



Fallout Equestria: Operation Flankorage

Chapter Five: Wendigo

"Maybe I should start up a pony-group to teach ponies about history. I bet everypony would love it."

Gellwin's quarters were sparsely furnished, but what furniture there was seemed to be of exceptional quality (compared to the rest of the camp anyway). Her bed was a larger version of the bowl couch in the lounge, except this one was filled with feathers instead of pillows. Most of them were large and rich brown, griffin feathers if I had to guess. As for the others, they were notably smaller than the griffin feathers and in all colors of the rainbow... they were pegasus feathers, no doubt about it. I didn't even want to think about how she had acquired so many.

A mahogany armoire sat opposite the bed, intricately carved with images of ornately armored griffins doing battle with an enormous dragon. It was mostly full of old clothes, pre-war uniforms and the like. Only two items peaked my interest; a set of griffin sized, bright pink, fleece pajamas gave me a good chuckle and a damaged, griffin-made, beam rifle with a scope I could probably use. I took the rest anyway, mostly out of spite. I'd probably sink them in the mud outside later.

Finally, a wooden desk with the same style of carvings as the armoire faced the door, polished to a mirror shine. It was unadorned, save for a few hoof bound books, and a cloud shaped like a terminal.

I had read about cloud technology, but had never seen it. I had to wonder what it felt like. My hoof passed straight through it, barely disturbing its surface. It was briskly cold and left my leg slightly moist, sort of like passing through heavy fog. Now how was I going to get into this thing?

I mulled that over while I flipped through the books. They were all slave ledgers. Most of the captives seemed to have been sent off to Fillydelphia, but a few others were sold to 'The Crucible', 'Black Apple Rangers' and 'The Northern Legion' as well as a hoof-full of independent ponies. I would need to keep an eye out for these groups: anypony who would work with slavers was bound to be bad news. I felt a twang of shame when I spotted 'Seven slaves purchased for 2400 caps by a grey, earth pony stallion; recommend upgrading him to a preferred customer to encourage future business'.

Back to the terminal problem. How was I going to pull this off? I lacked the magical skill to allow me to manipulate clouds on my own and no matter how I waved my PipBuck at it I couldn't make it connect. Heck, even if I could it was probably encrypted beyond what my ability with computers could handle.

"You just had a pegasus computer expert pledge her service to you," the cold voice said with a considerable amount of condescension.

"I... er... um," I mumbled back.

"Oh, no witty retort?" the delusion asked. *"Aren't you going to tell me to shut up? That you can't listen to my counsel because its 'coco time'?"*

"Well," I responded abashed. "You had a point this time."

"Of course I had a point!" the voice barked back, some how sounding both frigidly dispassionate and furiously indignant at the same time. *"I had a point in the cave. I had a point at the ski lodge. You*

may not have liked it, but I had a point on the overlook." I could have sworn that my reflection in the desk's mirror finish turned ice blue and glared at me. *"I have just as big a stake in your survival as you do, and don't you forget it!"*

Did I just get justifiably chewed out by my own crazy? I rubbed my temples with my hooves to clear my head of that unnerving concept. My reflection had returned to its regular grey and black.

Trotting back outside, I found Maple with her snout buried in the Canterlot Medical Journal, occasionally mouthing some of the larger words. She had spread out various snacks from the Neighstlé machine in and amongst a few magazines from the side table. Three in particular caught my interest: An issue of Ponies Magazine was featuring a piece on some noble who went nuts from 'war time stress disorder' and held up a school at gun point. There was also a copy of the Equestrian Cinematographer with a positively radiant picture of 'the little muffin' from the delivery buck's photos. Finally there was a stack of almost perfectly preserved issues of Wingboner that would have been old even before the war. I would need to take some time to brush up on my history later... yeah, history.

"I'm heading out to find Echo," I called back as I opened the door. "I need her to decrypt a cloud."

"Okay," she replied absent mindedly, waving her hoof in a half hearted, dismissive gesture. "You go. You go."

I left the bungalow without another word. Wait for it...

I heard the sofa's cushions rustle as she shot her head up. "You need her to do what to a what now?" she asked, utterly perplexed.

I burst out laughing as I shut the door behind me. She would probably buck my flank for that later, but it was so worth it. The look on her face was priceless.

I was still chortling as I opened the door to the middle bungalow.

The building was divided into six rooms. The bulk of the space was taken up by an industrial cafeteria with a half dozen stainless steel, circular tables and some rather uncomfortable looking, half rusted stools. The south wall had three bathrooms; mares, stallions and griffins (I guessed griffins were either accustomed to unisex restrooms or were simply an afterthought on the part of the designer). The entire northern quarter of the building was a half open kitchen that had once been sterile white, but was now a mold coated grey.

I froze immediately as I heard a long scream over a cacophony of destruction from the back of the kitchen. I pulled out my beam rifle and hustled towards the sound. I shouldered my way through the unlatched, metal doors.

thunk

The jet-black blade of a combat knife embedded itself in the door less than half a hoof from my eye.

Echo was standing on her hind legs in a storeroom at the back of the kitchen. The feathered soldier was a disheveled mess, panting heavily and coated in small pieces of debris. Her teal mane was matted to her sweaty sable coat in some sections and flaring out in frazzled tufts in others. She was staring at me with quaking, pinprick pupils seeming unsure whether to kill me or run away.

"Lieutenant," I said, hesitantly lowering my weapon. "Um, is there anything I can do?" That was pathetic. How was it that I could bluff through an entire camp of sub-equine sociopaths with little effort, but I struggled to try and comfort one, obviously traumatized, mare? At least I did better than 'Are you okay'.

She just stood there, motionless. I was honestly debating whether lowering my gun had been wise.

"No," she finally replied, dropping her gaze to the floor and making a conscious effort to normalize her breathing. "I'm fine." She hastily dusted herself off and dropped back to all fours. "What do you need from me?"

"Are you sure that you..." She shot me a vicious glare that made it abundantly clear it was in my best interest not to finish my sentence. "I mean, can you break into cloud terminals?" I quickly amended.

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Harbinger.

Ma'am, my flock has secured several prewar facilities that will make excellent processing and distribution centers for our trade with the north (Tagged list below). I have set up my headquarters at the Whorl Timber Yard as instructed. The slaves Red Eye has sent up with my Talons have proven to be quite industrious; we should be able to begin lumber production in a week or two at the latest. Red Eye can expect his first shipment in two months, far sooner if we can convince Canterlot Caravans to provide us with transport and guides in exchange for security.

Sincerely, Overseer Gellwin.

P.S. My pay is late. See to that quickly or there will be dire consequences.

