

Chapter 5: Blink And You'll Miss 'Em

[Restoring the greatest country in the world to its former glory, well, heh heh...well that takes time.]

The floating ball of metal slowly moved up and down as it hovered in the air. It didn't seem inclined to move closer. I was glad for that.

It was inclined to speak though. "Did you have fun in Neighlway? The Rangers make you feel right at home?" The tone was clearly negative, even when delivered by a robotic speaker.

I really had no idea what to make of this. From the way it was talking it didn't seem to be affiliated with Neighlway but they were the only ones I'd seen who used technology even remotely like this. Was Iron Sights pulling something? "Well, *Watcher*, they cured my getting bitten by a hissyflit. There are people in the Wasteland who'd do less in that situation."

Watcher chuckled. Some static bled through. "Only you would think that. Well, not *only* you but close enough."

Huh? "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that the world outside the Stable is very different, isn't it?"

I kept my promise about spending a few days without overreacting every little thing. I just sighed. “Yes. Yes it is. It still confuses the hell out of me but I also feel like I’m getting used to it faster than I should be.”

The robot stayed silent a moment before responding. “Do you want to get used to it?”

“In some ways, maybe.”

“In what ways?”

I frowned. What did this...how did Lexi put it? Squawkbox. What did this squawkbox want? “I need to be able to survive here and make some friends. Being alone in the Wasteland is less than ideal.”

Watcher wasn’t done fishing. “What do you consider surviving?”

Good question. “A way for me to be happy.”

“You could go back to Sprinkles and be a guard.....don’t act surprised that I know that. I’m called Watcher after all.”

I hesitated. “That’s...an option. I’d prefer to work in-house though. Being a caravan guard seems...”

“Dangerous?” Ventured Watcher.

I shook my head. “No. Well yes but I was gonna say violent.”

“You don’t consider violence dangerous?”

“Of course I do. *I* don’t want to be violent.”

“Why not? It could help. You’re not that good right now but you have survived Molar Bears, Raiders and a ghoul. You’re tough enough that getting some training would turn you into a force to be reckoned with. Ponies’ll pay good money for somebody with that kind of resume.”

I frowned. “I don’t need that kind of money. Plottawa has that kind of money.”

Watcher chuckled. “Good answer. You’ve probably heard this already since leaving the Stable but stay away from there. Did you hear DJ Pon-3 talking to the boss Peanut two nights ago? The whole place is riled up, because some joker snuck in and took a shot at him. They won’t be kind to a fresh-from-the-Stable pony.”

Some joker? I guess you’re not always watching.

Watcher continued. “So, as a Stable pony in a new world of opportunity, what would you *like* to do? Your friend the colt seems like he could help you out. Is he still travelling with you?”

“...We got separated.”

“Well you should try to make a few more friends like that. I saw what happened when you got taken by the Rangers. Those Pegasi took off without a backwards glance. Perhaps they’re not the kind of ponies you should be associating with?”

I faced Watcher openly. “Who are you, Watcher? Why is a robot taking such an interest in my social life? With all this talk of friends I’m starting to think you’re pretty lonely yourself.”

He was silent for several long seconds.

“I’m obviously not a robot. I use these bots to communicate and, well, watch the events of the Wasteland. As for the rest? That’ll take a little while, if you’re willing.”

I nodded. “I’m listening. Go ahead.”

“Well I was serious about the making-friends part. That’s still important. Frankly though, I was hoping you were somepony else.”

I cocked my head to the side quizzically. “Who else would I be?”

If it was possible for a floating ball robot to look embarrassed then Watcher managed it at that moment. “I...uh...I was hoping you might have been royalty.”

ROYALTY?! “You mean like the princesses?”

Watcher turned back and forth like a pony nervously twiddling a hoof. “Well not those princesses but *4* princess...Look I’m nearly out of time so I’ll have to tell you later. For now just focus on making friends and staying out of trouble Snowflake.”

Kinda refreshing to find somebody who only knows me by that name. “How will you find me again?”

A cocky undertone crept into his voice. “I found you this time, didn’t I? Tell me the truth. How many of these bots did you notice before I approached you?”

“I...uh...” I was rather surprised to realise he had a point.

“That’s what I thought. I could cut out any moment so head South-East to Vanchoofer. I saw your colt buddy there. You should really not spend so much time alone. A pony I knew grew up like that and she only really became happy when she-”

A burst of static cut through the words and then the bot fell silent for a few moments. I waited for Watcher to come back but instead music began playing through the speakers and the bot began moving off.

“H-hey! Watcher!”

The thing ignored me and continued moving away.

I huffed. “Well great, Watcher. Like I know how to get to Vanchoofer.”

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“Well ain’t that somethin’? Who’d o’ thought those little bugbots could talk? All ah ever heard ‘em playin’ was that cheesy music.” Lexi took a swig of her drink as she pondered the new information I’d brought. Since I didn’t know the way to Vanchoofer I’d stopped back at Sprinkles Supplies. It too had been South-East of Neighlway so I thought they’d be the best bet for directions to the town. Lexi and I were sat at the bar in the small saloon they kept on site. The liquor quality was around the level of what I was used to back in Whiskey Sour’s bar...

*I hope she’s okay. Roc’s still running for Overseer and he probably hasn’t forgotten that she kicked him out of the place*

...but not even in the same league as the fine quality beverages I’d enjoyed in *Hoofshine Harlots*. I sighed, missing the short-lived peace I’d found in that place.

Lexi noticed and, after draining her glass, slid a bag along the counter to me. “Here, girl. This’ll turn that frown upside down.”

I opened the bag. The glint of shiny metal greeted me. “Caps?” I took a quick count. “A lot of caps?”

“Yeah caps. Payment for the Grindstone run. My boys got back a few hours before you did and filled me in about what happened near Neighlway.”

“Bit this is way more than we agreed on!”

“Yup. Three times that. An’ a little bit o’ ‘pology money from the colts fer lettin’ you be taken by them dang Rangers. Even if it was t’ save yer life.”

I left the bag on the counter for a moment and looked at the purple mare. “But why this much?”

Lexi’s smile faded and she growled out the next words.

“Cause those lousy Pegasus twins took off the moment things got hot! They left the job unfinished so they forfeit their pay. I figure it can go to a pony who earned it. That’s you.”

“But I didn’t finish the job either!”

Lexi waved me off. “Tha’s different. If you’d stayed with my crew you woulda died. You had no choice. Plus you came back and then *didn’t* ask fer yer money. That says sumthin’ bout you, girl.”

My cheeks warmed. Lexi was no Peanut. She lacked charisma and couldn’t charm her reflection. She was gruff and mean and expected the worst of everyone but she

was a good boss to her staff and was fair in all her doings.

I'd take that over Peanut's schtick any day. Opening the bag, I removed the original payment and slid the bag back. "Thanks boss but this'll be fine. Keep the rest just in case. Those Rangers are up to something in Neighlway."

*Storming my Stable most likely.* "You might need those caps later."

Lexi was a pragmatist. She just shrugged and stashed the bits away. "Whatever you say, Red Ice."

I winced inwardly. I didn't need to hear that. I got up from my stool. The drink had done its work and left me feeling warm inside. Now was as good a time as any to head off. "I'm heading out to Vanchoofer. Thanks for the directions...and the drink."

"Any time. You should have some fun while you're there. It's the right place for it. They don't get much trouble round there so it's place to unwind. Mebbe find yourself a nice young buck fer a night?"

I chuckled. "Well I am going there to find a guy..."

Lexi guffawed. "That's the way, girl! And hey, you ever need a job you come see me awright? I can always find a place for a pony I can trust."



I nodded but didn't speak around the small lump forming in my throat. What I'd said to Watcher came back to me. I hadn't been kidding when I said this was an option. It was nice to feel welcome in a place after being thrown out of my home and being constantly on the move. I gave a final small smile and headed out the door.

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"Would you leave me alone?! I don't want to meet a guy this badly!"

This was seriously unfair. I could *see* Vanchoofer from here. I could see it! It was maybe a mile away yet I couldn't get any closer because I was perched on this rock while a naked slobbering Raider kept trying to get at me. One Raider. One.

This would be so much easier if I wanted to kill you.

Ouch. That was dark even for Red Ice. No more of that thinking.

The Raider wasn't a particular threat but I didn't want to use lethal force and he'd so far ignored my attempts to scare him off. From the time he'd come waddling out of his cave he'd been doggedly chasing me. Not that he was particularly fast. I could outpace him at a brisk walk but he just kept coming. He had a big gut though. I'd scrambled up this steep boulder in the hope that he was too heavy to follow me.

I'd been right. The Raider had responded by throwing twigs and stones at me which I could do little but shield myself from. Luckily my Molar Bear hide made his efforts futile. I was hoping he'd get tired soon. The sun was going down and it had begun to snow. The extra moisture combined with the slope meant the Raider wasn't getting up here but it also meant that I was kinda stuck. Judging from his actions and lack of clothing I guessed the Raider wasn't all there anymore. Didn't make him any less worrisome though. Given the drool on his lips and what was swinging between his legs I wasn't sure which part he wanted to sink into my tender flesh. That thought was what was really troubling me.

I looked up at the sky. I still had maybe two hours of daylight left and I didn't want to spend them here waiting for this poor tubby guy to get bored and wander off.

