

The muted howling of the wind bled through the walls, accompanied by distant peals of thunder and the rattling of the windows. We had covered the inside of our one-room shack with as much fabric as we could find, hoping to dampen the drafts, but still a current chilled the air and set the lantern swinging. In tandem, shadows danced and contorted on the rusted sheet metal of the ceiling, combining with the noise of the storm to invoke the color of a fairy tale.

I watched the shapes flicker with tired eyes. My body yearned for rest, but I had long since accepted sleep's elusion. With my luck, the rain would arrive soon and conspire with the leaky ceiling to make us both miserable.

My older brother Castor lay on the other half of the cot, facing away from me. He hadn't made a noise in a while, but his breathing had yet to fall into the deep rhythm of a dreamer's.

"You asleep?" I murmured.

A few seconds passed.

"Castor?"

"Go to sleep, Pollux," he grumbled, voice scratchy with sleep.

"I can't," I admitted.

"Can you at least *pretend*?"

I paused for a moment, staring at the dancing shadows. "I feel... restless, Castor. Like I should be doing something, but I don't know what."

"Sleeping?" Castor muttered.

I shot him an annoyed look, which was completely lost on the back of his head. "I don't know."

Castor let out a reluctant sigh and turned around to face me. His dark blue eyes were mostly open, but they threatened to shut at any moment. "Alright, what's bothering you?" he said, tiredly. "Out with it, and then maybe we can get some rest."

"Well," I said, mulling. "Ever since we heard about the Stable Dweller on the radio, I've been getting this feeling that I'm... wasting my time. You know? Like I do nothing all day but wait for time to pass, then I go to bed and do the same thing the next day."

"So you're bored?"

"No," I responded hastily. "Well, maybe."

“There’s always more work that needs to be done,” Castor said. “Just take more shifts if you want.”

“But that’s the problem!” I rolled over and addressed the ceiling once more. “I don’t want my greatest calling to be... sorting rations and counting dusty tools. I go to work everyday dragging my hooves and there’s *always* more boxes coming in and I just... it seems like I’m going to be doing this *forever*. It feels so...”

I looked at my brother, who was watching me silently but sympathetically. “...Pointless.”

“We gotta bring in the caps somehow,” he murmured.

“I know, I know,” I acknowledged, but my thoughts ventured onward. “Maybe... maybe I need to get out of town. You know, like, find a change in scenery.”

Castor snorted. “Yeah,” he muttered, “I hear the dead trees are beautiful this time of year in New Appleloosa.”

“Oh, shut up.”

We fell into silence. I went back to watching the shadows leap, but my mind was elsewhere, wandering down a dusty and broken road, something exciting just past the horizon. I had been nurturing a certain idea for a while now. I knew my brother would disapprove, but I could hardly bear the weight of my thoughts.

“*Maybe...*”

“Great,” grumbled Castor, “I thought you’d fallen asleep.”

“Maybe... you know, just a hypothetical...” I shifted under the ragged blanket. “What if I joined the Wasteland Marauders?”

“Not happening.” The playfulness in Castor’s voice was gone in an instant.

“Castor—”

“It’s *dangerous* out there, Pollux.”

I looked into my brother’s eyes, which were now perfectly open, and I suddenly felt desperate. “I mean, wouldn’t it be neat? Wouldn’t it be *meaningful*? Protecting ponies and, you know, *fighting raiders*—”

“Listen to me. The wasteland isn’t some sort of adventure,” said Castor. He propped himself up on one foreleg. “I get it, you’ve never been outside of Colterville, and you’re bored, and... curious, and whatever, but you can’t—”

“No, you *don’t* get it,” I insisted, sitting up on the bed. My thoughts roused me, made my heart pump, made it impossible to lie still. “Listen. Every week we hear about some new tragedy on the radio, the town never has enough to eat, the air is always filled with dust... it sucks. Everything sucks!” I looked into his eyes, seeking for some sign of comprehension. “Something needs to *change*. The wasteland needs to change, you know? But I’m just stuck here, following the same meaningless routine over and over until I keel over in boredom!” I looked at his expression for some sign of comprehension. “You get it?”

