

Fallout Equestria: Until the Break of Dawn

Chapter 2: *"The best laid schemes of mice and ponies"*

"Stone... Stone... Stone Stamp!"

I shot my head up as I heard my name, "Oh pony feathers!" I exclaimed nervously, busily burying my secret in the shallow mound of broken dirt. I dragged my hoof under the soft surface, laying three rocks of different shapes and sizes over the soft mound.

"Stone Stamp you get here this instant colt, or I'll skin you alive!" The voice shouted at me, sterner this time.

"Coming Papa!" I bounded to my hooves in front of my secret spot that was hidden in between a large rock outcropping, that was part of a mountainous wall, which extended around in both directions. I turned and ran as fast as my little nine seasoned aged colt legs could carry me, the mountainous walls extended out, circling past our small makeshift barn and house made of dead trees.

I ran and veered to the right, running parallel to an old broken wooden fence that surrounded our dead field with a shanty outhouse made of salvaged carriage wagons. The field had long been barren but had sizable rocks littered about that we broke apart during the day for gems. I galloped and galloped, past the fence and past our humble wooden home, catching sight of my father.

His expression was that of annoyance as I saw the scowl on his black coated face, his fierce gray stony gaze sent shivers down my spine, the thought of my hide being skinned had wriggled it's way into my mind. Oh horse apples, I knew I was in for it, he was not a happy pony at the moment.

"Son, what in Celestias great sky took you so long?" He drilled me intently, turning his head slightly to his side, putting his dusty desperado styled cowpony hat askew.

Looking down nervously, I tried to find a good excuse to not reveal my hidden

stash to him, “I... was... prospecting for gems papa!” I lied, beaming at him with a hopeful look.

His half slitted eyes of disbelief made my little heart sink, as he replied flatly, “Son, you know I don’t approve of you lying... especially to your daddy.” Tilting his head up to look at the clouded sky, strands of his graying brown mane fell loose from under his hat. To my great relief he knickered while scratching his snout with a hoof, “Shoot colt, we need to hurry now if we’re to get to Girdleshade safely.”

I never knew how he could tell when the time was right to make our trip to the nearby settlement of Girdleshade. Somehow he knew though, trotting with him, we passed the divide that was the entrance to our safe haven farm, as it was nestled in a surrounding mountain formation. The divide was fairly long and winding, taking at least a good fifteen minutes or so to finally have it jut out, only about a hundred yards from the main road.

“Papa, how do you know when to go to Girdleshade?” I asked quizzically.

He tilted his head a little again, lost in thought until he finally spoke, “You know son... I can’t rightly answer that. I suppose it’s kind of like magic.”

I shot him a skeptical look at his explanation, replying, “I thought earth ponies don’t have no magic?”

Under his massive frame, a soft chuckle reverberated, “Son I didn’t say it *was* magic, only that it was *like* magic.” He looked down at my confused face and continued, “The best way I can tell it to you, is that for me it’s like discovering your cutie-mark. Ya never know what your special talent is until one day, smack! It lands on you like a sack of potatoes.”

“So... it’s your special talent then?” Asking him, as I turned and saw his cutie-mark of three lightning streaks snaking in formation with one another.

“Not quiet.” He snorted softly, “It’s more of a feeling... like when you feel something by touching it, or look at something by seeing it, but in my case it only happens at certain times whenever my snout starts to get itchy.” He wrinkled his snout around at me, making a goofy face.

Laughing for a bit at his silliness, I calmed down, getting lost in thought about his

words for a minute. We had been traveling for what seemed like a better part of an hour, the dusty ruined stretch of road was further ahead of us. To our right was a vast flat expanse of endless wasteland, while to our left was more flat land until just at the horizon were mountains that looked like they were clawing at the sky above.

We came up to a fork in the road with a bent iron rod that was rusted heavily from the ages. There was an octagonal sign with several bullet holes and the top left portion missing, a crude black painted arrow pointed to the right fork with words over it that scrawled out, "rdlesshade". We took the fork the arrow was pointed at and continued on our journey.

I then looked down at my own cutie-mark in disappointment and looked up at my fathers jacket duster barding, my face brightening when I saw his repeater rifle hooked to his battle saddle. "Papa when can I use a gun?" My bright face immediately turned into a pout as he returned my question with a frown.

"When you grow up, colt." He turned his face away, calmly speaking.

"But I am grown up! I even have my stupid cutie-mark... one of a rock. Dumb rock!" I blurted out. Stupid rock shaped cutie-mark with a stupid hoofprint on it. What was that supposed to mean anyh-

"No." My dad said bluntly, halting my inner tirade, "You only think you've grown up, but you're still not ready yet."

"But!-" I began to protest.

"No son, end of discussion." He repeated in the same tone. I looked down sourly, my eyes watered in juvenile frustration. I was too a grown up pony.

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We managed to arrive in Girdlesshade thirty minutes or so after the fork in the road. The settlement was, for a lack of a better word... unimpressive. There was only

three makeshift houses made of various roadside junk, mainly stripped from carriage buses or wagons, that were cobbled together to form shelters. Each house was surrounded by more roadsigns, which were wrapped in cable wiring to form crude fences. Trails linked each of the houses to the main road with dozens of tents made of a variety of leathers and canvases also surrounded the homes, dirty ponies were milling about. The only thing that really stood out was the enormous highway that the entire settlement was under, both sides of the highway had collapsed, making travel by ground impossible. However there were ponies on top of there, ones with wings that I knew by as pegasus ponies.

Oh to be able to fly and reach parts of Equestria that both earth ponies or unicorns couldn't was such a wonder to me. A wonder that I would never know, I dwelt on sadly, only to have my depressing thoughts stop by my father's baritone voice speaking to me, "Stay close Stone." as we reached our destination.

We trotted up to the largest of the three structures, it had a sheet metal sign with large gouges that formed, "Diamond Dusts emporium." A lone orange-brown pegasus mare in a padded hoofball barding stared at my father, regarding him firmly until she looked at me. Her face changed into a smile and put her weapon away as she saw that I had backed behind my dad shyly.

"Aww, isn't he just cute?" She purred, making my face flush. Remembering where she was and what she was doing she turned back to my dad, stating plainly, "Purpose of visit?"

My dad matched her tone while replying, "I'm here on business to trade goods with Diamond Dust."

She regarded him again for a moment then used her left hindleg to tap on the metal door two times. Moments later, another gruff looking yellow pegasus stallion opened the door, ushering us into the large house. The inside of the place was only a little bit better than the outside, it was surprisingly spacious though. On the opposite side of our entrance was a grimy metal counter with four different metal shelves of various items that ranged from bottles of liquid to random junk to even dirty guns. A door was behind the counter with the words "Authorized personnel only" over it, while on top of the counter top I could see various types of 200 year old food and ammo strewn on it.

