Fallout Equestria: Sunrise Stardust and The Burned World

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by JasonSilver725

Summary

War has changed, but Sunrise Stardust has a plan to make Equestria great again. He simply needs to stage a coup in his overpopulated bunker, lead his Black Stars to victory against the Tribals, Raiders, and worse who made the Equestrian Wasteland their home, and take back Baltimore, the heart of pre-war Equestria's steel industry, all in under two months.

Challenge accepted!
Past

Once upon a time, in the magical land of Equestria, there were two regal sisters who ruled together and created harmony in all the land.

To do this, the eldest used her Unicorn powers to raise the sun at dawn.

The younger brought out the moon to begin the night.

Thus, the two sisters maintained balance for their kingdom and their subjects, all the different types of ponies.

Then, everything changed when the Zebra Nation attacked.

For as the two sisters made their country great over the course of their long and prosperous reign, lesser countries became resentful. The ponies relished and played in the day Princess Celestia brought forth, and slept peacefully during the nights under blankets of stars painted by Princess Luna. Meanwhile, Griffons were still clawing each other's throats out over petty disagreements regarding who could sit on the biggest throne atop the highest peak of the tallest frozen, barren mountain. Dragons were still goading each other into reaching new and ever-greater levels of stupidity by day and sleeping atop mountains of stolen treasure by night. Zebra tribes were still attacking each other, casting imaginary curses upon each other, throwing spears at each other, killing each other, exploiting and enslaving each other, and killing each other, as if the whole species had decided to hold off on that whole "Leave the Tribal Stage and enter the Civilization Stage" thing behind until only one backwards tribe remained on its continent, and that tribe would be left with no excuses and no scapegoats.

Say what you will about Griffons, their foul moods, their poor tempers, their frequent heats, and everything else that makes them what they are, but they at least have some accomplishments to their name, even though their culture and its fetishization of material possessions and how tough you can act in public suffered a complete societal collapse when, if experts are to be believed, their king lost his shiny idol of shininess and with it, the respect of his Griffons. Without the virtues of honesty, loyalty, laughter(Could somepony remind me again why this one wasn't given a more specific yet dignified name, like optimism or heart or cheer?), kindness, generosity or the magic of friendship, the whole species descended into the worst depths of greed and egotistical selfishness, constantly suffering at the claws of its own kind while what goods each Griffon hoarded and kept from circulation served no purpose to the greater whole.

Zebras, on the other hoof... Do they have an excuse? Did they ever have an excuse? What can excuse the things they have done? Was there ever a point in history when they were anything more than what they were on the day the Megaspells were cast? When that dark day is the high point of your species as a whole, what does it say about your species and the land it occupies? How could their culture collapse when they had no culture to begin with, their "Trained" soldiers could still easily pass for common thieving and raping bandits and pirates, and their tyrannical totalitarian mad king was a monster that ordered the deaths of Wonderbolts and Foals alike, still stuck in that stone-age "Be the biggest monster or the bigger monsters will get you" mentality?

I'll get to them later. In any case... for the longest time, things were great for the ponies of Equestria. It's just a shame Ponykind's greatness never extended beyond its borders. Perhaps, if other beings were ready to accept friendship into their lives, things would have turned out differently.

One fateful day, Nightmare Moon was turned to the dark side, determined to make the night last
forever. Princess Celestia handled this in a single afternoon, sealing the magically-corrupted being away in the moon for a thousand years. Experts believe the "Seal within X" function of the Elements of Harmony can only designate a duration in increments of a thousand years. Despite how short eternal night lasted, the Zebra Empire decided this one scary day was the perfect catalyst for some new scary stories to keep the other Zebra foals up at night. Some new Porquoi story to tell the stupid foals why you didn't get eaten by Jaguars in the forest or attack enemy tribes at night, and why you instead slept in mud huts at night. And that subspecies decided the stories of an evil night monster with stars that were actually far-off lights glinting and glimmering on the edges of alien superweapons simply must have been true, because other Zebras said it was. I swear, Sheep would laugh at these things if they knew how.

One thousand years later, Nightmare Moon returned. The brilliant Twilight Sparkle squashed this threat in under an hour before a single pony died from the horrible famines everlasting night would cause, seeking out the other five Elements of Harmony and purifying the magic-induced corruption from Nightmare Moon's body, turning her pure once again. Despite threatening to destroy the world, and attempting to do so, solely to sate her own ego and wounded feelings, Princess Celestia forgave her. After all, this was something Nightmare Moon tried to do, not Princess Luna. And Princess Luna... She was not furious at her sister for sending her to the moon, she was apologetic for forcing her horn, for putting Princess Celestia in a position where she had to choose between her friendship with her sister and her duty to her ponies.

The two made up, and everything was fine.

Then, everything changed when the Zebra nation attacked. Only the Elements of Harmony, masters of Honesty, Loyalty, Laughter, Generosity, Kindness, and Magic could stop them. But when the world needed them most, they fucked up.

There really is no way to put a more positive or eloquent spin on that, and to use a less vulgar term would be a disservice to the enormity of their mistake and the lost lives of all who suffered because of it. They fucked up, and then everything went to shit. The Elements of Harmony were magical warriors, not politicians or researchers, and certainly not experts in matters of war by any stretch of the imagination. This was something few of them were ready for, certainly not whoever was responsible for those stupid dedicated designated polka-playing machines. Experts believe one of those Ministry Mares even descended into drug addiction, the degenerate. They would not be ready to manage something of this scale during the best of times, but during a global crisis such as the Zebra Problem?

Simply put, while the Elements of Harmony could remove magical corruption, they could not remove the darker, more subtle evils, evils that were, for some beings, normal. They could not purge the evil from Zebrakind.

Some Zebra operatives posing as "Experts" claim that the war between Equestria and the Zebra Empire was actually started by ponykind. These "Experts" then argue against the necessity of that war, and repeatedly insult Equestrian society for thinking its virtues of harmony and friendship were in any way better than the virtueless and worthless society of Zebrakind, as if the simple tribal doctrine of "Look after one's kin" could possibly have an edge over a society that naturally looks after its own without needing the tribalist mentality to offer "If you do this, you get to lord it over the ponies" as a reward. I'm glad those spies were silenced by the Ministries before their lies could fool any fools. But even if those "Experts" were correct, I point to the economic position Equestria was in, and then, I ask: If I found a group of ponies in a desert, dying slowly from thirst, would it be moral of me to charge them all the money they and their families and everypony in their country of origin had for the life-giving liquid their bodies depended on? Would it be moral for me to charge them so much money, it put them into a lifetime of debt that would ensure they would spend their
lives financially enslaved to me? Would it be moral for me to charge them so much, the younger mares and stallions of their family would have to whore themselves out to keep up with the ever-growing inflation on the loan I would give them, so that they could afford my water? Would it be moral for some of those ponies to attack me and try to take the water by force? If they did, would it be moral for me to wipe the whole group out in self-defense? If no fighting broke out, and if the group's leader politely insisted on a better price, or begged for one, would it be moral for me to attack him over the perceived insolence, or kill a few hundred of his country's soldiers while he was forced to watch? At the end of the day, that was why the war had to happen, and why the war got so bad so quickly. Ponykind needed coal from the Zebra lands, but they still thought they could solve all their problems with friendship and kindness. Ponykind was ready to drag the planet and everypony onto it into a bright new future of prosperity and magic, and they forgot not everypony. Well, everypony wanted that, but they forgot not everyTHING wanted that. Meanwhile, a culture that had barely left its tribal ways of killing and exploiting and enslaving other tribes saw a new tribe it could exploit, the tribe of Po-nee-kind. And while necessity may have started the war, morality continued it and escalated it.

I doubt I need to remind anypony what happened to the Wonderbolts that died at the hooves of the Zebra "Pirates" the mad Zebra king harbored and aided. If that king was not corrupt, if that king was not evil, he would have helped ponykind take those pirates down for making his species look bad. And that's me being Equestrian and assuming the Pirates somehow able to kill Wonderbolts weren't actually drugged-up potion-chugging Zebra soldiers all along. And then, there's Littlehorn. I doubt I need to remind anypony what happened to Littlehorn. Go on, blame a simple miscommunication for the inherent evils of Zebrakind, claim the poor idiots just didn't know better. Blame a language barrier in a world where translation spells exist and ponies would happily give you a "How to speak Equestrian" book if asked. You probably wouldn't even need to visit a library. Which is good, because all those libraries lie in ruins right now, thanks to Zebras. Blame circumstance. Blame a misunderstanding. Blame the whims of fate that put genocidal Zebras in charge of stupid, cowardly, genocidal Zebras that would rather massacre a school if asked than turn around and shoot the monsters of a higher rank. Blame anything other than Zebras themselves, or the culture they followed, if you are so inclined.

Some actions... Some actions set a precedent. If your neighbours swear, it's ok for you to swear when you demand they stop before foals have their innocent ears forever tainted. If the foe you are fighting fights dirty, it's ok for you to fight dirty, because you need to end this fight one way or another before he causes serious damage to your body, and on a moral level, he must be punished for his evil. If the rules of Hoofball are changed, even this change occurs in the middle of a game, you need to adapt to those new rules and win, not stay stuck in your own ways and complain about your opponent's "Cheating", then insist you won a moral victory by losing the real battle and letting down all who relied upon you for the sake of your feelings, be they gamblers or fans or foals or anypony else who put their trust in you. And yet, time and time again, despite the ever-escalating evil actions of Zebras, from disguising their soldiers as unaffiliated pirates and holding ponies hostage to kill the small covert team of rescuers to massacring schools full of foals, even responding to the first healing Megaspell's usage by resuming a war instead of letting the victors keep it, ponies never responded in kind. Ponies never sunk to their level, even though they would only have to do so temporarily, to destroy the mad brute and then go back to their songs and sciences. Ponies never acted like Zebras. Zebras might claim we did, but Zebras claimed a lot of things during the war. Wasn't their favoured method of damage control to claim Littlehorn was a secret training ground for the next generation of dangerously powerful battle mages, full of evil dark magic getting forced into the heads of poor mindbroken foals that needed mercy-killing, and burning down this school full of unarmed civilian foals too young to fuck and too young to fight and too young to die/i was somehow justified because some cowardly idiot Zebras fleeing their homeland got caught and killed by Luna's guards for being a member of the Zebra species, a species that showed the world what it was worth in Littlehorn?
This species is dangerously evil, and should be wiped out for the good of the world. Or, this species is dangerously stupid, and should be wiped out for the safety of the world. If you disagree with either of these statements, look outside.

Outside... where the skyscrapers our ancestors toiled in the sun to build have been reduced to charred husks, their corpses picked at by scavengers desperately searching for their next meal in a world where food should be as plentiful as dirt and love. Outside, where the trees their ancestors toiled in the sun to plant have been wiped away, to never again give shade or shelter to Ponykind. Outside, where the land their ancestors fought for and died to protect is scorched, salted, and saturated with tainted, evil magic.

Outside, where the end result of showing kindness to your enemy is evident, a scarred world giving us all one last grim reminder: You can't trust a Zebra as far as you can throw the grenade that'd kill them, no matter how far that may be.

The Griffons claimed they waged war to gather wealth and glory. The Pegasi went from protectors demanding tribute to a staunch ally in times of war, until the day their descendants in Cloudsdale shamed them. The Dragon Lord Torch shaped inhospitable and infertile land and a populace of greedy fools into one colossal fortress, all to protect his treasures.

And the size, scale, and tactics of those conflicts will never be seen again.

As lone wanderers, mad tribals, and rabid beasts outside these walls fight with all their might over the last scraps of meat on the carcass of a dead world, one thing is clear.

War... has changed.

-Sunrise Stardust, Age 8 – Zebras, Not Even Once.

Excellent work, as always! I see you learned much from my lectures. It's nice to see a foal as rational, mature, patriotic, and honest as yourself. In addition, I see you're still working on your problem with run-on sentences. No matter, I'm sure you'll improve with time. Your usage of adult language was shocking, but it seems that was your intention. Still, avoid overusing such foul language, for the more it is heard from one mouth, the more of its presence and shock value is lost.

Top marks.

-Chalk Marks, Teacher of Class 7.

Somewhere in the Equestrian Wasteland, under a black-charred sky, in a lonely building in a ruined city that stood like a wordless grave marker for those who died there, an old cassette player was still playing the old, forgotten song near the skeleton of the one who'd chosen to loop that song.

"My little pony, my little pony…"

All was silent and still in this monument to death, and the singer's long note rose alone in an echoing hell, miles away from me.

Me, I was somewhere else, miles underground and ready to change that.

But first, some backstory.

I was a young lad, too young to have any solid memories or thoughts prior to this, when I knew what I wanted to do with my life, and what I wanted to be.
I wanted to be awesome.

I wanted to be incredible, and when I was young, it was easy to swear to myself that I'd do whatever it took to become incredible.

And the path to becoming awesome seemed so simple. Read a lot, work out a lot, but not too much, schmooze some higher-ups when the time was right, learn an instrument, make the greatest band of all time… It all seemed so easy when I wrote it down on imaginary paper using an imaginary quill pen in my own mind, so long ago.

I wanted to be remembered. I wanted my name in the history books.

