

Fallout: Equestria - Whispers

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Chapter 1: Sheepshead

“It’s the end of the world, all over again...”

If I had to describe most of my life, I’d say it was... nice.

Up until I was slightly older than a foal, my father kept me busy in one way or another. He raised me on his own, provided me with crude toys, sometimes of his own making, played games with me, all while working hard to make all this come true and prevent us both from starving. How he always managed to find enough time for everything including sleep, ensuring I grew up properly, preparing food, fixing things for locals, and not going insane, I will probably never know.

It was him who taught me the basics needed for survival, how to talk to ponies, what NOT to say when someone is accusing you of something, and so on. Some of these sounded quite extreme, especially to a foal of my age; tips such as “What to do when I find a bloodied knife and the air smells badly?” was one of the suggestions that I remembered the most. Maybe it was their sinister implication, the underlying tone of “what would happen if I didn’t do it” that made them so memorable; maybe it was their uniqueness, compared to other lessons I received.

But by far the most interesting and useful skill I had learned from living with my father was tinkering and repairing stuff. Throughout the years, he shared with me the passion of disassembling and reassembling items, improving their design, cleaning, oiling, and - to a certain degree - even jury-rigging. There was something particularly satisfying about seeing the device you’ve been working on for a couple of days finally kick into life... well, at least until I got a new thing to tinker with, and the cycle then repeated.

I guess I was kind of a nut when it comes to fixing stuff.

Other than that, I lived a pretty normal life, as far as wasteland standards go. As I grew up, I learned the values that living in a small, closely bonded society entailed, and I learned how important it was to cooperate and help each other out. Compared to some places I have heard of in stories, we were one of the most peaceful communities out there.

That is, until that one day.

* * *

I woke up as soon as the first rays of sunshine snuck their way past the old, dirty curtains, only to be stopped by my face on the simple bed. The warmth caused me to shift my head to the side, only to be affected by the same beam of light just a moment later. Realising that I would not win this fight, my brain eventually sent out the wake-up call to the rest of my body, and I lazily opened my eyes to look at the same, wooden wall that always welcomed me from my slumber.

A groan and a small dose of procrastination later, I got up onto my hooves, looking around the room. Nothing ever changed here; nothing but the chaotic mess of screws, metal elements, pipes and tools scattered around. My own little projects, stuff that I sometimes worked on in my spare time. Every now and then some parts would turn into a convoluted mess of wiring and jury-rigged mish-mash that, surprisingly, worked. Not always in a way I had wanted it to, but still worked. The furniture and the walls, however, stayed the same throughout the years.

Reluctantly, I left the mess behind me and walked down the stairs onto the main level of our house. My father and I lived in a pre-war, relatively renovated building made mostly out of wood and stone. Its simplistic design fit well with the general style of pre-war northern equestria, and the architects made sure Sheepshead was full of these kinds of constructions. It felt as if every other household was copied and then pasted a few dozen feet further down the road. I remember thinking that the designers for this place were the most boring and unoriginal ponies that ever existed, but as I grew up I started to suspect that streamlined production was much higher in wartime Equestria's priorities than aesthetic qualities.

Realising that my dad was not home at the moment, having likely gone out to the general store, I picked the door immediately to my left, which led to our little kitchen, and grabbed some mashed Tatos we prepared together the day before. Quickly munching on the impromptu breakfast, I swiftly trotted out onto the street, with the chilly air causing my nostrils to momentarily narrow as the rays of sunshine weakly hit my face.

Even this early on, our little town was heavily waking from its slumber. Local denizens slowly walked out of their homes just as I did, tending to their daily business and chatting with their friends. The faint smell of homely cooking lingered in the air as brahmins called out to their masters to tend to their needs. The soft sound of hooves clopping against the dusty road echoed between the buildings as more and more villagers came out of their hiding spots, ready to start the day. A bigger group of ponies was gathered by the main entrance to the village, though from that distance it was hard to see what the commotion was all about. A distinct rustle of wings betrayed our local pair of griffons, Sharpbeak and Featherlight, heading out towards the palisade gate, presumably to take the shift away from the night guard.

Were it not for that last part, one could think that our village was frozen in time from before the balefire.

Among the few ponies that decided to spend the day actively right from the start I had noticed the one, familiar face I had been looking for. The mare was talking to someone who looked like a caravan driver with exceptionally broad shoulders and flanks. Her sandy blonde mane gently waved in the morning breeze, complementing the light brown coat with a couple of freckles right next to her snout. Her lean frame, clad in simple leather armor with additional padding on her shoulders and knees, looked even smaller compared to the burly earth pony next to her. That did not make her look any less respectable, though. I also noticed her trusty, old pistol holstered right by her front right leg, ready to be pulled out at a moment's notice.