There was a small table with four different pillows on the floor with another Aqua earth pony guard sitting to the right, cards on the table, while to our left was another door with no markings.

The yellow pegasus guard that ushered us in, led us to the counter, where he tapped on something that made a ringing sound. Afterwards he sat down at the table to the right and a portly tan unicorn stallion wearing a loose tan jacket barding with many pockets and a cap, his

horn puncturing it, came into the room from the door behind the counter.

He stared at my dad for a moment before he smiled and loudly spoke in a husky, jubilant voice, "Welcome Thunderheart! What brings you to my little corner of the Ponave?"

"The usual Dust." My dad said politely.

The unicorn grinned wide, "Of course! Rifle rounds, water, and medical supplies! I trust that you've brought the mmm-goods?" the wide grin looked like it would burst on his muzzle.

My dad smirked and pulled out a satchel, laying it out open on the counter, shining with sparkles when sunlight filtered through one of the grimy windows. "Aaaahhh yes... marvelous..." Diamond Dust rubbed his hooves together in anticipation, his eyes were the size of saucers as he beheld the sight. Quickly he changed his composure and started bartering with my dad, "So for this particular set, I ca-"

His boring voice droned out of tune to me as I heard a creak to my left and saw... the most beautiful sight I had ever seen. Time seemed to slow as the other unmarked door closed, the sun seemed to glow brighter, as a light purple unicorn filly trotted towards me. Her brilliant yellow eyes sparkled softly at me as she tossed back that... oh that gorgeous blue mane, a mane that must have been a gift from the heavens itself, parted only by her horn. She must be a long lost niece of Celestia herself...

When she caught me gawking at her she let out a tiny giggle that made the walls of the house we were in to melt like a soothing waterfall. Then I realized she was almost right up to me and a wave of panic enveloped with my tiny self. Ooohh no, what do I say to her? Will she like me? What if I say something stupid?! What if-

"Hi!" She squeaked in an innocent soft voice, "I'm Tranquil Aura, I help my dads store by doing chores and learning how to conduct business, what's your name?"

With big beautiful doe eyes she looked at me, combined with her cute tiny smile, threw my mind in a fumbling mist. I tried desperately to form words but could only give out an awkward quiet response, "I'm... uhmm... Ssssstamp...er...?"

*Wake up stupid!* My mind shouted desperately at me. *Your name is Stone St-*

"Wow that's a cool name!" The pretty unicorn filly beamed at me, "What do you do Stamper?"

Stamper... From this moment forward, the world would know me as... Stamper.

My heart filled with elation, I managed to finally squeak out, "I... h-E-lp my d-A-d

pr-O-spect for g-E-ms.” my voice cracked with each word.

Tranquil laughed sweetly at my response saying back, “You’re funny Stamper, I like you.” making my face flush hot and red.

“Alright then, you got a deal.” I heard my dad tell Diamond Dust, sounds of rifle shells, water bottles, and other sundries following suit. “Come on Stone it’s time to go.”

I was torn! I couldn’t think of anything else coherent to tell this filly of my dreams, yet I didn’t want to leave! Oh Luna, matron goddess of the stars, take pity on this tortured soul! I got my answer in the form of my dad grabbing my mane in his teeth, gently pulling me away.

“Bye Stamper, come back soon!” Tranquil Aura warbled at me as I was dragged out of the shop.

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“Sure was a pretty little filly wasn’t she?” My father laid his words on me, dripping with amusement.

We had just passed the fork leading back home, when he finally spoke. I felt a wave of embarrassment wash over me when he asked me that for some reason. I’m not too sure why as something like this had never happened before, I never thought of ponies in anyway like I did then. It was probably the fact that I handled that whole exchange like a hellhound trying to do ballet.

“No!” I spurted out, “Fillies are weird!”

Good old dad let loose a raucous fit of laughter, making my shame surge with renewed frustration. “Is that so... *Stamper?*” the last word was noticeably higher in pitch.

Oh yeah, just lay it on thick why dontcha? I would’ve given anything to just disappear at that moment. Maybe I could convince Celestia to banish me to the moon, at least then he would stop laughing...

“Come on son.” He gasped for breath, “It’s alright, infact I’m darn proud of ya.” Sighing, he said something that left me speechless for a moment, “My little colt is growing up right before my eyes.” smiling while having an expression of pure pride.

Taking the opportunity of those words, I chided in, "So does this mean I can have my own gun?" Oh horse apples... that look he gave me was chilling. I knew I had made a mistake asking that, he looked at me like I had just shot somepony.

He just lowered his head and said somberly, "No son, it don't." He looked forward, but already could tell I was going to speak, swiftly adding, "Son, I meant what I said. You are growing up, but using a gun carries a lot of responsibilities and lots of... consequences." Grimly finishing.

I wasn't satisfied though, he always had a gun. Why couldn't I have one? I can handle those... responsibilities and I can handle whatever consequences were too! I've even seen him point it at another pony once, one that was scary and tried to steal from us. Finding new bitter resolve I spat out, " You have a gun, so sh-"

"No!" My father shouted, scaring the crap out of me, "Damn it colt, you just don't understand! A gun is no play thing, it's not for little foals to screw around with. Now keep quiet about this!"

His words bit into me deep and harsh. I could feel my eyes well with tears but I refused to cry in front of him. He may not believe I was grown up, but damn it, I would prove it to him one way or another. I quickened my pace so I would hide my face from his view, tears still managing to trickle down my face and on to the dusty road below.

My father gave one final sigh and we traveled the rest of the way to our home in silence...

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It was dark by the time we arrived at our home. We trotted into the room and I sat on my old mattress, my eyes red, puffy, were now burning and dried from my tears. My dad lit up a lamp that hung in the center of our small house, lighting up the area to reveal our makeshift firepit with a hatch to let smoke out through the crude chimney. Our two old mattresses laid to the next to the right wall, a table with two pillows to sit on and a large ancient gun rack was opposite the mattresses, the gun rack had a crack on it's side.

My father put his rifle into the gun rack and pulled out his .357 magnum revolver, planting it on the table. Hanging on a rope were meats of various wasteland creatures like bloodwings and radhogs over the table, smoked and cured ready for eating. My father took off his saddlebags and pulled out two bottles of purified water, handing me one. I took it but didn't even

open it, something of course my father noticed. He sat at the table on one of the pillows, taking a swig from his water as he eyed my unmoving and unemotional face.

"Son..." He finally spoke with hints of sadness tinged with his words, "I know I was right hard on you, but I only said what I said because my love for you is beyond this world." Pausing to see my face, he continued with a sigh as he saw it had not changed, "One day you will have a gun... you'll have both my rifle and my hoof-cannon. I have guns son, because this world is a right evil place now."