And you can see for yourself how that turned out. That's why I'm writing this. I want to tell you how all of this went down, from the start. Read on, unless you're too young to hear words such as pussy and fuck, and other terms I try to use sparingly, as overusing them dulls their fucking impact. I believe that when they come out of nowhere, like a smear of crap on an otherwise-nice painting, that's when they're the most noticeable. But on a painting of shit, who'd notice one more smear of the real thing?

In any case, this isn't a tale you can tell your foals, or your grandmare. Unless your grandmare is into sweeping epics with more words than half her literary collection combined, horrible equine violence, great wars, and cute ponies getting stupid manestyles and worse Cutie Marks and dying like mutated flies at the hands of cute and traditional and moral ponies with guns. This is a tale I personally consider for mature mares and stallions only, because it's got a lot of violence and more than a few bad words. This isn't a tale you will have heard before, and it contains many revelations about the world I come from, and what happened to the world that created my own. This tale might not be a tale that'll ever get told outside of this book. This is a tale of love, of hate, of hope and hopelessness, of victory and defeat, of great gain and greater loss, of war changing constantly and yet never truly changing at all. This is a tale with many words, many names, many faces, and many lives lost. This is a tale of great heroism, and great evil. This is a tale of brilliance, horror, glory, victory, failure, the past, and the future. This is a tale of… Oh, to hell with this.

I'm sorry, but to be honest with you, I always hated it when the characters in a work of fiction started to talk directly talk to you, the reader. Even if it was only for one scene, at the start of the story. I hated it more when the scene included some self-indulgent 'This really happened! This is a true story, I swear! It happened to me, and it could happen to you too!' disclaimer, which it often did, whenever the books that I've read in my lifetime felt like getting 'Meta', the code word in pseudointellectual literary circles for 'Too lazy to try and maintain the reader's suspension of disbelief and unjustifiably smug about being that lazy about such a vital part of the literature-reading experience'. Even when the disclaimer was modified to something slightly more plausible, such as 'It could have happened to me! Maybe! And it could happen to you too! I'm writing this from the perspective of someone who researched these events a lot and seeks to recreate them faithfully, so if anything seems stupid or contrived or poorly-written, that's why!' or 'These events happened, I only changed the names of the people, and assorted important places, and some dates!' or even 'This really happened, in the universe that I am from! I am going to sell this book in your universe for profit, and to warn you about morality and stuff!', I still found it distasteful. But most of all…

Most of all, I hated when stories would tell you, right at the start, that in the end, the hero wins. Or loses. Either way, it's annoying. It kills the tension, and your ability to put your doubt aside and pretend the writer might actually kill the main character off halfway through an absurdly long story. I have never, in my life, read a book that pulls any of these things off well.

Perhaps that's also why I hate stories written in a first-person perspective so much, and why I swore
to myself that if I ever wrote a story about my life, I would write it in the Omniscient Third-Person Perspective, writing about scenes I wasn't there for by using historical records, first-hand and second-hand accounts, and many other methods of information-gathering. I was also really tempted to edit the scene after this one, forcing it to include a scene that never happened, a scene in which I tell some other pony all the important information a new reader might need to know about my world and everything important within it. It would certainly feel a lot more organic than a character just talking directly to the reader. I even had a plan on how I'd give you an infodump about Pip-Bucks: I'd write about myself talking to another pony about the latest Pip-Buck models, while arguing over the features different models had and which one was better. Then, some other pony would show up, and we'd debate ideology and philosophy. And it would seem so natural, you wouldn't even notice that we were talking about events every foal learned about as if we were explaining them to an audience who didn't even know the difference between Laser and Plasma weapons.

Note: And if you don't know the difference, Laser weapons are like guns but better, as they fire armour-penetrating beams of intense light instead of little lead chunks with built-in explosive 'Primers' in them. Plasma weapons are stronger and slower, firing big, unstable blobs of green energy that miss what they're aimed at more often than not. You can dodge a Plasma bolt, but you can't dodge light. Either way, both types of weapons tend to take the same types of ammunition: Energy Cells. Or MicroFusion Cells. Or Electron Charge Packs. They usually take one of those three energy types, so it makes logistics quite a bit easier.

Yes, I had many plans on how to effectively and naturally convey a few tens of thousands of words of exposition to the reader, without it feeling like you were in some kind of school, taking notes for something there would soon be a test on.

But no, I don't want to make this ahistorical. And if I'm going to tell you about who I am, what I did, and what I'm about to do… Well, I'll just have to get this scene over with as soon as possible.

Here I write the story of who I am, what I did, and why I did it. The story of what had to be broken, and the story of what had to be built. I will not call myself a hero, but I will also not obnoxiously wax lyrical about how I'm totally not a hero. I offer unto you everything that made my adventure what it was, and everything that changed me and more, so that you may come to your own conclusions. Hero or villain, mastermind or monster, a beacon of light in the darkness or another rampaging beast in a world gone mad, I want you to decide for yourself what you think of me, once you have read everything I have to write in this tale.

My name is Sunrise Stardust, and this is the story of how I made Equestria great again.

First things first, I should probably tell you about Pip-Bucks. PIP for Personal Information Processor, and Buck for… Well, Bucks. A historian trying to earn points with the audience would say 'Buck' wasn't generally considered anything other than a slang term for colts until about seventy years before the war, and I'm no historian. Is Pipbuck, Pip-Buck, PipBuck, or Pip Bucks the proper way to spell the name of these devices? Yes. Hey, if the advertising department of the company that originally invented and sold these things couldn't be bothered to keep it consistent…

I'll try and keep it consistently spelled as Pip-Buck, except when others spelled it differently in the story. Anyway, while you're certainly going to see for yourself how great these wondrous devices can be soon enough, these little miracles can do many things. Therefore, it stands to reason that I should explain what they are ahead of time and tell you absolutely everything they can do, so it won't seem like I pulled their more fantastical capabilities out of my arse a few dozen chapters from now when backed into a corner. This is my Autobiography, after all, so it would just be weird if the readers came away from it with that impression. Anyway, moving on, Pip-Bucks are small and powerful personal computers, with incredibly advanced circuitry and runework so miniaturized that
they can be worn around on your left hooves like some kind of bracelet or hoof-armour. Remarkably dense solid steel makes up their tough outer shells, bulletproof glass coats the regular glass of the Pip-Buck's LCD Display, and a plush polyester-coated leather-stuffed interior ensures that you won't mind the fact that these things don't come off unless you can find a Pip-Buck Technician willing to take it off. These things are tough, durable, and full of useful features. But they aren't invincible, so infrequent trips to the Tech-Sec's local Pip-Buck repair station are an unfortunate fact of life. By Tech-Sec, I mean my the area of my Vault known as the Technological Sector, even though many other individual floors are dedicated to specific areas of science, magiscience, arcane studies, chemistry, or the less flashy kind of robotics. I'll get to that in a minute.

However, at some point, the ponies of my Vault looked at these hoof-mounted personal computers, considered marvels of modern engineering and arcane science for their time, and said, "Not good enough". So while the ponies who ran into this Vault on the day the Megaspells fell and burned the world away wore their traditional Pip-Buck 1.0s, or Pip-Buck 2000s, or even their Pip-Buck 3000s if they were lucky – Ponies stupid enough to have purchased the Pimp-Stallion 3 Billion, dooming themselves to an eternity of lugging around a gold-plated costume-jewelry-encrusted monstrosity that spat in the face of proper design sense and wallets everywhere couldn't really be called lucky, when it came to the lacking intelligence fate had cursed them with – The ponies of my Vault wore something better.

For a while, we called their upgraded form Pip-Buck 3000 Mark 2s. Then, we called them Mark 3s, and Mark 4s, and Mark 5s… And then, we went beyond the realm of adding minor ergonomic enhancements, quality-of-life improvements, minor upgrades to the Eyes-Forward Sparkle's User Interface, and an extra feature or two. We started to get into the REAL overhauls. Experimental materials, operating system alterations and 'Forks' (Alternate versions of the operating system that underwent their own developments and evolutions independently from the others), and more meant that between the infrequent releases of 'Upgraded' models with all-around improvements, we saw many more 'Sidegrades', devices that were better than the standard model in some areas and worse in others. We saw Pip-Bucks made from tougher and heavier materials, and some made from lighter and softer materials. We saw Pip-Bucks with long and thin blades hidden inside them, ready to spring out and stab somepony at a moment's notice. We saw Pip-Bucks with wires that stretched up and connected to a big chunk of computer you had to wear on your back, so your hoof only had to hold the part with the screen. We saw Pip-Bucks with bigger screens, Pip-Bucks with two additional screens beneath the main one to add the illusion of depth to everything it displayed, Pip-Bucks with no physical screens and a thin illusionary screen that floated a foot above the device and could only be seen by the wearer… I want to say the most impressive ones were Pip-Bucks with experimental and fragile screens called Resistive Touch-Screens. Transparent electrodes do cool magiscience shit between two thin layers of screen stuff layered above the thicker and tougher main glass layer, and when you touch the screen, those two thin screen layers are pressed together. More science shit checks the vertical and horizontal location of every touch to feed a number into a program constantly running on the OS, which moves a modded-to-be-invisible pointer onto the location you just touched and clicks for you. However, I remember reading about a model of Pip-Buck that allowed the user to swing it around in any attack its wearer wanted. The device would siphon some magic from its battery to 'Launch' that kinetic energy in an unstable and pulsating ball of force, which would explode upon impact with double the force of the user's swing. I wish my Pip-Buck could do that, but this feature was banned within my Vault after it was discovered. The official story was that it drained the battery at an unsustainable and potentially dangerous rate, but I personally believe our elderly whore of an Overmare just didn't like the idea of everypony's Pip-Bucks doubling as decently-powerful weapons you couldn't take away without hassle.

What was I wearing, at the start of this tale? A Pip-Buck 7000, the deceptively-named twenty-first true all-around upgrade to the original 3000 model, which was, itself, the seventh upgrade made to
the Pip-Buck 2000 model. It came in models of glossy pearl-white and absolute jet-black, with a deep and metallic purple for the highlights that would be a cold shade of gunmetal grey on a factory-standard Pip-Buck 3000.

This beautiful bastard had some pretty useful features. In no particular order... It has a Radio receiver. It has a Rad counter. It can turn the user invisible for up to five minutes per day every 24 hours. And it has some features that'll take several paragraphs to explain. Which is why I'll tell you about those when I'm done telling you about my home, Vault 177. Surely, the society of the area I come from should be more interesting and more important to the story than the gimmicky features of the marvel of magical engineering on my hoof. Though, to tell you the truth, I've always been a fan of both, and I've always looked down on the school of thought that says the 'Cool Stuff' in a sci-fi story should be mere window dressing compared to the same old generic pony interaction and relationship drama you'd see in any other story set in any other time period. When you tell amateur writers 'Not to focus on the cool stuff for too long', they hear 'Don't include any cool stuff', missing one of the biggest points of Sci-Fi stories, and how the new technologies of the future change our culture and society. In addition, I suppose my autobiography would certainly make a nice sci-fi story, were I to send it back in time to double as a cryptic warning for anypony paying attention.

Vaults... Sure, they're technically called Stables, but I've always considered that a rather stupid name. 'Stables' are what the pony species called Hotels before they were called Hotels, but after they were called Inns. Hotels, Inns, Stables, these are things you can enter and exit whenever you want. You go in, you rent a room, you sleep, and you leave when you're ready. Vaults... You don't leave Vaults. Vaults are reinforced boxes you put your valuables in, to protect them. Sure, you could say the pre-war idiots thought giving these bunkers such a cutesy name would make the idea sound more palatable, but what is more valuable to a nation than its ponies, and its future? I won't change every instance of Stable in my story to Vaults, but I probably should.

If you don't know what Vaults are, these 'Stables' are underground shelters. Really big underground shelters. Bunkers large enough to comfortably house somewhere between three thousand and a few hundred thousand ponies, maybe a million tops. Metal walls, metal ceilings, maginuclear reactors to power the lights, metal floors with tiled layers on top, pneumatically-driven extra-thick airlock doors that slide up to open and down to close, bedrooms with metal-bottomed beds bolted to the floors. I hear the Vault Project was originally supposed to save ponies, which made the sad fates so many vaults met even sadder, when you think about it. Due to incompetence, supply shortages, tight funding, bad supplies, miscommunications, Zebra saboteurs, and more, a lot of Vaults ended up with stupid gimmicks.

If you're somewhat lucky, your Vault ended up a perfectly-serviceable shelter and miniature society, and nothing particularly notable happened to you. If you're slightly less lucky, your Vault was only slightly supplied short in one specific, unimportant area. If you're a lot luckier, your Vault found itself with an abundance of some particular supply. Perhaps you got double the allocated amount of something, while another Vault got none of it. If you're lucky, but it's the kind of lucky that makes destiny feel like taking risks and betting your neck as the buy-in for nothing but a pot of entertainment, your Vault was supposed to research and advance some specific facet of technology, or your Vault's ponies naturally decided to do that on their own, and the technology DIDN'T go horribly wrong/right in a way that killed everypony or made them wish they were dead. If you're unlucky, something bad happened to your Vault after the Megaspells fell. If you're really unlucky, something bad was done to your Vault before the Megaspells fell, rigging the game from the start. I remember seeing one Vault that was just... missing a door. It had no door. Its door was missing. Its door, the big-ass metal gear door that's supposed to protect you from the darkest and vilest magic possible, was not there. You could just walk into the Vault, and walk right back out of it filled with Taint, a vile and twisted type of dark magical radiation.
My Vault… Well, you could probably call us one of the lucky ones.