Over a dozen new location tags sprung up on the E.F.S. map. I would need to take the time to deal with those after Stable 114 was liberated.

Echo had hacked into the Overseer's files with little difficulty and downloaded all the logs to my PipBuck. That first one was dated over four years ago.

"I will keep a lookout," my feathered companion said curtly. "The longer we stay here the more likely we are to be attacked." Without even giving me a chance to respond she spun and flapped outside, barely missing me with her tail scythe.

I sighed and brought up the next log; this one was tagged a year later.

Harbinger.

My Lady, production has been proceeding slowly. There have been unforeseen complications with the local fauna. Just this week I have lost six guards and four slaves to yao guai attacks. Any team I send in to exterminate the beasts return vastly diminished, telling mad stories of some evil spirits from buffalo mythology. Red Eye's logic for filling the heads of these ground pounders with such useless information baffles me. All a soldier needs to know is how to fight and how to follow orders, anything else is just a distraction.

The following is the debriefing of my youngest daughter and chief ranger Thirsha Stormpride. She was the leader of the last team I sent in to resolve the issue. It is mostly nonsense, but I figured you would want to make up your own mind, minds, or whatever you things have.

"The horror!" the text vanished and was replaced by a surprisingly young sounding and obviously terrified griffin's voice. The horror! They were everywhere! They are everywhere! We have to leave! We shouldn't be here!"

"Calm down," A raspy, buck's voice said reassuringly. "Tell me what happened, from the beginning."

"Yes preacher," Thirsha replied, trying to catch her breath. "I'll... I'll try." She took a deep breath. "A yao guai had killed a guard and ran off with one of the slaves she was watching. Mother sent me and a half dozen claw picked Talons to hunt the beast down and return the Unity's property, one way or the other. We trailed the monster five miles into the woods before things went bad.

"We stopped to rest our wings around dusk and Prin, my heavy weapons specialist, went off to take a piss. He never came back. The shit really hit the fan after that. I sent my wing out in pairs to search for him and one by one they vanished. In less than an hour only Rhorrin, my tracker, and I were left. I decided to return and get reinforcements before I lost what was left of my wing. We stopped back in the clearing to gather up our remaining supplies and we found my team."

"There was blood and feathers everywhere," Her voice began to waiver and I could almost hear her shaking. "I've seen battle, I've seen death, but this was something else. Something worse. They had been torn apart and strung across the trees. It would take a hellhound to do that to a single griffin, let alone five. I... I... I didn't know what to do." She gulped. "That's when I noticed them. Dozens of blood red eyes were staring at us from the shadows, always staying just out of our lights. My wing had been a warning. These creatures... the demons had given us a warning. That's why they let us go, to tell you that these are their woods and we have no place here. Please tell my mother that we need to return to Fillydelphia immediately."

"Interesting," the preacher said dispassionately. I herd him shuffling some papers. "You have been judged guilty of cowardice and dereliction of duty."

"WHAT?!" the young griffin streaked.

"You will now be subject to disciplinary action," the raspy buck continued, unfazed. "You are to be striped of your command and grounded for a minimum of three years." I heard a door open and two sets of heavy hoofsteps enter the room.

"No, but I-," I heard her start to stand, only to be slammed back into her seat. *"I demand to speak with my mother!"*

"My dear," the preacher purred (the bastard was enjoying this). *"Your mother is the only reason you are not facing the death penalty for heresy and treason. Now bring me those pliers; I will do this myself."*

"No, no!" Thirsha shrieked. *"Get your filthy hooves off my wing! No! NO!"* I heard a wet pop followed by a blood-curtailing screech. *"AAAAGHHH-"*

The recording cut off abruptly and Gellwin's log continued.

While I regret dismantling my primary scouting wing the abundance of griffins in this region has been a boon to recruitment efforts, mostly negating recent losses to the wilderness and disciplinary action. On a tangential note, please inform Stern that I have opted to go into business independently and will be negotiating my own contract at years end.

I will be requiring the services of one of your agents to sort out the facts and deal with the predator problem and additional laborers would not go amiss.

Yours, Overseer Gellwin

That was thoroughly unnerving; I had just figured out where all the feathers in the Overseer's bed had come from. I would need to wait on the other two reports.

I gathered up all of Gellwin's possessions that I had no use for and proceeded outside to enact my petty vengeance.

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It was past noon by the time I finished stringing Gellwin's fluffy, pink pajamas on a flagpole that was attached to the administrative building.

"Have you finished your juvenile pranks yet?" Echo shouted from the next roof, sounding like a disapproving parent.

I turned and stared at her. It had been years since somepony spoke to me like that; it was surprisingly comforting. "Nope," I finally said, turning back to my work. I pulled out a can of black spray paint I had found in the janitor's closet and painted a massive '114' across the sleepwear flag. "Now I'm done."

"Charming," the pegasus said, obviously unamused. She suddenly ruffled her feathers and spun towards the camp entrance, drawing two of her knives as she did. "We have company."

I swung up my newly scoped beam rifle and entered S.A.T.S. The targeting spell tagged six ponies coming down from the southern foothills. A green mare with a bushy, blue mane and tail was limping at the head of the group. I let S.A.T.S. drop. It was the former slaves we had left on the overlook.

"Echo!" I shouted over, lowering my weapon. "Stand down, they're not enemies!"

The soldier pony hesitated for a moment before sheathing her weapons and relaxing her wings. "Yes sir."

I climbed down from the bungalow and trotted to the camp entrance, carefully stepping around Sandstone's half sunken carcass. "Welcome to camp 'We Just Bucked The Unity's Flank!'" I bellowed to the approaching ponies with a doapy grin. "What can I do for you this fine day!"

The ponies stopped about two hundred hooves away from me and shuffled about nervously. The yellow buck was still carrying the comatose, white one on his back and seemed to be doing little more than following the four mares while staring dispassionately at the ground. The mares were having a hushed argument that I was obviously not meant to hear, however my hat had surprisingly good acoustics.

"You go talk to him," the green, earth pony mare said, nudging the pink one forward.

"What!?" she replied with a hushed yell. "I'm not going to talk to him. He's insane." While probably true, that still hurt. She turned to the lime green unicorn. "Why don't you go, unicorn to unicorn?"

"No way," the unicorn said, shaking her curly, yellow mane. I was starting to take this personally. "Besides, this was Rosalyn's idea."

"You are all pussies!" the blue mare snapped, marching to the front of the group. "I'll do it!" She ran a muddy hoof through her short, midnight blue mane and sauntered up to me as bold as can be. "I'm Scoop," she declared, holding her hoof out to me. She was a tiny thing, even smaller than Maple, she barely came to my chest.