I looked up and was shocked to see tears welling in his own eyes. My dad... he.. I've never seen him cry over anything.

"I had hoped to be talking with you on this matter as you got older, more mature." He resumed morosely, "When you could better understand the differences of right and wrong, but it seems there's no avoiding it now." There was a moment of silence, he must be collecting his thoughts as he usually does for these kinds of speeches... but this I could tell was no simple disciplinary speech.

"Is it okay to shoot evil ponies?" I asked him quietly.

"Sometimes." Simply he put.

"Sometimes?"

"Son, make no mistake when I say the world right now is an incredibly dark place to live. But we can never make the dark go away until somepony brings the light, the light can't fill ponies if we shoot bullets at them instead." He was looking at me now, tears streaming gently down his cheeks.

"So... it's wrong to shoot even... evil ponies?" Further I asked, trying to put more sense into his speech.

He sighed dejectedly and spoke, "Son, what I'm trying to say is that once you use a gun to kill a pony, there's no bringing them back. Some ponies are so evil to the point where the only way to deal with them is to use our guns, but there is a fine line between protection and murder." His voice was trembling now, on the verge of weeping, as he got up and came close to my face.

Oh Papa... please stop crying... I... I can't stand to see you like this... I felt myself crying with him.

"Stone Stamp, you are my light, my greatest creation I have ever been blessed to have. I promised... I promised your mom before she died that I would raise you right, right enough for the world to have." Sobbing through the words, he breathed deeply before going on, "Using a



gun in murder is a sure way to become as dark as the evil ponies. You have to know the difference between helping and hurting, promise me you won't become as dark as those ponies!" His exasperated cries tugged my soul, "Promise me, *please!*" he cried again.

"Papa..." I choked on my words, "I- I promise!"

He embraced me in a fitful weeping hug as we both cried for what felt like an eternity. I think I finally understood. He wouldn't teach me for fear that I wasn't going to know good from bad, or even care about it. That I would become evil with the ability to hold another pony's life in my hooves. I didn't know the full extent of how bad the wasteland was back then. After seeing the toughest stallion I had known break down like this... I finally understood, if I had ever the need to take a life, it would be to help those that couldn't defend themselves.

"Papa... I promise... I'll only use guns to help ponies, not just kill 'em."

He finally stopped sobbing and pulled away from his hug, smiling, "My little colt... growing up."

"My little Stamper..."

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Drip... Drip... Drip...

"P...Papa?" My weak voice cut softly into the air.

Drip... Drip... Drip...

My blurred vision started to clear as I took in my surroundings and realized I wasn't in my father's old home. Instead I saw that I was laying on some bed in a somewhat large dim room. There was bloody gauze wrapped around my body and more bloody rags to my right, bundled in a corner on the floor. A counter was against the right wall that looked like it had a sink and cabinets with broken doors hung above. Straight ahead of my bed was a small table with my revolver on it, past the table were hooks on the wall that had my battle-saddle, rifle, and my saddlebags. A doorway, wide open, was inbetween, letting dim orange light into my room.

Shifting to get up, the left side of my body shot out a momentary bout of dull pain, making me wince and groan. My hooves wobbled slightly as I set them on the floor and cantered to my belongings, retrieving them. Turning to the sink, I saw a wet bowl mixed with water and blood, tilted to the side, dripping. Fragments of lead were also in the bowl I noticed,

eyeing my environment only slightly longer until the sound of hoof steps made me whip out my revolver and point it at the doorway.

The orange light grew brighter as an unicorn mare with a lamp floating next to her in a green magical field enveloped the handle. She was wearing dirty overalls and chuckled when she saw me. Not exactly the response I expected.

With a twang she spoke, "Mighty fearsome sight d'ere cowpony." Setting the lamp on the table as she casually turned to me, "Be a might mo' fearsome f'n y'had some bullets loaded in d'ere."

I whipped my revolver open in my hoof. Fucking shit it was empty. No doubt my rifle was in an equal state, "Where am I?" My throaty voice questioned her.

"Oh yer in Flutter Springs darlin, right in mah inn slash clinic." Her face had a slight grin, "Dun' be worryin none, yer safe fer d' moment. Had yerself shot up somethin fierce, yer lucky to be alive at all."

Memories of the convoy raid surged through my head, bodies of Follower ponies dropping hard to the ground. A scared raider pony... begging for her life. "H-How did I get here?" I asked shaking my head slightly.

"Why yer real lucky t' be friends wid that spry unicorn buck, wid d' pale green mane." Pale green mane? She saw my confused look, "Y'know d' one that yaps bout Followin or somethin."

Tendercolt? The name rang out like a bell. I was saved by Tendercolt? I saw him go down in a hail of lead though...

"Yup he was shot something fierce too, I'm surprised he managed t' drag you here, fer bein such an awfully scrawny thing." She sat down as she spoke, "You seemed t' have healed up real nicely, let me take a gander at dem wounds n' make sure ya ain't gonna need further surgery." The magical field enveloped and removed my wrapped gauze, revealing my left side with several tiny scars. "Beautiful!" Her voice rose in satisfaction, tossing the gauze in the corner.

"Well thanks for patching me up Ms.?" I questioned.

"Needles."

I regarded her slightly and asked, "How much will I be owing you?"

"It's been taken care of, yer friend paid already." Candidly replying, "Yer fit as a fiddle

‘gain, I’ll show you to what’s left of yer bardin.” She got up, getting the lamp with her magic, and we both trotted out into a small hallway, past three more doors that flanked our sides, down a small flight of stairs, then into a large room with a counter and three other doors. Hooking to the door on our right as we passed the counter, she opened it and we were in another room that contained a refrigerator as well as an old armoire to the right, another door was straight ahead.

Needles passed the refrigerator to the armoire and it opened it, handing me my leather barding that was ripped, battered, and full of sizable holes. While I put the barding back on hastily, she opened a drawer in the armoire and handed me back my ammo, then strode past me back into the main room. Seeing her in more light, she was bright green with a short white bun for her mane. I noticed she had a threadspool with a needle for a cutie-mark.

I followed her into the main room, where she was behind the counter, asking her, “How long was I out for?”

“Fer about a day n’ haff.” She coolly said, “If yer wonderin where that unicorn who saved yer hide is, mah best bet would be d’ local waterin hole, jess out dem doors behind ya and to d’ left.”

“Thank you again Ms. Needles” Nodding, I turned and started for the door.

“Dun be a stranger sugah flank.” Hearing her voice rise a little. Now to find Tender- sugar flank? I looked back, only to receive a wry wink and smirk.