How would the others handle this? With Schwarzwald he'd be so very dead by now. Naiara'd probably just jump away. Bosco'd shoot him. Wings'd shoot him. Cassie'd shoot him. Breeze'd use some form of gadget. Who else? Peanut? Broken bones. Overmare? Kicked out of Equestria! Rockhaunch? Headbutt! Buff'd ignore him. Not like he can hurt a buffalo. Still Al'd toss him aside. Lo would...sit on him? Dunno what Lo would do.

...but I do know what I threatened to do to Lo back in the Stable.

I glanced down the boulder at the scrabbling wild Raider. "Last chance big guy.

Get out of here before I chill something that ought not be chilled!”

A rock bounced off my Molar hide. I shrugged. “I warned you, fella.”

Concentrating on his swinging...parts was not the most pleasant of tasks but it was better than the alternative. I willed the cold to come.

It came. The Raider’s face turned surprised. The surprise then shifted to discomfort and finally to fear. He wasn’t swinging so freely now. He looked down at his gear for a moment and then up at me again. I looked him straight in the eyes and pumped up the intensity a little.

“YIPEYIPEYIPE!” That did the trick. He turned tail and ran as fast as his portly body could carry him. I watched and waited for 5 minutes until I was sure he was far away before cautiously clambering down the boulder. Once I was down and the brief sluggishness from magic use passed I headed for Vanchoofer at a brisk trot.

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*This place is great!*

Vanchoofer was a very simple city but wow did it work well. The whole place was one big circle miles across. A ring of hotels, barracks and other places to stay formed the perimeter and the inner grounds were all open space. There was just one entrance so security didn’t get in your face. Once you were past the entrance

then you could do what you wanted. I was sitting on the grass watching a group of Earth ponies build a small stage by torchlight while a little way away there was a thunderous applause as a unicorn kicked a ball past the keeper and into the net. People were doing whatever they wanted here. Some were just laying on the grass with their eyes closed while others were-

*Okay I didn't need to see what those guys were up to.*

I quickly averted my gaze though they hardly seemed to care about privacy. I wasn't particularly comfortable about the idea of staying where I was so got up, dusted myself off, and began a slow stroll around the town in hopes I could locate Bosco.

I stopped by the many, many vendors selling salty and sugary snacks and got myself some...well I'm not sure what they were but they smelled so good. I munched on the crunchy morsels as I trotted along, occasionally stepping aside as giggling foals ran by. The last of the sun disappeared as I walked and flaming beacons were lit around the courtyard. With my search proving fruitless I finished my food and sat leaning against the outer buildings. I felt an odd sense of satisfaction just watching the people play. Yesterday and tomorrow they'd be struggling out there to make a living but in here they could leave it all behind for a night and just have some fun.

Music started up somewhere and grew louder and louder as other performers

joined in. More and more torches lit up as those present flocked to the stage where the band was playing. Pretty soon the sound of laughter filled the air as anyone and everyone got up to dance. I tapped one hoof along to the music but made no move to join in.

That is until a familiar feathered figure bounded out of the crowd cavorting with a bottle of liquor in one hand and a skewer of seasoned meat in the other. She almost missed me in her revelry before freezing and backing up. “Snowflake! Fancy meeting you here!”

I was instantly on my hooves before her. The words poured out of me as I released my pent-up worries. “Wings! I thought you were in Lethbridle! Did you see Bosco? Is he okay? Are you okay? What happened to you after I left? Did Schwarzwald get any trouble from that couple she slept with? Is she with you?”

Wings just held up a talon and I shut up. She didn’t immediately answer and instead bit a chunk off the flesh and took a swig of her drink. I was hopping from side to side anxiously. She didn’t hurry though and savoured her mouthful.

*Come on come on come on!*

Mercifully, she finally swallowed before giving me a cocky smirk. She began ticking off with her claws. “In order: That’s me! I was. No. Hell if I know. Always. I told you that I wasn’t gonna wait around forever, I had stuff to do. Nah,

Schwarz's fine. She's always fine. Nah she's not with me. She had another job. We'll meet up later." She took another swig of her drink before smiling and throwing a claw around my shoulders. "I've got a nice buzz and this party's gettin' fun. Want to hang out with me for a while?"

The lack of news on Bosco was worrisome but I still maintained some of the festive spirit myself. I brightened up at her suggestion. "Sure!"

"Atta girl! Where to first? I know! Let's get you a drink!"

I shrugged cheerfully. "Sure. Let's have some fun."

Soon I was sucking down spirits with a straw as we sauntered side-by-side surveying the sights and sounds on show. There was plenty to take in. After finishing our food we headed over to the attractions. Some enterprising ponies had set up games you could play for prizes. Shiny trinkets were on offer for the younger players while the older ones received drinks tokens or a few shells of ammo if they did really well.

Wings was a natural at the B.B. Rifle game, downing every target one-clawed. The crowd ate it up and the vendor, sensing more sales, kept her playing. She ate up the attention and really drew some applause when she started doing trick shots. First she hit the target over-the-shoulder and everybody cheered. Then she switched to hanging upside down in the air which had the crowd whooping. They burst into

laughter as she brought in an adorable little filly and had *her* hit dead center.

I was clapping along with the rest before she grabbed me out of the blue, “W-whoa!” I found myself being spun around and around before finally being dipped and ending up face to face with Wings. Her burning stare inches from mine. I just stared back nervously.

“OOOOHHH!” Went the crowd.

Wings said nothing but ever-so-slowly inched closer.

*Hey wait is she going to...*

BANG!

Shocked, I jumped in her grasp. I missed slamming my face into hers by the narrowest of margins. I still felt her feathers brush my cheeks. “What was-”

Wings just smirked as the crowd erupted.

Amid the show she’d put on she’d *still* hit the target right in the middle. Without looking! *Damn she’s good.*

She pulled me back up to standing. The crowd was still cheering and smirk still graced her face. I wanted to feel affronted but found that I couldn’t. It had all been in good fun. I grabbed her claw and raised it for the crowd to see. This brought a

fresh round of applause.

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Wings didn't get all the glory though. After moving on from the shooting gallery we somehow ended up in an eating contest. Her perplexed pose as I progressively ploughed into a pile of pies was priceless.

Shockingly I didn't win but the colt who did deserved it. He went to town on those pies. I still needed a little while to digest them though so Wings used her drinks tokens to refill our glasses and we relaxed on the grass. We were far enough from the music and other revellers that the noise was softened enough that we could communicate without yelling.

"Where did you put it all? I've never seen a filly your size pull off something like that."

Thank you Mrs. Doublehorn. "Three buffalo brothers meant you got used to big portions."

Wings let out a disbelieving snort. "Buffalo brothers? Yeah right."

I just lay with my eyes closed and smiled. It must sound crazy to somebody outside the Stable. "I'm not kidding. We weren't born to the same mother but they're still my brothers."

Wings was still unconvinced. “Oh yeah? Then what are the names of these brothers?”

Ah. The tricky part. “Their names are...Buff...Al...and Lo.”

She didn’t buy that. A barked laugh of derision escaped her beak. “That’s the dumbest-”

“Don’t say that!”

She halted. My outburst had obviously surprised her.

I sighed. “Sorry. It’s just...their mother, Mrs, Doublehorn, had...troubles. She wasn’t really right in her head. She tried though! She didn’t always get things right but she tried as hard as she could! She was a great mother to them...and me!”

My eyes began to glisten. “You should have seen her smile when she watched her sons. There may as well have been nothing else in the entire world...”

I broke off as that thought brought up other memories of the Stable. Whiskey Sour.
External Monitor Duty.

The Overmare.

“So she’s dead then?”

“Not yet,” I murmured before realising what she meant. “Oh! Uh...yes she died a long time ago, when Buff, Al and Lo were still very young.”

Wings stretched out on the grass. “So where are they now? Why aren’t they with you?”

“Well, they’re-” I stopped. Should I tell her? I took a quick glance around for unwanted eavesdroppers.

Wings had noticed that my sentence was incomplete. “They’re what? Running a nudie show in Tenpony tower?”

Wow that’s an image. I looked around. Nobody seemed to be paying us undue attention. *I can tell Wings. I mean she already knows I’m Red Ice and she hasn’t turned me in to the Plottawa slavers. I should be fine. I can trust her.*

I took a deep breath. “They’re back home...”

Here we go. “...in Stable 61.”

Instantly recognition dawned on Wings’ face. “HOLY SHIT!” She rolled onto her back and began belting out laughter. “AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! No wonder you’re crazy!”

I frantically tried to shush her. Even here, the wrong ear could be listening in.

“Wings! Come on, keep it down!”

She was shaking her head in mock disbelief. “A Stable pony! Of course you’re a Stable pony. It all makes sense now. Who else would be crazy enough to trot into Plottawa by themselves and pick a fight with the snatcher boss?”

“Wings, seriously!”

Still chuckling, she picked herself up and gave me a wan smile. “Eheh sorry. This really puts you in a different light though. A Stable pony Unicorn with three buffalo brothers. You couldn’t make this stuff up.”

Well I’m glad she’s enjoying herself but I’d best be sure. “So what light does it put me in then?” I really didn’t want to fight her if she decided that I was worth more as merchandise.

She lazily waved a wing. “Oh lighten up. Nothing’s gonna change except now I might have more questions. Who’d have thought I’d have my life saved, and claw puked on, by a Stable pony?”

I blushed. I’d forgotten about that. “I’ve gotten better about that.”

Wings shot a smirk in the direction of the pie contest. “Apparently.”

We both chuckled at that.