Stable 177. Or as I called it, Vault 177. It's one hundred and seventy higher than one of the luckiest numbers possible, one hundred higher than another of the luckiest numbers possible, and the one almost looks like a third seven. Does that make it twice as lucky as a simple seven would be, three times as lucky, or entirely unlucky? I'm not sure. I'd like to believe it's three times as lucky, but here's how it all went down. Also, screw it, I'm just going to say Vault from now on.

Vault 177 was one of between five hundred and twelve thousand big-ass bomb shelters constructed before the war, each one designed to connect to its own isolated underground network of tunnels and rooms large enough to house a decently-sized city's population, and each one… Well, most of them were hidden in defensible, rarely-seen locations. Some were hidden beneath major cities, and some were hidden in inhospitable hellzones, like the Everfree Forest and the comparatively-tamer Whitetail Woods. It's funny how that dynamic changed around, after the war. Anyway, here's a quick rundown of the geopolitical complexities of the era that led up to the Great War. I could slowly insert scenes that drip-fed you information about the pre-war era while making you wait eighty chapters before telling you everything, or I could not do that.

Once upon a time, Ponies were awesome, and they invented cool stuff. Art, music, architecture, video games, the wheel, the cart, the forge, the sword, the axe, the rifle, the revolver, the enchanted gun, arcades, bowling alleys, restaurants of every stripe and gimmick, robots, toys, robotic toys, toys that looked like robots, philosophy, science, flight, and so much more. They also discovered medicine, oxygen, nitrogen, and the magical power of things early scholars didn't even consider elements, like kindness and trust. They made cities larger than any mountain, and monuments to their own greatness larger than any city. They broke limits, they went places, they did things. Natural kindness and naturally high IQs helped the three types of pony survive alone, before the three came together to form Equestria. They were the best. Let's be real here, they were the best. They went from speaking their first words and figuring out the wolf-killing power of sharp sticks to making automated factories in under three thousand years. Who else are you going to compare them to, Griffons? Dragons? What did they accomplish, with all their sharp fangs and sharp claws and supposed 'Realistic' cynical views of the world? They didn't make airships out of storm clouds so thickened in cloud factories that they could comfortably hold Unicorns and Earth Ponies and even heavy metal cannons and plasma miniguns inside them. They didn't take gems, the most common and useless thing on the planet, and make them worth more than gold through the power of equine innovation, creating wealth while the long-lived Dragons and supposed super-tough Griffons simply hoarded what they had. Dragons and Griffons didn't build a secret and highly-advanced space program that would have sent ponies to the moon approximately eight months after the day the Megaspells fell, had they never fell. Ponies did all of that, and more.

Ponykind prospered. And they needed more resources, so they traded with the other types of animals in their world, all the types that had achieved true sentience. Not to be confused with the fake kind of sentience cows and sheep can display. They can talk, but they can't talk to you. They might sound lifelike, but they aren't truly alive. They might react normally to assorted stimuli, but there is no true intelligence in their heads. Dogs are smarter than farm animals, even though one is able to talk and the other is not, which means it's about as wrong for your dog to eat the meat of a cow as it is for you to drink the milk of a cow or eat an orange. Vegetables, fruits, these things are alive in the same way non-sentient and non-sapient farm animals are alive.

Anyway, Zebras, who had not invented anything impressive in the thousands of years they'd been around for, had been blessed by fate, but not by evolution. They lived in a place where pretty much everything was edible. Not just the grass and what you planted and farmed, because fruit naturally grew on its own, animals took care of themselves, the weather moved on its own, and you could even eat many vines growing on assorted trees. They didn't need to become more than they were a
few thousand years ago to survive, so they were lazy, violent, stupid savages that ate what they could and moved on to the next area to consume more resources there. When they came across land owned by other tribes, they would attack like the savage wild animals they truly were, even if the tribe was just a bunch of fillies and mares whose husbands had left to hunt animals or forage for food. They would even attack if they were facing foes stronger than themselves, because what else were they going to do with their free time, read a book? They never invented reading, as far as the entirety of Equestrian archaeology and history are aware. They warred with their tribal rivals and enslaved them, and traded their slaves to bigger tribes for food, which they ate rapidly. They had no self-control, and all foreign aid attempts to teach them how to properly farm food and care for soil failed. They were products of their environment: strong, fast, and stupid, with no family values and only a tribal mindset that held together small communities of equally-stupid animals. Many experts believe there's something about the lack of intelligence demanded in the area that stunts the mental development of foals, and that's why the rare Zebras intelligent enough to make their way to Ponyville are occasionally intelligent enough to hold a conversation. Anyway, ponies needed Coal, so they traded with Zebras and got coal, and everything was fine until Zebras decided to have the Zebra moment to end all Zebra moments. Zebras declared war on Ponykind, they sent soldiers to shoot up a school full of underaged foals, they bullshat themselves about Princess Luna being some kind of alien moon demon, and they fired the first Megaspells. If you don't know what Megaspells are, they're these dangerous technomagical devices that suck in spells and turn them up to 11. For example, a fireball spell barely strong enough to shatter a building's glass window would find itself powerful enough to char and scorch the entirety of Canterlot. Think of them like a guided missile, only so huge, you would need a rocket launcher the size of a pre-war observatory to fire them. And some kind of powerful terminal setup to program them to lock themselves on to a city, rather than a pony or vehicle. Megaspells were invented by Fluttershy, who had been assigned a secret superweapon project by Princess Luna herself. She subtly rebelled against her orders by filling the Megaspell spell-enhancing missiles with Healing Spells and firing one at a battlefield Ponykind had just taken from the Zebras, saving many wounded ponies and countless wounded and fleeing Zebras. It was one ultimate, supreme act of mercy, and it resulted in the Zebras turning around and continuing to fight on that battlefield. Then some Zebra spies snuck into Equestria and stole some Megaspells, filling them with a type of incredibly dangerous dark magic, something called Balefire. It's a violent green fire, almost alive with its hatred for life. This dangerous energy called taint radiates off it, like heat from a campfire. Or in this case, darkness and corruption from a dark and corrupt fire. Zebras looked into the future and saw a world bathed in the stuff, so they launched their Megaspells at Equestria, not realizing that some brave Ponies had stolen some Corrupted Megaspells back from the Zebras. We returned fire with those and some Megaspells filled with traditional combat spells, and the world ended in hellfire and death, just as the Zebras had predicted.

It would be poetically beautiful, if the Zebras hadn't claimed millions of innocent lives in their final act of stupidity as a species.

There, now you know how the world ended. Zebras were stupid and they ruined everything for everypony. Now, back to Vault 177…

Vault 177 was an ordinary pre-war Vault built near a town called Baltimare. Before the war, it was a peaceful and unremarkable port town. It had this experimental piece of tech in the water named Mr Trash Wheel, and it was the next step forward after Waste Reclaimers, but I'll tell you more about that when it's relevant. During the war, Baltimare was converted into a beacon of industry, a bastion of Titansteel, Power Armour, and Warship production. It saw a lot of refugees fleeing their war-ruined regions by boat, and a lot of those refugees found work in the factories, or the nearby mines. It also had a lot of coal refineries and weapon factories, a thriving community of artists and craftsponies with family-owned stores, and the finest university in Equestria. That little number had been founded by a mare named Moondancer, a student of Princess Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns over in
Canterlot, and despite its top-tier funding and its proud ownership of Equestria's largest library, it allowed any foals to attempt its tests and apply for entry, regardless of their economic backgrounds. Some beautiful and heartwarming rags-to-riches success stories had been written in that place. In this town, if you weren't here to run your own store and make a living after mastering some kind of skill at the Equestrian Foundation for Magic and Higher Learning, or after having mastered your skill elsewhere already, you were one of the rich ponies who owned or oversaw the factories, or one of the poor ponies who slaved away in them, and life was good… Until taxes, food-rationing, and government incompetence started to bite everypony in the flanks a little harder every day. The factories weren't unsafe or anything, they were just boring to work in. Still, nothing particularly major happened. It wasn't as if this was the starting point for a grand schism in which a lot of angry and dumb workers duped by a radical ideology that steadily grew in power decided to try and kill the rich, take their stuff, and become the new rich, planning on treating themselves better than the old rich. Something like that was going to happen at one point in history, but then Pinkie happened, so snipers were ready to kill the rabid mutts while they were in the middle of planting their bombs on assorted factories vital to the country's war engine. I don't know what genius decided to put a drug-fuelled future-seer in charge of the Department of Unpersoning, Killing, Mandatory Happiness, and Covering Things Up, but it's probably the biggest reason why Equestria lasted as long as it did during the war. After all, genetically-higher chances of being empathetic aren't exactly useful traits when you're fighting a defensive war against a foe that keeps pushing for total war. If only she was healthy enough to prevent the invention that put the planet on life support. Maybe she saw it, and knew it was the best possible future for Equestria, compared to a fate in which Zebras bled Equestria dry with a big, messy war under the cruel direction of its mad king. It must have hurt, making a decision like that. I've certainly made my share of decisions like that.

Like a bullet from a gun fired into the air, early-warning sirens that normally warned ponies of incoming potion bombing runs by potion-doped winged Zebras, rather than incoming balefire missiles, sent fucktons of ponies rushing out of their homes, headed for the local Vault. If they were on the list, having either gotten a free ticket in some kind of sweepstakes or competition, having bought a place in the Vault for an exorbitant fee, or having been selected and granted a free ticket for service to the country, service to the town, great academic performance, or any other excuse, they got in. If not, they were directed to the other Vault in town, Vault 132, which accepted anypony who showed up. As long as they were a pony, though this was the case for all Equestrian vaults. After all, Zebras had their own secret Vaults in our land and colossal Vaults in their own land, and Griffons had been nothing but trouble for most of Equestria. They wouldn't be missed. The rare good nonpony migrants had been granted tickets to the Vault anyway, so it was fine.

The lucky, the rich, the intellectuals… The elite entered Vault 177 and went underground, and most of them were Unicorns. It was almost a routine after all the practice drills. You could almost pretend it was another ordinary day for that town, if you ignored the deaths of all the ponies who stayed aboveground to make sure everypony got in. I hope nopony decided to sleep through the sirens, thinking it was another practice drill. Anyway, we had ourselves a new life underground, to wait out the war as we waited for the dark magic radiation 'Upstairs' to fade away over time.

I wonder if whoever designed these Vaults planned on underground ponies reproducing like rabbits with something to prove. Well, that was life, for many years. After all, Ponykind would need more ponies when the Vaults opened and ponykind was ready to repopulate, reclaim, and rebuild Equestria.

Our Vault was a normal one. We lived, we ate food from the Food Talisman and the Waste Reclaimer that used magic to turn crap into any sanitized and edible food you wanted, we drank water from the Water Talisman that produced clean drinking water, we fucked, we got watched fucking by the Overseer - a mare selected by Stable-Tec to rule over this population of ponies and live in a designated official-looking school headmaster-ish room with walls full of screens, though
we decided this Overseer and her unlimited power should be kept in check by a council of genuine intellectuals, artists, and free thinkers chosen by the ponies of our home based on their contributions to Pre-War Equestria and the Vault - and we eventually died, but our many foals lived on, and so did the many foals they would have in time. Nothing particularly noteworthy or interesting happened, unless you count the impressive advances in science our dedicated Technological Sector that began calling itself the 'Tech-Sec' developed, such as the Pip-Buck upgrades or this one thing called a 'Maginuclear Reactor'. Imagine nine washing machines together, in a cubic formation, and now imagine one big box that size, with wires coming out of it. Imagine that inside it, absurdly tiny chunks of this weird magical ore called uranium are being pulled off from the main chunk and pulled apart, unleashing the insane levels of power trapped within said metal, along with incredibly dangerous energy called Radioactivity. Around that Uranium, there's a shell of magic that transmutes the intense heat and deadly radioactivity into electricity, and wires send that electricity around the Vault to power the lights and stuff better than our old and traditional magical reactor ever could. These things were so powerful, we had to make bigger, better, and more advanced batteries just to store the excess electricity!

And nothing ever went wrong, if you can believe it. Things would go wrong, eventually, but not just yet. For the longest time, our Vault was just… boring.

Well… There was this one hallway. One hallway miles underground, which stretched further and longer than any other hallway in the entire Vault, a hallway many miles long with no side rooms or turns, a hallway that ended in the usual sliding pneumatically-powered doors you saw in the Vaults. It looked so ordinary, despite how out of place it was… And that just made it even more unusual.

This door was a door nopony could open. It had no controls, no easily-pressed Open Button, not even a puzzle that would somehow open it hidden somewhere in the Vault. Perhaps its Open Button was on the other side, ponies speculated. But what could be on the other side?

Naturally, it was a very exciting thing to talk about when you weren't fucking, or shooting at the Vault Shooting Range, or reading in the Vault Library, or working out in the Vault Gym, or swimming in the Vault Pool, or eating in the Vault Mess Hall, or sparring in the Vault Duelling Arenas or the Vault Dojo, or doing cool science shit in the Vault Laboratories, or fucking in the Vault Swimming Pool, or creating something for fun/prestige/extra cash. Sure, the stuff was practically meaningless now, but the jangle of bits still sounded nice.