Riiight... sugar flank... I raised an eyebrow and trotted towards the door, before leaving I noticed a large faded poster next to it with big yellow letters at the top “Give Peace a Chance” an image of a yellow pegasus mare with long pink mane was holding hooves with other silhouetted pony figures on each of her side as she had a reserved smile, below in white letters it read “Join the Ministry of Peace today!”

Hmph. I looked for a bit, then cantered through the double doors outside, light stinging my eyes as I adjusted them to the sun. It was past high noon, shadows being casted by several overturned charter carriage buses across the road that were being used as shelters for various ponies. The road extended down at a decline to my right with a crude wall of salvaged metal, a large opening in the center. Two ponies in heavy leather barding and hoofball helmets guarded the opening with scoped rifles. Turning back to the left, the same road had a fork that rounded a collapsed building, large pieces of it’s structure missing. Straight down the fork was another smaller building made with salvaged metals and chunks of concrete, a large wooden sign hung above the door with the words “Broken Desert Saloon” burned into it.

Well now what? Nearly broke, failed job that was a double-cross and saved by a pony I was supposed to protect. I guess the very least I could do was thank him for saving my worthless hide...

Finishing my thoughts, I was already at the door of the saloon and opened it, trotting in. Surprisingly, this bar was smaller than the shit-stained one in Pit Stop. Directly ahead was the bar with a pegasus bartender? Interesting, pegassi as far as I knew where never really content with just doing mundane jobs, but what did I know?

Empty tables stood between the bar counter and me, more tables, four total, with random ponies were on each side of the two tables ahead of me. I eyed the counter longing for another drink... No Stamper, you don't need one... damn it I was already in front of the pegasus stallion.

"Pick your poison." His low voice spoke.

"Hard Apple cider." I responded.

"Heh heh, hard apple cider?" He grinned in a slight, disturbing manner, "I might have some." He bent down behind his counter.

"Can't really see why it's that funny to you." My voice failed to mask my annoyance.

The grin on his face was just getting wider as he put the cider down on the counter, "Welp as far as I've known, *real* stallions always drank whiskey, specially earth pony ones, usually letting all the little mares to drink cider."

Taking the cider, I knocked it back and drank the entire glass in one sitting, then set the glass down, giving the bartender a half cocked expression, "As far as I've known, real pegassi weren't fat pathetic shitheads." I flipped a cap at his face and turned away, as his grin instantly turned to a frown.

"Asshole..." He said.

Surveying the room, I couldn't find Tendercolt anywhere here, so I headed back out, this time taking the road that forked to my left as it led me to a large campfire with scattered tents, one of which was very large with the road ending at it. That thing could fit seven to eight full grown stallions, it was so big. I approached the campfire and heard the strumming of a guitar while an old male voice sang in unison.

"Duuustyyy wasteland afffternooon."

"Just meeee and mah dooooog, raiders returning soon."

Finding the musical source was a fairly old maroon earth pony wearing a faded dirt stained duster, a white cowpony hat on his head. Indeed he had a rather nice wooden guitar sitting on his lap as he continued performing on a rocking chair.

"Suuun making goddess teeeearrs a-dryin."

"Her chiiildreeen fall dooooownn a-dyin."

Oddly I was transfixed on the moroseful song.

"When they cooome, they'll fiiind my guns a-blazin."

"As their lead takes parts of me."

"Paaaaain and deeeeaath will be their only haven."

"Cause this old buck jest won't flee-eeeeee!"

Cheers and whoops replaced his song, once it was finished he saw me approach, nodded, saying in an old smoky voice, "Howdy, whaddya think of mah song?"

I stopped and thought for a second, "Not bad."

"Not bad eh?" The old pony chuckled, "Welp, at least you liked it somewhat."

"I liked the message." Flatly I said.

"Ah, rough n' tumble huh? Welp sonny, here's hopin you and me can live through one more wasteland afternoon." His warm smile was comforting.

I gave a slight smile and replied, "Keep those guns a-blazin."

"Heh heh heh... eeeyuup!" He chuckled and started strumming his guitar some more, when I heard a familiar slightly high octave voice call out, making me turn around.

"Stamper!" Out of the large tent with his ragged and dirt-stained white coated barding, was Tendercolt. His gold coat and medium straight mane however looked no worse for the wear, "Praise the Goddesses you're still alive!" His cheerful voice matched his wide red eyes.

"Yeah... um.." I shuffled my hooves nervously, "Ahh, you know I'm not that good at these kind of things, so... that'll do buck."

His eyes closed halfway, "Really? That's like, the worst 'thank you' I've ever heard." Then casting his gaze down sadly, "But regardless, it's I that should be thanking you."

What? I was completely taken back, "Thank me? Kid I got us all nearly killed."

Kicking a pebble with one of his hooves he replied, "Stamper if you had not killed those raiders that caught us from behind, I would have been dead for sure."

Wow, he was letting my failure off pretty easy, but I still knew that if I had reacted faster it could have saved so many more.

He went back into the large tent with me trailing, "Beacon..." Tendercolt sighed as he sat on a pillow next to a large rectangular table. There were three refrigerators lined up on one side of the tent. I sat on another pillow in front of a refrigerator opposite of Tendercolt. A full minute passed as we both just sat, I could see his eyes were welling with tears. Luna's tight flank... I'm no good at sentiments... but I can't just let him cry like that.

"If it's any consolation kid, I'm sorry for your leaders passing." My low voice was full of as much support as I could give.

Goddesses... Oh! I checked my saddlebags, Yeehaw! I still had my ciders! I flipped one out and started chugging it. Tendercolt was looking at me as I stopped drinking, his face still full of sadness. With a sigh, I whipped out my... last... hard apple cider, offering it to him. He eyed it forlornly and took it, "Thanks." his words reflecting his look. He just stared at the bottle for a bit, while I resumed to suck my beverage down. His silence was for so long that I was slightly startled when he finally spoke, "This... this wasn't supposed to happen like this."

"Shit happens kid." Real smooth Stamper. Might as well piss on him while you at it.

"No." His tone darkened, "You don't get it. I know you don't think too highly of our organization, that since Littlepip improved our home, that we've somehow have grown soft and decadent, but this expedition wasn't just a spur-of-the-moment idea by a small band of foolish ponies."

"Kid." I tried to retort.

"It was an organized effort. Planned for years." His voice steadily rising in volume, "Not just the Followers of the Apocalypse, but by the heads of the NCR and even Applejack Rangers."

The who and the what? "NCR?" I asked.

"New Canterlot Republic." His voice was getting angrier, "You don't get it at all, the NCR sent pegassi scouts ahead first to survey Equestrias surrounding regions, to report the one thing they hoped not to find."

"And that is?" My curiosity growing.

"A viable threat." He responded grimly, "A threat so large it could not be ignored. This wasteland has an overwhelming presence of raiders for sure, but there was one that stuck out in the heart of Las Neighgas."

