

Fallout: Equestria – Fertile Ground
By: Warbalist
Chapter 7 - Caught with the Cookie Jar

Trueheart

“In Celestia's name, why are you doing this?!”

Kandy's protests grew more frenzied. They had to tie her to a kitchen chair for her own protection. Her eyes were bloodshot and her voice crackled like a Dash fiend. Streams of tears soaked the hair on her cheeks. None of them gave her the slightest regard. None but Trueheart.

“My husband will die without those machines!”

Trueheart felt it all.

He stood there, helmet off and head unbowed, like some ancient statue. He surveyed his squad as they dismantled the tangled nest of medical devices. They needed a strong commanding officer, and he played the part well. For them he could be a hero. Still, in Kandy's now-raspy voice was the damning evidence he was the villain. There was little else he wanted more than to comfort the mare, but he couldn't. Crystal Sheen had seen to that.

“Mrs. Corn,” he said. “Please stay calm. Your equipment has been requisitioned by the Steel Rangers. You will be given a fair market price for the equipment. You shall receive remuneration for any damages to your property while the extraction is taking place. Should you feel that you have been mistreated in any way, please remember that you are doing your part to bring about a better Equestria.” The rehearsed speech made him sound like some civil servant clerk.

She stared up at him, her lower lip quivering. “How-” her voice creaked. She cleared her throat and swallowed before she went on. “Do you think money could heal this? My husband is very sick. He won't last a week without those machines. How could you take a f-father away from his s-son?” Her head drooped as the sobbing returned.

His frosty stare betrayed nothing. Instead, he just lashed the new guilt with the old and tossed it into the well of his sin to be drowned at a better time. Nothing compared to the sea of tears poured out over Argent Soul. He patted his armored chest, knowing the locket hung there.

“You are a good citizen, Mrs. Corn. You are doing your part.” The words were like dandelions: pretty, but bitter.

Her husband, Shucks, had done nothing but stare at the pony in charge. His mane was stained and ragged, and his eyes protruded from his gelatin face. He didn't blink. Trueheart

could feel the loathing shooting from his pupils. Or it was the radiation. The haggard pony *had* been hooked up to what amounted to a balefire egg in an attempt to purge his body. It wasn't safe, but Trueheart always forced himself to look into a pony's eyes when he took from them. He felt he deserved it.

"Paladin Trueheart?"

He turned, regarding the young Knight. "What is it, Knight Fluff?"

"Knight Umbrella Showers is requesting weapons free, sir."

"Situation?"

Fluff leaned in, trying to whisper from within his power armor. "It's a pony, sir. He's big. Knight Showers is having a difficult time placating him. Wants let in. Says he's these ponies' son." Amplified through his armor's external speakers, his scratchy voice was plenty loud enough for Kandy to overhear.

"My boy? My baby boy? Well, let him in. He needs his mama right now. I need to make sure he's okay."

Trueheart looked into her pleading eyes. *Their son*. He chewed the thought. "Show me."

He could hear her wails over the thuds of their power armor as they left the kitchen. "No! Don't ... don't hurt him. Goddesses, leave my Plough alone! Let me see him!"

A large shape smashed through the living room window as they trotted out the front door. Mrs. Corn screamed from the other room. Stealing a glance at the figure sprawled out on the living room sofa, he recognized the shape of Umbrella Showers. Trueheart turned squinted through the bright light outside. There was a hulking pony shape standing within a plume of dust. In the dirt lay a broken mailbox. Steam rose from its rapidly disintegrating carcass.

"Fluff, take care of Knight Showers. Make sure she keeps that minigun of hers holstered." He hastened across the front patch of dirt, stopping tentatively several yards away from massive, heaving pony. The heat radiating off the ground blasted his senses. He lifted a hoof to pacify the pony. "Relax, now. Relax. You're Plough, I assume?"

As the dust cleared, Trueheart got a better look at him. A sickening yellow liquid oozed from a cut at one of his shoulders, carrying much of his leg hair with it. The ground sizzled below him. A stench of sulfur rose in rings of smoke about his hooves, giving him the appearance of steel being quenched by water after being tempered in the forge. His shadow appeared to grow as the ground surrounding him charred. He just stood there, breathing. He didn't need to speak. His eyes answered for him.

"It's alright. Your parents are fine. They're inside. Maybe we can go have a word with them?" Trueheart evoked the most fatherly voice he could. He had little interest in soaring through the air like Knight Showers.

Plough didn't blink. Desperation. Trueheart knew that look. If Trueheart tried to stop Plough then and there, firepower would be the only distinguishing factor between himself and the host of murderous raiders scattered throughout the wasteland. Elder Gazpacho viewed Trueheart as his "hermano", a pony after his own heart. Kandy Corn was right. Who was he to come between a father and his son?

"You stupid bag of shit!" roared a distorted voice from the house. Her armor dripped with the window's shattered remains as she marched out. Knight Showers steadied herself as her minigun rose from her armor and clicked into position at her side. Trueheart felt her intentions through her armor. She was going to break the chain.

"Knight Showers, stand down!" Trueheart ordered. "You secure that weapon, now!"

The three ponies stood their ground. Trueheart glared at Knight Showers, even as sweat stung his eyes. His stare was a wolf's who had just happened upon a lonely fawn.

A gust of wind swirled the dust between them.

Umbrella Showers' armor whirred. The gun retracted and secured itself with a click. Continuing to glower at Plough, she answered, "Yes, sir."