And that one mysterious door seemed to be enough to satisfy the universe's appetite for weirdness in this area, so nothing weird happened for decades.

What could be behind that door? Weapons? Gold? A portal to another world? A second Vault, full of naked mares? Or perhaps, some gigantic magical device that would purge all the dark magical energy, all the Taint, from the world outside, and get rid of the thick cloud layer those cowardly Enclave Pegasi left us with, and more! It didn't really matter at this point, but the Vault's Secret Door was a fun thing to talk about.

For years, for decades, for centuries, life was good.

Then, everything changed when Vault 40 attacked.

That was where the Vault's Secret Door led. Another Vault, nestled in some defensible mountains, had been designed to house Equestria's military in this region and keep it well-fed, trained, and ready to help make Equestria great again as soon as its main door opened. Overstuffed with weapons and supplies, and no entertainment media besides war-themed books, it was almost as if somepony had set this Vault up to be what they thought the ultimate Badass Vault would be. A Ruler Vault to house Equestria's scientists and artists and rich idiots, and a Soldier Vault to house the soldiers who'd
fight to protect them in the new world. It should have been a match made in heaven. However, at some point, they had undergone a coup. The Vault's Overseer was dead, and an excessively violent warmongerer had seized control of that population. Instead of training at a reasonable pace and waiting for Stable-Tec to send the All-Clear Signal that would allow the Vault's main door to open, he wanted to institute draconian training methods until he had an army he felt could conquer anything, even whatever horror he was certain lied in wait behind his Vault's Mysterious Door.

It would probably make this a better story if I waxed lyrical about horrific initiation rituals, training methods so risky they became inefficient, experimental brainwashing technology, and a secret room where young soldier mares and colts were 'Trained to resist torture' by being 'Used' by the military's corrupt higher-ups, but… This Vault was boring. It trained its ponies for combat roles, and if you sucked at those, you found yourself getting a combat support role or a weapon-making role, and if you sucked at too much at everything, you were shot. You feared getting shot, so you tried very hard not to suck, and life went on. Don't worry; we'll see plenty of spectacularly disastrous Vaults later on.

Anyway, Vault 40 sent in some Heavy Troopers decked out in standard-issue Earth Pony T-51e Power Armour (I'll tell you about that in a later chapter) and they made their way to the Overseer's office to make demands. It didn't go that well. How would you expect a war between classically-trained soldiers and academic masters of magic with a considerable tech advantage to go? They had suits of Power Armour, and we had powerful Battlemages in our Stable Security. Those things held up against bullets, not fireballs hot enough to melt you inside your armour. They had outdated Pip-Bucks, and we had modernized and upgraded models with more gimmicky features than you could shake a stick at. They had rocket launchers, and we had shielding spells, mind-controlling spells, space-manipulation spells, spells that spawn fireballs atop the head of targets in your line of sight, each one descending slowly and blasting on impact with anything, unleashing double the heat and force of standard rockets.

I wish I had some of those Battlemages in my army, when the time came for me to lead one. But I'm briefly and purposefully getting ahead of myself in this paragraph, to build up hype for when I eventually get to that part of the story.

The war ended when Vault 40 had no remaining adult survivors, only a fuckton of locked rooms full of hiding and heavily-armed foals we decided to take in and care for, after disarming them. Don't blame us, their Vault's adults were the ones who romanticized 'Fighting to the last' as the ultimate ideal a pseudomilitary organization could follow, even when it meant you left your kids behind with nopony left to protect or raise them. Anyway, we took their vault's stuff, and integrated it into our own. We didn't try to actively erase their old culture or anything, we just raised them as our own with our own ideals. 'Excellence for the sake of excellence', 'Science for all', and all that. Some took to it quite well; some hated it and wished their parents had won the war so we'd be forced to build better guns for them as slaves or something, but nopony was stupid enough to cause a fuss. Anyway, life went on, more foals were had, and decades passed.

Centuries passed.

Our Stable Security got less good at their jobs, and less moral.

Rations were reduced for non-workers, which meant if you ate what you were given by your masters, you were given fewer calories than you needed to survive. But if you had multiple foals and stole most of a different one's ration each day, you'd have plenty of food. Rations were traded like money, crime grew organized, and things got bad.

And to keep them from speaking out against, or replacing, our Overseer, our Intellectual Council was
compromised. Actual experts and intellectuals were replaced with phonies better at faking intelligence and sucking the Overmare off. Wearing the masks of mindless Yes-Ponies, corrupt backstabbers rose to power and began to give their friends and sexual partners jobs they weren't qualified for. Critics of the current system found themselves accused of all kinds of molestation by random paid-off whores who'd say they were raped a thousand times AND let themselves get molested by Stable Security once "To make their performance more authentic" if it meant securing more food for their families.

Speaking of the Council, I wonder… What would you call the system of government we had, before it became a sham of a civilization where lower-level ponies were forced to give up on life, and could often go their whole lives without ever finding their Cutie Marks, even if they escaped the culls month after month because a sufficient number of ponies beneath them were culled before them for every month they spent alive? An all-powerful Autocrat, restrained by a council of elites, each one either a pioneer in their field or simply highly knowledgeable about their field, or a beloved and brilliant writer, or our current Stable Security Chief. Or that one painter we had on the Council at one point. He was weird. In any case, the council leaders of old were not democratically elected. The founders of the institution made their case to the Overmare of old, in front of their Vault's ponies, and they argued for it so eloquently that they convinced her to give them power over matters related to their assorted fields of expertise. In the event that two or more ponies wanted to join the council, and wanted the same "Head of X" title in their council, they would debate over who knew more and who was best suited to the role. A general consensus had to be reached among the council, when it came to accepting new members and replacing the old. Was that democracy, when the council voted to pass something after it failed to reach a general consensus among themselves? Or was it Oligarchy? Was that Aristocracy, Plutocracy, or Technocracy? Techno-Aristocracy? A Techno-Pluto-Oligarchist Council, keeping an unelected and selected Tyrannical autocrat in check. Then again, the position of Overseer was an inheritable one, so perhaps Monarch was a better option. Yes, like the Kings, Queens, Princes, and even Princesses of old. A Democratic Techno-Pluto-Oligarchist Monarch, that's something you don't see every day, and it's something I would never get to see, because the system had dissolved into a Kraterocracy, rule of the 'Strong'. Only instead of actual strength or intelligence, your cunning and your ability to stab your rivals in the back were what got you power, along with your ability to suck the Overmare's non-existent cock. Then again, Katerocracies didn't typically have undertones of Hoof-licker-ocracy.

Anyway, when we realized we were overpopulating both Vaults, we knew something had to change. And I'm not exactly convinced the best changes were made under the watchful eye of our supposedly glorious Overmare, or her successor. And the Council, at that point, was unwilling to oppose either of them.

By the way, quick note for the sake of clarification: The job of Vault Leader, the one whose job it is to watch everypony, is called an Overseer. Male ones are called Overstallions and female ones are called Overmares.

Culls were instituted. If you sucked too much at something important, or you didn't show enough talent at what your Cutie Mark made you good at, or you got caught speaking out against the rulers too often, you were culled. You know, killed.

If you were a criminal, you were killed. If the Elites couldn't think of a use for you. If you were a criminal the ruler and her little party of helpers and conspirators didn't like, you were publically executed. If you were disabled, you were killed.

If you were a criminal, you were killed. If the Elites couldn't think of a use for you. If you were a criminal the ruler and her little party of helpers and conspirators didn't like, you were publically executed. If you were disabled, you were killed.

Ponies were shuffled around and moved at the Overseer's whim almost weekly. If you were one of the current generation's 'Elite', or a previous generation's 'Elite', you got to live on one of the higher levels, closer to Vault 177's main door and the Overmare's office. If not, you were moved into the
lower levels. Crappy rooms near things like generators went to crappy ponies, and as the years went by, lower-level ponies in sleeping bags and on bedrolls started to outnumber ponies in beds. The threat of getting killed, or worse, getting sent to a lower level of the Vault, where you would be tortured and then killed by ponies who hated the 'Elites', kept the upper-level ponies who could have stopped this fearful and in line with the Overmare's goals. After all, as she said when she justified this to herself and her followers, they and their way of life would be destroyed if they allowed the lower-class ponies, who easily outnumbered them a hundred to one, to seize power.

Any weapons you couldn't bullshit Stable Security into letting you keep, such as baseball bats or tire irons, were taken from the ponies of the lower levels, and hoarded in the upper levels. If you wanted a gun, you had to "Earn" yourself a promotion to the middle levels, where they were allowed crappy old pistols, and nothing stronger than crappy old pistols. If you wanted the 'Right' to own sniper rifles, assault rifles, and anti-tank rifles, or laser and plasma pistols, or anything like that, and you wanted the right to play around with them at the Vault's Shooting Ranges, you had to be an Elite, preferably one in Stable Security.

Vault 40, having been annexed, became empty space. Empty space that was quickly filled up with our poorest. Our jobless, and our hopeless. Their Overmare's Office found itself getting a new owner and professional perpetual voyeur: Stainless Steel, the leader of Stable Security. Away from the all-seeing eyes of our Overmare, this vault was where he found the opportunity to really indulge in his sadistic tendencies, and to speak out against him or what he did to some poor soul's daughter this week was to speak out against the Overmare who trusted him completely. I'm not sure why this arrangement was made between the two, but it wouldn't surprise me if Steel had something on the Overmare, or had threatened to organize and execute a coup and run solo unless she did as he wanted. Then again, maybe she just liked it when her ponies were hurt. It's hard to speculate on which monster is worse than the other when you barely knew anything about either one.

Something called an Expansion Program was established, when the overpopulation crisis got even worse. Tough worker ponies from the lower levels thoughtcriminals who wanted to be spared from the Culls were sent to a certain wing of the Vault's lowest level, which was emptied out for them a week ahead of time. When the penal colony ponies had gotten to their new home, the heavy steel doors to that area were permanently sealed, and the ponies began to get to work drilling through the Vault Walls, with a supply of spare metal ready to be spread through the tunnels to serve as new walls and floors. These ponies were tasked with digging deeper and deeper underground, to expand the Vault. Some ponies died in tunnel collapses, some ponies died from overexposure to soil and rock tainted with dark magic, and some ponies died of exhaustion after being forced to work almost non-stop, with few breaks, long days, and short sleep sessions. This became where the thieves, repeated minor rule-breakers, critics of the government, and other undesirables were sent, to die in the name of expanding the Vault. And whenever the Expansionists found themselves running low on members, the Overmare would invent new, stupid laws for the sake of bolstering their membership, such as 'It is illegal to wear silk-laced clothing on a Tuesday' and 'No belts are permitted to be worn on a Monday'. Or, the Overmare would simply claim she cast a future-seeing spell and knew one pony was about to turn into a criminal, and that locking him away pre-emptively was the only way to stop him from doing something stupid like putting bombs in the generator room and detonating everything our Vault needed to survive.

Through it all, the Overmare insisted that some day, the Expansion Program within the new Miner's Quarters would expand the Vault so much, we could all go back to the glory days when the place didn't feel so overcrowded and you didn't have to book your sessions with in the Vault's Leisure Activity rooms months in advance. Or years in advance, in the case of the Vault's lower-levelled rooms. Speaking of which, higher-level ponies were allowed to trump the pre-made bookings of lower-levelled ponies when it came to activity rooms like the libraries, gyms, and workshop rooms. You can guess how many violent crimes against smug time-stealing bastards this resulted in.
When our Overmare died and everypony tried to hide their desire to celebrate, her replacement promised us changes.

We should have known this meant she'd make the rich 'Elites' and their foals immune to the Culls, ruining the whole point of the system by allowing rich wastes of resources to dress themselves and their many foals as extravagantly as they desired while lower-level ponies struggled to find enough cloth to make bedrolls and sleeping bags. Speaking of cloth, I forgot to mention it, but we had a Cloth Talisman, just like our Water and Food Talismans. Infinite supplies of each, sure, but they're slowly-dispensed infinite supplies of each, and if you overtax them for even a second, you increase the likelihood that they'll break. While the ponies of many Vaults never changed out of their Vault Suits, thick and fashionable blue jumpsuits, our Vault's ponies thought we were better than that, so we put our Vault Suits in the back of our cupboards and dressed ourselves differently. The upper-level ponies dressed themselves in absurd fashions, elaborate costumes that took long periods of time to get into and out of, while the lower-level ponies dressed in tough work clothes, in the case of workers, and rags, in the case of those who weren't granted any better by upper management.

One more thing… The overpopulation was starting to get so bad that there were more workers and apprentices than there were resources to go around. Sure, our Vaults recycled a lot, but that didn't pull new supplies out of thin air. Some research was being done to try and open portals into other worlds, which we could expand into and take resources from, but that hadn't borne any fruit before the day I left the Vault, no pun intended.

Into this lit powder keg waiting to blow, I was born.