My heart sank, "The Great Herd." I said quietly, then like a vine that... that memory...

no... I shook my head heard, trying with all of my will to suppress it, swiftly I downed the remaining liquid in my bottle and the memory receded back into my mind.

Tendercolt was eyeing me confused then resumed, "I see you know about them."

"Of course kid, they're just the largest and most organized band of soulless fuckers to ever exist in the Ponave. Other raider tribes just wish they were like them, only reason why they don't own the entire region is because every other tribe hates them." My response was full of indignation.

"That's why we came." He replied, "The NCR wants to neutralize them before they come knocking on our door."

"So why not send a fighting force instead of you guys?" I puzzled, such a strange story. 'Hello we heard you were evil, here's our pacifists?'

"Three reasons." Tendercolts voice was calming somewhat, "Because not only does the NCR have issues at home, but also because they can't field a military appropriate to deal with them. Not at the cost of significantly weakening their position within Equestria."

Hmpf. So much for altruism. "What's the third reason then?"

Tendercolt closed his eyes and took a breath, then opened his eyes again, "The third is because The Followers truly do care about the welfare of all of you." My face gave him a half-eyed look of disbelief, "I'm not lying to you. We came first in hopes to help the lives of everypony. If we could show you all that indeed there were ponies that would be willing to freely aid others while expecting nothing back in return, that in the very least you would support us in our cause to make all of Equestria a better world again."

"To help fight in your war." I coldly said.

He sighed heavily at my comment, "We don't want war. At least the Followers don't, but that doesn't mean we are blind." Repositioning himself on his pillow he continued, "War is never the answer we want, but unfortunately is the only answer we can get. Equestria deserves better ponies, but for now she will have to settle for us."

Well slap my flank and call me a filly, this buck sure his way around words. I would be lying if I said that his words didn't reach me on some level. Ponave has suffered for such a long time... maybe...

"With this setback and Beacon dead though, I don't know what to do now." His voice was reverting back to despair, "I know of our original mission guidelines, but I can't possibly help by myself... oh Celestia what am I going to do?" He wept horribly knocking the cider I gave him off

the table with his elbows.

I... I couldn't take the sight of this. My mercenary instinct told me it was tough luck and welcome to the Ponave...

Papa... I promise... I'll only use guns to help ponies, not just kill 'em.

"Tendercolt..." I said for once in the longest time, a soft supportive voice, "I'll help you."

SNORT! "What?" He blinked through tears, "I... I don't have many caps left."

I smiled, "It's okay you don't need to pay me." He was dumbstruck, I must've looked like lakelurks were crawling out from my ears, "I have to warn you, I'll help, but it won't be pretty or easy."

Tendercolt rubbed his eyes in disbelief, then smiled as he saw I was serious, "I don't... I don't know how to thank you... Stamper, you're a good pony." He smiled at me with... hope.

"Of course thought I get first rights to any spoils on this foalish crusade of yours. Oh and if anypony asks, I'm hired under contract by you, can't give up my mercenary cred." I said with my usual macho bravado. "And kid... I ain't a good pony, trust me on that." Adding a dark undertone.

He just sighed and smiled.

First things first, we got to get more provisions, namely more Hard Apple cider. Okay and some ammo, medical supplies, whatever...

Bah. Tendercolt would disagree, but I still felt like we got ripped off. For all my knowledge in how to use and repair guns, I could not for the life of me haggle for a decent price. I swear those merchants have some sort of pricing conspiracy. We did manage to get quite a stock of ammo for my rifle and revolver: 70 standard .357 rounds, 44 hollow-point rounds, and even 18 JFP (Jacketed Flat Points) rounds for when we met anything armored like robots. I even had my barding patched up somewhat, oh! I also found a snazzy tan stetson cowpony hat. We managed to obtain four kits of magical medical bandages, three more healing poultices, and even a

couple of med-x, rad-x, and radaway. The last of my caps went to procuring six bottles of hard apple cider.

Tendercolt was able to get a few more items than I had, having some of the expeditions caps. He mainly bought medical supplies but I did convince him to spend some of his money on a new 9mm sub machine gun, although it's condition wasn't great, I knew of a way to repair similar firearms from one to the other and jury-rigged from his old 9mm pistol the parts necessary to improve his new guns condition.

We had left Flutter Springs and were heading west along the road, our ultimate destination being at a place called "Quarryville", apparently the New Canterlot Republic pegassi scouts reported that out of all the rad holes in the Ponave, that it was the largest concentration of actual decent ponies. The plan, as Tendercolt put it best, was to reach Quarryville while we helped anypony that we could.

And lucky us, it seems like we just might get that chance.

We were out for a couple of hours, when we rounded a small hill and saw a merchant band being attacked by a small group of raiders. The three merchants were each behind scattered rocks, taking shots from the raiders further up the road from their positions. They were still quite a distance away when I saw one of the merchants jump up, only to be launched in the air by an explosion, his rock cover disintergrated into small pebbles.

"Shit kid, we picked one helluva time to play heroes." I knickered moving from rock to rock, off of the main road, hearing Tendercolts gulp as he followed. Our cover unfortunately ended with a noticeable gap of rocks towards the five raiders that were scattered behind their own rocks. The road separated each of our three groups, the merchants and raiders on one side, us on the other. On the road itself was the corpse of a pack brahmin, no doubt belonging to the merchants. Turning back to Tendercolt, I told him one last thing, "Remember, short controlled bursts." Then spun back and leaned just over enough with my repeater rifle, loading hollow points and picking the second closest raider as my target.

Aim... gently activate the trigger... and exhale...

CRACK!

The yellow-green unicorns head nearly exploded out his right temple, showering the ground with blood and gore, the body recoiled back violently on the ground, her rifle clattering next to her.

RAT-TAT-TAT-TAT!

Tendercolts SMG roared as he managed to land three of his four shots into a blood-orange

unicorns neck and upper shoulder, covered by a hoofball uniform. The impact made the raider fall over, dropping her 9mm pistol and making her gasp for air, wide eyed.

The other three raiders swung around towards us, but before they could do anything else, I had already taken aim at a pink earth pony stallion, white paint covering his face in splotches.

CRACK! CRACK!

One of my bullets nailed the pony raider in the upper chest, causing him to recoil in visible agony, screaming out obscenities, the other bullet missed completely.

RAT-TAT-TAT-TAT!

My companions gun thundered as two of the four shots hit a light gray earth pony, one lodged into his left shoulder, the other right below the previous shot. His spiked raider barding probably caught the worst of it as he just took aim with a scoped rifle and fired.

CRACK! zzZIIP!