Trueheart breathed and let his face relax into a more modest frown. "Knight Showers, when you were chosen for this mission, Head Paladin Pozole *himself* assured me you would be perfect for it. He said you follow orders well and could easily fit into my parameters of a successful mission. Now I will have to tell him he made a mistake." Trueheart let that sink in. Umbrella Showers may have been young, but that was no excuse for this kind of open defiance in the field. Pozole would have to take a closer look at the training regimen for new troops after this mess. Trueheart stifled a smile. Anything which forced that mama's colt to do any work earned his stamp of approval. He sighed. "Report to Knight Helado. Please send him to me. You are now on retrieval duty."

"Sir."

After the required salute, she was gone. Trueheart looked over at Plough, who hadn't so much as flinched. "Please forgive that outburst. Knight Showers is ... new."

"She's rabble," Plough said at last.

"Rabble? What makes you say th-"

"She's useless and we both know it. Can't control herself at all."

The paladin was taken aback. The savages, or ponies of the wastes, rarely spent their time reading, let alone studying others. This, coupled with the strength to hurl a Knight in power armor, left Trueheart stunned as he regarded him through squinting eyes.

"You sent for me, sir?" said a voice from the house.

Trueheart craned his neck. "Yes," he said. "Knight Helado, I need you to stand sentry."

"You got it, Jefe."

Trueheart turned back to Plough. "You gave Knight Showers quite the shock. How did you manage to throw her through that window, power armor and all?"

Plough tapped at the ground and recited, "It is simple to fight an enemy who fights herself."

No way, Trueheart thought. *No way this kid knows that book*. He fielded another question. "Why haven't you attacked *me*?"

"You mean besides the fact you've carried yourself in a non-aggressive stance since you've been out here? Or that you were attempting to pacify the situation? It's because I know when I can and can't win."

Trueheart smiled. "*Zebra Infiltration Tactics*. You've read it?"

Plough nodded. "And as much as I'd love to chat strategy all day, I really need to get in that house."

Upfront and to the point. Nice. "I can't let you in, right now. It'll only be a few more minutes. But really, how did you get a copy? It's not the easiest book to come by." The smoking stallion lowered his head and sighed. He staggered towards Trueheart. The paladin prepared himself for anything. It was nearly impossible to know what these country bumpkins might do. A head-butt? A shank to the neck? He had already proven his strength and willingness to fight back. "That's far enough. Keep your distance."

Plough stopped. "Please ... What is your name?"

"Trueheart. Paladin of the Steel Rangers."

"Trueheart, please. My mother's in a very delicate situation. My father's dying, as I'm sure you noticed. She can't cope with it alone. I could hear her screaming from out here. Please. You know the power of family. I'm begging you, let me be there for her."

Trueheart hadn't noticed how close Plough had gotten. A wicked scar twisted his lower lip, keeping his mouth slightly open. Beyond his face grew a multitude of callouses and scars breaching his matted coat. Trueheart gawked at the leg bereft of hair. The acrid smoke swirling from it burned his nostrils. "Are you sure you're *well* enough to go inside?"

Plough lifted his hairless leg. "This is just a condition." He tentatively placed it on Trueheart's chest, where it sizzled on the armor. "Please."

Trueheart jumped back and looked at the blackened hoofprint now etched into his armor. His brow furrowed as he looked up at Plough, then back at the hoofprint. A grin cracked. His chuckle eased away the serious atmosphere. The day had certainly taken a turn for the strange. He half-expected Senior Scribe Ohms to pop out of the mailbox, dressed in a pink gown and sneeze glitter in his face. "Well then ... You sure you'll be fine? No foalishness?"

Plough crossed his heart.

"Cute. Alright, inside. *Slowly!* Some of my Knights are a little jumpy today."

The two ponies passed Knight Helado and entered the house. Mrs. Corn stopped sobbing as soon as her son entered the room. Plough rushed to her side and threw his non-smoking leg around her.

"Oh, thank the Goddesses! Plough, my baby are you alright? You're hurt! I can smell it. Let me look at you."

Plough backed up to give his mother a better look at his wound. She grimaced a smile as her tears fell, happy to see her son mostly intact. Though the old Paladin hadn't witnessed it in years, the love between mother and son was obvious. The way Plough inspected Kandy to make sure *she* was unharmed transported Trueheart back to a softer chapter in his life, filled with Hearthswarming wrapping paper and times playing catch. The look in her eyes, knowing her progeny would live on long after she had passed, pierced him. Her son would live to bury her and he envied that.

"They got yew, too, huh?" Shucks piped in. "Figgers."

The boy ignored his father completely. "I'm okay, Mom. Are you hurt?"

"No, no. I'm fine. I'm fine." She looked to her side. "Are you seeing this? They're taking away your father's machines. He's not going to last long without them. They're killing him, baby."

Her eyes welled and glistened.

Plough took to his knees and spoke gently. "Mom. Okay? Now, we've talked about this before. Dad's tumors have gone untreated for too long. You *know* they're too advanced. These ponies are almost doing us all a favor, okay? Sparing him from all his pains. We have to let him go with dignity."

Shucks looked at his son like he had defiled a national relic. "The Hell is *that* supposed to mean? I'm right here. You ungrateful little shit. Treat yer father with some Goddesses-damned respect. Dammit, how much of a failure are you?"

Trueheart felt cheated. After all of Mrs. Corn's pleading, he envisioned the family dynamic as something different. Shucks had been silent for so long, Trueheart had already placed a different preconception over him: the strong, silent protector, keeping his family safe from the perils of the wastes. Shucks wasn't content with just shattering that notion. He needed to drag it in the mud and desecrate it. Before they passed, Trueheart's parents would always implore him to "spend as much time with loved ones as you are able. You never know when the dust of the wasteland will claim them." This was so far removed from that sentiment, it wouldn't even be tolerated in the order.