"Ocher Bullion," I replied, shaking the worst of the grime off my hoof before shaking hers. "How can I help you?"

"First of all, we are all grateful for what you did for us, even if some ponies are too cowardly to say so," she said, turning back to shake her hoof at the other mares. "Anyway, we have nowhere to go and were wondering if we could come with you until we find a place to stay?"

I face hoofed. Of course they didn't. Ocher you are an idiot! All I had done was point south, say 'there is food and shelter about seven miles that way' and left them on a rock in the middle of nowhere. They didn't have digital maps strapped to their fetlocks. Hell, I hadn't even had the good sense to give them winter clothing or weapons. If they had done what I had told them to they would have wandered the mountains aimlessly for days, completely naked before freezing to death or being eaten by wolves.

"Sure," I replied, hiding a blush. "But I expect everypony to pull their own weight... except for him." I pointed to the yellow buck with the white one across his back. "He can pull that guy's weight."

"How wonderful," Scoop said, clapping her front hooves together. "Well now, this means introductions are in order." She pointed a hoof at the green, earth pony. Taking a closer look, I noticed that she had a pumpkin wrapped in rose vines for a cutie mark. "That's Rosalyn. Asking you for help was

her idea, but she's **too much of a coward to talk to you herself!**" the blue mare raised her voice pointedly.

Apparently cowed by Scoop's comment, Rosalyn hesitantly approached me with her head down and her entire body tensed. I couldn't tell if she was about to run away or curl up into the smallest shape equinely possible.

I put on my most friendly salesbuck face (I wasn't sure how reassuring I actually looked as I was still nearly coated in blood.) and slowly extended my hoof to her. "Hello Rosalyn. It's a pleasure to see you again." See? I'm not always talking to my self, shooting things or using rocks as currency... Wow. I really needed to reevaluate my life.

"All that happened in the last six hours," My ever-helpful crazy chimed in.

"Not now," I snapped back at him. "I know you're trying to be 'helpful', but we don't want these ponies to get the wrong impression."

Rosalyn stared at me, utterly terrified. Even Scoop backed up nervously.

"You did that on purpose didn't you?" I asked the voice.

"I am a spiteful bastard."

"Thanks Echo," I said to nopony, flicking a random dial on my fetlock computer. If I was lucky they might think I was talking over my PipBuck... Could PipBucks even transmit audio? I popped my ear bloom out and turned to address the assembled ponies again. "Sorry about that," I said with a smile. "Do I get to meet everypony else?"

One by one, the others made curt introductions and retreated to the middle bungalow for some much-needed rest: The blond unicorn with an dartboard on her flank was Flights. The pink mare I had mistaken for Primrose was named Spruce after her cutie mark, a small tree. Nopony knew what to call the catatonic, albino buck so we settled on Cave, due to the barely visible cave mouth on his flank.

"And what about you?" I asked the yellow buck.

"What about me?" he asked in a tone that was disturbingly similar to my delusion's.

"What's your name?" I pressed. I wasn't going to have any of that 'tortured stoic' garbage. I rescued you from slavers and just agreed to escort you to some form of civilization. Be happy damn it!

"Rocksalt," he sighed, lowering his head and letting his unkempt, brick red mane fall over his slate grey eyes. "Is there anything else I can do for you Master?"

"Whoa there," I said, taken aback. "I'm nopony's master. That's what the whole rock thing was about. You're free."

He raised his head and stared me strait in the face. "Will we be following you?" he asked calmly.

"Well I suppose that's the plan," I replied, unsure of where he was going with this.

"Will you be giving us orders?"

"Not orders per say," I said. "But I will need you to help carry things and, for the sake of safety, I'd like you to follow any instructions my companions or I give you."

"Then you are our master."

"But... but," I stammered. "I freed you."

"I am no longer a slave," he said, a bit of the coolness leaving his voice. "This is true, but we all have our masters. Now, if you will excuse me, I need to see to Cave; my back hurts." He turned and walked towards the bungalows.

"Luna's lacy lingerie!" I exclaimed, pointing a hoof at his rump. "What happened to you?!" It looked as if somepony had skinned his flanks and branded crescent moons on the scar tissue where his cutie marks should have been.

He paused and turned back to me with a sad smile. "Not all masters are as kind as you seem to be."

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"All right," I said to my assembled traveling companions as I unrolled a region map that I had found in the survival kit. "Now, how will we be getting to that big city on the horizon?"

"Flankorage," Scoop corrected me.

"Right, Flankorage."

The former slave ponies had all retrieved their belongings from the janitors' closet and donned several thick, furry coats that the slavers had been using. The only one who refused the rather ripe winter garb was Flights. The pail green mare had instead opted to wear the clothing she was brought in with; a rather alluring blue and purple saloon dress, complete with fishnet stockings, that was apparently enchanted to resist the cold.

That did strike me as an interesting reason to enchant clothing; I added winterized nightwear to my ever-growing list of things to invest in.

Maple had also insisted on arming them with the Shrike hoof cannons and various small arms we had taken from the Unity raiders. Aside from Rocksalt, who had assembled an assault rifle and a shotgun from the various bits-o-gun that we had scrounged together as if it were second nature to him, our new traveling companions showed about as much aptitude for firearms as Echo or I did.

"We head east," the scared buck said. "Along the foothills until we reach the main road from Canterlot and follow it north. The entire journey should take a little under a week."

"I don't think Caves has a week," Rosalyn objected. "He needs medical attention now. Besides, that takes us too close to the place Baron was sighted."

It was refreshing to finally see ponies actually caring about one another out here. I had to agree; in his current, catatonic state Cave probably wouldn't last two days.

"Why don't we just take the lumber rail?" Maple suggested, tracing a thin line on the map through the woods to the dot labeled 'Flankorage'. "That should only take three days; even less if we can get one of the trams outback running."

"That's perfect," I said. "This way we can set up a decent place for Cave to rest and get to the city in about a day. We don't even need to do any repair work. According to Gellwin's logs they had everything fixed nearly four years ago. And as a plus we would still have enough room to take everything that isn't bolted down."

"We don't want to travel in the woods at night," the scared buck stated. "Its too dangerous."

"I'm sure we can handle a few wolves and yao guai," I said dismissively. I had no idea what a yao guai was, but if they could only handle two raiders then they couldn't be that tough.

"I'm sure we could," Rocksalt replied. "But the yao guai aren't what we need to worry about."

"And what is?" Echo asked from the corner of the bungalow, where she had been hovering silently.

"These woods are home to demons."