My name is Sunrise Stardust. I am a red Unicorn with bright golden eyes, and my horn is framed with the frontal part of my mane, straightly combed hair that fell forwards, streaked with horizontal zigzags of orange, gold, and red, cut into jagged ends. The upper-back part of my mane spikes up and backwards, an orange array of combed-out spines with golden centers. Running down the back of my head and neck is the last part of my mane, combed-out and straightened spines of purple hair with one gold streak. That gold streak has an orange streak running through its upper half, curving up and stopping short just before it meets the end of my hair. As for my tail, it's a long, straight, and wide curtain of purple hair with one orange streak and one wider golden streak running down its length, and it frames my ass quite nicely. As a foal, I somehow got it into my head that the fact that my tail naturally resembles Twilight Sparkle's in shape simply must mean that I'm destined for great things. I won't say I spend a while in the mirror each day making sure my mane spikes properly in the way I want it, while letting my tail fall in its natural manner, but I also won't deny that, because it's true. Twinned piercings run through the ends of my ears, two titanium sticks with a separate diamond on either end. Upon my flanks, my Cutie Mark can be seen. I got it reasonably early, and it's a sun, with wavy rays of orange light radiating from it. But it isn't just any old sun, it's a spiralling yin-yang of white-mooned purple darkness and a red sun's golden dawn, representing cycles, changes, the sun and moon, conflicting concepts and their synthesis, the skies above and all within them, and above all... Magic. Well, that's everything I can read into it when I look at it, but I'm pretty sure it mostly means magic.

I am a direct descendant of Moondancer, though to be fair, a lot of ponies from my Vault are. Unfortunately, I did not inherit an incredibly-powerful laser weapon, a mysterious and powerful magical weapon passed down through the family line for generation, or an even better spell only the 'Worthy' and 'Chosen' can cast, or a family of spells only those of my family line can cast, or even a seemingly-normal hand-me-down family heirloom of a book that's actually the key to a hidden segment of the Vault with portals to any of the hopefully-infinite worlds out there, providing infinite food, space, and resources for all. My hobbies are studying magic, studying the important sciences(And to be honest, studying some fields more than others. My overall knowledge of science probably isn't the best in the universe, all things considered), caring for my room's small planter of.
flowers and pretending that's gardening, writing music to channel my incredible rage constructively, playing that music on the electromagical guitar, sparring, engaging in magical duels, studying pre-war tactics, reading about pre-war history, and reading about fictional worlds that turned out better than my one. My life's ambition is to learn from the past, bring Equestria back to life, and make Equestria great again. And to become awesome, of course.

And to carry out that ambition, I made a plan.

*Step one, Study harder than anypony else.*

*Step two, Make some friends in high and low places.*

*Step three, Become a rockstar.*

*Step four, Improvise and adapt as necessary until I've turned my gang of loudmouthed juvenile delinquents, its secret supporters, its even more secret rule-abiding members and sleeper agents, my adoring fanbase, and everypony who ideologically agrees with me into the greatest army the Equestrian Wasteland has ever seen.*

*Step five, Reconquer Baltimare, the key to bringing an industrial revolution and civilization to a blasted hellscape where these things lie as forgotten as the names of the pony skeletons that still litter the ground in some cities.*

*Step six, Avenge Equestria.*

*Step seven, Improvise and adapt as necessary until Equestria is great again.*

Quite a good plan, if I do say so myself. Sure, I dreamed it up when I was a young foal and wrote it in an imaginary book with an imaginary quill in my own mind's imaginary bookcase, but if I wasn't going to dedicate my life to that foalhood dream, what else was I going to dedicate my life to? What else could I do in such an environment, besides keeping my head down, trying not to get killed by bad policies out-of-touch rulers enforced with the aid of corrupt 'Law' enforcement, hoping that I survived long enough to have foals, and hoping that my foals did the same as I did before our population passed the point where our supplies could sustain us all, or even any of us at all?

Long nights spent studying in the Library until I fell asleep, missed parties and lost friendships, pretending to get glowing hornboners in class when I was actually performing magical control exercises and pretending to get them so often that ponies eventually stopped taking so notice… almost constantly playing illegally-shared and downloaded audiobooks and playing them so often, I must have heard the voice of narrators more than my own voice and the voices of my parents… talking to troubled and good-natured ponies the system was failing and pushing into a short-lived life of delinquency and eventual servitude as an Expansionist, and getting those troubled ponies to join my gang of 'Badasses' that didn't really do much of anything except posing, posturing, protecting the weak kids from bullies, and yelling "Black Stars rule!" now and then… skipping out on school to spend more time in the library and the firing range, where I threw spells around until I had fully mastered them and the underlying mechanics of magic… I eventually started skiving off school to dedicate my days to magic and convincing the teacher to let me into the Night Schools with the poorer kids… and eventually, it was time for me to start sucking up to the 'Elites' and pretending that my life's ambition was to leave my 'Silly and juvenile' gang-leader ways behind and become one of them, metaphorically sucking them off by pretending their decadent, wasteful, detrimental lifestyles could ever be anything a foal like me could ever consider admirable…

It was hard.
For one thing, my family was less than useless. They weren't just useless, they were an active
detriment to my goals, and the life I would lead if I gave up on them. My life actually would have
been easier if they'd both died during childbirth, or gotten Cancer and died at some point in my
youth. I'd like to tell you they were just old-fashioned closed-minded idiots who hated the upper-
level ponies and my ambition to become one as part of my Stable Saviour Plan. I'd like to tell you
they had good intentions, but were out-of-touch idiots who thought trying to break my spirit and
resign myself to a life spent with them would make me happier when my dreams inevitably –
according to them – failed and I had to spend my life with them anyway. I'd like to say they had
good intentions, or some sort of redeeming feature. Maybe even more than one redeeming feature to
share between them. The truth is that they were much worse.

They were low-class ponies, like myself. And jobless, like I was during my younger years. Though
unlike myself, they were both jobless for pretty much their entire lives, having both tried working
once each in their lives and crumbled under the stress, giving up for good. And unlike myself,
instead of hungering for a meaning in life, they hungered for meaningless things they considered
meaningful. Most of all, they hungered for social status. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a
week, they were acting. Playing the part of poor, precious, put-upon parents who tried The
Hardest(TM) for their foals and do The Most(Patent Pending) out of anypony on their level, acting
like appearance-obsessed upper-classers in a low-class level that should have been a place free of
such pretentiousness and two-faced dishonesty. They would regularly emphasize and exaggerate
how difficult commonly-done and simple little things like getting laid without their respective spouse
finding out, cooking rationed food ingredients into acceptable meals, and taking their foals to school
were. Even though, on many days, they didn't bother with those things. They would also whine to
friends they secretly loathed – and who, of course, secretly loathed them in turn – about how hard it
was to be a parent of a 'Robot' like me, and they had similarly awful nicknames for the rest of my
siblings, let me tell you. To try and earn some precious sympathy points, they would lie about things
I did, things my siblings did, and so on. Suddenly, I went from a quiet and mature foal to a horrifying
and violent brute who'd terrorize my parents behind locked doors, and my habit for leaving the
classroom and hitting the Technological Sector's Digital Book Machines for some fresh downloads
became a habit of running into the lower levels and exchanging sexual favours for drugs. Yes, really.
That isn't hyperbole, they truly were that dishonest, that manipulative, that obsessed with shallow
appearances, and that willing to throw away the reputation of their own foals for some worthless,
meaningless status. I got into more than a few fights in the hallways over whatever bullshit rumour
my parents had been spreading about me today. Still, I doubt anypony above the age of twenty was
really fooled by their whining about how hard their lives were, and how much harder I supposedly
made it by being a smart foal they hated. Most likely, as the ponies of their level did what little
parenting my birth parents did every day and then some, they didn't think of these things as
particularly hard, only that they were particularly hard for my birth parents. It's almost funny. They
thought they were so much smarter than those around those they secretly detested with a hatred they
also prided themselves on for some reason, but they were too stupid to notice that everypony else
secretly detested them far more.

In their heads, my parents were pitiable and perfect paragons of virtue who'd been dealt a miserable
lot in life, and anypony who got in the way of that fantasy of theirs was a monster out to make them
feel even worse than they already did. Of course, they were the monsters, terrified of what might
happen if anypony found out that their absurd 'Sad pathetic ponies' act was a lie. To try and add
some credibility to the lies they'd tell, they would sabotage me and my work, try to keep me up all
night to sabotage my performance in school(I sometimes suspect they are the cause of my little
'Sleeping problem'), make up bullshit reasons for me to be denied the right to leave the house and eat
dinner that day, removing the burden on them to cook it... And all the while, they would lie to my
face about what they were and what they were doing. They even tried to get sympathy points from
me, the one they were hurting most of all! It really fucked with my head when I was a foal, but after
On some miserable nights spent trying to stay awake and pay attention in class with my little 'Time problem' screwing me over (I have problems with falling asleep when I want to, and I have a habit of uncontrollably falling asleep at inopportune times. And in terms of my physical and mental capabilities, I do a lot better during the day and a lot worse during the night. Nopony's sure why that last part is a thing that exists and happens to me, not even our Vault's resident medical experts. Better for it to screw me over during unimportant lessons trying to teach me stuff I already know than during magical training, where a random collapse could seriously injure or even kill me, right?), the temptation to give up manifested as the temptation to give up on my dreams and just coast like all the other markless and lifeless low-level foals had done so long ago, all the miserable bodies waiting for death who'd lost faith in the world, their ability to ever get a Cutie Mark and find anything that made their lives worth living, the Vault's social system, and Ponykind's ability to ever change that system without war, bloodshed, purges, and worse.

On some miserable nights spent exhaustedly striking the ground in frustration after having failed to master a spell or magical trick too many times in a row, and worse ones spent in the hospital after fucking up high-level spells so badly I almost died, while my beloved parents bitched at me about what a disappointment and embarrassment they claimed I was for them when I hurt myself in this way, the temptation to give up manifested as the temptation to let myself go stir-crazy, or develop 'A Stable Mind' as some cutesy piece of shit had decided to name it, and start killing Stable Security ponies until I got killed.

Not any thoughts a foal should probably have, I know. Thoughts about killing my own parents - and then myself - probably aren't thoughts a foal should have, either. And I suppose the same went for the temptation to let myself go stir-crazy, or develop 'A Stable Mind' as some cutesy piece of shit had decided to name it, and start killing Stable Security ponies until I got killed.

Getting some illegal home-brewed alcohol from the lower floors and smuggling it into the rooms of my parents, and then calling Stable Security to get them caught with it, was one of the best decisions I ever made. What a way to celebrate my tenth birthday! They weren't killed or anything – Unfortunately – But myself and my siblings (I'm going to be honest with you, I often forget that I ever even had any of those mind-fucked parent-loving little bastards for siblings in the first place) were scattered to the four winds, so that we could be placed with better families. Well, I was placed with an elderly piece of shit, who at least had the good sense to trade me to some other family. Though to be traded away in return for some pre-war trading cards, of all things! What an insult. In any case, I found myself placed with two bright young things, Pheonix Flame and Volcanic Flare, two kind-hearted ponies with a loving family I made sure to send regular packages of supplies back to, later on in my life, when I'd moved on up in the world.

Oh, right, I forgot to mention this, but alcohol is supposed to be illegal in my Vault. Plenty of middle-class ponies drink it anyway, plenty of lower-class ponies smuggle it down to even lower classes and trade it away for assorted goods and services, and plenty of higher-class ponies are "Professional Advice-Givers" that are actually magically-gifted crafters of premium-quality alcohol that finds itself all over the Vault soon enough. How do ponies with alcohol bottles for Cutie Marks keep that sham up? Stable Security only objects to the lower classes brewing alcohol, because they're shit at it, due to having to make do with crappy and improvised nonmagical equipment. The upper classes… Well, if they send regular gifts of "Old, dusty, hand-me-down" bottles of premium alcohol to Stable Security, they'd get the brutes to look the other way.

It was also kind of funny how, once my parents were cast down into the Vault's lower levels and known through my Vault's level and their new one as alcohol-drinkers, they became the detested ones, while myself and my siblings became the poor, precious, pitied ponies who everypony needed to be seen being hugged. Stories abounded of my parents being vicious drunken bastards who beat
me and my siblings for fun and molested all three of my sisters together. The ponies of this Vault's level were fickle idiots, of course, because that culture tended to develop in the lower levels. Something about the place turned supposed adult ponies into shallow, gossipy hens, constantly trying to socially assassinate each other and throw each other under the tank treads so everypony would be too distracted by trying to be seen hating the demon of the week to notice any hen's own dirty laundry.

I'd be lying if I said that my parents were the only things holding me back, and that I would magically, instantly become amazing and a bastion of absolute physical and mental stability and reliability once my 'Emotional Training Weights' were removed.

I wish it worked that way. Fuck, I wish it worked that way. I wish I got more out of it than an understanding that sometimes, you have to lie to save your own ass. I wish my reflexes to dodge this thrown metal dinner plate and duck under that swing made me an invincible god when it came to martial arts. I wish my finely-honed ability to read ponies was always reliable, and would never give me false positives regarding the trustworthiness of others and the likelihood that I was being lied to. I wish I didn't have to expend serious effort to keep it together when things go off the rails. And I wish I was emotionally ready to bear my heart and soul to another pony and trust that pony unconditionally, without having to fake a smile and pretend there's nothing more to me than the good I've done, my skills and accomplishments, and the good I want to do with my life.