Silence fell once more in our little hut. Castor looked down, preventing me from reading his expression, and the windows began rattling again with a vengeance.

Eventually, he sighed. “Yeah. I know, Pollux. The wasteland, it’s... depressing. We all want things to change.” Finally, he met my gaze. “But joining the Marauders isn’t the right way to do it.”

I huffed, unconvinced. For a moment I thought I had gotten through to him.

“Look, Pollux, I’ve been out there.”

Castor put one hoof on my shoulder, making sure I absorbed what he was about to say. I listened silently.

“When you’re travelling through the wasteland, you get up day after day, and you don’t think ‘*oh, what’s for breakfast?*’ you think ‘*oh, I hope I don’t die today.*’ There’s always some mutated wildlife or sadistic raiders that want your throat, and there’s never any guarantee of shelter, food, clean water... anything. You barely get by. This town is a blessing,” he said with a tone of finality, “and you don’t know how lucky you are to have it.”

A dozen retorts flew through my mind, but I stifled my indignation. It was pointless to argue more. “Alright. I get it.”

“You sure?” retorted Castor. “You’re gonna get this idea out of your head?”

“Sure,” I muttered.

Castor’s face was skeptical, but he grunted in acknowledgement and settled back into bed. “Get some sleep, Pollux. You’ll feel better in the morning.”

“Dear Goddesses Celestia and Luna. To be honest, I’ve never really believed in you. And they say it doesn’t work if you don’t believe. But... I’m desperate here. Please, help us. Let Castor and the others be safe. [pause] I don’t know if you’re real, but there is one thing I’ve always believed. If a Goddess exists... if somepony is watching over us... I want to think they’re good. I want to think that anyone that has existed for so long and has so much power would care about each and every one of us, and that it would break their heart to see the wasteland tearing our lives apart. So I believe – if you do exist – I believe you truly care about us, and that you’re listening to me, whether or not I believe in you. So... if you’re there. If there’s anything you can do. Please.”

It was a very hot day. Since daybreak the sun had been sending its burning rays into the abandoned town, suffocating the air and reducing the earth to a lifeless desert. It was approaching noon, and the meager shade from the ruined buildings had all but disappeared. My throat felt like it was coated in dust.

I aimlessly kicked at the ground, sending a plume of sand into a startled flurry. I traced the path of one particle as it wandered, catching the sunlight and becoming a suspended, firey speck in the air. It gradually settled to the parched earth, where it was lost in the sand. I kicked again.

"You should be more alert," said Castor from his place on the bench beside me.

"Alert for what?" I dismissed. "We've been out here for hours and nothing's happened."

"It's only been thirty minutes."

"You know what I mean," I muttered, and kicked again. Castor rolled his eyes and looked away.

The air was sweltering, and the heat hung heavily overhead. I wished Cloud Weave was here to distract us as we waited. He always knew how to—

No, I shouldn't think about that.

I looked up at the crumbling, multi-story building that Mercury and Truck had disappeared into. Much of the brick exterior had collapsed, leaving in many places only bare metal supports. It reminded me of a skeleton, or maybe a hollow corpse, decayed by time and emptied by scavengers like so many fruit flies. There was no motion or sound.

"Danger can approach at any moment, Pollux," said Castor. "If you're not alert at all times, hostiles might take you by surprise."

"I know, Castor!" I said, with a harsh release of air. "You've told me a bajillion times already."

"Then why haven't you heard me yet?" demanded Castor.

I didn't respond, hunching my shoulders and returning to the dancing of the dust motes. With a frustrated grumble, my brother turned away.

If Cloud Weaver was here, I thought, he would diffuse the situation with a well-placed joke, or—

Mercury and Truck were taking a long time, I thought. I hoped there wasn't anything dangerous in there. Looking up, I decided the harsh sun was too far in the sky for my liking; if they weren't back soon, we might not make it to the next town by nightfall.

The air was oppressive. The heat surrounded me, making it hard to breathe.

"I don't think Truck is alert all the time," I said suddenly. "She's loud, too. Doesn't that attract hostiles? Why don't you tell *her* to be alert?"

"Truck knows when to be quiet," he responded, not looking at me.

"But is she alert all the time?"