Spruce, Flights and Rosalyn recoiled from the table as if the yellow buck's demons were going to claw their way out of the map and devour everypony. Scoop, on the other hoof, seemed almost excited at the concept. Echo just hovered there, her expression unreadable.

"What do you mean 'demons'?" Maple asked unconvinced. "The last demon in Equestria was defeated over two hundred years ago."

The scarred stallion shook his head. "I don't know the specifics, but I know they're there. I have had many masters and none of them will travel the woods at night. Not even the Northern Legion or Frostborn would make the attempt without considerable numbers."

"The Legion is full of superstitious fools," Echo scoffed. "And the Frostborn are paranoid relics of a dead world. I have been in the forests and there is no threat greater than a few predators and those vagrants savage enough to live there."

Given the choice between a soldier's first hoof experience and a traumatized buck's rumors I would need to go with Echo; especially with somepony's life at stake. "We have to risk it," I declared. "We're pushing our luck as it is staying this long. We have no idea when Gellwin and her army are coming back and Cave is short on time."

The yellow buck bowed his head. "As you wish."

"All right," I rolled up the map. "Gather everything you can carry and meet up at the tracks in ten minutes."

"By the way," I said to Rocksalt when the others were out of earshot. "What are yao guai?"

"Bears," he replied, seemingly unsurprised at my ignorance.

"Oh, well that's not so bad."

"Twenty hoof tall, mutant bears."

I gulped. "And these things aren't as dangerous as the 'demons'?"

"Not even close."

Maybe this wasn't my best idea.

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Everypony managed to clean out the timber yard with surprising efficiency, gathering around the tracks just before dusk. They were all laden down with packs, bags and even a rolled up bed sheet, all filled to bursting with everything from rifles to tin cans.

The train itself was a small, bullet shaped engine with peeling green paint that looked like it ran on some form of giant spark battery. Several flatcars were hitched between a modest crew car and the engine. Each segment was emblazoned with a stylized, crosscut log over a faded motto. 'Choose Whorl Timber, It Makes A Whorld Of Difference.'

It was no surprise that I had failed to spot the machine from the overlook. The entire thing was being kept under an old rain tarp in an alcove under the camp. I was initially very worried that I had been wrong in guessing that Gellwin had repaired the engine, but a cursory examination showed recent repairs (I may not have been a mechanic, but I could tell when something was patched together from a half dozen different metals) despite the considerable amount of dust that coated every surface.

I was getting a bad feeling about this trip. Despite Gellwin's insistence that Thirsha's story was nonsense, she had allowed this fully functional vehicle to languish after taking the effort to fix and fuel it. Why would she do that if the woods were safe?

The crunch of dry leaves pulled me away from my worrying. Echo had landed next to me with a fluffy, white ball in her front hooves.

"We are ready," she stated. "Maple seems to have made a full recovery and the refugees are settled in the crew car." A jet-black wing pointed to each location in turn. "I would recommend designating two ponies to watch from the tree cars for security purposes. Two shifts would be preferable."

"So, you and me then Maple and Rocksalt?" I asked. As the scared buck was the only other pony in our little group to seem competent with weapons he seemed the most appropriate choice for the

last slot.

"I don't trust that one," the umbral pegasus replied, nodding her head towards Rocksalt. "He isn't what he claims to be."

That had been bugging me as well. I couldn't quite place my horn on it, but he was almost too calm, too accommodating. Regardless, if he tried anything Maple would be with him and if anypony could take care of him it would be the nigh immortal, security mare.

"By the way," I pointed at the ball she was carrying. "What's that?"

"I took the liberty of relieving our pursuer of her terminal," the soldier pony said with a slight smirk. I had never seen her smile before: she had such a serious face that there was actually something unnerving about it. "Quality cloud is always useful to have around. I also took the chance to leave Gellwin a little token of my appreciation for her hospitality over the past two weeks."

Two weeks?! Sandstone had managed to reduce Rosalyn to a quivering heap and beat Cave into a coma in little more than two hours. Whatever the black flyer had left, I didn't envy whoever found it.

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Harbinger.

Praise be to The Goddess my Lady. The new solders Red Eye has sent to us have proven quite effective at hauling fresh timber; almost making up for the loss of our direct route through the forest.

These 'Scrappers' have also allowed me to use my Talons for more sensitive tasks than shepherding these new converts. They are little more than steel plated thugs, but they follow orders fanatically and are capable of controlling this new army you are assembling.

Though I am afraid I do not only bare good news. Canterlot Caravans has withdrawn its support from our trade route in response to our recent build up of soldiers who, in all honesty, are little better than raiders. While we will still be able to use the pass near Glyphmark, it will force us to reduce our loads to what our traders can carry on their backs. I hope you will be able to make them see the light and amend this grievous error in judgment.

Your servant, Overseer Gellwin

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We managed to get the train running with little difficulty. Its interface seemed to be idiot proof, consisting of little more than an on/off button, a speed lever, a fuel gage and a radio; my PipBuck had more buttons. I was rather impressed that the pre-war ponies were able to reduce such a complex device to these few, simple controls.

Scoop had volunteered to mare the controls for the first shift.

"So, you were captured 'trespassing'?" I asked the blue mare in an attempt to start conversation

while the vehicle went through its agonizingly slow power up sequence. "Are you a spy or something?"

"A spy?" She gasped, feigning offense. "I am not that boring, I assure you." She turned to the controls and flashed me her cutie mark, a notepad a quill. "I'm a reporter for The Voice of Flankorage. I was looking into a build-up of Unity forces; Ron thought they may be violating their treaty with the Frostborn."

"Treaty?" I asked, cocking my ears.

"How do you not know about the treaty?" Scoop asked, utterly baffled.

I spent my whole life in a simulation, being used as a magical power source. No, that was stupid. Everypony was already doubting my sanity; best not to add fuel to the fire. "I'm from a Stable." I responded. I didn't lie, I just neglected certain truths.

"OooOoooh," she said, turning back to me and putting a hoof on my shoulder. "Stable ponies. I got it. Just stick with me and you'll be fine. You won't find a better guide to the city."

"I appreciate that," I replied, copying her gesture with my own, considerably larger, hoof (I may have been a weak pony, but I was by no means a small pony). "But, you mentioned a treaty."

"Right, right, right. Well, the Unity set up camp here about four years ago and started preaching their 'goddess'," the reporter pony bobbed her hooves for quotations. "So, obviously, the Frostborn got involved. Oh, right. The Frostborn are Flankorage's military; they pretty much run the show, but we can talk about them later."

Scoop sat down and removed her hoof, I did the same. "You see," she continued. "Flankorage doesn't support slavery, but most other groups do."

I sighed at that hideously depressing statement.