"Just relax, Mom. Let me ask him. Paladin Trueheart? May I have a word with you, in the living room?"

Trueheart shook his mane as Plough snagged a box of plastic wrap. "Sure."

The two ponies headed into the living room. The angry sun scorched the dirt outside and a breeze carried the heat through the shattered remains of the living room window. Their hooves crunched on the broken glass. A trail of scorch marks burned their way into the floor despite Plough's hopping, three-legged effort. He culled a particularly large piece of glass from the other shards and splinters of bannister and began to curiously smooth its edges with a pink hoof file. Trueheart felt like foil-wrapped-pony in his armor. He was tempted to put his helmet on and activate the armor's cooling protocols, but it was impolite and weak to hide your face when talking to somepony. At least, that's how *he* was raised. Intent to suffer through, he shook his mane out again. "Do you have a question?"

"Yes, well ... More of a statement and a question." Plough took a deep breath and leaned in, close. Trueheart watched his eyes steel. "My father is dying and there's no way to save him. We both know that."

Plough cast a gaze over to his restrained mother and turned back to Trueheart. Trueheart peered into Plough's inscrutable eyes. Just like the helmet of a Knight in the Steel Rangers, they spoke nothing.

Plough continued, "But, my mom is still here. I'm going to have to take care of her after her husband is gone. Is there anything I can do to convince you to leave at least the Bio-Resonance Wave Generator with us? She only has a few memories left with him. Please let them be pleasant ones, all things considered."

Bargaining, thought Trueheart. *The truest display of a savage*. The paladin dropped back into his civil servant voice as he answered, "This equipment has been requisitioned by the order of the Steel Rangers, and was chosen for your protection. Should this equipment fall into the hooves of an enemy of Equestria, the conse-

"Don't patronize me with your meaningless speeches. Listen, I don't know why you want these machines and I don't really care. This is my home. That's my family over there you tied up. I would do *anything* for them. Now, I just *know* you have somepony special to you. Wouldn't you do the same for them?"

Anything to bring them back. Trueheart's neck ground out a solemn nod. Plough's possessions were meager, his life utterly pathetic, but the defiance stampeding from his eyes told Trueheart a story of a young stallion desperate to create a more fulfilling life. He could feel Plough's desires to shift the reality of the wasteland into something more promising, a shift Plough had apparently wrought within himself.

"Wait here," Trueheart commanded. Thoughts raced through his head. *Is he right? Could he handle the lifestyle? How tightly will he cling to the chain? How tightly to his moral code? Does he even have one?*

Have I really come to this? Looking outside the family for more fresh recruits? Bringing in savages?

The thought had occurred to him for some time, now. So many generations in such a small gene pool. It wasn't healthy. Elder Gazpacho and his family would, of course, tell him he'd rather "keep it en la familia." He was, however, forced to accept savages in the past on occasion due to the chapter's dwindling numbers.

Ohms, Trueheart was sure, would hate the idea. The old Scribe always went on about the differences between the high- and low-born as if he lived in a world that cared what the word "aristocracy" meant.

Marrow shrouded himself in mystery, but always found a way to provoke Trueheart. From casually mentioning Trueheart's drinking habits in front of council members to making flippant remarks about his wife and child, Marrow was the great antagonist. Trueheart was almost thankful that Gazpacho endorsed his own family over all others. The thought of Marrow or his crew gaining seats on the Elder Council froze his blood, even in the heat of the desert. The future of the Steel Rangers' Greater Los Pegasus chapter was as nebulous and impossible

to touch as the clouds which made up its namesake.

He looked around at his squad. Each pony was fiercely loyal to him, with the exception of Knight Umbrella Showers. Each was worth at least two of any pony from Pozole's old squad, not that their integrity increased the weight of their political support. It still left him with only a handful of well-wishers. With the number of his allies thin, he had to take any chance of fattening it up.

He trotted back into the kitchen. "Knight Fluff."

"Yes, sir?"

"Make sure this operation finishes cleanly. Treat these two ponies like equines. I don't want casualties. And keep an eye on Knight Showers for me; she's acting up. I'm heading into town with their son, here, to see if I can't do something about this town's mutation problem without some ridiculous incident."

"Yes, sir."

"Glad to have you around, Knight. Carry on."

"Sir."

He walked back to the living room. His armor hissed and whirred as it fell away from his body. He stepped from his armored shell, dripping noticeably from his linen tunic. Plough raised an eyebrow. "It's hot," Trueheart said. "Besides, can't go into town dressed like some kind of Robronco reject, can I?" Plough didn't flinch from his quizzical expression. "You want to help your parents, right? Well, I need you to do something for me, first. Consider it a trade."

"What do I have to do?"

"We need to go have a chat with that scumbag mayor of yours."

Slowly but surely, Plough's lips crooked up into a smirk as he nodded.

"At least raiders have th' decency to *need* whut they're stealing from yuh," Trueheart heard Shucks yell as the two ponies trotted out of the house. "Damn Steel Rangers!"

Plough

"Sorry about my father," Plough said. Apologizing for Shucks felt like a foreign language to him. His father's epithets had outlived their offensive power with the ponies of Balk, and

Plough's shame had shriveled along with that power. At least his hoofprints were no longer smoldering. The replacement glass and plastic bandage worked its magic. The sore still stung, though, and he *knew* it was just a matter of time before sand and dirt scratched their way into it.

Trueheart dismissed the sentiment with a hoof. "Think nothing of it, Plough." The militant tone in his voice battled the honesty expressed on his face. The conflict had raged for years if the warzone under his eyes told the truth. His stride, though short, was purposeful and Plough struggled to keep the tempo. "Really, I'm the one who needs to apologize. I *am* taking his life support away, after all."