"...Well, she's alert when it matters. Truck is a smart pony. She knows what she's doing."

I knew I was being difficult. I knew he had given me good advice. If Cloud was here—

I crossed my forelegs defiantly. "Oh, so does that make me a dumb pony? Do you think I'm too dumb to care for myself?"

"I didn't say that!"

"Well it sure sounded like it."

Castor's eyes narrowed. "Why are you being so difficult, Pollux?"

"Why are you treating me like a foal?"

"Maybe because you're acting like one!"

"How can you expect me to be alert all the time anyway?" I shot back. "How can you be on edge all day without going crazy?"

"How can you *not* be on edge all day when Cloud Weave died because of our carelessness?" Castor demanded, his voice rising to a yell.

He locked his angry eyes on mine, and I halted, my retort faltering before it could leave my mouth.

The air was intolerable. It was like a sea of thick, viscous heat, sucking the air out of me, crushing me under its weight. I wanted to scream, or run far away, or crawl under the bench to get away from Celestia's accursed sun. But I didn't do any of that.

"...I'm sorry, Pollux," Castor murmured. "I'm just trying to keep you safe."

"I know," I whispered.

I looked back at the ground, trying to focus on the dust, but it all looked awfully blurry.

“Are you crying?”

“No.”

After a few moments, Castor slid over and wrapped a foreleg around me. I rested my head against his shoulder.

I watched my tears drip onto the warped wood of the bench and rapidly evaporate under the sun. “Shouldn’t be wasting water on tears,” I muttered, eliciting an amused noise from Castor.

Time passed quietly as the sun sizzled on, and eventually the crying stopped. My face was probably red and puffy, which I hated. I was glad none of the others were here to see it.

“I was alert, you know,” I muttered.

Castor was silent.

“When the raiders attacked. I saw them. I was ready. But I just... I couldn’t do anything.”

“It’s okay, Pollux.”

I opened my mouth, as if to protest, but nothing came out.

“Listen, Pollux,” said Castor. “If you ever need to talk about it. I’m here for you. You don’t have to deal with it on your own.”

I looked into his concerned eyes, and I was certain that he knew. That he understood the unbearable pangs of guilt I felt whenever I thought about Cloud Weaver, which was all the time. He always seemed to know.

But I couldn’t bring myself to admit my weakness, to admit that the guilt was slowly eating me up, that I *hadn’t* been as alert as I should have been just now, as if saying it out loud might cause another Cloud Weaver. On some level I knew that was ridiculous, but I still held the conviction. I had to act strong. Else how many more ponies would die because of me?

Castor looked at me sadly, and I wondered how much of that he knew as well.

The sky dimmed. Both of us looked up, where by some miracle a rogue cloud had passed in front of the sun. Slowly, gradually, the heavy blanket of heat lifted, as if peeled away by the magic of the Goddesses. I took a relieved breath and put on a faint smile despite myself.

“What do you think happens to ponies when they die?” Castor asked me, still staring at the cloud.

I gave him a startled look. “What?”

Castor shrugged. “Just thinking.”

“Well, I dunno. Why do you ask?”

“Because. I hope Cloud is somewhere nice now.”

“Come on,” I scoffed. “We both know the Goddesses Celestia and Luna are a myth.”

Castor shrugged again. “You never know. It wouldn’t be the strangest myth that happened to be true.”

The door to the building burst open with a cloud of dust, making both of us jump. “Yo, Pollux, Castor, look what we found!” came Truck’s enthusiastic voice. I rubbed my eyes furiously, trying to hide the evidence of my tears before the others noticed. Truck wore a wide grin, her oversized saddlebags filled to bursting. Mercury, on the other hoof, wore a satisfied smirk, holding aloft in his maroon magic a six-pack of Sparkle-Cola.

Castor trotted over, jovially congratulating the pair as the drinks were distributed. I smiled and telekinetically accepted one of the glass bottles, but I didn’t really feel like cheering. I twisted off the cap and eagerly took a sip, allowing the sugary beverage to refresh my aching throat. By Luna’s mane, it felt like I hadn’t drunk in years. I closed the top quickly, intending to make it last.

As the others celebrated, I cast my eyes up at the landscape. Alert.