I relaxed. The tension had passed. I felt relatively sure that Wings wasn't sizing me up for cash value. Considering her aim that was a very good thing. "So...still friends?"

It was shocking how quickly the griffon sobered at that. It was just as quickly covered. "Uh sure. Yeah. Still friends."

I had no doubt I was grinning like a fool at that moment. That grin grew into a joyous smile as the Unicorns began setting off fireworks. Enraptured, Wings and I watched in silence.

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"Which side do you want?"

It was far into the night when the party finally began to wind down and the tired festival-goers began trudging towards the accommodation buildings on the perimeter. Wings and I only just managed to snag a place to stay but there was only one bed. Luckily Wings wasn't the biggest griffon and I wasn't a buffalo like my brothers. We'd both just about fit.

My chocolate-and-cream friend flopped down on the bed in response. I shrugged and took the free space. I found I could barely keep my eyes open. "Huah! G'night Wings."

A grunt was all I got in return.

I pulled the covers up to my chin. Before I went to sleep I wanted to say one more thing though. I was riding a pretty good feeling today and wanted to share it.  
“Wings?”

“ ... ”

“Thanks for being a friend.”

“ ... ”

I dropped my voice to a whisper, not wanting to wake the griffon if she was already asleep. “G’night Wings.”

“...s’not my name.”

“What’s that?”

The Griffon didn’t turn over to face me but her shoulders bunched up a little. “My name isn’t Wings.”

“Then what’s your name?”

“...ZZZZZZ”

I left her to her fake snoring and looked up at the ceiling. That was certainly a way to stave off sleep...at least for a little while. My eyes were already getting heavy again.

*The rest can wait. Glad you told me though. G'night Wings.*

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The next morning the fun was over. Wings still had work to do and I still had to find Bosco and Naiara. I gave her the contact code for my Pipbuck and then we each left Vanchoofer, she by air and me by land.

I managed to get away from Vanchoofer without running into the feral Raider colt again. I took a wide path that kept me a safe distance from Plottawa and pointed me towards Grindstone. Of all the locations I had at my disposal this was the only one I hadn't checked. Well aside from Plottawa but I wasn't going back there any time soon.

A day passed uneventfully. The morning after, however... "Snowflake, wake up!"

"Whzzt?" I cracked an eyelid open and instantly regretted it as the rising sun hit me straight in the brain. I blinked through the spots but still couldn't see the speaker.

“Come on, I can’t stay forever.” The voice was tinny and unnatural.

Ah. “Watcher? Is that you?”

“Yeah it’s me. Hurry and wake up. I don’t know how long the connection’ll last.”

“What’s wrong? Did something happen? Did you see Bosco again?”

“The colt? No. I just thought you might want to finish the conversation we had from before.”

Honestly it’d slipped my mind. It took me a while to remember what we’d discussed. “Oh! Oookay. You said something about...a Princess?”

Watcher began as I readied myself for travel. “Yes. You see I took an interest in you because of your Stable.”

I found the Grindstone heading on my Pipbuck and began walking. The bot followed. “My Stable?”

“Yes. Stable 61 is the only Stable-Tec enclosure for miles around. It’s the northernmost Stable in all of Equestria.”

I thought back to what Facemask said: *“We’re the place where the road ends an’ all. You reach this li’l town and ya only got two choices: Settle in or turn around.*

Ain't nuthin' out here but us."

The only thing further north than Cefar is the Stable. "Is that important?"

Watcher's voice became more animated. "Heck yes it's important! Listen, do you know what was here before the war began? Before the world ended?"

I really should. We had plenty of history books in the Stable. It'd been years since I'd picked one up though. Stable 61's anti-Old Equestria sentiment tended to discourage it. "Uh...a spice farm?"

The bot leaned slightly in a fair facsimile of confusion. "A what? No! I'm talking about the Crystal Kingdom."

Ohhh. "Um...what about it?"

Watcher wasn't impressed. "I'll tell you. The Crystal Kingdom used to be the Crystal Empire. More than a thousand years before the Great War began a powerful Unicorn king ruled there. His name was Sombra. You'd be hard-pressed to find a more powerful magic wielder."

And I can still barely whip up a cold shock for a would-be rapist. "Hooray for Sombra."

Watcher grunted. "If you'd met him you wouldn't say that."

I started at that. “You sound like you have. You were alive over a thousand years ago?”

“NO-look let me finish. The Crystal Empire was ruled by Sombra 1000 years ago but he was a tyrant. The Crystal ponies feared him. He stole and hid the mystical treasure of the Empire, the Crystal Heart. Not only that but he used its power to seal the Empire away for 1000 years. It literally disappeared off the face of Equestria.”

“One Unicorn did that? Sombra was that powerful?”

“No, not on his own. Don’t get me wrong he was still a grave threat even to Celestia but for what he did he needed the Crystal Heart. 1000 years later the Empire returned and 8 brave ponies banded together to defeat Sombra and free the Crystal ponies from his grasp.”

“I take it they were all powerful Unicorns too?”

A static-y chuckle was the response. “Actually no. Only three were Unicorns. What make these 8 ponies special was the abilities unique to them. I guess...I guess you’d call 6 of them the Ministry Mares now.”

My jaw couldn’t get any lower. “Them?” I sputtered. “They saved an entire Kingdom?”

Watcher really was enjoying himself now. “Believe it or not they’re not the most important ponies here.”

“More important than the leaders of the 6 most powerful organisations in Equestria’s history?”

This was scoffed at. “Equestria has a long history, and the Ministries are were not the most powerful *anything*. They were just mistakes. No, the other two ponies are the important ones. You know about Twilight Sparkle? Head of the Ministry of Magic and personal student to Princess Celestia?”

“I knew some of that.” I lamely responded.

“Well the 3rd Unicorn was special too. Captain of the Royal Canterlot Guard, older brother to Twilight Sparkle and future Prince of the Crystal Kingdom: Shining Armour.”

“WHAT?! Shining Armour was a Prince? And he was Twilight Sparkle’s brother?!”

“Their parents were very proud.” The deadpan response did not help.

“Wait. Why wasn’t he a king if he ruled the Crystal KINGdom?”

“Well they called it that but technically it was a Princessdom.”

Finally! “And the Princess you mentioned...”

“Yes. Shining Armour was her husband. She was the 8th pony. Not Earth, Pegasus OR Unicorn. She was Princess Mi Amore Cadenza...an Alicorn.”

“A what?”

“Horns. Wings. Leagues above all but a few extraordinary Unicorns in power. Alicorns are the type of pony we class Celestia and Luna as.”

“The Princesses? So this Mi Amo-...Mi Amore-...”

“Cadence to her friends. Yes. She, like her Aunts Celestia and Luna before her, had both wings AND a horn.”

“And she and Shining Armour became the rulers of the Crystal Kingdom after defeating Sombra?”

“Yes.”

“And you thought I was her?” *Is he serious with that?*

Watcher’s reply was bashful and a little melancholy. “More like hoped, honestly.”

“Why?”

“I DON’T KNOW ALRIGHT! I’M GRASPING AT STRAWS HERE!”

The outburst was as shocking as it was sudden. “Watcher?”

Heavy breathing was the only sound from the bot for several seconds. Finally his voice returned. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to snap like that. It’s just...Cadence could have helped so much. Nobody knew what happened to her or Shining Armour.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well when the fighting started the Crystal Kingdom was too far to maintain an effective defense. Their soldiers weren’t enough to stop a full attack but they were too far from the rest of Equestria to get help in a hurry. It was a bad situation. The power of the Crystal Heart could not fall into Zebra hooves. It would have been disastrous.”

They already made megaspells without it. It’s hard to think of anything worse than that.

“Cadence and Shining Armour knew this but they also cared deeply about their subjects. After a dozen raids by Zebra forces the Kingdom’s defenses were heavily depleted. Soon they got word of a massive incoming attack. They wouldn’t hold against it and help wouldn’t arrive quickly enough. That was when they made the hardest decision they would ever make.”

I was all ears. This was terrible but at the same time I yearned to hear more. “What did they do?”

A heavy sigh came through the speakers. “The only thing they could do. They used the Heart and recreated Sombra’s spell. The Crystal Kingdom was sealed away just as the Crystal Empire was. Only the two of them remained.”

Watcher managed a giggle here. “Cadence was pissed too. She wanted to seal Shining Armour away with the Kingdom since he was a Unicorn, and wouldn’t live nearly as long as her. He wouldn’t hear of it.”

That’s...that’s heartwarming...and heartbreaking. “Then what happened?”

“Well the Zebra forces arrived and found nothing there. Where the Kingdom had been there was nothing but frozen tundra. The Kingdom will return when the seal breaks though hell if anypony knows when that’ll be.”

“...The Prince and Princess?”

“Gone. The Crystal Heart too. There was no trace of any of them after that day.”

“What does it mean?”

A noncommittal sound was heard. “Couldn’t tell you. I’d hoped Cadence might have been in your Stable.”

This sucks. “I never saw any Alicorns in my time there.”

Wacher moaned low. “Ughhh. I didn’t think so. I had to try though.”

I never saw any ponies with a horn and wings in the Stable. She could have hidden one or the other but how would I have known it was her even then? I don’t know what she looked like.

“What else can you tell me about her? What did she look like?”

Watcher’s voice was void of emotion. “What does it matter? She’s not there. Probably gone like the rest.”

“Please, Watcher?”