"Don't worry about old Shucks. He's had his day in the sun."

"You seem very lackadaisical about your own father. What brought this on?"

"You've only glanced at his surface. So much more goes unnoticed and unpunished everyday. Besides, this might even be the event that brings my mom back to me."

The loneliness of the wastes surrounded them. Plough squinted at the heatwaves radiating off the road to town. He mused that Balk should have been a sister city to Celestia's Acre. *They could have called it Luna's oven. At least that would've been more honest.* They walked in silence until Plough noticed the locket bouncing at Trueheart's chest. "You know, I don't mean to pry, but what's the story behind that necklace?"

"Huh?" Trueheart stopped in his tracks and held up the locket. It looked more like a tiny saddlebag, if saddlebags were inside-out pocket watches made from blue, anodized titanium.

"I mean, if you're comfortable relating the story. You don't have to if you don't want-"

"No, no, no. It's fine. It's fine." He delicately pawed at the locket. It clicked several times as he pushed and twisted buttons and knobs on its surface. It looked like he was attempting to solve a puzzle cube. The show ended when he pulled a button on the front of the locket with his teeth. The locks all simultaneously ratcheted open and Trueheart carefully opened the locket like a storybook. A 3D image of a young colt hovered over Trueheart's outstretched hooves.

The rainbow hologram showed the little colt with one hoof stepping on a Steel Ranger helmet. He was striking a pose as if he had just defeated his most worthy adversary in battle. His eyes were fixed on the morning sun, with a determined look only youthful idealism could bring. His expression was as steely as any colt that young could ever hope to achieve. It was pretty cute.

"Who is that?" Plough asked. "Your son?"

"My son, yes. Argent Soul. My greatest achievement. My favorite pony in Equestria. He

keeps me going. Reminds me what's important. The future. If colts and fillies like him can inherit a better world than the one we live in, now, then any sacrifice I make in my own life will be worth it." He looked around at the desolation. "They don't deserve all this. They need serenity. Peace. Tranquil waters. Cool grass on which to run..."

Trueheart stared at Plough expectantly, wanting him to finish the line. Missing out on a reference wasn't an everyday occurrence, so Plough felt a stiff pang of shame at his own ignorance. "I'm sorry, but I don't get the reference. I was raised way out here in the middle of nowhere, you know? Not exactly a cultural epicenter."

"No, it's alright," said Trueheart as he closed and locked the locket. "It's from one of the zebra religious texts. I forget which tribe. We all have to learn it in the brotherhood. 'Know your enemy' and all that." He went back to his speedy walk. "So, about your scumbag mayor..."

"Yeah, what about that? What could you possibly want with him?"

"Couple months back, one of my knights was on her initiation quest out here, looking for old tech. She told us about how everypony had some kind of sickness or mutation or something. There was even this foal she said was so riddled with lumpy tumors it looked like it ate a pile of rocks and stayed that shape."

"The Coolers' daughter, Sunshine Sprinkles. She passed away last month."

Trueheart shut his eyes. The news was stabbing, but surely not unexpected. "I'm very sorry to hear that. How old was she?"

"Not quite old enough to read."

"Well, that makes what we're doing more important. To get back to the story: She took her readings and, of course your house was marked as a target, but before she left she hit up that bar ... store ... thing. You know what I'm talking about."

"Quitclaim's Snack Shack and Watering Hole."

"Right. So, she goes into this place and orders up a drink. This slick-looking guy slides next to her and says to put the drink on his tab. Turns out it's your mayor. Anyway, long story short, he asks her up and she's ... um ... not keen on what he has to offer, but she agrees to see him because she wants to look around his compound. To see why he's so much healthier than anypony else in town."

"I've always wondered that myself. He, his family and a few others are always doing better than the rest of us. They say it's 'genetics' or some crap. I don't buy it."

"Well, get this: come to find out, this guy has his own, personal water purification talisman installed there. This thing could provide clean water for the entire town and he's keeping it to himself. That kind of thing doesn't sit right with some of us in the order, so I made it kind of a 'side-mission' of mine, if you will."

"I *knew* it was something like that. That prick. So, what do you need me for?"

"*You* are going to find a way to give that talisman back to the ponies without me lighting his coat on fire and stuffing a grenade in his mouth. In other words, I want you to do this without any bloodshed, if possible."

"Why? Can't you just threaten him or something?"

"You obviously don't know how the Steel Rangers normally operate, do you? You ever heard of the town, Thermite?"

"Can't say I have."

"That's because a *colleague* of mine leveled it. The Steel Rangers have made a pretty bad name for themselves around the Los Pegasus area, and maybe rightly so. Some of us value technology over lives, but I for one, am just trying to keep these powerful toys away from anypony who could do serious harm with them. Equestria needs peace and strength to rebuild herself. So, if the ponies here took the water talisman back for themselves, it would not only mean so much more, but would also keep the name of the Steel Rangers from becoming more rusted than it already is. Maybe you could steal it or make him confess or something?"

"I appreciate your sentiment, Trueheart. I really do." Plough thought it through. *Too difficult to steal with guards around. Will not confess.* He watched as Quitclaim's shop passed them by. Freezing, he stared at it and his eyes brightened up. "Let's make a quick stop, Trueheart. I have an idea."

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"Once you're on that page, you use this one to download," Trueheart explained, pointing it out on the PipBuck. They needed a special tool for a job like this and a PipBuck fit the bill, perfectly. He tossed Plough a bag of bottle caps. Trueheart didn't seem fond of such a simple plan, but Plough was nothing if not persistent.