The wild shot went wide, missing us completely. We heard shots ring out from the merchants as their shots all missed the raiders, except the last remaining neon-red unicorn grunted painfully, taking a bullet to his right leg.

“FUCK THIS!” He screamed and I saw him toss something at us.

CLINK! TIK.

I looked in horror as I saw the apple shaped grenade land right between me and Tendercolt, causing me to jump over the rock cover but to no avail. I was launched from the force of the explosion, burning my hind legs, and landing much closer in the raiders view, out in the open.

Oh Celestias sweet nipples... The pink, white splotched face stallion had a 10mm pistol aimed right at my head, grinning with sadistic fury and none to happy about the gaping hole I put into his chest that was bleeding heavily.

POW!

I put up my hooves in front of my face instinctively as he pulled the trigger, but I wasn't hurt? Well I know I have strong hooves but... oh... what is this? My eyes were wide along with the raider, both of us were stunned seeing a gold shield ripple around me, the bullet had been pulverized on the ground. “GET UP!” I heard Tendercolt yell, scrambling up, I galloped as fast as

I could and charged the stallion on to his back, bringing my rifle to bear.

CRACK! CRACK!

My two shots entered the stallions head and sprayed out brains all over the ground behind him, leaving his face in a permanent twisted shock. The shield that had me surrounded, shuddered violently then collapsed utterly as my body was rocked on the right side as incredible pain followed after hearing, *THOOM! THOOM!* dropping me to my knees. I managed to turn and face both the earth pony and unicorn raiders with my rifle, the neon-red unicorn was reloading a double barrelled shotgun that was still smoking.

CRACK!

My left shoulder flared with pain as the earth pony's rifle shell rocked my body, nearly knocking me down. I started to stand back up on my hooves until I heard Tendercolts SMG sound off again, nailing the neon-red unicorn multiple times in the head and neck, making him crumple in a heap with his raider barding and double barrelled shotgun. Distracted by his comrades death, I quickly took aim again as I was back on my hooves.

"See you in hell." I said bitterly, activating the trigger.

CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!

All three shots pelted the last raiders neck and upper chest, causing him to fly backwards in a sickening bloody thud. Whipping out a healing poultice, I consumed it, letting the painful regenerative spell do its magic. I heard Tendercolt and merchants approaching me, taking one more look at the red unicorn's body, I noticed a white flaming skull on his barding.

"Are you alright?" Tendercolt asked with concern, eyeing the buckshot in my side.

"I'm good for now." I replied, then asked incredulously, "Did you actually create a shield over me?"

He was blushing a little as he saw how awed I was by his feat, "Yeah I've been practicing it extensively when you were recovering."

Damn, I knew unicorns had magical abilities, but this just wasn't fair! I'm grateful that he saved my life with it, don't get me wrong. As tough as I am, two direct shotgun blasts at close range can put down almost anything, but it still wasn't fair. Not only could I not fly like a pegasus, but I had no magic like those horned bast- okay I'll stop complaining...

The merchants trotted up to us, both unicorn mares. The light blue coated one with the swirly yellow mane had tears streaming down, pelting her baggy tan trader jacket barding, while the silver one with a short coltish red mane, gave a sad smile, "Thank you for helping us." Her

similar browner jacket rippling in the wind.

I stood there while intently eyeing the bodies of the dead raiders, Tendercolt trotted forward speaking, "Of course, I only wish we had arrived sooner to save your other companion."

"The other two." The light blue unicorn sniffled.

"Two?" I asked raising a brow.

She just started sobbing, provoking the silver one to interject on her behalf, "I'm sorry, Globie had her partner taken when the raiders ambushed our trading caravan. I'm Bartilee by the way."

Tendercolt nodded, "I am Tendercolt and my trusted guard behind me is Stamper." I nodded to them at my name, "On behalf of the Followers of the Apocalypse, I would like to impart my greatest sympathies for your loss. If there is anything we can do to help assuage your sorrow, we would gladly render it."

What are you a dictionary? Bartilee looked shocked at either his lengthy choice of words or his willingness to help, neither of which I could guess, as she finally replied, "I... we can't really pay you much in the way of caps."

Tendercolt bowed humbly saying, "We ask nothing in return."

Nuts to that! He might not ask for anything but I'm going to at least take what I can from the raiders bodies.

Globie perked up at his words, hastily spitting out, "Would you please find and bring back Stacks?"

I started going through the corpses of the raiders, pulling out anything I found valuable, as Tendercolt silently contemplated her request, finally responding, "Give us a description and we will do our best to return her unscathed."

"She's an indigo colored earth pony, with a long straight navy blue mane, tan eyes, and a stack of bottle caps for a cutie-mark. Oh please just bring her back alive!" She wailed loudly, Bartilee hugging her in comfort.

The raiders didn't have much of anything useful between the five of them. I managed to get about a hundred caps, 13 more .357 standard rounds, 28 more 9mm rounds, as well as some buck. The scoped rifle turned out to be a pretty decent hunting rifle, although in poor condition. I gave it as well as the 12 .308 rounds found on the raider to Tendercolt and further repaired his SMG with their 9mm pistol. I also gave him the 10mm pistol, but kept the double barrelled shotgun, the best thing we got were three silver apple shaped grenades.

"Whom did you say these raiders were and where are they located?" Tendercolt asked, as we were trotting over small hills north of the merchants ambush site, sparse desert plants and tumbleweeds passing by, night was closing in fast.

"Burning skull tribe, they hole up at an old camping site near a train tunnel that connects to Nelly Airforce base." I responded casually.

"You're pretty knowledgeable about the Ponave."

"I know my raiders kid." my flat response earned me a moment of silence. "Kid" I paused, determining the best way to ask about this subject, "Why didn't you save your leader?"

Smooth as usual Stamper...

"Beacon was already dead when I came to." Tendercolts voice was sorrowful, "I saw you take a full clip of rounds from two separate ponies and didn't even flinch."

Flashbacks of my wrath swarmed my mind. *P-PLEASE! I-I JUST Wa-WAS DOING w-WHAT THEY f-f-FORced m-me t-TO D-D-DO!*

"I only had enough time to give you a healing potion before you died. I had to drag you on one of the caravan covers to Flutter Springs and have Ms. Needles perform surgery to remove all the bullets that were dangerously covered by the potion. "He finished.

Damn, I was lucky. In over sixteen seasons since... well since in forever, I've never had anypony give me any regard, much less save my life. I had to stop dwelling on the matter as we rounded over a hill, we were at the camp site.

Two small fires were lit, revealing two park tables with three ponies on the seats, four tents, a tiny structure with a broken sign that said "Res ooms", and to the left was a run down cabin. Surrounding the campfire on the right was two more raiders, " Stay low, stay quiet, and follow my lead." Whispering to Tendercolt, then I crouched low and we snuck around the far right, towards the tiny structure, as the cover of the cloudy night concealed our approach.