I approached her with a cheerful smile, yet she didn't even notice at first, clearly preoccupied with chat between her and the caravan driver. The closer I got, the more I noticed their worried expressions, which in turn made me frown as well. It took the mare a couple of seconds to spot me. Her worry seemed to dissipate in an instant, replaced by a similar, cheerful smile I had shown just moments earlier.

"Hey Tinker," she greeted me with a nod. "I see you aren't wasting any time today?"

My snout curled into a grin as I chuckled. "Nope. I wanted to do some scavenging today and I thought you might want to join me, Middy. I wanted to take another jab at that terminal today," I offered, nodding towards her and sparing a glance towards the caravaneer. He offered me a small nod in greeting, while my friend sighed and shook her head in response.

"Sorry, Tink. This fine fellow here told me that a bunch of raiders are camping a short way from town," Middy - or Midday Shine, but she hated being called that - replied apologetically. "We're gathering some armed folks and going out to take them down." Her expression then softened and turned into a smirk. "I'd invite you over for a party, but... you know..."

I waved a hoof at her, chuckling. "I know, I know. We'll find some time to train one day," I replied, sparing a glance towards the main gate; indeed, even before I could make out the exact shapes I had noticed a small number of armed ponies chatting about. Now that I was a bit closer, I realised that most of them had taken their weapons and kept them close, similarly to my friend. I could see old revolvers, lever-action rifles, some sawn-off shotguns and even one semi-auto rifle that I recognized from my father's workshop. It belonged to a tall earth pony with a contraption on his back which allowed for much easier use of the rifle. He was standing in the middle of the gathering, and while I couldn't make out what he said exactly, his words seemed firm and demanding.

Eventually, I just nodded. “I won’t stop you, then. Kick some raider butts from me, will you?” I requested, to which Middy simply laughed, assured that she would, and rubbed my head affectionately before leaving with her companion. I could feel that she was slightly disappointed, and so was I, but we both knew duties were more important than our spare time activities.

With nothing better left to do at that moment, I spent some more time observing the commotion by the main gate. Most of the ponies had been standing near the saddled leader, listening to him attentively as he gave out orders that I couldn’t quite hear. Shortly afterwards small groups of two to four ponies moved out in a hasty trot in various directions; a couple of them were headed to their homes, others approached our local, small warehouse and some even wandered to the general store on the opposite side of the village. As the group dispersed, I finally looked back at the tall earth pony, who - much to my surprise - was walking right towards me. He wasn’t even looking at somepony else, or at the workshop behind me, no - he was looking *straight at me*.

My confusion swiftly dispersed as I observed his approaching form. His dull, red coat was mostly covered by pads and stripes of strong leather. A broad, curved, inch-thick sheet of metal was fixed onto his chestplate, serving as additional stopping power for anyone brave enough to shoot him. His sides and flanks were protected by what looked like a thick, hardened, leather-like material. The only uncovered elements of the stallion’s body were his hooves and head. He looked at me with his piercing, sharp gaze, the mimic of his snout firm and unyielding. This pony practically *screamed* authority.

Yet despite his appearance, his expression softened as he spoke in a surprisingly low, non-demanding tone, now that he moved close to me.

“Hey,” I heard him say, the words in a stark contrast to the orders he had been giving just a few moments ago. He seemed uneasy, or maybe he was just being a little awkward. “You’re Benchwood’s kid, right?”

Hearing my father’s name, I felt my ear twitch; I gave the stallion a small nod. “Uhh... yeah,” I replied, then quickly corrected myself. “I mean... yes, sir.”

His expression shifted to an oddly casual one, but that only made it look even weirder, as if he wasn’t really used to looking non-threatening. I gambled a look at the rifle I recognised earlier; it must have been one of the old Equestrian military models. The exact designation eluded my memory at the moment, though.

“Cut the formalities, kid, me and your father go way back. Name’s Gemstone Glint, or just Glint for you,” he said, putting a hoof to the back of his head. “Speaking of your dad, is he around? I need to talk to him.”

I simply shook my head in response. The name seemed quite odd for an earth pony, especially one that didn’t seem related to gemstones in any way, but who was I to judge? The stallion sighed and looked to his side, pondering on something. Upon closer inspection I noticed a few wrinkles on his face, which made me realise that, despite his healthy look and energetic attitude, he must have been quite old. It made the possibility of him actually knowing my father that much plausible. The short, ragged mane actually sported a couple of silvery hairs, though the stallion himself did not seem to notice their existence in any way. If the well toned muscles were any indication, this earth pony was far from retirement.

Finally, he simply sighed and spoke again.

“Ah, well. I left him an old, broken E.F.S a while back. Just wanted to check if he’s managed to fix it up. I don’t suppose you know anything about it?” He asked me, and added a short while later, “Could be damn useful against those raiders...”

My ears perked up at the very mention of the E.F.S. Magical tech was a rarity in these parts, especially as advanced as Stable-Tec goes. I was sure my father would have at least told me if he ever got his hooves on one such device, so I shook my head again. Still, to actually see it in action...