A distinctly unimpressed air was emanating from my companion. A list of characteristics were delivered monotonously in list form. “Pink. Pink fur and multi-shade pink mane. Tall for a mare. Used Love Magic.”

The barest glimmer of remembrance appeared in my mind but disappeared the moment I tried to focus on it. It was gone so quickly that I wasn’t even sure it had been there at all. “I’m sorry, Watcher. I didn’t see anybody who could fit that description.”

“Don’t worry about it Snowflake. Thanks for listening anyway.”

“Is there anything else I can do?”

“Make some friends? Not much more than that unfortunately. Listen I’m gonna sign off for now. I need to think.”

“A-alright. Take care, Watcher.”

“You too.”

Then he was gone and the music started up again. The bot began floating away as I continued on alone to Grindstone.

~~~~~

I decided against stopping in at Sprinkles Supplies again. They still had a business to run and I didn’t want to disturb them.

As I walked I considered the events of the past few days. I’d gotten halfway to Grindstone for Lexi before being poisoned and taken to Neighlway. I was about an hour away from there now.

*Caramel and Sassaflash deserved better.*

After that I’d spoken to Lexi again and headed to Vanchoofer to find Bosco.

*Instead I found not-Wings. I really want to find out what her name is now.* I was

just now realised exactly how much I'd told her in comparison to what she'd told me. I'd trusted her then and would have to trust her now.

“RED ICE!” The familiar but not terribly welcome voice put a halt to my retrospection. I glanced up just as the Pegasus slammed down before me.

*Her on the other hand...* “Aqua Breeze. Been a while since I saw your face rather than your tail heading the other w-”

“WHERE IS SHE?!” Hoarse yelling was not something I was willing to take from her.

“*Who* is she?” I shot back.

“Cassie! Where is my sister?”

*What?* “How should I know? Last time I saw you two, I was frozen on the ground, and you both were flying away as fast as you could.”

Breeze's armoured hoof stomped the ground. “You're lying!”

I waved my hoof. “Look around us. Do you see her here?” I made a calming gesture. “Take it easy and tell me what hap-”

I spotted Breeze's indicator on my Pipbuck.



It was red.

*Ugh. Crap.*

This thought was compounded by the fact that the Pegasus was already mid-pounce.

We went down in a heap. It was a far cry from the gadget user in her last fight. This was messy, desperate, furious brawling. In a way I was glad. I didn't think I could take Breeze if she was collected but like this she was simply trying to bite and kick and pummel me into giving up her sister's location. Even if I did know that this style was clearly not her forte.

*Still...I don't want to fight her.*

Breeze did not share this compunction. Locked as we were I couldn't get to my Power Hooves. Lucky for me Breeze hadn't deployed her hidden blade yet but her mindless attacks wouldn't last forever. As soon as she realised that she could use it I'd be royally screwed if I was still this close.

"Tell me where you took Cassie!" Breeze growled as I held my foreleg under her chin and pushed back. Her wings were flapping hard, forcing her down onto me. I was losing strength and wouldn't last if this kept up.

“Stop it Breeze! I don’t want to fight you and I DON’T KNOW WHERE SHE IS!”

With a massive effort I got a hoof into her stomach and bucked as hard as I can. Breeze went falling back. Hitting the ground with the wind escaping her lungs in one big exhalation. She remained prone for a moment, gagging and coughing. I took the opportunity to roll backwards onto my shaking hooves.

“Breeze I’m telling the truth. I really don’t know where Cassie is.”

The Pegasus was dragging herself upright. “You’re...you’re the only one who knew where we were...” she wheezed,

“If not you...who else is there? I already tried the guards at Sprinkles Supplies.”

“That’s...not unreasonable thinking but I really don’t know where she is. I can help you find her if you’d like.” This would delay my search for Bosco but I really didn’t need this psychotic flier chasing me all the time. Plus it could potentially mean another...well maybe not friend but another not-an-enemy-anymore. Her AND her sister.

Breeze let out a rough cough. Looking at her now it was clear that she wasn’t at her best. Her blue-&-white mane was unkempt and she had bags under her eyes. her aqua coat was looking pretty haggard too.

*She must’ve run herself ragged trying to find her sister.*

Try as I might I couldn't help myself feeling sorry for her. It also forced me to think a terrifying thought. *Are my brothers going through this? Did they turn the Stable upside down looking for me?*

Close on the heels of that thought was a crushing shame that it had taken me *this long* to realise this might be the case. Breeze had been away from her sister for a few days. I was *two weeks* removed from the Stable. Two weeks and I hadn't found the time to be worried about my brothers. Breeze didn't even have the knowledge that her sibling was safe inside the Stable like I did.

All my indignation was draining away. I found I couldn't see Aqua Breeze as an enemy anymore. All I could see was a girl my age who was lonely and afraid and sick with worry about her family. "I'm really sorry, Breeze. You're a better sister than I am."

This was not the right thing to say. Breeze still had plenty of hate for me. "Of course I am, you bitch! I don't take a pony's sister away from them!"

She flung out her forelegs and four familiar spears. They stuck in the ground on either side of me and began crackling. I wasn't completely stuck like last time but I couldn't move on either side. I could only go backwards or forwards.

Frantically I looked for a way out. "Breeze don't do this!"

She just smirked. It held no trace of warmth. “You know what I want.”

She raised her bracer. I recognised the same crystal weapon I’d fueled when we fought the hissyflits. Apparently she’d gotten it recharged.

*I’m fucked.*

Her face morphed into a mask of hate and she loosed an incoherent scream as a torrent of magic poured out of greave. A mighty telekinetic wave roared forth. It tore up the ground and flung a wall of debris straight at me. I threw up my hooves as the vortex of magic and matter slammed into me. The pain was instant and immense. I couldn’t even cry out. Bloody gashes burst along my body and stars exploded before my eyes as my head and horn were struck again and again. I finally slammed down a hundred meters away. I lay quivering and fetal. The pain was too much to pick myself up.

A voice came from outside my eyelids. “Now give me what I need.”

I didn’t answer. Someone else did. Someone whose voice moved me to tears. “Oh I’ll give you something.”

It took more than a little willpower but I finally cracked an eye open. A vicious scene was playing out before me.

Naiara was taking Breeze apart. It wasn't even a fight anymore. The Pegasus would try to get some distance and the Zebra would be on her before she could get airborne. Breeze couldn't keep up with Naiara's speed either. She'd try to get her with her blade and be effortlessly danced around. I'd never seen a more graceful fighting style. Peanut might've been the better fighter but Naiara outclassed him in style. Breeze simply didn't stand a chance.

It was over quickly with Breeze in much the same shape I was. Naiara bound and immobilised her before rushing over to me. "*Roga nimbala, svara?*"

"I think so." I croaked as she eased me into a sitting position. "How's Breeze?"

"The Pegasus? Hurting. Like she should be. Want me to finish her?" Naiara's voice was colder than I'd heard from her before.

"N-no. She's not to blame. Not really. We'll fix me up then fix her up."

My Zebra friend looked at me incredulously. "You're not serious? Snowflake she just tried to kill you!"

"I...know but she...had a...reason." The pain was still intense and I felt faint.

Naiara excused herself momentarily before returning with the pack I'd left behind before infiltrating Plottawa. It was still chock-full of the medical supplies from

*Hoofshine*. “Thought you might want this back.”

“You’re a lifesaver, Naiara,” I began sucking down a healing potion. Feeling it instantly go to work on my insides. I winced as I felt a twinge, “...perhaps literally. Well, heh, it wouldn’t be the first time.”

Naiara fussed over me as I drank. “Take it slow now. Little by little.”

I just nodded and looked over at Breeze. She hadn’t moved and just lay there softly moaning. I was still far from 100% but when I was strong enough to move we turned our attentions to her. Still-bound, we nearly had to force-feed her a healing potion. “Now can you promise not to kill me long enough to talk to me?”

The cyan Pegasus looked away. “What’s there to say? You’re not going to tell me where Cassie is.”

“Because. I. Don’t. Know. The best I can do is offer you my help to find her. Do you want my help?”

She still didn’t look at me. “Why would you help me? The stripe is right. I tried to kill you. Twice.”

“Twice?!” Echoed Naiara. She gave me another ‘are you crazy?’ look.

I attempted to give her a ‘probably’ look in return. “Yes and I’m willing to forgive

both of those occurrences IF you agree not to kill me at any point in the future. You or your sister. Who I will help you find.”

Suspicion still ruled Breeze’s posture. “Why would you do this for us?”

I shrugged. “Probably because you just said ‘us’ rather than ‘me’. I know what it’s like to be away from your family. Plus if you agree with my terms I doubt your sister would let you go back on it. She doesn’t seem the type.”

Tears formed in the corners of Breeze’s eyes. “She’s not.”

I smiled at her. “Good enough for me.”

I turned to my friend. “You coming, *svara*?”

The Zebra considered her options for a moment. “That depends. Where are we going?”

“Well since he’s obviously not with you I’d still like to find Bosco. I was gonna head to Grindstone. Aside from Plottawa it’s the only place I know how to find that I haven’t been to yet. Since that was the delivery destination of the caraven we all guarded we might find Cassie there too.”

Naiara chuckled. “Yeah we’re not going back to Plottawa.”

Breeze was watching the two of us guardedly. “You were there too, stripe? Here I

thought Red Ice went by herself.”

I rounded on the Pegasus. “If you want my help to find your sister then *you will not call her that ever again!*”

Breeze ‘tch’ed. “Why the hell not?”

“Because it’s offensive. She has a name. If she deigns to tell you what it is then you’ll address by that name as you would anybody else. If not then you either be respectful or I’ll gag you.”

Naiara was having trouble holding in her laughter at this. “Wow. You tell her, *svara.*”

She gave an aside glance at Breeze. “My name’s Naiara. Who might you be?”

“...Aqua Breeze.”

Naiara was all smiles. “Pleased to meet you.”

*Hell, she’s already proved she can take her.*

“And I’m Snowflake. If you both don’t mind I prefer that over *Red Ice*. Now if you’re both up to walking can we set off?”

“Oh I don’t know, Snow. I think her face may have bruised my hooves a little.”



“Naiara...”

“Oh fine.”

Breeze got up. “I can move. Let’s just go already.”

We set off. I had the location in my Pipbuck so I took the lead. Behind me I heard my two companions sniping at each other.

“I coulda taken you easy if you hadn’t suckerpunched me.”

“Try hurting my friend again and I’ll end you before you hit the ground. She may be giving you the benefit of the doubt but I’m still watching you.”

*Oh yeah, we’re totally all friends here.*

~~~~~

We arrived at Grindstone well past midnight. The Buffalo guards weren’t particularly pleased to get visitors that late and refused to let us in. They changed their tune when I headbutted the both of them.