I wish my foalhood left me better-adjusted than the average pony, and I wish it didn't make me feel like a wounded actor pretending he's fine so the show can go on as if everything's fine. I got better at hiding my pain quickly. Learning to handle my pain took longer. With a lot of effort, meditation, and thinking about my life, I think I've gotten myself to… ninety six percent, perhaps? I'm not really sure how to describe it. I don't get flashbacks any more, and I don't randomly get pissed off at random shit out of the blue either. It feels like there's a weight inside that I carry with me, and I've gotten better at carrying it over time. And after many years of dealing with it, I don't notice it much. I'd like to say that I don't notice it at all, but I still do. It's still there, even now.

Furthermore, that wasn't the only thing holding me back. I'm going to be honest with you, I am a naturally lazy pony. I don't know if this is something I developed over time or if it was always with me from the start, but I love sitting around and doing nothing. Even curling up with a good book and slowly reading it for fun, instead of speed-reading it for the information, is something I like to do when I feel really lazy. And while I love challenges, and fights, and fucking, and other things that get my heart pumping, I've always felt adventure, true adventure, was something best experienced on the safe side of an old page marked with ink. I truly, honestly love being lazy, even though I don't like how disgusted I feel with myself after doing it. Developing that sense of disgust at laziness was what got me to stop lazing around every so often and "Woe is me!"-ing around the place. Despite everything I had already accomplished, and everything I wanted to accomplish, there were many days when I just wanted to give up. My parents certainly didn't help, with how they tried to sabotage my youngest years, or how they emotionally sabotaged me for the rest of my life.

It was pain. It was hell.

And through it all, I had one friend I could truly count on: Books.

Books didn't care who you were. Books didn't care where you read them, or what time you read them at. If you had some free time, you could duck into a nearby bathroom and pull a book out of your saddlebag, or read some downloaded digital copies of books on your Pip-Buck. Books wouldn't get mad at you for opening them up at six in the morning, before the rest of your family had
woken up, and reading them in silence. Books didn't mind if you had to read the same piece of
information multiple times and check out what other books had said about the same subjects before
you truly understood what the books wanted you to know. Books didn't mind if you stopped
listening to them halfway through a sentence, due to having something else to deal with forced upon
you, and you didn't get a chance to hear that book's voice again until you turned on your Pip-Boy in
some bathroom stall. And if a book turned out to be garbage, full of misinformation and lies, you
could throw it away and find better ones, without having to worry about those books coming to
resent you, or try and get revenge upon you. Books didn't have personas to keep up, masks to hide
behind, or fears of getting put down. The way I saw it, and the way I still see it… Books are like
wishes made not on shooting stars, but on ink and parchment by their writers, and they would tell
you what they wanted to tell you, no matter what.

Sure, physical copies of books were luxuries, ordered in advance and borrowed from the Library
more for status than anything. Even books from the Reference Section (That bit of the Library with
books you aren't allowed to take outside of the Library) could be rented for the right under-the-table
transaction. I got my books from this place in the Technological Sector, the Tech Sec, where there
was this open-to-the-public terminal, filled with digital copies of books. Fiction and nonfiction,
modern and outdated… You could even submit new digital files you'd written yourself (With the aid
of an old-fashioned Pip-Buck Keyboard you had to plug in using a normally-covered slot in the side,
or with the aid of the Pip-Buck 7000's illusionary keyboard display) to the Book Horses, the owners
of this unnamed book terminal. If your digital book was good, it would be published on that terminal,
for all to copy.

And due to the rules against low-level ponies going too high above their level without a pre-
approved permit, and the cultural stigma against going too far below your level, and the considerable
health risk in going too far below your level and getting jumped by a poor pony with nothing to lose
but the tire iron in his mouth, many ponies on assorted medium and low levels had downloaded large
quantities of books onto their Pip-Buck, to then redistribute at will, either for free or in return for
goods and services. Remember this, it'll be important later on.

Anyway, that was my foalhood. First, I was the detested foal of two open frauds, who accidentally
made ponies think to themselves, "If these idiots can't stand him, he must be REALLY bad!". My
only reliable friends were books. And then, when the fakes had changed their tune on me, I made
two new friends, though they were often too busy with their studies to talk to me. And that was
refreshing, to live with a family who cared about their studies. In any case, books were still my oldest
and most reliable friends. It was lonely. Crushingly lonely, and in a few ways, having two almost-
friends live with you made it feel… Worse? The idea of having family members I cared about was so
alien to me, I still wasn't sure if I liked it or not by the time I got my Cutie Mark.

My Cutie Mark…

MY one. My Cutie Mark, the best one.

I made up for the pain that was my foalhood in my teenage years, when I blossomed like a fucking
sunflower. Or… Bloomed, I suppose. Either way, when I got that mark, everypony knew it: I was
rising in rank, and I was headed for the top.

Making sure to stay reasonably fit, but not too fit, while dedicating my whole foalhood to magic
without dedicating too much time, emotion, or favour to any particular aspect of magic above any
other aspects finally paid off when I got myself a Cutie Mark in Magic, the best possible Cutie Mark
for a great hero to have! I don't know if I really cheated fate out of a great Cutie Mark or if I only
found myself developing an affinity for magic and a desire to get a Cutie Mark in Magic because I
was destined to get one anyway, but either way, hooray for me, I finally got some confirmation that
my dreams could be possible. And finally, I could branch out, make friends, cheer ponies up, learn the sciences and the arts, take up what passed for 'Gardening' around here, learn to sing, learn to play the guitar, learn to make a speech, and learn to lead an army without having to worry about getting a Cutie Mark that doomed me to a life spent with a great talent for one of those things and no talent in anything else.

I was a genius, according to everypony else. They called me Gifted. I claimed I found it easy, when that would endear me to 'Elites' with a serious hard-on for natural talent, and I said that I'm good at this and that but it's my hard work that got me where I was today when I was around 'Elites' who wanted to believe they were also in the lap of luxury thanks to hard work and natural, inherent virtue.

I was able to form a Study Group, where ponies from multiple Levels met up together and studied alongside me. Through discussions and debates with my peers, this gradually grew into my group, and the fillies and colts of powerful ponies started to join it, and get absorbed into it. Whenever I felt I needed to grow my reach in one floor, I would instruct one of my older students to leave my group and form a group of their own in these areas, to spread my teachings. Politics, personal opinions, and social standing did not matter to the pony I sought to present myself as, and they should not matter to my students. Knowledge is for everypony, I preached as I aided ponies in learning subjects their teachers had intentionally failed to teach. The teachers, I gathered, had hoped to ensure some students would fail, so there would be less room on the metaphorical chopping blocks for the foals of teachers.

While my friends in low places continued to grow and expand my Black Stars gang to lay the groundwork for my revolution, in return for some 'Misplaced' supplies that turned up in a certain mid-level locker with a perpetually 'Lost' key I'd destroyed long ago, I got the lower classes to respect me and see me as one of their own while I worked even harder to get the middle classes to want me around, and I got the upper classes to want me when they heard stories of what a kind, considerate friend I could be, how loyally devoted I was to Equestria and the Vault, and what an absolute fucking riot I was at parties.

And I liked being wanted. I liked being loved. I'd be lying if I said an attention-starved ultra-stressed workhorse didn't love every minute he spent getting himself to stick in minds that saw hundreds of faces walk past them every day. I didn't just hit parties, I slammed into them with the force of a sentient freight train after three Atomic Cocktails laced with ground-up Vigorgio pills. I stayed up for ten minutes before bedtime every night thinking of witty responses to say to things I expected to hear from different Vault Dwellers, I wrote my own songs, I played up the 'Tortured emotional brooding artist full of barely-restrained angst and desire' angle when I was around mares who wanted that, and I played up the 'Absolute fucking madpony who'd drink anything you bought for him' angle when I was around stallions who wanted that. My constitution was always pretty great, but thank fuck for healing spells designed to purge alcohol's corrupting influence from the body, even the lingering traces of the poison and the damage it left. There was a stronger version of the spell that had you violently ultra-shit out not just the alcohol, but all of the assorted lingering bad shit in your body, in what those who cast the spell often called 'Waterfalls' and what I privately called 'A good reason to spend a week learning an enchantment-class spell that'd burn up and destroy anything that went too far down your throat before it hit your stomach'.

As far as the Vault's elites knew, they were all collectively seducing me away from my small-time low-cost life and training me to love the good life I'd hopefully do anything to keep. They liked having throwaway low-classers they could threaten to kick back down into the lower territories, to force that low-classer to do embarrassing, illegal, or even potentially life-threatening things, see. As far as the Vault's lower classes knew, I was the one who would get them a better life, and all they had to do was make sure my Black Stars gang was big and bad enough for me by the time I turned sixteen.
Let me tell you, you haven't been to a real party until you've been to a party with hard-working middle-class and upper-middle-class students dangerously stressed out over their performance in school, their apprenticeship performances, and their potential upcoming deaths.

Through my songs, I spread my ideas and ideals. My gang of Black Stars carved an ever-larger chunk out of the Vault's criminal element every day, because starving ponies would do anything for extra supplies. How did criminal activity go undetected in a Vault full of magical security cameras, some may ask? Simple, the 'Master Criminal' pseudo-mob bosses down there had maps of blind spots and unmonitored hallways where contraband could be exchanged, and criminal factions gained even more power if they operated in Vault 40. Plus, the areas the Miners dug out and fortified didn't have any cameras yet. Finally, the Overmare had her imposing wall of screens jump from one floor to the next floor every so often on a regular schedule, and when the cameras weren't on you, you could do anything.

Speaking of doing anything, I did mares. Before I met the love of my life, I did four other mares, each one a powerful figure in the Vaults in their own right, a mare any Stallion would be proud to know and prouder to fuck. I never engaged in any of the degenerate things many parties degenerated into, however. I lost my virginity, but not my purity.

Speaking of mares, one of the Overmare's ideas on how to reduce unemployment for mid-level and lower-level ponies (And, in her words, take away their excuse for being poor) was to have many, many mid-level ponies get paid to stalk and observe those with jobs to learn how to do them, should any one pony fall ill or get injured. And for the low-level ponies, high-paying jobs were offered in the quarters of Elites as 'Personal Assistants'. If you could follow a pony around all day, carrying his stuff in your saddlebags, or you could stay at home and cook for him, and you were sure you'd never complain about your job or annoy your employer, you could get the job, and the Elites could get their pick of ponies willing to 'Leave their poor lifestyles behind', as many incredibly-punchable Elites put it. There were rules against molesting your Personal Assistant, but there were no rules against whacking off in front of one, or having her whack you off, or having one shove his/her hoof up your ass, or having one dance for you, or having multiple fuck for your entertainment, or pretty much anything else besides the genitalia-on-rich-pony's-genitalia kind of sex. Speaking of the 'Shadow Program', as it was called, the program that had unemployed ponies get employed to wait around and eventually perform a job in the place of someone sick or injured… To the program, it didn't matter if you were the second or fourth or seventeenth one on the list of ponies that would replace one particular real worker with a solid job if that worker called in sick. And thanks to one particularly brilliant two-billion IQ piece of legislature, individual ponies were 'Shadowed' instead of large corporations, so an empty role at an office or factory could still go empty if one pony and his 'Shadow' assistants were all sick or injured, even if several other ponies in the room had pages upon pages of names ready and waiting to fill their own gaps. Because you were paid in rations ever so slightly more than jobless ponies were paid for existing if you had your name anywhere on that list, and the 'Elites' at the top thought that was enough to justify all the flaws in the system and turn it into something unfairly good to workers, at the expense of the bean-counters who managed the Stable's food and water supplies.

The five Personal Assistants I got for myself when I was sufficiently high up were Tech-Sec ponies, they were a band of five bright young mares I had working on a secret project of mine, once I was quite certain I could trust them with, hence why they weren't working on new video games I could sell in cassette form or lease to the cabinet-makers, or gimmicky new programs for my Pip-Buck. Perhaps something that automatically forced the nearest robot my Pip-Buck could hack to play one of my songs.

Speaking of my songs, they were great. And they still are. If I have to name one regret, but it can't be anything that would spoil anything that happens later on in this story, it would be that this story does
not come with a Songbook, sheet music and all, instructing readers on exactly how they can sing and perform my songs. Still, they'll be sung in assorted scenes, so my story will still have them. And I'll probably arrange performances of these songs, some day.

That music career of mine did wonders for my reputation. Mares wanted me. Local DJs wanted to interview me. I was a busy guy, and 80% of the time, I was having the time of my life. I could have had any mare I wanted. I could have had an unlimited supply of food for myself and my family, if I banged the daughter of the Vault's head chefs or head Quartermaster. I could have had unlimited access to the Vault's gyms and the Vault's best personal trainers, if I banged the daughter of some Hoofball team, Buckball team, Basketball team, or Baseball team coach. I could have had all the guns I ever wanted to play with, and expert instruction on how to use them all, if I banged the local Stable Security interim head's daughter. I could have probably gotten the Overseer to change her mind regarding the Vault's ban on marriage being anything other than a union between one mare and one stallion willing to promise the vault at least one foal within a year of their marriage on pain of simultaneous execution. There were perks to being wanted, and I made a show of enjoying them for a while in my 'I am a cool dude, but I am also still a star-struck foal on the inside, and I will choose one of the mares who wants him when he is ready' phase. I could get into overbooked rooms, like the upper-level Vault Gyms and upper-level Vault Libraries, which were nicer, and had higher-quality gear and equipment. There was even a state-of-the-art magical hardlight VR Shooting Gallery you could use, but only after the Stable Cleaner Bots had gone in and scrubbed the place clean to cleanse it of the sexual fluids from the last pony to go in and install a Nude Mod, All-Female/All-Male, and Molestation Mod on the enemy gunponies.