“Dad never showed me anything like it, though I suppose I could go take a look,” I offered, glancing back at our workshop, then setting my eyes on the stallion’s face again. He seemed to have brightened up, if only a little. “What’d it look like?”

“It’s a small eyepiece that you wear on your dominant eye,” he explained shortly. “Last time I’ve seen it, it was cracked and the IFF module was smoked, but the rest was okay. The interface is probably blue, given the tint of the glass, though I can’t be sure,” the stallion added before glancing over his back, seeing ponies returning from the tasks they had been given. “Look, if you find it quick and it’s fixed, bring it over to the main gate. I need to make sure our militia is ready.”

Even without his authoritative tone, I couldn’t help but straighten up and nod. I watched the odd stallion trot back where he came from, already shouting some commands to the ponies passing by. It felt as if that was a completely different pony speaking to me.

Deciding not to waste any time, I went right back to our house, taking the passage to the left as I stepped through the main door. My father’s workshop was only slightly less cluttered than my own room, though that was definitely not the case of him having fewer

things to work with; more like he was much, much better at organising his work and keeping his workplace tidy. There were still various trinkets, small machines of many sizes and tools scattered about, but there was a method to it. A quick glance and some knowledge would make it obvious that the screwdriver, a pair of pliers and a hammer were all bundled together because they were all used to work with screws and nails; similarly, the caliper and a couple of rulers were placed next to a jar full of many little screws, nuts, and bolts. There were many examples of that kind of “planning” all over the room. To a naked eye it was a mess, but a professional repairspony would probably feel comfortable with the setup.

I did not go there to admire the regulated chaos, though. My eyes scanned the room for any sight of small, blue items that could match the description Glint had given me. Of course, there was nothing that fit in the criteria at the first glance. I trotted over to the shelf on the right side, hoping I would find the device lying somewhere in plain sight - to no avail. The armor workstation held nothing of interest either, though I did find a few designs scratched onto a small notepad with yellowish pages that I could probably take a look at later on. Searching through all the cupboards, shelves, and even his personal desk yielded no results, either.

Frowning, I took a look outside the dirty window at the gathering by the main gate. They were still there, I still had some time to look! ...but where?

Filled with a newfound wave of motivation, I felt my eyes drifting towards the footlocker by the desk, the only place I haven't checked yet. That one held my dad's personal belongings though; things that I should never even see.

I didn't even manage to consider opening it before I heard the familiar, heavy hoofsteps of an earth pony step into the workshop.

“May I know why you are in my workshop, son?” Benchwood, the local repairspony, tinkerer and most importantly - my father, spoke out. He seemed to be in his prime, with his voice cheerful and filled with vigor despite his age. It would probably sound even better if he didn't catch me snooping through his stuff. Luckily, I had a good reason to be here.

“Looking for an E.F.S that you apparently have!” I replied, feeling a small smirk appear on my muzzle. His eyes widened in surprise.

“How do you know about it?” The old pony asked. There was no anger or disappointment in his eyes, just... surprise. In turn, the lack of negative emotion coming off him surprised *me*.

“Well, there was this stallion who came by, said he left it by you a while ago. Went by the name Gemstone Glint,” I explained, suddenly feeling bad about actually looking through

my father's stuff without even asking. How did I know if that odd stallion was actually a friend of my dad? He might as well have just made up some short story in order to coax me into giving away something that didn't belong to him.

Luckily, that didn't seem to be the case, as Benchwood's face slightly relaxed.

"Ah, that old bastard. That makes sense," he muttered, half to himself. "Though it doesn't justify... ah, doesn't matter. The device ain't ready yet, so it wouldn't be of much use to him anyway." The stallion waved his hoof dismissively. "I'm surprised he actually talked to you instead of looking for me."

I was about to reply, but a loud shout from the outside compelled me to look through the window again. The militia were moving out, walking steadily in a loose formation, though there was a noticeable order to it all. I could gamble a guess that most of these ponies rarely wandered in a larger group like that; their positioning was nothing like what I've seen on larger caravans that sometimes stopped by our village.

"He was in a hurry," I explained. "They were gathering ponies to strike at a nearby raider camp. That's them heading out right now," I added, pointing out a hoof to the window.

My father moved over, watching the group marching out with a frown. "That's a lot of ponies about to leave Sheepshead," he commented. "Will there be anyone left to protect the village?"

Not really in possession of such information, I just gave him a shrug. Together we watched the party move past the griffons I had seen earlier, though at this distance that was all the detail I could make out. Eventually, as the group disappeared behind the gate, I turned back to my father.

"I'm gonna go visit the ruins," I said, heading out towards the main hall of our house. "See if I can find anything useful in there."

The earth pony looked at me and rose a brow. "You've been there so many times, Tink. Are you sure it ain't picked clean yet?"