"Yeah, I know it sucks up here." My self appointed guide shook her head. "Anyway, Flankorage would never survive if it completely alienated its neighbors; it's having enough problems with the Northern Legion... argh, later." She ruffled her midnight mane. "The treaty, the treaty. What the Frostborn do is, in exchange for trade rights, make each group limit their operations. Slaves can be brought in from elsewhere and will not be freed, but no pony can enslave anypony else in Flankorage's territory unless they break the law; assault, theft, larceny stuff like that."

"Well they're definitely violating their treaty," I growled. "They attacked my Stable and captured or killed everypony they ran across."

"Really?!" Scoops asked with an offensive amount of glee. She leaped to her hooves, grinning from ear to ear. "That is just so wonderful!"

"Well fuck you too," I snorted, glaring at her. "I'm glad the massacre and enslavement of everypony I have ever known makes you happy."

"Oh, my." She flushed. "I am so sorry. Its just that this will give the Frostborn a valid reason to

boot the Unity out, or at least force them to release their slaves and pay reparations.”

“They would help 114?” I asked hopefully.

“As long as it’s in the valley I don’t see why they wouldn’t,” she replied with a shrug.

“That is perfect!” I exclaimed, scooping up the diminutive mare into the tightest hug I could manage. “You are my new favorite pony!”

“Thanks,” she said calmly. I had honestly expected her to push away, but she actually snuggled deeper into my embrace.

While I knew it had been less than a week, it felt like an eternity since I held somepony like that (actually, I had probably never held anypony at all. Wow, was that a depressing thought). All my worries just seemed to melt away. It was hard to imagine that something so basic as simple pony contact could make me feel so much better. She was so soft and so warm. I nuzzled my muzzle into her dark blue mane. Despite having obviously not bathed in over a week, and having recently slicked her mane back with mud she still smelled nice.

knock *knock*

I started and fell onto my back, pulling the tiny, reporter mare with me.

An upside down Maple was standing with one hoof on the door to the engine, staring at us with a sad smile. “I don’t mean to interrupt,” the security mare said softly “But Rocksalt insists that we leave while there is some light left.” Without another word she turned and walked out.

That couldn’t be good. I didn’t have to be talented with psychology to know there was something wrong. I started shifting my head back and forth between the door Maple had left from and the reporter pony in my hooves. If I dropped Scoop and went after Maple I might ruin what had just happened and I didn’t know if I could handle that. It wasn’t even sexual, I just needed some kind of physical contact.

“Are you two...?” the tiny mare asked hesitantly, pressing her forehooves together.

I released her and rolled to my hooves. “Not to the best of my knowledge.”

Scoop gave me a little smile. “Look, I got into the coffee from your survival kit so I’ll be wired for hours. You go talk to her and I’ll start the train.” She cantered over to the controls skillfully swishing her tail. “We can talk more after your watch if you like.”

“Thanks.” This filly was a saint. “I may take you up on that.”

I trotted out the door as the train rumbled to life and began to move. I could hear weeping over the low hum of the engine as I opened the small battery room (the only other compartment in the engine car). The chamber was tiny, only large enough for two ponies to stand face to face. The entire back wall was taken up by a pair of titanic spark batteries and various pieces of monitoring equipment. The front wall had a small cot pressed into it, leaving barely enough space to squeeze by.

The security pony was curled up on the bed in the far corner. She was clutching The Grim Harvest to her chest and sobbing into the weapon. Her head shot up as I entered the room.

"What do you want?" she asked gruffly, hiding her face behind her gun.

"You seemed upset," I replied, sitting down next to her. "And I was wondering if there was anything I could do for you?"

"You keep your fancy talk to your self," she said trying to restrain herself. She waved her hoof at me dismissively.

"Look," I pressed, telekinetically patting her on the shoulder (I would have used my hoof, but I was afraid she would break it... I seemed to have a bad habit of gathering mares that could kill me with no effort). "If I upset you with that thing in the control room I'm sorry. I didn't know you felt that way."

She immediately stopped crying and stared at me with her ears cocked. The security pony raised a hoof and opened her mouth. She turned back to the batteries and pantomimed something before turning back to me. "You mean you thought that I..."

The blue mare fell on her side and burst out laughing. "Oh, Nightmare tap-dancing Moon, that is good," she guffawed, clutching her sides. "My little egotist here gets all cuddly with one little filly and suddenly thinks he's the next Coltsanova or something." The azure mare wiped her eyes with the back of her hoof and rolled back to her rump. "Thanks," she sighed, controlling her snickers. "I needed that. Look, how about you insult my character again and then we'll talk," she barely managed to squeeze out before a new wave of hilarity overtook her.

"Huh?" I asked, cocking my head. I was barely audible over the blue pony's raucous laughter. Why would insulting her character make things better?

*"But if you **ever** insult my character like that again I'll make you a mare,"* the icy voice said in a mocking imitation of the security pony.

"Oh... OH!" I said with dawning realization. "So you and Chief Harvest were..?"

"Yeah," Maple sighed, her laughter quickly dying. She was softly petting the gun that had somehow remained in her lap. "She was my wife."

"Oh goddesses. I am so sorry." I bowed my head. No wonder she had been so hostile with me at first, given what I had cost her.

"I know it wasn't your fault. She chose to go to the pods and..." The little, blue mare wrapped her front hooves around her chest. "She always had to try and help everypony. I know she saved your life and without you Overmare Goldlight wouldn't have been able to hide everypony else in the pod banks." She rose to her hooves and turned to me. "That thing in the control room..." She looked away and sighed. "You remind me of her, okay? She was always a good talker, had your sense of humor and always went out of her way to take care of everypony else. Seeing you cuddled up with that little surface pony..." Maple reattached The Grim Harvest to her saddle. "It just brought back some memories."

"Well, I can't be her," I apologized, bowing my head further. "But I'm still good at talking and I do want to help everypony so if you ever need to get something off your chest or something, just let me know." I spread my forehooves. "Friends?"

"You're a good pony Ocher. Blossom would have liked you. Friends," she said, hugging me and resting her head on my shoulder.

Wow. I knew she was well built, but this mare was pure muscle. It was like hugging a toasty warm, flannel wrapped block of steel.

"Ocher," my new friend whispered in my ear.

"Yes?"

"You smell really bad."

"I know," I said, holding her tighter. "So do you."

*** *** ***

Harbinger.

All praise be to you, my Lady. First allow me to say that your solution for the Canterlot Caravans problem was truly inspired. With their access to the city cut off they will either go bankrupt or come back to your glory on their knees, begging for your forgiveness.