There was a small guesthouse made available to us by too many caps changing hooves. The space was crowded and full of junk. Obviously it doubled as storage. Grindstone was hardly a big city. The Buffalo didn’t exactly encourage visitors.

Trade caravans were about the only ponies who came out this far. We were all pretty exhausted so we decided to crash for tonight and ask around tomorrow.

As we were readying for bed Naiara decided to have some 'fun'. "So Breeze...exactly how did you get our dear Snowflake in such a bad state? As far as I can tell you're not enough at her level in hoof-fighting and that's saying something."

I mock-growled. "*Unten, svara*. No, Breeze is no brawler but she's got some amazing gizmos. Apparently they're her own design. Trust me when I say you don't want to be on the receiving end of her..."

I frowned and turned to the grumpy Pegasus. "Do you have a name for the magic gauntlet? You named the Shock Lock. How about that one?"

"...It's my Spell Shooter."

"Right. Her 'Spell Shooter' packs a real punch. I've even had the honour of providing the ammunition before too."

Naiara was looking back and forth between the two of us. "Okay I'm confused. Are you two enemies or allies?"

To my surprise it was Breeze who answered first. "When we first met we weren't friends. My sister and I were bored and looking for something interesting. We met

Red Ice out in the canyon and...I guess things got out of hoof.”

“Her sister Cassie shot me clear through the hoof.”

“I wondered what that scar was.”

Breeze yawned before continuing. “Well after that we met again the next day. We were all hired as freelance guards for a caravan heading to here. We got into a rumble with some Hissyflits...”

“I’ll tell you later.” I assured Naiara upon seeing her clueless expression.

“...and then the Steel Rangers took Snowflake to Neighlway. Cassie and I took off but we got separated when a freak snowstorm kicked up. I’ve been looking for her since.”

The Zebra seemed to barely hear the last part. She was looking at me with open worry in her eyes. “The Rangers got a hold of you? Are you okay? Did they do anything to you?”

“Not much. Cured the Hissyflit poison then ‘asked’ me to watch some Memory Orbs. All their Unicorns were out tangling with Plottawa slavers, our fault by the way, so I was the only choice. After that they gave me some supplies and kicked me out.”

Naiara shook her head definitively. “Don’t...don’t go near them anymore. They’re bad news.”

Don’t I know it. I’ll tell you the rest as soon as I can.

Another yawn escaped Breeze’s lips and she slumped back against the wall. The Pegasus fought off sleep just long enough to raise her head and look me right in the eyes. “Listen Red-...I mean Snowflake. I’m...sorry about before. I don’t think you’d go to all this trouble if you had taken Cassie. I appreciate your help in finding her.”

My heart warmed at her words but she just couldn’t resist hedging her bets with a followup as her eyes were closing.

“But if you were the one who took my sister I’ll...” She didn’t quite manage to finish before sleep took her. I was pretty sure I got the gist of it though.

Naiara seemed halfway between amused and annoyed. “Charming girl.” Then she too rolled over and left the conversation.

I took a moment to double check that Breeze’s gadgets were safe with me. Naiara had insisted. A prudent move even if it detracted from the trust angle.

They’ll both come around. Watcher’s gonna be happy the next time we talk. I hope Bosco’s back by then. It’d be nice if we could all be getting along. Me, Naiara,

Breeze, Bosco, Cassie, Schwarzwald...

...Wings.

Just who are you, Wings?

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The three of us awoke feeling rested and much healthier. Breeze and I still weren't all the way back but we wouldn't slow anybody down unless things got rough.

We strolled around the various clan compounds that comprised Grindstone's community asking each in turn about our two missing ponies. As we went Naiara and I got caught up. "So what happened after I blacked out in Peanut's office?"

She smirked. "You mean when you stuck him to his desk? I wanted to finish him but he tripped a silent alarm and we had to vacate fast. We got dressed in the slaver gear again and dragged you out of there. Anypony we passed just assumed you'd been attacked by the intruders. We were half-a-mile away before the non-silent alarms sounded. I had Bosco keep going with you while I doubled back and bought you some time. Took a few more out quiet-like."

*More dead ponies on my conscience. Yay.* "...Thanks, Naiara. I know we got back to Lethbridle okay since I woke up there. After you dropped me at the jail where did the two of you go?"

Naiara had a hint of shiftiness about her for the next part. “Well I’m fine with travelling light but Bosco wanted our buried gear back. Said it was important. I’d left my package from Nightcap there too so I agreed to go back with him and get the stuff. We got TO it with no trouble but...well...Bosco tries but he is not a graceful colt. We got found out by a slaver patrol. Managed to fight ‘em off but by then the game was up. We were ducking and dodging them for 2 days before we were close enough for a mad dash back to Lethbridle. O’ course by then you were up and off on your adventures.”

She chuckled. “Bosco sure had you pegged. He said you’d be trying to get chummy with the entire Wasteland. You’re not quite there yet but you’re still travelling with a pony who’s tried to kill you twice. Anyway we each had a few notions of where to look for you so we split up. If all else failed the final option was to meet back in Lethbridle a week later. That was 5 days ago.”

Breeze chose this moment to speak up. The lack of success in Grindstone was rapidly eroding her mood. “So you’ve just to wait 2 days for your coltfriend. Great. Let’s focus on the bigger issue: Finding my sister!”

Naiara and I exchanged glances. I nodded. “She’s got a point. Bosco should be able to take care of himself. If we hear anything about him before that then great! But for now let’s find Cassie.”

Naiara just shrugged. “Awright. What does Cassie even look like? She a Pegasus too?”

“Yeah. She actually looks pretty similar to Breeze. Her hair’s different though. Instead of blue and white it’s red and black. Her Cutie Mark is stars and she’s more polite than Breeze.”

“Hey!”

“Suck it up. It’s true.”

Breeze pouted. “Still, cheap shot.”

We walked in silence until we reached the next camp. It turned out to be another bust. Breeze didn’t complain though. It seemed like knowing we were focusing just on Cassie had her motivated. We let her take the lead. I brought up a nagging issue with Naiara. “Hey, *svara*. Yesterday you asked where we were going before you agreed to come along. Why? And why did you want to go to Plottawa in the first place?”

Naiara sucked air through her teeth. “Well I can’t talk about Plottawa just yet but I’ll tell you the first part. I’m supposed to be meeting some other Zebra back east next week. The package is for them. *I can’t be late.*”

I put a hoof on her shoulder. “*Roga nimbala?* Do you want some help? You’ve done plenty for me. I’d be happy to come along and meet some more Zebra.”

She hesitated. “Mmmmmmaybe. I haven’t decided yet what I’m gonna do. I’ll let you know when I do. That’s all I can tell you for now.”

I tried to reassure her with a smile. “That’s plenty. *Unten.*”

I got a weak grin in return. We both broke off as we heard Breeze’s raised voice. Apparently we wouldn’t have luck with this group either. “WHAT DID YOU SAY?!”

“I said you’d best leave now, Pegasus.” Retorted a heavy voice. Concerned, Naiara and I headed over. Breeze was surrounded by a half-dozen Buffalo. None of whom looked happy. All of them wore strange contraptions that were fixed around their waists. They looked like reinforced belts and were brimming with guns. This was serious.

“Breeze, what’s going on?” I didn’t like this. She was outnumbered and dwarfed by the bovines. Each one was full-grown too and would outmass even Buff.

The Pegasus huffed but didn’t turn away from the glare-down she was having with the speaker. The Buffalo had a mud-brown coat and was clearly the leader. The only creatures I’d seen bigger than him were Chief Rockhaunch and the Molar



Bear. “I was asking about my sister when all of sudden these hornheads show up and started threatening me!”

The Buffalo’s front hoof dug at the ground irritably. “You shouldn’t even be here at all! Ponies bring nothing but trouble. We Buffalo aren’t interested in being dragged into YOUR problems!”

Naiara was evidently unimpressed by the posturing. She gave a terse laugh. “It took six of you to tell us that?”

A rumbling growl emerged from the Buffalo’s throat. “You’d best watch your tone, stripe. You’re no more welcome here than they are. We all know what your kind did 200 years ago. You gonna bomb us too?”