"Excellent," said Plough. He made sure the bag of caps was closed tight before he threw it in his saddlebags. "And you're *sure* the hacking system will work? I'm only going to have thirty seconds to a minute at his terminal. I don't want to miss this chance while I'm in there and then imagine some kind of way to weasel myself out."

"That's the only part of the plan I have faith in. I may not look it, but I've hacked my share of Stable-Tec technology. Heck, I got her PipBuck working, haven't I?"

"Again, it's my dad's," said Chaff. She eyed the Steel Ranger like some drunk leper. Of all the strange ponies Plough acquainted himself with, this was by far the most threatening. The Steel Rangers had the firepower to demolish Balk twice over. Seeing one out of his power armor calmly discussing how to overthrow the local government was simply more proof. "I shouldn't have even grabbed it. Please don't drop it."

"Nonsense, miss!" said Trueheart. "This is Stable-Tec we're talking about. I'm pretty sure we can shoot it with a Gatling laser and it wouldn't even get scorch marks." Chaff's eyebrows knitted even further at the mention of a *Gatling* laser. "I'm still concerned about this plan of yours. Are you sure it'll work?"

"Nothing's for certain," Plough said, tightening his saddlebags. "But simpler is better. Not as many variables means fewer spinning plates to mind. Besides, Mayor Filibuckster will listen to anything that has the possibility of giving him more money or power. Now, remember: his office is in the northeast side of the building in that part that looks like a separate house. I don't remember which room, so just be ready. So, is that it? Nothing else?" He looked at their expressions as Trueheart fastened the PipBuck to his leg. Chaff chewed on her lip and the bags under Trueheart's eyes sagged heavier than normal. "Alright, time to go." Plough left them in the alley behind the Balk Lanes Bowling Center and headed off to city hall.

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"CASA DE ARENA" was carved in the south face of the building. The second floor balcony encircled the whole building, minus the northeast museum wing. It was all supported by a multitude of smooth, doric columns. Armed guards were stationed on either side of the front door. *It's easy. He's just another pony. Not a genius. Not very strong. Just a normal conversation. "Don't be shy, look 'em in the eye."*

He crossed the threshold into the the station and was greeted by it's cool air. His stomach clenched despite the relief. Refreshing temperatures was one luxury no other pony in town enjoyed. The peace of mind brought by just stepping on a comfortable surface sickened him. There was rarely a reason to visit the place and he hoped he was using his last one.

Townspenies were making use of the long, wooden benches in the main hall. There were families, probably waiting for hours for a five minute audience with Filibuckster. A blue unicorn filly donning a newspaper pirate hat reared up on her hind legs. Standing on the back of a bench, she towered over everypony. "Hoiss the misses' mass! Batten down the hatches! We're off to find adventure!" she squeaked before being pulled down by a frazzled unicorn stallion. The rest of the station chuckled. "Daddy, I'm *firsty!*"

"Then get your water, sweetheart," her father said with a voice more gentle and tired than he looked.

She rummaged through an agave fiber bag and pulled out a sippy cup plastered with a drawing of a happy sun. She brought it to her lips and gulped, loudly. Looking over her withers, she stared at Plough. Tainted water trickled out of the sides of her mouth and down her chin.

"Sorry about the outburst, folks. She just loves her stories." Everypony laughed lightly and ignored the useless apology.

Plough shook his head and hurried himself to the museum wing. More armed guards. "Gonna have to wait in line, like everypony else," the stallion to his right explained. "Unless you have an appointment."

The security mare to his left snickered and shook her head. "Heh. Yeah, huh?"

"I don't need an appointment," said Plough. "Tell Filibuckster I'm here to talk business."

The security ponies looked at each-other and burst out, laughing. "*You* are here to 'talk business?'" the stallion asked. "Everyone knows you. You're that corn farmer's kid. Trust me, there's nothing you have that the mayor wants."

"Is that a fact?" Plough rooted through his saddlebag and pulled out the bag of caps. He tossed it into the air with his teeth and caught it again with a hoof. It jangled as he gave it a little shake. "I suppose Quitclaim will have to take my money, then. Sorry to have wasted your time."

As he turned to leave he heard some rustling over his withers. It made him smile. "Out! Out! Get out of the way!" A throat cleared. "Now, hold on a second, there, big fella. I have plenty of time for *all* of my constituents."

Plough turned looked down on Filibuckster. The little, suited pony had the manestyle of a used cart salespony. It sported distinguished lines of gray running down the sides and parted only to display his opalescent horn. "Are you sure I won't be a bother? The way these two were talking, I was thinking you might-"

"Don't pay them any mind. They're just here to keep the peace, not my schedule." Filibuckster squinted a dirty look at his cronies. "Now, let's head on up to my office and see if we can't come to some kind of understanding, alright?" He motioned Plough to follow him into the railroad museum. "Is that new?" He pointed to the PipBuck on Plough's leg.

"Oh. Yes and no. It's Quitclaim's. I'm doing some corn inventory for him to streamline his workflow. And make a few caps for myself, of course."

“Well, money makes the world go 'round, right? I'm surprised he let you use it. He's pretty meticulous about his things. Shoot, I accidentally brush up to something in his store and he has a conniption. I can't hardly leave there without spending a fortune.”

“Chaff can be very persuasive.”

“Oh, that's right! You're dating his daughter! Now I know how you get under his skin. You get under *hers*! Am I right?!” He laughed and elbowed Plough in the ribs.

Plough bit at his feigned grin. “Oh, yeah. Ha-ha, that's right.” *Ew.*

The two ponies quickly passed through the railroad museum and trotted up the stairs. A bespectacled, young mare doodled mindlessly on a legal pad. At her left hung a door with a blurry window. It was guarded by another sentry, this one taller and more bulky. A large gash marred his face, and the intense stare he shot at Plough was nothing short of electric.