Why did so many higher-ups have daughters? The same reason so many higher-ups had sons.

But there was one mare I knew I needed if my preferred version of my master plan was going to work, and I had my work cut out for me.

She had no siblings, an oddity for this place. She was quiet. She was repressed, subdued, restrained, and quite shy. She didn't take much initiative, because taking initiative meant taking the risk of being wrong. If she didn't know the answer to something, she wouldn't ask for somepony to tell her about it, because that would mean looking dumb and weak and bad. She was afraid that the ponies in the lower levels hated her, not because the thought of being hated by so many scared her, but because being hated by ponies is a Bad Thing. She wanted her mother to think of her as a Good Daughter, and a good candidate for a future ruler of this Vault.

That's right, she was the Overseer's daughter.

And I had her in my sights.

To bring life and love back to the blasted war-torn hellscape that was once the magical land of Equestria, I was going to seduce the Overseer's daughter.

It wasn't quick, or easy. Hell, at first, she probably only talked to me because she wanted the other mares in the Vault to respect her, and she thought being seen talking to the colt everypony liked would net her some 'cool points' and a higher social standing. Her goal in life was to be an alright Overmare who hopefully wouldn't ever get shot by her underlings in a revolt that hopefully wouldn't ever happen. And after some pushing, she told me that her actual and interesting dream – or as some would call it, her silly foalhood dream – was to write a series of books about a mare who was
actually a reincarnated star, sent down from the skies to teach a tiny space station of pony-like kittens how to live in peace and harmony, and it was honestly really crappy. I talked her into making that story better, so I could tell her how proud I was of her revised version, and fill her heart with joy.

Anyway, I wanted her.

And I wanted her to want me.

So, pretty soon, the Overmare’s daughter wanted me. Sweet fucking Celestia, she wanted me. I’d like to say it was my natural charm and charisma that instantly made a mare a year older than me want to marry me as soon as she saw me, but that would be a lie. It wasn’t instant, she was a year and a half older than me, and I wasn’t exactly born with that charm or charisma. It was through intense training and studying many books, fictional and nonfictional, that I learned how to practice away all of my bad habits and signs of damage, and I also learned how to charm a mare properly. And improperly.

Many books on romance start at 'Express interest in your chosen target and be good to him or her!', and end shortly afterwards. Many books gave instructions on how to behave in a manner the author wished ponies did when one wanted to court another. Many books used a snarky tone and an obnoxiously self-congratulatory number of "This works, it works for me, I'm awesome because I do this, worship me and be like me!" scenes to cover up for a lack of real clinical knowledge on anything beyond squeezing a one-night stand out of some whore who has to already be up for it when you ask her anyway.

I read as many books on the subject as I could, observed relationships in the wild, both healthy ones and unhealthy ones, and I eventually gathered a full working knowledge of how the female equine mind works, how the male equine mind works, and how you REALLY got a mare to want you, and keep wanting you.

I expressed interest in her, I got her attention, and I kept it. I put on an attractive facial expression and said generic witty-person crap only a teenager would be impressed by, I passed the stupid tests you gave somepony when you were getting to know him or her for the first few times, and I got the most adorable reactions out of her, often in front of other mares who wanted me. Sometimes, I got her mad at me, and left her furiously blushing and standing as stiff as an unwanted boner in front of her friends. I made her friends gossip about the mysterious, handsome young bad colt interested in her, and nopony else. I spent just enough time with the high-ranking mares who wanted to steal me out from under her… Wait, no, would ‘Above her’ be the correct thing to say in that scenario? In any case, spent just enough time with those mares to make them think they might sway my interest if they tried hard enough and offered me enough perks to make my chosen target want to double their offer. I made her friends jealous that I was talking to her. I made her feel good that I was choosing to talk to her, instead of them. When I talked to her, it was with a purpose, and whether she gave me the responses I wanted or not determined my attitude towards her. Succeeding in something I had asked of her, something small at first, such as reading a book I liked and had recommended, would get her an approving smile and an enjoyable conversation about the topic. When that ended, I'd leave her with another instruction on what to read next before I left. Failing to read the book by the next time I showed up to talk to her would get her a restrained show of disapproval, and some hints that my interest in her might be waning. I wasn't obvious about it, not like some fictional characters were when the writer wanted to make sure that what their seductive character was doing was incredibly obvious and easy for even a novice at the subject to understand.

I didn't abuse her, and I didn't use her. I didn't want her for sex, I wanted her so she could help me achieve my dreams and save millions. And to be honest, she really was pretty cute. And it wasn't as if I was planning on using her up and casting her aside when I was done with her. I had a nice little place in my master plan set out for her, after all.
But there was more to what I did than mere positive and negative reinforcement, which I also used when talking ideology with her, but only when she said something stupidly generic and 'Safe' instead of an actual ideological position. And when she had ideological positions I didn't like, I talked her around to my way of thinking.

Go on. Come on! Stop being old. Break free from your bonds! Break your limits, like I did! Stop being old and boring like your mother. Stop trying to impress me, and impress me! Stop being an out-of-touch, stuck-up little Princess, and be cool. Live a little, and want me, the embodiment of cool! That's what I told her, every time I was with her, through the great dance that was my mixture of body language, unspoken words, and my choice of books we'd romantically read together in her private bedroom when she'd been really good.

'Private Bedroom'… Great. I can't erase that, but there it is. Proof that my Vault wasn't exactly normal after all, because the thought of having a whole bedroom to yourself still feels, to me, like something on the same high-class show-offy rich-pony level as having a whole private swimming pool to yourself, or wrapping yourself in many pounds of gold with thousands of diamonds and other gems studded all over it.

Come to think of it, it probably isn't normal for a teenager to decide to get a slightly-older mare into him in the way that I did. Would it make the subject feel less weird for the reader if I said I was often terrified that one day, the Overmare's Daughter would leave me if I took things too far, or not far enough, or went too fast, or went too slow, or did anything else she didn't like? Or that if any of the born-rich raised-from-birth-to-be-cool ponies with high-ranking positions waiting to be inherited expressed interest in my mare, she'd want them instead? Or that I was terrified that if she ever saw the real me, she would leave me or even order me killed out of sheer disgust?

Anyway, once I'd gotten her to want me and seriously consider a life spent with me, we formed a proper relationship with love, mutual trust, and a lot of care for each other. I talked her around to my point of view on every ideological issue that mattered to me, our society, and the planet, and only when I knew I had her did I tell her about my dreams.

An edited, redacted version of my dreams, of course. It felt strangely lonely, to hide different parts of who you were around different ponies. It was as if there was a wall between you and each pony, and that wall was attached to the different masks you knew you had to wear if you wanted to keep these ponies around. But that was just one of many hard things in my life I had to bear. One mildly-generic and somewhat-safe speech that gradually accelerated into dangerous territory later(Thank Celestia our Vault had an Overseer, not an Overhearer!) and she was finally fantasizing about a happy life where we ruled the Vault as joint Overseer, a married couple taking the roles of Overmare and Overstallion, and we made the world a better place and reformed the Expansion Program to make it safer while pouring ALL of the Vault's Research And Development budget into finding reliable and safe ways to open two-way portals from here to different worlds and alternate universes, and we all struck metaphorical gold and real gold and we found a wonderful world without war and we went there and all lived happily ever after with infinite resources and infinite space and infinite happiness and blah blah blah.

Don't get me wrong, it's nice to talk about a best-case scenario, but I wish I didn't have to take so long slowly acclimatizing her to the idea of helping me take over the Vault and lending my army a degree of perceived legitimacy in the eyes of the broken Vault Ponies in love with the system and authority after my coup. I remember, for the longest time, wishing she was an exciting, cool, spirited, badass mare with brilliant ideas and a fiery temper she'd unleash at anypony who displeased her, except for me, because she loved me with all of her lively, pounding, hot-blooded heart. I remember weighing my options and reminding myself that she's not really bad, per se, just not interesting like the cool fictional mares I read about and fantasized about dominating and taming and fucking like a
horny rabbit. And then, as we grew closer and she started to trust me more, she started to show more of her true personality and... Well, my desire for a forceful and spirited mare must have been a result of my subconscious mind trying to tell me something. Or something Destiny had chosen to bless me with, in preparation for her, for beneath the layers of shyness and safeness and rules of proper decorum that had been drilled into her from the moment she had first opened her eyes, she had that spark, she had that forcefulness, and she had one hell of an inventive mind. At night, when she wasn't building robots, she went to the shooting galleries, and got pretty good scores. I'd like to say she also donned a black suit of armour with a helmet that concealed her identity every few nights, and in this disguise, she was known through the entire Vault as the Mysterious Stranger, the ultimate fighter nopony could beat at any range, one feared and respected by all. She was not that, and her mother would not have allowed it if she tried. But hey, she was still pretty cool. And she still had her own Mysterious Stranger outfit, which she used when she visited the Tech-Sec and took her robots with her for some field testing. She couldn't rebel openly under the hoof of her mother, and her father had killed himself in her mother's bedroom at her request when she was seven, so his opinion wasn't a factor. And she wasn't bad in a fight, even without that impressively powerful spell she had, the one that allowed her to turn her whole body into a shifting and fluid living diamond-like substance harder than diamond. Or the spell that allowed her to conjure simple shapes, such as rectangles and spheres, and simple weapons, such as broadswords and tower shields, out of the same material.

Turns out all that "I want to make a nice, sweet, safe story about kitties!" garbage was just a cover story. Her true goal was to be seen writing that, while writing other, better stories in secret. Exciting, dangerous stories of heartbreak, betrayal, war, and fighting for what you believed in. Her plan was to admit that she wrote the books she would pen under the fake name of Big Green on her deathbed. After all, she said to me one otherwise-routine day, nopony would expect a mare to name themselves Big Green.

Did I mention she had a genius-level IQ, like myself?

Her real goal, as it turns out, was to become the Overmare, and merely feign incompetence. She would feign incompetence, impotence, and a wishy-washy wait-and-see play-it-safe nature. "I'll do my best, for everypony!" She would cheerfully state in the stupid little speeches she often rehearsed with a sufficiently hopeful, pure-hearted, and ever so slightly dopey tone. She would be a reliably unreliable idiot anypony in power could bend to their whims. For every one backstatter who wished he or she was the Overseer, there would be five more who would greatly benefit from having her in power, willing to hold that backstatter back and even violently deal with him or her in some cameraless corner if things came to blows.

She would seem to be an idiot, while she carried out her reforms. And whenever she did something one Elite didn't like, he or she would simply assume that some other Elite swayed and manipulated her harder. 'Accidents' would start to happen to the worst, the vilest, the most abusive and corrupt dogs in positions of authority, making room for ponies she trusted and would appoint, if appointing the agenda-pushing offspring of an 'Elite' soon to die anyway wouldn't end up turning out the same way anyway. Her Stable Security would seem to go to pieces in the gradually-worsening chaos as evil 'Elites' died coated in evidence that other 'Elites' did it, and corrupt grunts and bosses obtained sealed instructions to kill even more corrupt grunts and bosses. And through it all, she would pretend to be an idiot playing right into the hooves of some evil rich asshole convinced that her machinations were his own, and that his own machinations had lied undetected for years. Or even decades! And other elites would be led to believe that she was getting fully taken under the wing and hoof of that evil rich 'Elite', forcing them to play their cards to get rid of that one and each other. Only once she had purged all of the corruption from the top dogs, right under their very noses, would she start to properly and openly push through reforms that would benefit all of the Vault's ponies and ensure its long-term survival.
So she certainly wasn't opposed to having to integrate her plan to save the Vault into mine.

I still think mine is better, because it would help the Vault faster, and it wouldn't rely on unpredictable variables like whether the different cabals of rich aristocratic cutthroats would spend their time cutting each other's throats instead of hers or not, and whether the Aristocrats would stay fractured and opposed to one another or whether they would unite to form a cabal in the guise of a parliament or council that would take power from her and seek to 'Restore Order', and replace it with an order that puts them and their offspring permanently at the top while the Vault rots beneath them.

But I have to admit, her plan was brilliant. And it didn't require her to openly risk her life or spend years laying the groundwork for a revolution.

Also, she was a fundamentally good person. Probably should have said that earlier on, but yeah, she's a good person.

She was my Precious Gem, and I loved her.

…Damn it, I forgot to mention the actual name of the Overmare's Daughter. I swear, I do love her. Even now, after all this time.

Her name is Radiant Emerald.