This brought chuckles from his cohorts. “You tell her Crush!”

“Damn stripes always causin’ trouble.”

“Yeah! Hurhurhur.”

Crush was seemingly bolstered by his friends’ heckling and took a menacing step forwards. “Leave Grindstone by tonight or there’ll be trouble. Take your *stripe* with you, *Pegasus*!”

The 5 goons began walking away between the tents. Crush stopped besides me.

“Got something to say, *one-horn*?”

I couldn't decide whether I felt angry at him or bad for him. “Only that I think Rockhaunch is a better Buffalo than you'll ever be.”

His nostrils flared at the name. “You would.” He snarled before trotting after his friends.

He hadn't gotten very far before a new Buffalo came running up. “Crush! Crush! More ponies at the border camp!”

“Ugh. Let one get in and they all show up. Worse than fucking Hissyflits!” He shot a disgusted look back at us before charging off.

Breeze was already moving. “Come on! We can ask these ponies if they've seen Cassie!”

“Alright just wait for us.” Naiara and I followed.

“Breeze!” I called out. “Don't get your hopes up. It might just be another trade caravan.”

“Yeah yeah I know.” Her reply was distracted. She obviously hadn't listened as she sped up. I tried to keep up but was slowed by my injuries. Breeze either healed faster than I did or was pushing herself too hard.

“Naiara go with her, I’ll catch up.”

The Zebra nodded and bounded after the gadgeteer. “Hey blue, wait up!”

I slowed to an easy walk. *Exactly what are the chances these ponies will know anything about Cassiopeia Venatici? I know Pegasi are gonna be noticed more easily than other ponies but according to Breeze and her sister there are hardly any of them left down here. I bet some ‘dirt ponies’ could go their whole lives without seeing one. Hell I only saw one because I was the loudest thing in the valley and she has super-hearing. I only saw two because she has a sister. We really might have to go meet up with Bosco before we can find Cassie. I can’t wait to have that conversation with Breeze.*

As I walked an increasing number of Buffalo were heading the other way. None of them looked happy and many looked downright scared.

*What scares Buffalo in their own home? A Molar Bear attack?*

As I neared the gate the sounds of commotion grew louder. There was an argument going on but I couldn’t make out the specifics.

“Snowflake! Get Back!” Naiara spoke in barely a hiss. I glanced around but couldn’t see her. Then a striped hoof popped out from behind a rain barrel and urgently waved.

“Naiara? Wha-”

Her head appeared next and her pupils were shrunken in fear. “Get out of sight! Hurry!”

Confused, I ducked inside an empty tent. I spotted a cobalt pupil looking out near Naiara’s jade eyes so I knew Breeze was with her.

*What’s got you so spooked, Naiara?* I checked my Pipbuck indicator. Two blues indicated the others but the rest of the screen was full of yellow indicators. They were split into two distinct groups. Both were pretty large. The closest group was probably the Buffalo while the farther one would be the ponies. Each time one person moved a dot from the other group would move to match. The Buffalo had a slight edge in numbers but if things got bad then a lot of damage would be done before it was over.

“WHAT THE HELL DO YOU WANT HERE PONIES?!” Crash was not subtle in expressing his displeasure.

*Oh crap. If he’s there then the ponies will be in real danger! I have to try and help them.* I lifted the tent flap and darted out towards the confrontation.

“Snow, don’t!” It almost sounded like Naiara was pleading.

*I have to help them, Naiara.* I weaved through a few tents before finally emerging in the clearing. Both groups whipped their heads...and guns around to point at me. The Buffalo were annoyed. The ponies...

...were wearing Plottawa uniforms.

*OHSHITSHITSHIT!!!!*

“IT’S HER! OPEN FIRE!”

I turned and ran as a hail of bullets shot under, over, and past me. Blood spurted from my flesh as half a dozen grazed me. There was a momentary lull as the Buffalo opened fire on the slavers to protect their home but I didn’t stop running. I had to get away.

“Red Ice is getting away! After her! Take her alive if you can!”

*Nononononono! I can’t be caught! I can’t be a slave!*

I couldn’t spare the time to give a proper look but from the corner of my eye I could see flashes as my Pipbuck jerked back and forth.

Every icon was red.

*Breeze? Naiara?*

They'd vanished. I didn't know what that meant. I feared the worst. Even so I couldn't stop. The slavers were closing in behind me. Every few seconds a new burst of gunfire would strike my surroundings. I had no choice but to keep ducking and weaving between the tents and storehouses. They were so fast!

Or maybe I was just getting slower. I still wasn't fully healed from my fight with Breeze and I was running on pure adrenaline at this point. I couldn't last. I needed a way out!

"FREEZE!" Two slavers jumped out and blocked my path.

"You're coming with us, Red Ice. Peanut wants a word."

*No!* I didn't even have my Power Hooves! They'd pump me full of bullets if I even tried to use magic.

It was over.

*Thud.* A metal ball hit the ground behind the two slavers as they closed in with restraints. My eyes went wide. They noticed. One glanced behind them as the other kept their rifle trained on me.

"DOWN!" Naiara jumped on me and pushed me to the ground just as the grenade went off. The heat was intense. Luckily it passed after a moment. We both lay still

as the world smoked around us.

“GET THE FUCK UP! MORE ARE COMING!”

Breeze’s yell snapped us both out of it and we scrambled to our hooves. Two charred heaps remained of the slaver pair. We jumped over the small crater left by the grenade and kept moving away from the red icons. Breeze swooped in low and stayed with us. “Keep going this way. There’s some uneven terrain not far from here and it’s starting to snow. We can lose them.”

I vehemently shook my head. “No! Get out of here both of you! They *can’t* see you with me! If they do they’ll come after you too!”

Naiara scoffed grimly. “I was there too, remember? They’re already after me.”

“You had makeup on! They thought you were a pony!”

“Yeah? Well now they don’t. I’m staying!”

*I’d be touched by that if it wasn’t suicidal.*

“Fine then. Breeze you can still get away!”

“Not fast enough to avoid being seen by somepony. Fliers are too rare in these parts. They’ll put two and two together.”

*No! This can't be happening again! I can't ruin any more lives!* “I’m sorry. I’m so so sorry.” I sobbed at the injustice of it all. More and more people were getting trapped in the *Red Ice*.

My right foreleg gave out under me and I crashed down into the hard ground. Sharp pebbles cut into my face as I slid to a halt. Immediately I felt hooves trying to pull me up. “Come on Snow, can’t sleep here!”

My tears stained the ground. “Just leave me here. Get away while you can. They want Red Ice more than anything. They can take me if you’ll get away.”

“Of for fuck’s sake!” A blue hoof shoved something past my lips. “Eat it!”

I swallowed without thinking. Seconds later I nearly bounced off the ground. I felt like I could run for days! “What was that?!”

“Buck. It’ll keep you going. Now hurry the hell up!”

“Okay!” *At least I know how she found the strength to fly.*

My body felt so light as we raced across the open ground. The slavers had found out where we were going but they were hampered by the counterattacking Buffalo. Only a half dozen were coming after and we had a good headstart. Didn’t stop them from taking some long-range potshots. At least one of them was a passable



shot. Naiara had lost a wrist bangle. It had been shot clear off while she ran. She'd have some painful bruises if we managed to get away.

We made it out of Grindstone and into the wild land. Small mounds of raised land and increasingly numerous trees gave us some blessed cover. Breeze had been right. The snow had started to fall heavier. It was everywhere. I couldn't see many clouds in the sky but they always seemed to be overhead. I didn't care if it meant a better chance that we lived longer. The 6 slavers chasing us had caught up again.

*Are they on Buck too?*

A barrage of hot metal rained down around us. I felt something pierce my calf and squealed. Moments later Naiara and Breeze echoed my cry. Naiara's was the loudest. She hadn't taken any Buck. She'd be feeling it more than either Breeze or myself. At least for now. None of us dropped though. We somehow found the strength to stumble to an incline and throw ourselves down it.

Rolling with a bullet in you is...painful. I planned on being significantly more verbose about the matter if we lived.

Given where we were when we rolled to a stop that seemed an unlikely scenario.

*Oh how I wish I didn't know what a pack of thoroughly-confused-but-soon-to-be-angry Molar Bears looked like.*

We lay in the center of the clearing they'd been using as a rest site. A full-grown male was looking stunned by this new development. It has paused mid-chew with a bloody carcass hanging from its oversized teeth. Behind us a mother and her two half-size cubs were beginning to growl. They were between us and the steep slope. We effectively cornered them. We were half their size and we were cornering a mother and her babies.

“W-what are these things?!” Breeze’s voice had been drained of its Buck-fueled strength.

“Notgoodnotgoodnotgood.” I couldn’t think of anything else to say but that. One of these things had nearly killed me. Now there were four of them and one was a *pissed-off Mama bear!*

*We are so very very dead.*

Naiara made it clear that she did not accept this as the case. “COVER YOUR EYES!”

If you split time into seconds then milliseconds then split it again and again and again until you reached the smallest possible fraction of time then Breeze and I *still* wouldn’t have thought to argue with her even for that long. We flung our hooves into our peepers as a brilliant glow burst around us. The Molar Bears roared as the light robbed them of their sight.

“SNOW WHICH WAS HAS NO MONSTERS?”