“Quitclaim's on the horn for you,” his secretary said, barely looking up from her doodling. Plough was able to make out several fine-looking dresses and a pile of gems in the squiggly lines. “Says he needs to speak with you, or something? I dunno.”

“Tell him I'm sending someone right over,” said Filibuckster. “And if he radios back complaining or something, please don't bother me with it. Just try to placate him.”

“Sure thing, Mr. Buck.”

“And, Gemmie? Remember to smile.” The two shared a statutory grin that gnawed at Plough's gut. “How's it goin', Hooftack?” The muscled pony snorted and glared at Plough as Filibuckster brought the farm pony into his office and closed the door. The room smelled like rotting newspapers.

“Can I get you anything to drink?” Filibuckster asked. “I have scotch. Brandy?”

“No, thanks. I have to stay hydrated today.”

“Ha! Yeah, it's a scorcher, isn't it?” He rounded his impressive mahogany desk and reclined in his high-backed, green chair. “Almost makes you wish for Vanhoover, huh?”

Plough forced a laugh. “Ha-ha! Yeah, almost. Have you been able to keep cool?” The small talk chipped away at him. He felt his chest tense.

“Living in a train depot is not without it's perks. How are your folks?”

“Well, actually that's why I'm here. You know my father is terribly sick.”

Filibuckster dropped his forehooves on the desk and leaned in. "Oh, that's just awful. Cancer?"

"Yes. From taint." Filibuckster clicked his tongue as he shook his head. "And, until recently, we had the equipment to keep him alive."

"Had?"

"That's right. The Steel Rangers swept through our farm, 'appropriated' everything and left, but not without leaving us something in return." Plough reached in his saddlebag and tossed the sachet of caps onto the desk. Filibuckster's eyes brightened, ever so slightly. "Since it is an emergency, I wanted to know if you or anypony you know has access to advanced medical equipment."

"Medical equipment? That's a pretty tall order, son. Even if I could find anything, it won't come cheap."

"Please, is there anything we can do. We're desperate." The words tasted terrible. Always knowing the right thing to say and actually saying it lived on two different continents, and sailing between them fried the nerves. Plough hoped the mayor assumed it was just from family strife.

Filibuckster leaned back in his chair once more. "Well, I'll put the call out and see what I can do. No promises but I think, if we're lucky, we just might be able to-" There was a knock at the door. Plough's stomach dropped as he tried to keep his legs from shaking. "Hold on, one sec. Yes, come in!"

It was the smug-faced secretary. "Mr. Buck, Quitclaim's girl is here. It's about some kind of shipment. Says it came in early this month."

"Oh, you know what, Plough? I have to take this. Sit right there and I'll be back in a flash. Come on, Gemmie, let's go see what Chaff has for us today." He jerked his head to Hooftack on his way out. The guard pony trudged into the office, closed the door and stood in front of it.

His yellowed eyes fixed on Plough.

Damn it. How could he take this pony out? How could he even get close enough? He knew it didn't matter what he felt. Trueheart was counting on him. Chaff was risking her own safety. How could he let them down? What would become of his family if he allowed Filibuckster swindle them out of their money? What about the townspopies? Plough couldn't take another Sunshine Sprinkles. Before he could think himself out of it, he found himself creeping to the door.

"You ain't goin' anywhere, son." The guard's graveled voice resonated in the floorboards. "Just sit right back in the chair and Mr. Buck will return to finish discussing any terms."

"Oh, I just wanted to see if I could talk wi-"

"Back in the chair, son!" Hooftack bit down and whipped out a nightstick. His stare beckoned Plough for an excuse.

Every precious moment Plough spent thinking was a moment closer to ruin. It was now or never. How to approach? Hooftack was trained, and fast. *Deflection.*

"I'm selling these fine leather jackets," said Plough. For a moment, Hooftack was taken off guard. This was all Plough needed. He lunged. His foreleg hooked around Hooftack's neck. Plough used the leverage to spin, like a drunk around a lamppost. He pulled the guard close. His leg squeezed around Hooftack's neck, tighter. Tighter. Through the PipBuck, he could feel Hooftack's pulse.

Hooftack, however, leveraged his experience.

With a flick of his neck, the smaller pony swatted Plough in the eye. Waves of what would become pain surged through his quickly numbing head. The room began to spin. His grip slackened. *No!* He could hear Hooftack gasp for air.

Not another Sunshine.

Hooftack shook to dump Plough from his back.

Not another Kandy.

Plough twisted the same way, ripping Hooftack from his hooves. The two slammed against the floor. It didn't matter Hooftack landed on Plough. It didn't matter he kept beating him with the nightstick. Plough kept squeezing, only this time he hooked his pastern into the knee of his other foreleg. He used his leg's remaining length to push on the back of Hooftack's head.

Within a few seconds the beating slowed, then stopped. Plough finally let go and heaved Hooftack off of himself. His body shook with adrenaline as he staggered to his feet. Thoughts eluded him. What did he have to do? A hoof found the side of his face. No feeling. The ground sizzled. A nosebleed. He wiped what he could onto his smoking coat and noticed the PipBuck.

Oh, yeah!

He stumbled over to Filibuckster's terminal, careful to keep his bleeding nose from the keyboard. He held up the PipBuck and watched as it went from double, back to single, back to double again. He closed his swelling eye to keep a better focus and fumbled with the controls.

Click. Click. Bzzzzzz. Click.