"There's still one door I haven't managed to open," I admitted with a grin. "I will though, someday. It's protected by a terminal, and once I actually learn how to hack these, it should be easy to get through!"

I heard my dad chuckle as I turned around again. "And how do you plan to actually learn how to hack, huh? You know it's not even close to repairing machinery, right?"

I stopped in my tracks, thinking. Of course hacking was a completely different thing, but I felt compelled to at least try. The perspective of finding out some hidden treasure down below the ruins was tempting, but... my father was right. I had no idea how to hack. I felt my ears droop as I sighed.

“I know, but... maybe someday...” I started. Then, I heard the older pony’s hooves move over and felt the weight of one of them being put onto my shoulder.

“In fact, I think I know what door you’re talking about. I might just come with you this time around, show you a couple of tricks here and there... maybe you’ll actually learn something from your dad, other than messing around with tools,” he spoke, a warm smile appearing on his muzzle. My ears immediately shot back up as I looked at him.

“Really? You’ll show me how to hack stuff?” I asked, the excitement in my voice obviously betraying how happy I was to hear this news.

In return, I got a simple nod. “Aye. You go there, I’ll follow you soon. Gotta finish some business here in town first.”

I wasn’t even listening to him anymore. Instead, I ran out to my room, took my saddlebag, my little bag with most important tools (you never know when something might need fixing!) and my warm coat, and then swiftly trotted out towards the ruins. My curiosity that had only been rising since the first time I saw that door was about to be satisfied, and I couldn’t give a single buck about anything else!

* * *

After taking the secret passage at the back of the village, which was not really secret to anyone that had been living in Sheepshead for a while, I headed straight to the place I had been visiting somewhat regularly for the past few years. The high, deserted building was visible on the horizon, oddly distant from any town or village known to ponykind. The trip took only a couple of minutes, and soon enough my eyes were bathing in the shadow of pre-balefire Equestria’s glory.

The ruins were standing there, always as imposing as they were ominous. The old, crumbling walls of the building rose at least sixty feet upwards and ended with a collapsed section of the roof that allowed a peek onto the top floor, provided there was enough distance between the observer and the building itself. I figured that in the past, it used to be some kind of office, if the cubicle-like structures of the higher floors and the general design of a boring, bureau-like construction were anything to judge by.

Those levels had been thoroughly scavenged even by the time I first arrived there. Curiously enough, the lower ones - including the reception at the bottom floor - still had a few things that a typical wasteland pony could consider “valuable”, even if most of these were old magazines and barely recognisable, half-broken trinkets and common appliances such as watches or toasters. I was genuinely surprised to see an actual, leather-coated couch still standing in what once used to be the waiting room for guests; it was incredibly comfy and I said my thanks to whomever had previously gone through this place that they were lazy enough to let a valuable, yet heavy and cumbersome piece of furniture be.

What I found most interesting, though, was a set of thick, metal doors that apparently led to the basement levels of the building. Protected by a terminal with a password that I couldn’t hope to crack with my meager knowledge, the door held guard over the mysteries of the lower levels; Goddesses only knew what I would find in there. A simple generator room? Hidden treasures of corrupted, evil CEOs that didn’t even pay their workers well? A janitor’s closet? Some secret lab full of cool, futuristic stuff?

Whatever it was, the anticipation was massive, and with it came the conflicting emotions that filled my mind. On one hoof, the contents of the mysterious room (or set of rooms) were obviously begging to be discovered; on the other, I was clearly fearful of a disappointing result of nearly three years of hyping myself up.

I was lying idly on the couch, head pointing upwards as my hind left hoof dangled off the comfy leather, slightly swishing in the air. My father was taking his sweet time. So, after going through the same beauty magazine for the umpteenth time, I let out a quiet, bored groan. Waiting pointlessly was never my forte, and so I itched to at least keep my hooves busy with something.

Eventually, I got up and approached the terminal. Its thick casing hung from the wall, bolted onto a solid metal frame, which in turn was secured by four thick bolts that dug into the wall itself. The smooth, black screen was turned off at the moment, though that changed quickly as I pressed the button on the side of the case. The bright logo of Stable-Tec appeared at the centre of the screen, taking up most of it and momentarily illuminating my face.

Then the blackness was replaced by a dim, green hue, with the prompt to start writing at the top left of the screen. Occasionally, a brighter stripe of green slid from top to bottom of the screen, likely caused by the refresh rate not quite matching the power delivered to the terminal... or something. I never really worked out how these mysterious devices worked.

For the first time in ages, I set my hoof on the keyboard, staring at the prompt in the top left for a while. Back in the day I had no idea where to even start, and I’m fairly sure I got close to accidentally blocking out the entire system. Admittedly, after a few years it became pretty obvious that writing “Open” to a password protected terminal would not quite work.