Successfully hiding behind the tiny restroom structure, we noticed the three tents that flanked the right campfire were empty, only one tent was on the left, near the run-down cabin, slightly past the park table that didn't have the raiders.

"When my grenade goes off, you take out the two raiders by the fire." I instructed Tendercolt, who got his SMG ready and nodded in response. Taking out one of the grenades and unhooking the stem, I gave a slight countdown.

One.. two..

Hurling the grenade at the center table, it made an audible *tinking* sound, followed by a raider confusingly saying, "Huh?"

BOOM!

The three raiders flew back in bloody chunks, causing the two by the fire to gasp and turn to the smoldering pieces of the table.

RAT-TAT-TAT-TAT-TAT-TAT-TAT

Tendercolt spread his fire wildly as the SMG spewed constant lead, riddling one of the raiders with numerous holes, while the last earth pony stallion reeled in pain, catching three rounds to his right body.

A unicorn stumbled out from the tent only to hear the ring of my rifle, as he was hit three times, causing him to collapse twitching on the ground.

The cabin door flung open with two vicious dogs rushing right towards us! In the doorway, a pegasus stood holding an assault rifle, training it on us. "Move to the side of the building!" I yelled out, stepping backwards, firing at the pegasus.

CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!

He flinched to his left as two of my rounds connected to his hip, but his gun still roared to life, bullets whizzing past and hitting my right shoulder.

YIPE! One of the dogs leapt in the air, his backside catching the majority of the rounds flying at me, wish I could've said the same about the other one as he clamped down on my right foreleg. Pain seared up my leg as I fell forward from the little bastard tugging at me, ripping my flesh.

With my left hoof, I slammed it over the dogs head twice before it let go. For my efforts, I was rewarded with more rounds perforating my upper chest making my vision blur in torment.

Aiming my gun proved difficult, but I was a stubborn old pony, not ready to cash out yet.

CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!

_____One round caught the pegasus in the shoulder, one in his chest, the other ricocheted off the cabin. He flew up into the sky in response, making me almost forget his damned mutt, it lunged at me as I swung and fired another two times.

CRACK! CRACK!

“Ompf!” I grunted as the lifeless body crashed into me, causing me to land on my back. Tendercolts shield rippled as the original earth pony he shot earlier was now firing repeatedly with a 10mm pistol. A *whoosh* interrupted me from seeing the outcome, followed by a glass shattering sound, flames erupted on the dogs corpse that doused both it and parts of me.

“AAARGGH!” I hollered as the flames licked my forelegs, causing me in a state of panic to launch the flaming dog corpse off and onto the ground. I rolled around in the dust to put out the flames on me, only to hear that dreaded *whoosh*, glass cracking sound, more flames burst behind me, the pegasus flying up overhead to make another pass.

I scrambled up and put my rifle away, whipping my revolver out, galloping towards the cabin, I spotted the pegasus coming for another pass with a bottle trailing flames, “Die in a fire!” He bellowed, bloodlust clouding his judgement as he ignored my gun barrel pointed right at him.

BLAM! FWOOSH!

His flaming bottle exploded showering him in an inferno, hurtling to the ground screaming, and smashing right into the dust with a gruesome bonecrack.

“And let there be light.” I smirked at his blazing corpse. Looking at the campfire, I saw Tendercolt was trotting up to me in a limp, several bullet holes covering his body.

“Ugh... what’s that burning smell?” He panted out, causing me to laugh in a wheeze.

It took us a couple of minutes for Tendercolt to telekinetically remove the bullets and heal

our wounds using four of our nine combined potions. We searched the bodies looting from all the corpses another couple hundred bottle caps and various ammo. The assault rifle the pegasus had was strapped to his body when he was charred to death, leaving it worthless, even for parts.

Checking the cabin gave us no sign of our missing earth pony mare, just a table, some molded stained mattresses, sitting pillows, a lamp, a crate with one bottle of flammable liquid, and... a safe! It was locked much to my disappointment, I turned to Tendercolt expectantly.

He returned my look in disbelief asking, "You can't pick a lock, mister mercenary?"

Narrowing my eyes at him, "Kid I'm really good at doing what I'm about to do to you right now, unless you open that safe." My voice had no hint of doubt.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, what kind of mercenary can't unlock a safe or at least work a computer terminal? The kind of mercenary that is supposed to do his job, killing. I had many ways to end life, including with my bare hooves, but I never had a computer to use and I just wasn't good with a screwdriver and bobby pin.

Tendercolt set to work on the safe as I looked around for any clues to where that missing merchant was. Not finding a damned thing, I walked back to the door and saw the restrooms.

"Got it!" Tendercolt exclaimed happily, making me turn and approach the opened safe. I saw a bunch of pre-war bits, a book with the title "Lying Trollestia(?) Style" a picture of a gilded sun on the cover, but the strangest thing I saw was a... snowglobe? It had big yellow letters saying "Welcome to Flutter Springs Recreational Park" with a strange unicorn looking mare with wavy cartoonish hair, beady eyes, and an odd stable-tec suit on. There was a not destroyed picturesque setting of Flutter Springs nestled in it's small canyon, undoubtedly before the war. On the bottom of the snowglobe in tiny black print were the words, "*All the birdies and the critters, They will love me, big and small.*"

Odd. I put it in my saddlebag and told Tendercolt, "Let's check out the restrooms and bring that lamp with you." He complied, lighting the lamp and bringing with us into the Stallions side first. The lamp poured light into the messy room as there was two broken stalls to the left and a double faucet sink to our right.

Turning left on the last stall, we saw the unconscious body of an indigo earth pony mare with a... shredded... navy blue mane, her jacketed barding was slashed and ripped with many different stains. I slung her over on her side and saw her cutie-mark was gone! Instead a nasty fresh blood-stained scar was in it's place with a burning skull painted over it?

Something wasn't adding up, but Tendercolts horn glowed slightly and he touched her, jolting her awake, her eyes completely bloodshot. "Wha? Who?" She gasped out, jerking her

head around in a perplexed and drugged look.

"She looks drugged." I stated turning to Tendercolt who was eyeing her thoroughly.

"I'd have to agree, she's pretty messed up... Hey!" Tendercolt stomped a hoof, "Can you hear me? Do you understand?" She stared at Tendercolt dumbly, "Do you remember your name?" Inquiring her further.

She licked her lips and said weakly, "S..Stacks.." We looked at each other briefly, then turned back as she asked, "W-Who are you guys?"

Tendercolt smiled slightly, "We were hired by Globie and Bartilee to rescue you from these raiders." Her eyes went wide at his answer, but she didn't respond, "Can you stand or move?" She nodded. Tendercolt and I got up, only to hear a faint weak groan in the mare's section of the restroom, causing us to face the wall with the sink.