*The hell should I know? I can't see my Pipbuck through this!* I was as blind as the Molar Bears and because of it I was going to get us all killed. I couldn't see the screen to tell me where the beasts were in this world of white. It was as useless as trying to see something on External Monitor Duty back at the Stable.

“!” *THE STABLE GOGGLES!*

I frantically dug in my pack to find them. *Comeoncomeoncomeo-YES!* I rammed them onto my face and flipped the switch to synch them up with my Pipbuck. They blocked enough light to show me what I needed. There was a gap to the left. The Molar Bears were still blinded but the Plottawans were coming up fast.

“LEFTLEFTLEFT! GO LEFT!” I didn't wait and sprang into action. Thankfully my goggles showed two blue icons following. 6 red dots charged up to where we'd been and suddenly stopped. I heard roaring and then the 6 began moving rapidly back the way they came. They were very swiftly pursued by 4 more red dots. It didn't take long for the two groups of red to mix. I stopped caring at that point. Whoever won would be in no shape to come after us.

*We just might make it after all.*

~~~~~

“Ugh!” I coughed and near-retched. “That’s awful. What is it?”

Breeze took the bottle from me and took a swig herself before grimacing and passing it over to Naiara. “Hydra. Heals you up fast. Just don’t take more than you need. Ponies get hooked on the stuff. For emergencies only.”

I could still taste it in the back of my throat. *No fear of that at least.* “Are you two doing okay?”

They both nodded. Even with Buck we’d gone on far too long. We were all in dire need of a rest. We’d covered more ground in a few hours than we had all of yesterday but it finally looked like we were in the clear. There’d been no other indicators on my screen for hours. We’d changed direction halfway through. Doubling back from Southwest to North. We’d reached a frozen lake that my Pipbuck dubbed *Sombra’s Shadow*. I think I was the only one who got the reference. We followed the far shore until reaching a small gully that ended in a hollow that pinged up as *Crystal Point*. It was secluded and out of the still-falling snow. It would do as a place to lick our wounds and plan our next move.

We’d all been shot. Hence the Hydra. It had been hell to dig the bullets out. Surgeons we were not. It shamed me that even while my ice powers were returning I remained entirely unable to perform any level of telekinesis. It all had to be done by hoof. All of our wounds were therefore very raw and sensitive after being

disinfected. They were also very tender. None moreso than Naiara who'd taken a bullet in the backside.

I really REALLY hope we get a chance to think that's funny at some point.

My calf was still stiff until the Hydra did its work and Breeze, having taken the shot in her wing, was temporarily grounded.

All in all we considered ourselves damn lucky to be alive and didn't intend to have any contact with the rest of civilisation until we were all healed up.

“GOOOOOOOOOOOD EVENING EQUESTRIA!” We all jumped at that. The DJ had impeccable timing.

“DJ Pon3 here with some primo news for you! It's busy busy busy up north these days folks. Reports are coming in about major dustup between the Buffalo settlement of Grindstone and a contingent of Plottawa slavers. It seems that Plottawa's undesirable no.1 - Red Ice was spotted in the area.”

Bringing you the truth...no matter how bad it hurts.

“We've received no figures on the number of dead yet but it seems like the surrounding factions are taking notice. Sprinkles Supplies has halted all caravans west of Lethbridle. Founder and president Fedexi Lexi states that this is ‘for safety reasons’. Girl's got my support on that one. Nopony wants to be running afoul of trigger-happy slavers. Not only that but Steel Ranger hangout Neighlway has

issues official recall orders for ALL its Knights and Paladins. You are hearing correctly Equestria. Every single member of the Neighlway Steel Rangers is heading home. Avoid the place at all costs. Rangers don't play nice when they feel threatened. Given the proximity to Grindstone this DJ considers it all but inevitable that Neighlway and Plottawa will be going at it in the very near future. Unfortunately for the citizens of Lethbridle they happen to sit directly between the two. If any pony in Lethbridle is listening and has distant family it might be a good idea to visit them. Whatever happens you all need to stay safe while these two groups of lunatics are on the warpath."

The three of us looked at each other. We were all at a loss for something to say. Meanwhile DJ Pon3 continued his broadcast: "We can't forget about the Buffalo here folks. Grindstone was attacked by the slavers and the supply lines are being disrupted. It'll be hard times for a while. Buffalo are people too, ponies. If you can give them any help then ol' DJ Pon3 is askin' you to do so. If it's safe o' course."

The tears started again. I was officially past being able to handle everything. *People die and it keeps being my fault.*

"Now then Equestria. I think we need a little cheering up after this troubling news. So here's an old classic from the Canterlot Choir..."

I shut the recording off. I couldn't bear to look at my friends. I just rolled over and shut my eyes. I couldn't bear to look at anything.

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“...don’t care! I want to find my sister!”

Breeze’s harsh tones roused me from my uneasy slumber. The pain of my wound had subsided but I felt no more rested than when I finally dropped off to sleep. It had taken hours. I kept imagining Buffalo being slaughtered by slavers. It was no great leap for those Buffalo to become Buff, Al, Lo, Chief Rockhaunch and Deputy Dent.

In my mind I watched them die over and over again.

“You can’t leave her like this!” Naiara’s disapproving retort was no softer.

“The hell I can’t! It’s because of her I got shot in the first place!”

“Don’t say that!” Hissed the Zebra. “Come on, she’s right there! What if she heard you?”

*I did. Can’t exactly disagree either.* I lay with my back to them. I didn’t know whether I wanted them to know I was awake yet.

“Look, Naiara. Snowflake isn’t a bad pony. I thought she was but she’s not. If anything she’s as far from it as she can get. But I didn’t come with you two to be pals. I came to find Cassie. She wasn’t at Grindstone and because of what

happened there we're now in the middle of nowhere. Cassie has no reason to be this far out. *I* have no reason to be this far out. There's nothing here. Wherever my sister is it won't be here. *I'm not staying.*"

There was conviction in her voice. Even if I wanted to ask her to stay she wouldn't.

*She shouldn't.*

"So then what? You're just gonna-"

"Go." I cut through Naiara's scoffing with that one word. The two of them looked at me with chagrin.

"You heard us?" I was a little touched that the Pegasus still managed to sound ashamed.

Still facing away from them, I nodded. "You should go, Breeze. You're right. All of what you just said was right. You need to find your sister and Naiara has to meet up with Bosco. You should both head back to Lethbridle. It's the biggest place around. We know Bosco will be there tomorrow and there's as good a chance as any that Cassie will head there too."

"You said *we*-"

"You said *we*-"

Both of them broke off. Perhaps they weren't comfortable to be sharing the same thought.



Now I rolled over to look at them. Instantly their faces turned to concern. What a picture I must make. “You two can help each other out. I’d like to ask that of you both. I’ll make it worth your while. Naiara, did Bosco tell you about *Hoofshine Harlots*?”

She shook her head. *Why not, Bosco? Do you still not trust a ‘stripe’ or did you just like the idea of having your own place?*

“Well I’m telling you both now. *Hoofshine Harlots* is a place that Bosco and I found. It’s safe and secure and fully stocked with everything you need. Consider it...a haven for whenever you need a quiet place to rest and recover. You’ll definitely like it Breeze. There’s all sorts of pre-war tech in perfect working order.”

Even with all that was going on she still displayed her enthusiasm for all things mechanical. “Really?”

“Uh-huh. It’s a half-a-day’s walk north of Lethbridle and a little ways off the path. Ask Bosco to show you if you’re having trouble. If he refuses just tell him that the password is ‘Cefar’. That way he’ll know I told you.”

Breeze’s excitement at new gear had faded and Naiara had never looked happy to begin with. She made her unease clear.

“What will you do? You’re not going to surrender to the slavers are you?” Breeze was paying close attention. Evidently the thought had crossed her mind too.

*Whatever I tell them it'd better be good.*

“No. I’ve got...” I hesitated. Trying to think up an excuse on the fly was harder than I thought. “...another lead to follow.” I finished lamely.

They thought so too. “No you don’t. We’ve been with you the entire time.”

“You’ve been with me for a few days tops. I’ve been out of the Stable for over two weeks now. I have other contacts to call.”

Breeze snorted derisively. “Oh yeah? What are their names?”

I did a quick mental rundown of all the souls I’d met since leaving the Stable and realised that the ones I felt closest to were Wings, Bosco, Lexi and Watcher. I only knew half of their names. “...Watcher...Wings.”

Even in my sorry state I wasn’t fond of the pitying looks they gave me.

“WHAT?” I challenged. “Watcher’s a stallion and Wings is a girl. I can reach both through my Pipbuck.” I thrust the device at them as an attempt at proof.

The calculating look in the Pegasus’ eye reminded me that I’d not actually told her what the gadget was until now.

The jade-green eyes of my Zebra *svara* were not so preoccupied. “Snowflake...I

really think you should come with us.”

Aqua Breeze agreed with her. “She’s right. No good comes of us leaving you alone.”

*WHY WON’T YOU STUPID FILLIES LET ME KEEP YOU SAFE?!?! Seriously. It was pretty aggravating.*

“You’re not staying with me. I’ll give you the code to contact me through the Pipbuck but then you’re leaving. Wings and Watcher are pretty private. They won’t meet with me if I’ve got company.”

A look passed between the two. If I had to make a guess I’d say it was along the lines of: “Just how long is she planning on keeping this charade up?”

Fine. I’d stop being nice about it. “If you don’t leave now I swear I’ll freeze the both of you and call Plottawa myself. I’m sure they’d love to get a couple of exotics like you two for sale.”

“SNOWFLAKE!”

“RED ICE!”

My horn began to glow. “You have until the count of three. One...”

Breeze began laughing nervously. “Come on Red Ice. You couldn’t take one of us

let alone both.”

I fixed her with a steely gaze. “I’m gonna try. And keep trying until I do it. Two...”

I looked back and forth between the two. I dared them to call my bluff.

Naiara threw up her hooves. “Alright! Alright! You win.”

I couldn’t believe it. Neither could Breeze. “WHAT?!”

Naiara shot a ‘shut up’ look at her. “It’s okay. Snow, give us the code to contact your Pipbuck. We’ll leave after that.”

*It...it worked?* “R-right. The code.” I displayed it on the screen and held it up for them to see. It was actually going to work.

Nobody spoke after that point. An incredibly uncomfortable silence descended as my two soon-to-be-former companions gathered their things and, pausing briefly at the mouth of the hollow to look uncertainly back at me, left.

I waited the long lonely minutes until their heartbreakingly-blue icons were out of range. Then I activated my Pipbuck’s transmitter.

“Watcher? Are you there? I’m at Crystal Point. Can we talk?”

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“ARE YOU NUTS?!”

I turned towards the cave mouth just in time to get a faceful of bot. “Oww! Right in the horn!”

The bot righted itself after the collision and got in my face again. “Suck it up. What were you thinking with that open broadcast? This isn’t a game where you can call me for a chat whenever you like, Snowflake! Lives are at stake!”

“I know, Watcher.”

“And you’re still alone! I told you to make some friends. Staying by yourself won’t keep you safe, Snowflake. If you keep calling me like this then it’ll put me and a whole lot of others in danger too! There is more to this than just you or me, Snowflake!”

“I know, Watcher.”

“You don’t know the first thing about being by yourself in the Wasteland. You send out an open transmission like that *and then stay in the same spot you broadcast from* for hours afterwards? Why don’t you just send up a flare and save the Steel Rangers or whoever the trouble of tracking you down? You...you...YOU NEED A ROLE MODEL!”

“I know, Watcher.”

“And another thing...” The bot stopped. “...what’s wrong? You weren’t like this before.”

“...like what?” My reply was listless. I wasn’t even looking up.

“Like that! Before you had questions, worries, ideas!”

“That hasn’t changed.” My flat tone still echoed around inside the near-empty hollow.

Watcher was silent for a few seconds before responding. “Snowflake...what happened?”

I gave him a smile. I was trying to laugh at a joke that wasn’t funny. “I made some friends.”

The bot emitted a happy little chirp. “That’s great! Tell me about them.”

I was drowning in manic, self-loathing irony as I cheerfully related to him my adventures in socialising. “Well there’s Bosco but you already know about him. Then I met a Zebra! Very rare. After that came a Griffon and now a Pegasus! How lucky can one filly be?”

“What a crew.” Quipped Watcher. The bot made a slow rotation. “So where are they now?”

“Dunno,” It was getting harder to maintain my false cheer. “I sent them away.”

“What?! Why?”

I waved a hoof airily. “Oh why does anybody do anything?”

“Snowflake...”

A beeping on my wrist interrupted him.

I’m sure they would have been just lovely words of comfort, Watcher. However I simply must take this call.

I triggered the recording. “*Is this thing on?*”

Ah. Not-Wings. My burning-blue-eyed Griffon friend.

“Snowflake, if you can hear this...I heard about Grindstone. If you’re still somewhere relatively close then I’d like to meet up. We need to talk about something. I’m sending the location to your Pipbuck now. I’ll wait there for 24 hours. It’s important. See you there.”

“She’s smart that one, didn’t give much of anything away.”

So glad to know you approve, Watcher.

I rounded on the bot with a wide, if uneven, grin. “Well now, Watcher. I hate to be rude, but I must dash. As you heard I have an appointment to keep.”

“ ... ”

My Pipbuck pinged as a new location was added to the map. A few seconds later there was a second sound as a new frequency lodged itself in my contacts.

“That’s a secure channel for you to contact me on. No more of this open broadcasting. I also included a how-to for setting up other channels. It means you and your friends can talk with you privately.”

Watcher moved to the cave mouth before turning back to me. “Really talk to them, Snowflake. Not...whatever this was.” His irritation at what must have amounted to a waste of time was clear. The bot said nothing more and flew off.