Over the last couple of years I managed to learn one extremely useful command that actually did something other than putting out the words “Wrong command”. It was called, adequately, “Help”. From there, I followed instructions that eventually left me with a couple more prompts, including “Login”, “Logs” and “Debug”. The second one was filled with boring data my young, impatient mind couldn’t be bothered to read at the time, and the third one was a complete mystery to me. I selected that option once, and the sheer amount of text that appeared in front of my eyes convinced me never to touch it again without someone to explain it all.

And so for the majority of my life I was left with just “Login”, which - when selected - typed out two simple words that had been blocking my progress ever since.

Enter Password.

I had tried guessing, but - not wanting to accidentally break the terminal - that usually didn’t last long. There was virtually nothing in the room that could help me crack the code and learn the secret word, so I was left helpless time after time, day after day. At some point it frustrated me enough that I considered tearing the machine out of its socket and tossing it onto the ground. That of course never happened, as I lacked the physical strength to do that in the first place.

That day I spent another half an hour dabbling with the options I had at hoof. The “Login” section still stood undefeated, and I honestly couldn’t be bothered by reading through boring logs again. And so my hoof pressed the navigation key twice, highlighting the “Debug” option for a couple of seconds before, hesitantly, I confirmed my choice.

Before me, a wall of text appeared once again. Most of it seemed like incoherent gibberish, with weird symbols that didn’t even look like letters intermingling with actual words; those words, however, made no sense either, as if they were taken out of context and put on this screen for the sole reason of confusing the user.

I felt like there was something eluding me as I stared at the mess on the screen. Trying to input anything held the risk of accidentally breaking the entire system and locking myself out of the mysterious cellar forever. I considered noting the words that appeared on the screen, to maybe see any correlation with the logs, but that would take me ages, and I honestly doubted that would be the case.

Eventually, I just gave up once again. Dad would teach me, and then I would understand.

Speaking of him, though...

I turned my head towards the exit, frowning. How long had I been here? An hour? Dad was taking much longer than he should, and even if he ran into an unexpected event, he'd have sent someone to deliver a message, in order to prevent this exact situation from happening. I looked back onto the terminal, pondering for a moment before reaching out with my hoof and turning it off again. The screen promptly flickered, showing a goodbye message: "Thank you for choosing Stable-Tec!" and shut off shortly after. Picking up my belongings I trotted back towards Sheepshead, with an ever growing cloud of worry on my mind.

That trot turned to gallop the moment I noticed a trail of dark smoke above the village.

* * *

The first thing I noticed was the smell.

The clouds of smoke only grew heavier and darker by the time I approached the secret passageway. They carried a distinct, near-choking scent of burnt wood and smoldering ash, mixed with a disgusting odour I had rather not known the source of. As my nostrils picked up on the scent, my body felt the subtle difference in temperature. The ominous, ember-like glow I had noticed from the distance felt much more intense from up close, promising no good news, and neither did the lack of anypony actually using the "secret" passage that acted as a gathering point in case of a fire or other, disastrous events.

That could only mean one of two things. Either the event was not serious enough to warrant a mass escape, or it was so serious that nopony had the time to actually get away.

That question was immediately answered when my ears perked, hearing a faint sound of a gunshot somewhere far inside the village. Then another, muffled thunder of the weapon of the same calibre, followed by a rattle of a long, drawn-out burst of what sounded like a submachine gun. We were being attacked!

Fear crept down my spine as I rushed through the passageway into the village. The small tunnel, covered on either end by an inconspicuous trapdoor went right underneath the walls, making sure the evacuation route was short, but also broad enough to allow for swift processing of a huge number of ponies. After going down into that tunnel I kept my head low, and eventually peeked out through the trapdoor to assess the situation.

Luckily for me, most of the gunshots came from far away, closer to the main gate than this secret entrance. Shouts and commands carried over the sounds of battle, mixed with screeches and screams that made me sick in the stomach; pushing those sounds away from my mind I focused on trying to see the course of battle, but it was nearly impossible from that distance, especially through the smoke from the fires that burnt in the distance. To my horror,

I realised it was the main gate that was burning, along with a couple of buildings closest to it. The warehouse's roof, made mostly of hay and wood, was almost completely gone, and I could see the flames raging through the local tavern's walls. The attackers hadn't managed to penetrate deep into the town yet.

As I looked around I had realised that nopony was trying to shoot me in the head or decapitate me with a machete, which was certainly a good sign. I did, however, notice one of the townsponies hurriedly getting out of their house through the back door and glancing around in search of danger. I immediately waved over to the mare - our daytime shopkeeper, miss Flowerpot - to hurry up and get into the tunnel. She seemed to get the message immediately; nervously looking around to make sure nobody is following her, she quickly joined me in my little hiding spot.

The moment we were both safe underneath the trapdoor she immediately started talking.