"Raider?" Tendercolt quietly asked wide-eyed.

"No, sounds like anoth-" The itching on my left shoulder made me stop talking and instinctively spin back to Stacks, back hoofing her across the face, making her drop a serrated rusted knife to the ground.

Tendercolt turned in shock and saw she was up against the toilet stunned, "What in Equestria?!" He exclaimed.

"She was about to stab you with that knife!" I pulled out my revolver and trained it on her, "What the hell are you doing?" I demanded angrily, but she just lunged for the knife.

BLAM!

She slammed against the toilet, cracking it, as my bullet pierced her right shoulder. Tendercolts horn flared brilliantly this time, touching her quickly and making her entire body rigid, staring at the ceiling. I looked at him in astonishment while questioning, "Luna's luscious lips, what did you just do?"

"It's an anesthetic spell." He panted, "Not a very good one, but it'll keep her still for the time being."

I loaded another round into my magnum, then started to trot out of the stallions room, "Let's find out what's in the other room, while psycho bitch can't try to kill us." Tendercolt nodded as we trotted into the mares restroom.

Oh Goddesses... the mares room was similar to the stallions, except there was only

crumbled cement where the sink and one of the stalls should have been. The remaining stall was suspiciously intact with a bungee cord tied to the handle and a rebar piece sticking out of the pile next to it. The stench of decaying flesh was rank in the air, a couple of mutilated pony bodies laid at the very end, guts strewn about, eyeballs ripped from the sockets, and one of them was headless. So much blood was smeared everywhere, most of it dark brown, I heard Tendercolt losing his stomach contents behind me.

We approached the stall and heard another weak moan, emanating from it. The tone and volume of the voice sorta sounded... oh no... please Celestia, let me be wrong, oh please. My mind was racing as I unfastened the bungee from the handle and... Goddesses NO! A battered and bloodied orange earth filly was crumpled in a pool of blood on the stalls floor! She had several lacerations and her blank flank was heavily stained.

My mind spun, becoming light-headed. I stepped back as Tendercolt rushed in, his horn glowing bright. The blurred images of the past came flooding into my psyche... muffled laughter and screaming... followed by a wave of nausea, I turned and quickly emptied my own stomach on the rubble. I wiped my mouth and rushed back in the stall.

"Come on sweetie wake up!" Tendercolt was desperately crying, his horn shimmered and he touched the filly's chest.

Her weak coughs were like songs to my ears, as her eyes fluttered open. She looked up with half opened eyes, "P..Please... no more.." she spoke weakly, Tendercolt produced a potion, tilted her head forward, and gently poured it's liquid down her muzzle.

Thankfully her pale coat was slowly returning with more color and her eyes became less glassy. She stared at us and started crying softly. I cradled her in my chest rocking her slowly, "It's okay child, they won't hurt you anymore."

She looked at me, a deep gash across her left cheek and asked, "Is the bad purple ladypony gone?"

The bad purple ladypony? She couldn't mean... I looked at Tendercolt and gave him the filly, got up and strode to the stallions room, finding Stacks still paralyzed in the same spot, only now it looked like she was able to control her face as she looked at me with a wicked sneer.

"I'm giving you one brief chance to explain yourself... and for your sake it better be good." I told her, my tone getting deep and dark.

"What did Globie tell you? That I was captured?" She spoke, a sick grin creeping across her face. "Were you hired to rescue her poor little damsel in distress?" Her snide comments began to make my blood boil.

"You weren't captured?" I asked with a mix of anger and disgust.

"No I wasn't you hog-fucker, I left them to join my new brothers and sisters." She spat her words like venom at me, "I was given three glorious tests by Hellfire and I passed them all wonderfully!" Her voice went giddy like she had found a million caps, "First I had to prove I could take their punishment by getting the weakness beat out of me. Then I had to prove I could be as cold as them by finding an innocent and dragging them back here for some fun, lucky for me I found that pathetic mother and her foal near Flutter Springs." My eyes widened when she mentioned that.

"You... You didn't.."

"Oh yes..." She knickered, "I killed that weak bitch and took her brat back here, had some fun with her myself." My eyes welled with tears at such brutality, but she seemed to enjoy that so she continued, "For my last test, I had to prove I was loyal to no pony but them, so I led a squad of my new friends personally to the trade route of those pathetic fools, so they could be slaughtered in glorious combat."

"Why?" I tuned and saw Tendercolt was standing in the room with us, his face was filled with sorrow. "Why would you turn on your friends and lover? Why join a raider tribe?"

She stopped smiling so wide and coldly said, "Because I was tired of being scared and weak all the time. Why be on the losing side, when you can be strong and be on the winning team?"

My anger reached its limit, I couldn't stand here while this depraved monster still existed. My hooves started pummeling her chest, snapping and breaking bone with each successive strike, making her cough blood.

"Stamper!" Tendercolts horrified voice shrieked, "Stop! Don't kill her!" I stopped only to grip her mane in my teeth and dragged her screaming in pain past Tendercolt, "What are you doing?!" He cried out again.

I didn't stop. I continued to drag her until we reached one of the firepits and dropped her on the ground with a heavy thud. Tendercolt bolted out behind me, seeing me walk into the cabin. I found the last remaining fire bottle the pegasus raider used on me and I trotted back to Stacks' putrid body, her very presence was vile, making my fury explode like a bomb.

"Stamper don't do this!" Tendercolt rushed and used his magic in an effort to stop me, but all it did was make me angrily shove him away, nearly making him topple over.

When Stacks saw me approach, her eyes widened in fear. I flipped her on the dying embers and she whinnied in agony, her eyes bulged up at my face. I knelt down to her face and

asked in a malevolent tone, “**Do you feel strong now?**”

Her pained cries of torment had no relevance to me, as I shattered the bottle on her, engulfing her in flames. I watched her burn until her screams faded, my expression never changing. I wasn't happy or sad, I felt hollow, like a part of me had died with her.

Tendercolt was crying quietly when I turned to him, the only words I spoke as I passed him, “I told you I wasn't a good pony.”

War is a game that is played with a smile. If you can't smile, grin. If you can't grin, keep out of the way till you can.

Footnote: New Perk unveiled - Run 'n gun - Halved spread with one-handed ranged weapons while running or walking.

New Companion perk unveiled - Better Healing - Regain +20% more health from all consumable sources

New Trait unveiled - Built to Destroy - 3% critical chance, condition decays 15% faster.

A/N: Huge thanks to the great Kkat for creating this awesome universe and thanks to all the exceptionally talented and supportive Pony wastelanders on the FO Equestria: Side Stories Compilation.