~~~~~

Whinniepeg, the meeting place that Wings had chosen, was almost as far north as Stable 61. It was basically due west of Cefar. A few days due west of Cefar.

*Facemask said Cefar is the end of the road. That makes this town a place where the roads don’t go. It sure looks it.*



As evident by the steady ticking of my radiation meter and the general disrepair of basically everything in sight it was easy to see that Whinniepeg had been a Megaspell target.

“Well at least we won’t be disturbed.” My faux-cheeriness with Watcher was over but I also wasn’t feeling quite as terrible as I had back at Crystal Point. I was almost back to the middle ground between sadness and happiness. I was even looking forward to seeing Wings again. I’d given up forcing myself to call her anything else until she told me what her name was. Referring to her as ‘Not-Wings’ just became ludicrous after a while.

“WINGS? YOU HERE?”

No response. I ventured deeper into the small town. Mindful of my rad levels. There wasn’t a whole lot to see. Burned out homes and charred stores were basically it. I did find a bigger building that had an official look to it, even lacking a logo, but as soon as I got within a dozen feet of the place the radiation spiked and I beat a hasty retreat.

I nursed a lukewarm Radaway as I sat on a blackened bench. I wondered where Wings was. Her recording made it seem like she was already here but I’d been around most of the town and hadn’t seen any sign that she was here at all.

“Hey Snowflake!”

*I really stunk at this.*

I got to my hooves and trotted forward as Wings landed in a clearing. “Hey Wings. Good to see you.”

She was busy unburdening herself of her gear and didn’t look directly at me. Her shoulders were set in the same tense bunching as they had when she’d told me her secret in bed. “Sorry I’m late...and for this.”

I cocked my head to the side in confusion. “Wh-URK!” A thick cord suddenly wrapped itself around my throat and stole the words from off my tongue. My eyes bulged as I scrabbled at the garrote with my hooves. The noose snapped taut and I was hauled off my hooves onto my back.

*Wings, help!*

I tried to focus beyond the choking cord and the darkness creeping into the edges of my vision. I found the tight cable and followed it back to its source.

*Oh I don’t believe this!*

A Pegasus so very like the one I’d spent the past few days with wielding leg covers so very like those of her sister was flapping hard in the air. Cassie fought for altitude to keep her whip from slackening. Her face was grim and...sad? She wasn’t

angry but there were definitely more than a few emotions playing across her face. Nevertheless her jaw was set firm and she was committed to the act. A strong yank convinced me of that.

Clawsteps sounded behind me. I craned my neck around to see Wings pointing her pistols right at me.

*What's going on?*

“W-...W-...” I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t breathe. I could only gurgle and drool as my eyes threatened to pop out of their sockets and my vision grew dim.

Wings said nothing but flipped her pistols around. Holding them by the barrels she raised them above her head. As she readied her strike I could only look into the cold fire of her eyes and silently ask the only thing running through my mind.

*Why?*

The pistol butts descended.

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I awoke with the dawn. Painfully. It was no gentle rise from sleep. My entire body convulsed as my lungs greedily sucked in precious oxygen. I managed to roll from my back to my side just in time to empty my stomach over the irradiated ground.

How long had I been out? I lifted my hoof to check my Pipbuck for a clock and my radiation level.

My wrist was empty.

They took it! They took my Pipbuck!

What else had they taken? I still had the clothes on my back and my Power Hooves were scattered across the dirt. So were my supplies of food and medicine. Seemed like everything was here...

Oh please no!

Frantically I checked my pocket. Every pocket. Every nook and cranny of every piece of gear I had.

GONE!

They'd taken the Memory Orb too.

Why Wings? And Cassie too! Why were you two even working together? What happened to you after the Hissyflits? What happened to Wings after Vanchoofer?! WHAT'S GONNA HAPPEN TO ME???

I curled up in a fetal position. What was I gonna do now? They'd taken my

Pipbuck. I couldn't find my way around without it.

They'd taken the Memory Orb.

My last two links to Stable 61 had been taken from me by someone I called a friend.

The Overmare sat on the bench watching me with a smug smirk.

"Welcome to the Wasteland, Snowflake!"

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*Level Up!*

Perks gained: *Chimera Formation* - Snow and allies receive a 10% stat increase for each non-Unicorn present.

*Wandering Workout* - Constantly trekking across country and running away very fast has greatly boosted Snow's stamina.

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Author's note: Wow was this an experience. I dunno how else to describe it. I had to overcome my frankly horrifying tendency to procrastinate as well as a chapter that evolved constantly as I wrote it. I wrangled it back to something reasonably

similar to the bullet points but there's a whole lot more in there that damn-near wrote itself. I'm keeping track though. I'll be making damn sure there's no dangling threads by the end.

Thanks to [Kkat](#) for the original Fallout: Equestria and the FiM team for their continuing quality programming. Another thank you for [Cascadejackal](#) for the title artwork. Click on the links to see more from these lovely people.

I really need a pre-reader though. So badly. Anybody wants to help in that regard can essentially name their trade parameters. If I can get a like-for-like arrangement I'd consider that perfect. Any takers let me know. Thank you.