only rule is strength and the only laws are those you can enforce. There are things worse than death, Colt. There are places where nothing is sacred: where ponies are bought and sold, where violence is the only language and torture is nothing but an accent, and Cross was born at its heart."

The last vestiges of sunlight withered and died behind the horizon as we sat in silence. I tried multiple times to speak, but each time my mouth closed without a sound crossing my lips. Spoon's words seemed to hang in the air, a bulwark against any further conversation.

Trying to shake off the odd oppressive feeling that had settled between us I stood and turned

back to the wagons and the bed of clouds that awaited me.

I lay my head down with a weary sigh. Every muscle in my body felt heavy with fatigue. Spasms wracked my limbs as my eyelids closed of their own accord. The distant sounds of the caravan below me were like a serenade, punctuated by the howl of Spoon and the curses of a very wet Echo.

Footnote: Level Up!

Skills:

Sneak: Apprentice (25+)

Perks:

Flight (Rank 2): Failures are better teachers than successes. If that's the case you will be flying like Rainbow Dash soon enough.

Special Equipment:

Blu-Horn: Wireless communication at its best. Just *try* to bring it back in one piece this time.

(Special thanks to Doomande and Fillyosopher for their help.)

[Index:](#)
[Previous](#) | [Next](#)