The enlightenment of Stable 114 has been delayed by the machinations of its heretical Overmare; she has been punished and awaits your final judgment. Half of the population have been locked in the lower levels; with the equipment Redeye wished to acquire. We are using the scrapers to cut through the doors, but it is a slow process. It may take up to twenty-five days before the remaining ponies can be brought into the light.

Of the population we have access to only a small percentage were ready to join the Unity. Many of the Stable ponies fought back quite vigorously and had to be eliminated. As for the pod ponies, many of them were too emancipated to even walk, let alone toil for the good of the Goddess. In addition, the magical potency of the population required the extermination of several others, as Red Eye has discouraged the capture of powerful unicorns (they are more trouble than they are worth).

I have sent the ninety-seven new workers directly to the Polychrome Weather Facility in hopes that you will forgive me for this debacle.

Your servant in this life and the next, Overseer Gellwin

*** *** ***

The moment I stepped outside my E.F.S. was flooded with contacts; mostly white, but a few bands of red were sprinkled throughout. Some of the trees were absolutely massive. A giant ironwood

was easily two hundred hooves tall and as wide as a family carriage.

With the last moments of Celestia's light fading behind the still solid cloud curtain I managed to discern dozens of creatures practically swarming through the underbrush. A colony of ants the size of grown bucks were feasting on the body of another one of those bramin, cow things. An enormous, jet-black bird sat perched in one of the larger trees, vibrating slightly and making an ominous buzzing tone. Some creature resembling a wallaroo with vicious, curling horns darted into a thick shrub as our vehicle approached.

Despite the monstrous appearance of most of the fauna, I was amazed to see so much life. Everything I had been told in Shetland made the wasteland out to be some barren desert practically oozing with radiation, but there was a thriving ecosystem here without any pony help. As an added plus, there wasn't a 'demon' in sight.

There was, however, a black pegasus waiting for me on the lumber cars. She was sitting in a sofa made out of cloud, widdling down a discarded piece of wood with one of her many knives. Little piles of scrap wood and bits of random debris were scattered around the half rusted edges of the flatbed.

"So, Echo, hugs?" I asked the umbral pegasus as I approached her perch on the center log car.

She just sat there and glared at me, unblinking, like some form of grim statue... with lots of sharp objects. The only motion I could see was a slight shifting of her back legs. Small flakes of dried blood flaked off her thighs and stained the perfectly white cloud chair as they dissolved into flowing red-brown veins.

I averted my gaze. "No hugs then?"

"No hugs." she stated flatly, turning back to the forest.

I cautiously meandered over to the soldier pony, feigning interest in the various piles of trash that littered the car. Wood, wood, rock, milk bottle, 'My Foal Is An Honor Student' carriage sticker, wood, blue horseshoe, another rock... thrilling. Oh! A deck of griffin playing cards, still in its original wrapping; I'll have that.

"Are you done digging in trash now?" Echo asked in her disapproving parent voice.

"Oh, um, yes," I said abashed.

I trotted over to her chair and plopped myself down on the floor. I got a better look at the pegasus' craft project. She was carving a small, wedge shaped blade, shaving off bits here and there for balance.

"So," I said, breaking the silence. "You're from the Enclave?"

"Yes," she replied, not looking up from her work. "I'm a first lieutenant specializing in communications technology, assigned to the raptor Pyrocumulus."

"Interesting, interesting," I said, rubbing my chin. "Now... what is the Enclave?"

"The Grand Pegasus Enclave is the governing body of Equestria's pegasus population," the flyer said stretching her wings. "We control everything above the cloud layer."

That's right, pegasi could control the weather. That would explain such a long overcast and the violent weather; they must have been trying to clean some of the magical fallout away. "That makes sense now," I replied. "So, when can we expect a clear day? Don't get me wrong, the cloud cover is wonderful for Maple, but I haven't seen the sun or stars in... ever come to think of it."

"You can't."

"Pardon?" I asked confused.

"You can't expect a clear day," Echo clarified. "The cloud curtain is active indefinitely."

"Because..." I prompted, rolling my hoof for her to continue.

"Further information is classified to surface ponies," she stated flatly. "But I can assure you that it will come down one day and we will save you."

"Ah." Well that sounded like a pile of well rehearsed, grade A horse apples. I guess I could count the 'Grand' Pegasus Enclave off my list of potential saviors. 'Paranoid relics' it was.

I twiddled my hooves for what felt like an eternity despite my PipBuck's claim that it was only ten minutes (If this was ten minutes of silence I would go mad by the two hour mark; well, madder). "Do all Enclave communications specialists know how to use knives like you do?" I asked in another attempt to make conversation for our four-hour shift.

"No. Most com officers have only limited combat training," Echo said finally looking up from her work and meeting my eyes. "But I find it helps me to get my *point* across."

Had she just told a joke?! It wasn't a very good one but still. It was progress. In a few more days I might actually be able to have a conversation with her that lasts longer than two sentences.

"Darn," the Enclave pony said sounding a bit disappointed. "My wing mates always found that one funny."

I wiped the vacant expression off my face. I had been so surprised that she had even attempted humor that I had failed to even provide a token chuckle.

"Oh, I'm sorry," I quickly apologized. "You just seem so somber I was surprised."

"I wish I could say that was a new development," she sighed. "I'm not what you would call 'good with ponies'; don't take it personally if I bark at you."

"Don't worry about it. I probably deserve it anyway, being an ignorant Stable pony and all." I put my hoof on her shoulder.

The next thing I knew I was on my back staring up at the black pegasus with her blue knife at my throat. She was breathing heavily and staring at me with a mixture of rage and terror. The wickedly sharp blade bit into my throat as I desperately tried to stay still, producing a thin trickle of blood. It didn't even hurt. It was more like a line of ice being drawn across my throat.

"I... I..." she stammered, pulling the knife away. "I didn't mean to do that."

"No touching," I whispered gently rubbing my neck. I could still feel the blade and the wound was just starting to sting. "Got it." I slowly rose to my hooves.

"I honestly didn't intend to hurt you," she insisted, sitting back in her chair and pulling her knees to her chest. "It just happened."

"Don't worry about it," I reassured her. At this point I was willing to consider anyone not **intentionally** trying to kill me as an ally. "Now I know, no uninvited contact."

"Thank you for understanding," she sighed, going back to her carving. "DUCK!"

Without thinking I threw myself to the floor just in time to see Echo's new wood knife fly over my head.

splunch *thunk*

I turned and saw a wolf sized cricket pinned to the flatcar's five hoof tall lip. The mutant monster clicked its bolt-cutter-like mandibles in the air as it struggled to remove the wooden spike in its thorax. It was producing the most horrid sound I had ever heard next to the Shetland simulation failing and Keystone's singing, as if somepony was failing terribly at playing the violin while accompanied by a warbling screech.