"Tinker! You're alive!" she spoke out, looking over me as if to make sure she was not hallucinating. I saw fear right in her eyes; she had no family in Sheepshead, luckily enough. We weren't very close to each other, but it was still good to see a familiar face in the chaos.

"Miss Flowerpot! What is going on?" I asked in a hushed tone.

"Raiders! They attacked shortly after our militia left!" She replied almost instantaneously. I felt blood drain from my face as I imagined all the ponies that were not fit for fighting, elderly and children, left at the mercy of the raiders...

I shook my head.

"I heard gunshots. Who set up our defense? And where is the militia?" I asked urgently, glancing at the trapdoor again. I could only hope he was alright.

"They haven't come back yet! It's as if those raiders knew when we would be at our weakest! They were gathering... oh Goddesses, why us?" She replied, stressing out considerably. Her pitch was rising, and the mare was about to start hyperventilating.

"Calm down. You'll be fine, and everything will be alright," I said, putting my hooves on her shoulders to try and manage her panic. I may not have been a psychology expert, but my actions seemed to work; It took a while, but eventually her breathing slowed down, and she gave a reluctant nod. In the meantime, I was trying to gather my own thoughts as well. "I need to find my father, so I will go out and try to sneak through to the workshop. You stay here and try to gather more ponies to escape, just in case we need to run. If anyone spots you,

run.” My words were met with another, brief nod. She was still terrified, and honestly speaking so was I, but at least now we both had a plan.

With that in place, I left my belongings in the tunnel next to the mare and moved out. I snuck out into the small alley near the palisade, immediately sticking to the wall of a nearby building, leaning out onto the main street to observe the situation again. In the distance I notice muzzle flares of a small caliber weapon in what seemed to be one of the houses on the left side of the town. The sounds of combat were sporadic and worryingly rare, but they were also intense; the attackers must have been engaged with villageponies in quick, fierce, close quarters combat. I tried to ignore the nagging wondering about how many innocent people would be dead this day and simply pressed onward. I had to stay focused if I did not want to join them soon.

In truth, two thoughts were keeping me from falling into panic as well. The lessons I received from my father allowed me to look at the situation from a broader perspective and avoid going into the loop of worrying thoughts; thoughts that would render me frozen and incapable of performing any action. All that theory was never put into practice, and I constantly had to remind myself about the most important aspects of managing in stressful situations. Then there was the worry about my father himself, but that needs no explanation.

As I progressed further, sticking to the walls and shaded alleys, I heard a group of ponies nearby. I quickly hid behind a garbage bin and listened. A mix of wild cackles and violent shouts that outnumbered the one, desperate sound of a stallion calling out for help reached my ears. My heart sank as I noticed a group of four foul-looking ponies dragging along the fifth, whom I vaguely recognised as one of the older villagers. I didn’t know him very well, but that didn’t stop me from staring in quiet horror as the raiders basically threw him onto the middle of the road, encircled him, and pulled out a number of jagged knives, a machete, and a hoof axe.

I felt sick to my stomach as I forced myself to turn away. Soon after I snuck into the side alley, the terrified cries of agony from the tortured stallion reached my ears, along with gleeful cheering of the psychotic raiders. I momentarily stopped to try and resist the urge to relieve myself of those mashed tatos I had for breakfast.

The journey onward was not easy either, but at least I somehow managed to avoid directly seeing any more brutality. Every now and then I was forced to suddenly stick to a wall or a short stairwell as more of the violent attackers rushed from streets perpendicular to the main road. Twice they had managed to run right past my hiding spot without spotting me. The raiders had infiltrated Sheepshead deeply, and the quicker, smarter ones among their crowd were looting and plundering instead of relieving their sick desires. I honestly didn’t know which was worse: the imminent danger of being seen by opportunistic bandits, or the

screams of the tortured stallion that I could still hear just a few dozen meters away from my current position.

Out in the distance, I saw the reason why there hadn't been a lot of fighting. Much to my horror, the villagers were being rounded up in the same area where our militia had gathered just an hour earlier; herded together like a bunch of mere cattle they were shoved around, abused, and beaten. I was glad I could not clearly see the terrified look they must have had, even though I *could* hear the gleeful chatter of raiders. All those ponies must have been going about dealing with their business, left vulnerable outside of their households. Some of them were limping, and a few were lying on the ground, lifelessly.

How could we possibly win with... with *this*?

What mattered even more to me, though, was that my father wasn't there. I would spot his coat from a mile away, and despite the hot air and the smoke I could still see clearly enough to know that he was not among the rest of the ponies.

My eyes laid on our workshop, which was now just a couple of dozen feet away; however, it was separated by the broad main street, where I would be seen plainly by anything that cast a glance in my general direction. I looked to either side of the road. One was occupied by the four raiders who were still busy with the now sobbing stallion on the ground; the other was full of villagers and nasty-looking ponies that oversaw the operation of them being dragged away. I only had one shot at this, and this was as best as I could possibly get.