The terminal screen filled with a bunch of letters, numbers and symbols before resting on a screen:

```
Hello Mayor Filibuckster! Please make a selection:
```

1. Population Status
2. Water Status
3. Taint Status
4. Water Talisman Status
5. Personal logs

Despite his pre-existing suspicions, it still stung Plough to read the words. He mindlessly pressed the 1 key.

```
Population Status:
```

```
Manageable. Weakened. Dependent. Slight mutations.
```

Plough snorted. Slight *mutations*, *heh!* The other numbers tempted Plough. All the information was right there. His hooves hovered over the keys for a few seconds, but his willpower won out in the end. He could read them later. Clicking through a few more menus on the PipBuck, static crackled and a distorted voice crunched out of the little speaker:

“...and pray to whatever Goddess you worship that this heat-wave fizzles out! Somebody get me a Sparkle~Cola®! I'm dyin' out here!” The sound of an opening bottle followed by it's fizzy contents being poured into a glass filled the little room.

Oh, crap, no! Wrong button!

“Some disturbing news in from Withershire,” the radio continued. He fumbled with the switches, trying to stem the noise, only making it louder. Screens flashed until both the PipBuck

and terminal screens read:

Copy all: (Y/N)?

He stared for a moment, confused. Realizing what it was asking, he hurriedly tapped "Y."

File transfer in progress. Please do not disrupt data stream. 1%

Plough watched the percent numbers creep up. *Hurry up! Hurry up!* The radio kept blaring.

"It seems our killer pony has struck again. The body of a yet-identified stallion was discovered by nearby residents who happened upon the gruesome scene in Withershire Park. And wouldn't you know, he was found under a boulder. Terrible, just terrible. If anyone has any information about The Crusher, his whereabouts, his acquaintances, anything at all, don't hesitate to hoof some information to me or any ACRE representative. With that, here's a track from Abacus Bits, recorded live at the gates of Tartarus about getting '[Caught with the Cookie Jar](#).'"

The percent number neared 100 when the music poured out, even more loud and distorted than the speech. Plough was fascinated. He hadn't heard live radio before. The distance of any broadcasting tower to Balk prohibited any such luck. He marveled at the power of the tiny device. Who else was out there listening to this broadcast? What were these other towns like? Who lived there? And, why was it a big deal that a pony was murdered? Didn't the gangs rule most of the wastes?

He shook his head to dislodge the thoughts and quickly regretted it. The side of his face pounded out his heartbeat.

Transfer complete. You may disconnect your Stable-Tec® PipBuck®.

Yes! He threw open the window at the back of the office. It rattled and slipped, so he propped it open with a hoof. Trueheart stood many feet below.

"Come on," Trueheart hissed. "Toss it down."

"Hold on, I gotta..." Plough bit and maneuvered his lips around the locking mechanism until it clicked and the unit fell free. "There."

"Good. Meet you soon. You sure you're okay up there?"

"I'm good. Just go. I'll see you there."

Plough leaned back inside, let the window slam and turned around just in time to see Filibuckster burst in the room.

"What the Hell?" he exclaimed after seeing Hooftack's snoozing body. His secretary curiously peeked her head around the corner and screamed. She turned and hoofed it down stairs, wailing all the while. "What... did you do?"

Plough clenched his legs, trying to conceal his shaking. "Well, Hooftack there-" His voice cracked. Clearing his throat, he tried again. "Hooftack there didn't want you to hear my offer."

"Your offer. Is that supposed to be some kind of joke?"

"You're a busy man, Filibuckster. I wouldn't dare waste your time with trifles. No, this one's important." He stepped towards Filibuckster. "A copy of all your files is on its way to being printed and passed out to everypony in town." Another step. "As much as this pains me, this town would suffer too much to take on you and your goons, so against my better judgement, I'm giving you a choice." Another. "You can either live, let live, and be the hero..." He towered over the mayor. "...or damn the town and I hang you over the balcony like you deserve."

Filibuckster gave Plough a suspicious, sideways glance. With his eyes he followed a drop of Plough's yellow blood drip onto the ground and fizzle. "You're bluffing."

"Really?" Hooftack wheezed, shuttered and lay still once again. "He doesn't seem to think so."

-

Quitclaim's Snack Shack and Watering Hole had become the embodiment of a fiesta by the time Plough made it back. Sing-a-longs and "woo"s could be heard throughout the town, and their volume only doubled when he made it inside. If it was an oven outside then this was a pressure cooker. His sweat doubled as it mingled with the sweat and breath with those around him. Fans squeaked their laughter from the ceiling. It was only mid-day. There was no way this place was cooling down any time soon.

"Can you believe the Mayor found that talisman?"

"Yeah, and to think it was just an average travelling merchant who sold it to him."

"This is the first time that lout has ever used our taxes in a good way."

"I dunno about that. You've seen those fillies coming and going from that station."

"I seen 'em *coming*!"

"Oooooooooooooh!"

He squeezed through the throng of party ponies to the bar. The loud music hammered his head with each beat as every triumphant yell clawed at his ears. The rest of his body resonated with other pains he didn't even know how to describe. The eye socked by Hooftack was fully closed and he was nearing delirium as he felt a surprisingly pleasing slippery sensation latch around him.

"You did it! I can't believe it! I don't know what you said or did, but I don' – Oh, Goddesses! What in Equestria happened to your eye?!" Plough just sank his whirling head into Chaff's chest. "You poor thing! Let's see if we can't make some of that pain go away. HEY, TRUEHEART!!! LOOK WHO'S HERE!" *Aw, Chaff. The most caring and gentle of ponies.*

Trueheart put his foreleg around Plough and sat him in the stool next to himself. "Good job, my friend. That's a nice shiner you got there. You look like you could use a little something for the pain."

"Oh, yes please."