"Damn locusts!" my flying assassin bellowed over the thrashing insect's death throws. "Could you get me a new piece of wood and shut that obnoxious thing up before it brings the whole swarm down on us?! I don't want to ruin another knife on it!"

I pulled myself back to my hooves and bucked the creature with all my meager might. It burst like an egg, showering my hind quarts with pail green ichor. The horrible noise stopped.

"Is anything here normal sized?" I asked, totting over to one of the debris piles.

"Most birds are," Echo flared one of her wings and started counting on her feathers as I rummaged for a new bit of timber. "Radhogs are about the same size as normal pigs were. Most canines seem unchanged. Other than Brahmin, I think that's it."

I found a promising chunk of wood that looked like it had once been a two by four. I wrapped it in my telekinesis and yanked it free of its pile. The rest of the heap tumbled after it, burying me under a small avalanche of wood chips and assorted garbage.

I pulled myself out of the trash shaking the splinters out of my mane. Bits and pieces of refuse were sticking to the bug goo on my barding. Ugh, that was disgusting, my armor was soaking up the

slime and I had no choice but to wear it (otherwise I would trigger my frostbite again). I began peeling old food wrappers off my clothing.

I spotted something glint from under a rusted floor grate uncovered by the trashalInche. I lit up my horn and maneuvered around the debris to get a better look, absentmindedly pulling more ooze smeared scraps off of myself as I went. It was a small, glass orb, about the size of a billiard ball, with a soft glow coming from inside.

"Hu, what's this?" I asked Equestria in general, reaching out to the little ball with my magic.

"NOOOO!!!!" I heard Echo yell as I managed to wrap the little sphere in my magic.

The world ripped away from me.

<-----ooO Ooo----->

GAH! What happened?! Where did the train go?! How did I get here?! Why wasn't I slimy anymore?!

Calm down Ocher, calm down. Get a feel for your situation. Then you can panic.

I was standing in a large, dimly lit, wooden room, staring at a heavy, deep blue, velvet curtain. Everything seemed duller some how. Shapes weren't as sharp, colors weren't as vibrant and lights were dimmer.

I had no idea where I was or how I got there, but all in all I didn't feel too bad. If anything I felt better than I ever had before, albeit a little on the bulky side, but I could chalk that up to eating nothing but two-hundred year old pie and cocoa for the past four days. I was wearing some form of fitted suit made out of a soft, flexible fabric and a headband. My chest was feeling strong and puffed out. My legs felt like tensed cables, just itching to run, heck, I almost felt like I could outrun Echo. My flanks were clean and slime free. My... wait a minute, that's not what's supposed to be there. I WAS A MARE!!!

I tried to charge my horn... no, horns. I had a small one on either side of my head. What type of pony had two horns? My body involuntarily stared down at my light brown hooves. Those weren't pony hooves, they were far too spindly. What in the sphincter of Nightmare Moon was I? I attempted to twist my head around to get a better view, but I couldn't control any aspect of my warped body. Even blinking and breathing seemed beyond me. It was as if I was a prisoner in my own body. No, I wasn't even in my own body. What had I done to myself?!

"Don't be so nervous, you'll do fine," a scratchy mare's voice said. "Besides, if you mess up nopony will be able to see past my pure awesome."

My... host, for lack of a better word, turned to the speaker. She was a cyan pegasus, about ten years older than I was, wearing a blue and gold uniform similar to Echo's tan and black one. The mare looked familiar... this was the same polychromatic pegasus pony that had won the gold metal in Boxxie's photos.

"I know, Dash," my host sighed and shuffled her tiny hooves. What ever I was sounded like any

other mare. She had a hint of an accent that I didn't recognize and a slight raspyness, but now where near as much as the rainbow pegasus.

Hold up there; light blue pegasus, prismatic mane, and Iron Pony class athlete... Was that Rainbow Dash? The commander of the Shadow Bolts, leader of the Ministry of Awesome and one of the best flyers in Equestrian history Rainbow Dash?!

"Of course its Rainbow Dash you dodo," the icy voice scoffed. "You would have known that in the cave if you paid more attention in your history class."

Wonderful, you're in here too. So I never got a Rainbow Dash Wonder Bolts card or Ministry of Awesome Shadow Bolt action figure and found the abridged blurb they had on the wartime government boring. Its not like I wouldn't recognize any of them; Applejack's book 'Tails Of A Small Town Apple Vendor' helped me learn my trade.

"You failed to recognize the single most distinctive historical figure other than the goddesses?"

Oh, forgive me. What a crime I have committed in assuming that more than one pegasus might just happen have the same color scheme in the past two centuries. And besides, I know all their cutie marks, so I could pick them out that way.

"Then why don't you just check?"

Trust me, I'm trying. Given Dash's athletic record it is probably an absolutely glorious backside, but my host doesn't seem to be all that interested in the potentially perfect pegasus posterior and I seem to have no control over what goes on at the moment.

"You still should have known."

Yeah? And I bet you could pick Starswirl The Bearded out of a crowd.

"Sure I could. Here's a hint; look for the one with the beard."

If you weren't me I would buck your ass so hard!

*"If I wasn't you, you **couldn't** buck my ass."*

Why you little-!

"I just don't feel right being celebrated for what I did," my host finally continued. "I had never killed before."

The sudden and involuntary movement forced me out of my heated argument with... myself. Crap, I did it again. I really hoped I wasn't lying on my back somewhere, yelling at myself about meeting a two hundred year old celebrity.

"Strongheart," the legendary pegasus snapped, slamming both of her front hooves on the not-pony's shoulders and pressing their faces together. "You did what you had to do to save lives, never

feel sorry for that.”

“But Dash,” Strongheart started to object, but was almost immediately cut off.

“But nothing, Dash insisted, narrowing her almost unnaturally intense, magenta eyes. “Those filthy traitors got exactly what they deserved; hijacking a train full of innocent ponies like that.”

“I know you’re right,” my host sighed, gently pushing Dash off “I just don’t know how to feel. Last year I would have been sick to my stomach at the very thought of taking a life and now I’m being praised for taking five.”

“You’re not being praised for killing,” Dash said sharply. “You’re being praised for saving the lives of nearly three hundred innocent ponies. Be proud of that.”

“All right, I’ll try.”

“Good. Well you’re on soon so I better go get ‘em warmed up for ya,” the cyan pony said, lifting into the air. “Oh, and you have something in your teeth.” With that Rainbow Dash vanished through the curtain in a burst of light, leaving a thin trail of multi hued fire in her wake. Not a moment later there was a bright flash on the other side followed by what sounded like thousands of ponies letting out a roar of applause.