Quickly making sure nobody was nearby to accidentally spot me, I stealthily trotted out into the open, crossing the main road as quickly as I could without making too much noise. The daylight still managed to pass through the clouds of smoke and shone right onto my body, contrasting heavily with the ground around me. Deciding not to even try to look to either side, as if fearing the possibility of seeing someone staring directly at me, I hastily moved and finally reached the porch in front of our workshop.

The journey only took a couple of seconds, but it was enough to keep my heart pounding against my chest; scooting off to hide by the main entrance underneath a small table, I listened. No shouts came in my direction, no clapping of hooves rose in volume, and I could safely assume that no raider would suddenly show their ugly face right next to mine and shout "Peekaboo!" I lay still for a couple of seconds, letting my heartbeat drop and making absolutely sure that no one would come to investigate before proceeding further.

Opening the door felt like uncovering an ancient tomb, with all the dangers and fears included. The quiet creak of old hinges betrayed my intentions as I poked my head through the crack in the doorway; dead silence was the only answer. I stepped inside, closing the door

behind me. The curtains had been draped along the windows, dulling the light on the entire ground floor and covering it in unnatural, dusk-like darkness. Everything looked about the same as when I left for the ruins; no signs of looting or violence.

“Dad?” I called out in a hushed tone, the sound almost deafening in the silence. There was no reply at first, but I did hear some rustling from the kitchen. Eventually that rustling was followed by a strained voice of my father.

“In here, Tink. Watch for the bear trap,” he warned me. Immediately taking note to pay attention to the ground, I carefully moved in the voice’s direction. Said trap was put right next to the doorframe of the now-wide-open kitchen door; as I poked my head around, I noticed the older pony had made a makeshift barricade made of the table, a sofa, and a couple of chairs. Benchwood’s head was poking out from behind the table, a revolver in his mouth that only lowered when he saw that it was actually me.

“How did that all happen?” I asked in a hushed voice, stepping over the bear trap and approaching the stallion. He gave a shake of his head as he holstered his weapon, in order not to accidentally shoot me.

“They attacked soon after the militia left. The griffons were able to hold the initial force back, but...” the way his voice hung in the air made me sigh after a short while. I lowered my head and closed my eyes. *They didn’t make it... just like many others.*

“We set up a line of defense near the main gate, but they torched our defensive positions quickly. Most people got caught and beaten into submission. I managed to escape and come here to prepare myself, hoping you’d manage to find your way here,” he admitted, a small smile creeping onto his muzzle.

“But... what about the militia? Where are they now?” I asked, and felt a cold chill run down my spine. What happened to Middy? And Glint? Could they have fallen into a trap?

“I don’t know. They never came back, and we lost radio contact with them shortly after the attack,” my father replied. Noticing the look of horror in my eyes, he immediately put a hoof on my shoulder. “Even if they do come back, we won’t stand a chance, not with our defenses compromised. You have to get out of here.”

“W-what?” I stammered out, looking at him as if I had just seen the princesses descend from the clouded sky. “But what about you? About Sheepshead?”

“It’s lost,” he said grimly. “If we go together, we’ll be spotted right away. I’ll stay here for a moment, gather some supplies for the road, and then I’ll follow you. But just in case there are complications - head to Junk Hoard. It’s a town a few miles north from here;

I'll meet you there," he explained. The earth pony then proceeded to detail a couple of landmarks to help me navigate. I listened to him, but in my mind I still tried to comprehend the fact that I was about to leave my home, likely for good, with no friends and little in the ways of self defence measures. A large part of my mind told me that I was definitely not ready for this.

And yet, there weren't any other options left. Staying in Sheepshead meant death or slavery. Coming to terms with me being thrown into the outside world, full of dangers and without the protective walls of my home... it would take a while. Even with the guidance and protection of my father I imagined we would struggle to find food and stay healthy in the wasteland, not to mention actually avoiding encounters with the wildlife and the bandits that plagued this part of the wasteland. Eventually, after the set of instructions from my father had been explained and detailed, I gave a couple of nods.

"Good. Remember what I taught you," the stallion reminded me, and I gave a simple nod. "And one more thing..." he added, reaching out to his pocket. I widened my eyes at the sight of a blue-tinted eyepiece, held out in the stallion's hoof.

"Take this. It's yours. If we somehow meet Glint out there, you'll decide what to do with it, but for now - use it." His tone was serious as he passed me the device. It was almost shining, looking brand-new! The tinted glass in a rectangular shape was adorned with a thin, metal casing. A strap was attached to either side of the E.F.S, allowing the user to wear it like an eye patch. I stared in awe at the piece of technology, and after a small, encouraging nudge from my father, I tried it on.