Chaff sat a lime-topped bottle of beer in front of him as Trueheart dropped a pill on the countertop. "Drink up. I must tell you, I would have let him burn for what he did, but this way might be better for the town. Nice and gentle. They may find out the truth one day, but at least they're safe from drinking poisoned water." Trueheart looked over to see Plough's head, snoring next to an empty bottle on the countertop. He smiled as he took a swig from his sixth beer. "Lightweight."

-

Plough woke up to splinters. The cart was moving. No, it wasn't. His head was spinning. He shambled on his knees to the side of the cart. Trueheart was there in his armor. The sun was setting.

"Oh, hey. Look who's awake. The squad is finished packing. We left a few pieces of equipment, like I promised. Hey... I wanted to ask you something. You don't have to answer right away." He scratched at the hoofprint on his chest. "I'm not sure if you're aware, but the Rangers are always looking for new recruits who show the positive character traits you've demonstrated today. I know this is a hard question, because your family is here. You could still visit, sometimes. I'm sure it would all work out, I mean- Anyway, what I'm trying to ask is: will you join my squad? Become a Knight in the Steel Rangers?"

Leave it all behind? Plough's head spun. He surveyed the landscape. The yellow wash

of the earth burned his eyes. He saw the barn, loose boards tearing themselves away. Greenish-yellow stalks speared the ground in one field, the other sported tilled earth from earlier in the day. Two Steel Rangers were doing what they could to repair the hole in the front of the house. Another tile fell from the roof and shattered on the ground. *Anyplace would be better than this dump.*

"What about Chaff?" Plough asked.

"She's waiting to see what you'll do. She loves you, you know?"

Plough gave a drunken nod.

Trueheart continued. "But, yes. Her bags are already packed. I'm thankful she has the willingness to learn. Seems you two share something in common. She shouldn't be forced to live with that poor excuse for a father, either."

"Hmm..." Plough doubted Chaff was the type of pony the Steel Rangers were looking for. He was sure Trueheart brought her along as a kindness to him. He stared at the house. A hot breeze swirled his greasy hair in front of his eyes. The right one throbbed with each hair. "How long do I have to say goodbye?"

"We're making camp outside of town and leaving tomorrow at dawn. I wanted to make sure you had enough time to think it over, and if you agreed, say goodbye."

Plough lay back down in the cart. The splinters tried, in vain to pierce his thick hide. Waves of pain washed over his head from his closed eye. He tasted acid and his nose was blocked. It was hot, he was bleeding, and his muscles still ached from the fight and plowing the field earlier in the day. It didn't matter. The townspies would have safe water to drink and he made it possible by swindling a crooked politician. Justice tasted wonderful, and Plough thirsted for more.

What about the Steel Rangers, though? They regularly stole and hoarded technology. How could his conscience make sense of that? Trueheart felt like an honest sort, but what about the rest of the order? How many ponies were there like Umbrella Showers? How many were worse? The point that stabbed at his heart the most, however, was: how in world could he abandon his mother to the volatile emotions of his father? She needed him now, but could his family actually be healed? Should it? "Huh. Would you mind helping me up?"

-

His mind was with his mother as the group's power armor pummeled the quiet hours of dawn. She had seemed to accept his lie; he was going to work for them in exchange for health care for Shucks. The tears were dry and the sobbing had shook itself out by the time hugs were

shared. She laughed when Chaff brightened everyone's spirits with a new joke she learned from a water merchant, but the wrinkles around her eyes whispered the truth. A bump in the leg brought him back to present time.

"Hey," said Chaff. "You sure you're okay with this?"

"Yeah. I know it's the right thing for me to do, but it hurts, you know?"

"Yeah, your mom's the greatest. I'm sure she'll be okay. I made sure to tell the Coolers to keep an eye on her. They might just take her in."

"Yeah, they're great."

The dirt thudded and scraped under their hooves. Plough looked back at his parent's house, silhouetted against the rising sun. It was once his house, too. No more. He breathed a broken sigh and glanced at Chaff. She was staring back at the city, too. He couldn't completely fathom what she was thinking, but the reflection in her eyes showed a smoldering crater.

"How about you?" Plough asked, wishing to not stir her demons inside, but hoping for a little connection.

"Are you *kidding*? This is the greatest thing that ever happened to me! I'm ready for anything those red-coats can throw at me. Balk can lick my dock!"

Plough smiled as she giggled at her own comment. He thought of all the other towns he could rescue, of all the other ponies under terrible rule and in bad situations. Dreams of throwing off chains, and becoming the hero to so many swirled through his head. In the fantasy he became the martyr for thousands. He fought and died so they could be free to rebuild the nation. They chanted his name as he was interned under a monument to his charity. Chaff gave the stirring eulogy. Her dear husband had changed the world.

"So, what's going on in your head?" Chaff asked.

Plough looked over at his girl. "Thinking about our future together."

She smiled and leaned her head into his withers. Plough stared at the dark horizon in the west and continued the story in his head about the stallion who taught ponies how to rule themselves.

This story is based on Kkat's strange and wonderful, *Fallout: Equestria*. If you haven't already, please do so. Here's the link: [Equestria Daily](#)

If you'd like to read more *Fallout Equestria Side Stories*, take a look at: [Fallout Equestria Side Stories post](#)

[on Equestria Daily](#) and the [Fallout Equestria Side Stories thread on Ponychan](#)

Thank you also to Arcane Scroll for the excellent site: [Fallout: Equestria Resource](#). There is a chat function on that site, come say "hello."

I want to give an extra-special thanks to my now former-editor yetanotherpony for helping me out so much thus far. His input on my writing has been an invaluable tool in my progress and I will be forever thankful. I hope you're able to get some time for yourself in the future. Lord knows you deserve it!