Strongheart turned and trotted to a body length mirror. As she went I managed to take in more of my environment. I was definitely behind some sort of stage. Various props and lights were scattered amongst sections of rigging in what could only be described as organized chaos. A few stagehooves were milling about at the edges of my host’s vision, doing something with the ropes that I couldn’t quite make out. Curse this body’s inferior senses!

Strongheart finally made it to the mirror. A little buffalo was staring back at me with nearly black brown eyes. The horns I had felt were covered up by a caramel poof of hair. She was wearing an expertly tailored, white dress jacket trimmed with turquoise triangles and a matching head band with two long, black tipped, white feathers sticking out the back. She looked exhausted, some obviously talented makeup ponies had attempted to hide it, but there were some things no amount of cosmetics could cover up. There were dark bags under her eyes that were still visible through the layers of concealer and she just seemed to slump; though that may have just been how bison held them selves. And she did indeed have a scrap of green stuff wedged between her front teeth.

The little buffalo had a sort of natural grace to her. While she didn’t have what one would call traditionally beauty, I would have definitely taken a pass at her if she were a pony. Hell, I was an experimental stallion, I might have given it a shot anyway... yet another on a depressingly long list of attractive females who could rip me to pieces.

“FILLIES AND GENTLECOLTS!!!” Rainbow Dash announced from the other side of the curtain. **“NOW FOR THE HEIFER YOU’VE ALL BEEN WAITING FOR!!!”**

My host frantically picked the offending bit of foliage from between her teeth; it was a bit of clover with a nice raspberry vinaigrette. She patted her self down and put on a smile that I could have pegged as fake when I was no more than a foal and zipped to the front of the stage.

“LITTLE STRONGHEART!!!”

The wall of blue fabric pulled back with a flash of blinding light. As the bison's vision cleared I could feel her muscles tense up, desperate to be anywhere else. We were staring out into a vast, marble and gold auditorium. Gilded VIP boxes coated the walls, swathed in countless noble banners displaying the cutie mark heraldry of the Equestrian elite. Statues of regal looking ponies were garbed in flowing robes of gold filigree and rich, flowing silks billowing dramatically in a magical breeze that kept the entire room pleasantly cool.

All of that paled in comparison to the rows upon rows of checkered ebony and white birch chairs filled with more ponies than I could conceive of existing in one place. There had to have been thousands of them of every hue and breed imaginable. I had only ever seen two hundred and forty nine ponies in one location before and even that only happened at major events in Shetland. Now I was staring out at ten times that easily, every one of them frantically stomping their applause.

“IN THE BARREN DESERTS OF SOUTHERN EQUESTRIA!!!” Rainbow Dash's voice boomed out across the theater in the most overly dramatic tone I had ever heard... coming from somepony else. **“ALL THE PONIES ON THE TEN O' CLOCK APPALOOSA EXPRESS WERE GOING ABOUT THEIR DAILY LIVES, UNAWARE OF THE DANGER LURKING IN THEIR MIDST!!!”**

The crowd hushed almost immediately as the legendary pegasus continued from wherever she was hiding in a low and ominous tone. **“Hidden among all the good little ponies were five who were not so good!!! And then THEY ATTACKED!!!”** The assembled ponies had a collective intake of breath. **“THESE FIENDS HIJACKED THE TRAIN AND PLANED TO SELL IT AND ITS PASSENGERS TO THEIR ZEBRA OVERLORDS!!! THEN...!!!”**

“IN CAME LITTLE STRONGHEART!!!” The flyer dropped down next to my host in a burst of prismatic light. **“TO SAVE THE DAY!!!”** She was wearing some sort of gem encrusted bridal that was magically amplifying her voice to supernatural levels. **“SHE SINGLE HOOFEDLY DEFEATED THE TRAITORS AND SAVED EVERYPONY ON THE TRAIN.”**

“And today we are here to honor her bravery,” a mare said with a thick Manehattan accent. My host turned to the new speaker, an orange earth pony with her deep purple mane done up in a tight bun. The newcomer was wearing a tailored, black business suit and a pair of small square glasses over her emerald green eyes. “Because of your heroic act I, Valencia Orange on the behalf of everypony in the Orange family would like to present you with these tokens of our appreciation. First we have Treads from The Cutie Mark Crusaders.” Valencia ushered a little, deep red colt in the same red red and gold cape I had seen the ‘little muffin’ wearing.

“Well, um,” the little foal stammered awkwardly. “We, the members of Crusader Troop 42, would like to... to...”

“Go on sweetie,” A breathy, motherly voice from off stage encouraged. “You can do it. yay” It had come from a buttery yellow mare standing with about a dozen other red cloaked foals and the coffee coated buck who was shaking hooves with Boxxie. I knew her, she was the same pony from my sparkle cola stand up. Agh, she was an important pony, a former model, was part of the group that banished the last two demons from equestria, mare of the Ministry of Peace and mind behind the megaspell; what was

her name? Bumblefly, Flutterby, Buttershy... Fluttershy! Ah ha, that was it! Wow, I really should have paid more attention in history.

"To present you with this," Treads continued with renewed confidence. He pulled out a larger version of his own cloak except the foal emblem had been replaced with a buffalo. "We would like to make you an honorary Cutie Mark Crusade Master."

The procession of gifts continued for the better part of an hour. Some of the more impressive gifts were a silver rifle called 'The Shooting Star', given by a older buck with a ten gallon hat and a huge mustache, a trio of luminescent feathers from Princess Celestia's pet phoenix and a royal knighthood bestowed by Princess Luna's captain of The Night Guard (a slim, pinto, earth pony stallion).

As the ceremony drew to a close Little Strongheart trotted numbly back stage, laden with treasures and trinkets galore.

"I told ya you'd do great," Rainbow Dash's voice came from above me. "Now I know you've already done so much for Equestria, but I want to ask you to do something for me." The blue pegasus sighed. "Things aren't going well... this war isn't just another little adventure my friends and I could just make go away. All right, I'll just spit it out. I'm going back out there at the end of the week and there is no one I would trust more to watch my back."

<=====ooO Ooo=====>

I surged back into my own body with a start. I wasn't on the train anymore.

Before I could take in my environment a black hoof covered my muzzle.

"Shhhh," Echo whispered in my ear. "We're being hunted."

Footnote: Level Up

New Perk: But I Am Weak And Helpless -- Due to your timid demeanor you generate 20% less threat from all actions and are less likely to be suspected of misdeeds.

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

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