At first, nothing happened. But as the eyepiece settled on my head, a number of information appeared on the screen, which quickly adapted to my own field of vision. I could see a tab in the top right corner that showed my vital functions such as heartbeat (currently at 110 beats per minute), blood pressure (132/84... whatever that meant), and even brain activity (which I had no idea how to read, honestly). I frankly had no idea how an eyepiece could measure such things, but apparently the Ministry of Arcane Sciences liked to know *a lot of things* about their customers.

What mattered more, however, was the display at the bottom of the screen, showing a single dot, pointing in the direction of my father. I reckoned it must have been the Identify Friend-or-Foe module; the big dot was green at the moment. Other than that, it showed an arrow somewhere behind me, likely pointing the way towards this whole Junk Hoard place.

"Woah..." I simply spoke out, speechless. Dad chuckled softly at my reaction.

"No need to thank me. Now go, before those bastards come here."

I didn't need that to be told to me twice. As I was about to head back where I came from, a short snort reached my ears. "And for Celestia's sake, don't take the front door again. You'll be more exposed than a ghoul in Tenpony Tower."

I had no idea what that was supposed to mean, other than that I should take the back door. Of course, I knew what a ghoul was, everyone in the wasteland learned that at one point... but what the heck was Tenpony Tower?

Pushing that matter aside, it was time to go. The plan had already formed in my head as I left the building through the back, hoping that my dad would indeed follow shortly afterwards. But just in case I wouldn't be lucky enough to see it happen, I had to move.

Going back turned out to be even more difficult than arriving at the workshop. The raiders' presence was pretty much established in the village; more and more houses caught fire, filling the air outside with choking, irritating smoke. Everywhere I looked I saw small, red dots on the E.F.S interface. A single glance towards the main gate revealed that the huge group of villagers was being led out by a mean-looking overseer with a long whip. Every few seconds I heard that whip crack, followed by a cry of another settler. I felt my heart sink at the sight; those weren't just raiders... those were slavers!

I had to press forward and push those thoughts aside.

With the help of the E.F.S, I managed to reach the trapdoor again unnoticed. Red dots were all over the place as I opened it up, hoping nobody would see me in the shaded spot. I simply jumped down, expecting to see miss Flowerpot and perhaps a couple other ponies waiting there for me. I was ready to tell them to follow me to a new place, to rebuild, resettle and live our lives anew.

What I didn't expect was the sight of the unicorn's corpse, lying with her eyes wide open and her muzzle twisted in agony, looking straight at the trapdoor I just came from. Above her body knelt another pony, if one could call them that. The raider's muzzle was covered in the mare's still warm blood, it being sunk deep in her torn belly. His ragged ear twitched at the sound of my body dropping into the tunnel; the muscles on his scarred, hideously dirty coat twitched, the short, dusty blonde tail rising attentively as the cannibalistic stallion turned his head to look at me.

He grinned viciously, and charged right at me with his bare hooves!

I screamed. The charge was met with a panicked sidestep, the unicorn's head crashing right into the ladder up to the village. I ran towards the opposite side of the tunnel trying to escape, but the raider got up with astonishing speed, lunging right at me!

I fell onto the floor, crying out as the ferocious stallion bit into my shoulder. A swift jab of my shoulder sent his muzzle recoiling to the side as I tried to overthrow him. Despite his aggression, he was relatively light, his muscles likely deteriorated from his cannibalistic diet; still, the kick I had delivered to his gut wasn't enough, and just a moment later he was on top of me again.

I got a good look onto his gleeful face as I was pushed onto my back, pinned down by the drug-addled raider. My eyes filled with terror as I saw him looking right at my neck, about to strike and sniff my life out with a single, violent bite.

In the moment of panic, I was not quite sure what I was doing. My mind was filled with lots of conflicting thoughts as I struggled with all my might, until I just couldn't take any more mental stress. I felt a sudden rush of warmth as a bright, green flame briefly enveloped my form.

The sudden combustion made the stallion recoil violently, screaming as green flames singed his dirty coat. My normal, bug-like form laid there, panting as the aggressor stumbled and fell onto his back. The wound from the shoulder plate of my carapace was bleeding, but that was going to have to wait. I frantically glanced around, noticing one of my wrenches that fell out of the toolbag at some point.

Grabbing the wrench with my telekinesis I screamed time after time as I swung it right against the raider's face. By the fifth swing, he was definitely dead. By the fifteenth, I saw fragments of his brain matter splatter on the nearby wall.

Finally, I stopped the onslaught, looking at the violent display before my reflectionless eyes. The raider's face was frozen in that maniacal, mad grin even through his death; His body only twitched slightly as his brain was attempting to send out signals to his body - and failing. My wrench dropped onto the floor with a muffled cling, and soon afterwards - my body followed because of mental exhaustion.

* * *

Footnote: Level Up!

New Perk: Silent Trotting - A keen eye and a sense of timing mean a lot when there are lots of ponies after your hide... or carapace. You are less likely to be spotted when sneaking and trotting.