It might seem odd to a pony from my Vault, since many Expansion Program ponies name their foals after gemstones, rocks, mountains, canaries, and other things associated with mining (Even though they are diggers, not miners), but I suppose her mother thought there wasn't much else a gold and silver-maned emerald-green Unicorn could be named. Gold on the right and silver on the left, her mane's twin colours extend straightly from her head to fall down and frame either side of her face beautifully, with the excess hair on the back of her hair and neck tossed on the right side, her hair's golden side naturally resting atop her silver side. Her tail is a naturally-twisting spiral of both colours; ending in a diamond-studded emerald-green bow she re-ties herself whenever it comes undone. Her mismatched silver and gold eyes copy the colour scheme of her mane in reverse. Her Cutie Mark is of a fucking big emerald. We're not sure what it means, since emeralds have meant pretty much everything out there in the nonsense field of pseudomagical spirituality – Books claim they can heal the heart, calm and restore the soul, and symbolize and ensure or at least aid in growth, eternity and long life, healing, one's ability to care for nature, reflection, fertility, peace and balance. Books claim emeralds can also aid the ability to breathe steadily while meditating and represent the innocence of inexperienced greenhorns, the hardness of the gemstones themselves, and so much more - but considering how surprisingly tough the mare is, we're pretty sure her Cutie Mark means she's tough. After all, gems are tough. Emeralds might not be the absolute toughest stones out there, but they also look nice. They're certainly more interesting than boring, generic, stupid diamonds. Sure, they might supposedly be the hardest gemstones out there, outside of the fancy magically-made junk, but in their perfection, they are boring. They lack colour. They're only good for storing enchantments, really.

She's my wife. Sort of. We haven't had an official ceremony in front of the whole Vault, a colossal ode to excess and our eternal love, narration of the ceremony broadcast live on official Vault Radio, like the one we've dreamed up and fantasized over together just yet. Especially since part of our dream wedding includes it happening outside of our Vault, in a massive city called New Canterlot within a beautiful and fully-healed Equestria, thousands of ponies watching in awe as we say our vows and kiss, and then I fuck her on the wedding podium before everypony's shocked stares. Or I carry her off to a private bedroom where we fuck, either works and we haven't been able to agree on that last part yet.

In any case, we've already had a small, cheap, private ceremony for myself and a few of our closest friends and most trusted allies to make our wedding pseudo-official. Well, my closest friends and
most trusted allies made up my side of the audience, and backstabbing political conspirers currently allied to her made up her own. Everypony in the Vault knows it: I'm hers, and she's mine.

Anyway, now that I've told you about myself, my Vault and its history, the political situation that made the Vaults necessary, and the first mare I ever fucked, I can get to what some may consider the most important part of this entirely-necessary pre-story infodump.

Let me tell you a little bit about Pip-Bucks, and show you mine.

You remember that mine is the Pip-Buck 7000, with a Radio receiver, a Rad counter that'll tell you how much radiation-like necromantic 'Taint' is in the area, along with nonmagical nuclear radiation(We decided to add the feature after early Maginuclear Reactors made ponies pointlessly panicky about potential leaks), and the ability to turn the user invisible for up to five minutes per day every 24 hours, right? Well, that's not all it can do.

First of all, Eyes-Forward Sparkle. A neat little feature that had been upgraded so often, I found it hard to believe that at one point, it merely placed a tiny little bar in the bottom-right corner of your vision beneath your health meter, with thick lines displaying not where your friends and foes were and how far away they were, but merely what direction they could be found in. I also hear that these little 'Compasses' could only display targets in front of you and beside you, with targets behind you appearing as if they were beside you. Sure, THAT would never confuse somepony at a vital and potentially-fatal moment. I hear some models even had built-in limits that prevented the Compass systems from displaying more than twenty – or was it fifty? – foes at any given time, after some pre-war test had found that the system started to lag when it tried to track the hundreds of foes you might find on a battlefield.

Mine was better. The Pip-Buck 7000 model was just objectively better For one thing, the two functions of my 'Compass' had been divided into two separate displays. The one in the bottom-left corner was something small to remind you if you were heading North, East, South, West, Northeast, South-By-Southwest, or any other of the 32 horizontal directions that mattered. My 'Enemy Compass' was wider and thinner, and translucent. A long and thin horizontal line, notched, with 5 numbers beneath the notches to needlessly remind you how directions worked with this thing. 360, 270, 0, 90, and 360 were the numbers that marked and oriented my compass. The notches ticked upwards with slight spiking points, and the numbers were beneath it. And unlike the eight 'NESW' letters of my directional compass, they didn't move about. You could see through the whole thing, numbers and all, if you wanted to, but you could still see it clearly enough for you to use it at the same time. Quite handy, really, and it's hard to describe to a pony who'd never used one of these to describe how your mind adapted and grew around this feature when you’d had it since you could walk. Your other senses didn't dull or anything, you'd still notice somepony sneaking up behind you if your Pip-Buck didn't tell you about it, for the same reason you'd notice a black-clad but utterly-silent pony sneaking up in front of you in a purely-white room. Using it felt natural to you, like using a sixth sense. Or a seventh sense, in the case of Unicorns, who already had a sixth sense for sensing magic use, and Pegasi, who had a sixth sense for sensing wind currents and things moving towards you. I once read that a Pegasus's wings were a bit like a cat's whiskers: Both could serve as an early-warning system for the lucky guy or gal with those things. Do Earth Ponies have an official and scientifically-recognized sixth sense, again? I'm not sure. Anyway, back to cool tech shit: This 'Life Compass' of mine, as it was officially called in the official .PDF Instruction Manual, displayed friends and foes all around me in a three-hundred-and-sixty degree radius, and instead of marking their locations with stupid and useless bulky lines, it did something smarter.

It used triangles. Small, downwards-pointing triangles, with the size of the triangles telling me how close or far away the detected life forms were. The triangles of foes over two hundred meters away didn't shrink any more and the triangles of foes within ten meters of you or less didn't grow any
more, but apart from that, the system was pretty great. The feature’s radius was around two thousand
meters, and after enough time spent using it, you’d eventually develop an almost instinctive sense for
how to use it without even thinking about it.

The numbers helped. So did the other triangles. To put it another way, whenever I looked at a life
form, my Pip-Buck ‘Marked’ that life form automatically. Which meant a small and illusionary
triangle would hover over the head of that ‘Marked’ being, be it a friend, a foe, or a neutral party.
Above those triangles only the Pip-Buck’s wearer could see, triangles that existed to keep track of
what direction your Marked pony was in, numbers and the lowercase letter ‘m’ hovered and updated
themselves in real-time. If I saw you, a triangle would appear above your head in my vision, with
some numbers above it to tell you how many meters away from me you were. If you walked behind
a wall, that triangle would remain, and a pulsing white… You know how echoes are typically
visually rendered? Imagine that constantly running along your body, along with a white outline
constantly around you to outline you and tell me where you are. I would be able to see you through
walls, through smoke, even through several feet of solid steel. Sure, your life signature would
eventually find itself cleared from my device’s logs after an hour had passed since the last moment I
saw you, but until then, I would always know what direction I could find you in and how far away
you were from me. Oh, and I could always bring up my Pip-Buck to mark your signature as a
‘Favourite’, to permanently store you in one of ten spaces my device has ready for this feature. This
would allow my device to permanently remember your signature and display it constantly in my
vision until the day you die. Or the day my Pip-Buck is destroyed. Or the day something wipes out
all of my Pip-Buck’s data. I would also be able to ‘Toggle’ my device’s display of your remembered
signature on and off, so if I wanted to go a few days without seeing a white rendering of you through
walls, before going back to always knowing exactly where you were, I could.

Anyway, once I Marked you on my Life Compass with this, I would also be able to see how many
meters away from me you were, rendered as numbers my Life Compass. So, to recap: If I saw you,
I’d know where you were for the next hour at the very least, and I’d have two triangles that told me
where you were. One triangle on my Life Compass, and one triangle that always floated above your
head, no matter where it was.

Those little triangular marks on my Life Compass that showed the location of enemies would get
more translucent the further-away a target was, though a small and thin arrow-bottomed vertical line
near the base of the marks would always remain solid to aid in the visibility of said marks.

Finally, I could toggle my Life Compass and everything about it on and off. Or I could just toggle
the Marked Pony system on and off, while keeping the usual triangular numberless compass marks. I
could also toggle one option in the Settings menu to ensure that only Foes and Neutral Parties would
be tagged by this system. Yes, the Life Compass and regular Compass made fine additions to my
EFS Display, which told me my current Health, Magic, and Action Point levels, my radiation level,
my currently-equipped weapon and how much ammo I had left for it, whether my weapon had an
attached subweapon or not, and how much ammo it had, my currently-equipped grenade of choice,
whether I was currently hidden or detected, whether enemies were currently looking for me or not,
what percentage of ‘Concealment’ I was currently at(The better you blended in with your
surroundings, the darker it was, and the slower you were crouching while sneaking, the harder you
were to spot, which increased that number), and there was even a small and square grey translucent
Minimap in the bottom-right corner of my vision, which used radar to scan and display the area
around me from a bird’s-eye view, with myself as a pointed purple isosceles triangle in the center,
and Waypoint Markers and Quest Objectives made by my Pip-Buck's Quest Tracker as five-pointed
blue stars that flashed white for a fifth of a second every four fifths of a second. Hostiles would be
displayed as red dots, just as friendlies would be displayed as green dots, and neutral parties would
be displayed as pure-white dots. If I had friends at my side in that moment, small and cartoonish
‘Vault Pony’ icons would be generated to display their faces, and I would be able to see their health,
Did I say just say 'Finally'? I meant finally as in 'Finally, I can move on to the next feature', not 'Finally, I can get on with the story'. Trust me, I'd love to skip all of this as well, but you'll need to know this stuff later on, so you can appreciate it more when you learn it organically through reading my story.

I've told you about the EFS, the Eyes-Forward Sparkle. But have I told you about the device's ability to store weapons and armour, AND scan them for damage? When you had your Pip-Buck's 'Weapons' or 'Armour' tabs open, you could see a tiny Video Game-style health bar for each item, visually displaying the arbitrary number it deemed the item's 'Condition' to be. According to the instruction manuals, all items had a 'Maximum Condition' and a regular 'Condition', which should have been called something like 'Current Condition', in my opinion. An item's 'Maximum Condition' was the arbitrary number your Pip-Buck assigned to how tough your item is, and how much wear and tear it can withstand. An item's current 'Condition' was the arbitrary number it assigned the state your chosen item was currently in. So a recently-washed shirt would have, for example, 1000/1000 Condition, while a torn-up shirt full of bullet holes would have 40/100 Condition. It's not a metric I particularly saw the point in, which is why I'm glad the Condition System keeps it simple by just giving you an easy-to-read health bar. Speaking of item deterioration, the Pip-Buck 7000 model was immune to that, thanks to a sophisticated on-board auto-repair system. Magic, you gotta love it.

Speaking of Video Games, while this Pip-Buck had the usual cassette player, which meant it could play all the latest physically-released games, it could also wirelessly connect to any Terminal. And if that Terminal had any Cassettes inside it, I could force that computer to play that game, while my Pip-Buck screen used magic to perfectly copy what was on its bigger screen.

Speaking of screens, my device's thick glass screen was more of a decoration than anything. While it still functioned properly, I preferred to use the bigger illusionary screen that could be toggled on and off at will. The illusionary screen hovered a few inches above the physical screen, which went dead, becoming fully black while its display was magically raised outside of its usual physical constraints. The device also has a magical touch screen, one magically enchanted to only work based on Intent. If I wanted to touch my screen to change my currently-selected menu or something, and I did so, it would register. If I wanted to select one thing and I tapped the wrong thing, the right thing would be selected. If I wanted my screen's currently-displayed menu to change and I didn't want to tap the screen, it would change for me anyway. If somepony tapped my screen to mess with my menus and I didn't approve of this, none of his taps would register. And as a bonus, with this gimmick and the aforementioned unrestrained-screen thing, I could also view and interact with all of my menus at once.

I've just realized that I glossed over my Pip-Buck's ability to store items. Well… Think of it like having a magical suitcase. A magical suitcase that follows you around, floating and intangible, something you can only interact with using your Pip-Buck. A magical suitcase that'll weigh nothing at all, no matter what goes inside it… Until you put so much inside it that you go beyond its current weight limit. At that point, a lot of weight starts to press down on you. Not enough to kill you, but enough to make you struggle to stand and walk. Galloping in that state is certainly out of the question. The weight that presses down on you isn't equivalent to what you have stored in that 'Magical Suitcase', either. You could teleport stuff near you into that 'Suitcase' until you had twenty thousand pounds of weight in there, and you'd still feel the same incredible weight crushing you that you'd feel if you'd only gone over your weight limit by a single pound. Your weight limit starts at two hundred and fifty pounds for a Unicorn or Pegasus (Three hundred pounds for an Earth Pony, no idea what it is for a Zebra, Donkey, Griffon, or anything else. It's probably three hundred for Zebras, they're basically Earth Ponies without any redeeming qualities), and that weight limit is increased by the end result of ten multiplied by the arbitrary number the average Vit-O-Matic Vigor
Tester machine will give you on standard settings for your Strength stat.

There's one more thing my Pip-Buck's EFS can do, and it does something ponies everywhere had always secretly wanted their Pip-Bucks to do, whether they knew it or not: When changing the colour of text, S.A.T.S. and E.F.S. displays, and so on, you could designate more than one colour to be used. If you wanted the names of your items to be a bright yellow, you wanted the little box designating which items were equipped to be a bright pale blue, you wanted the rectangular highlight that told you what you were currently selecting to be pink, and you wanted all of your enemies to appear the your octagonal mini-map in the bottom-right corner of your EFS as pale light-blue letter Ds while making the triangle that represented you look like a penis, you could.

Speaking of the minimap, it tracks the location of nearby hostiles and can be maximized to fill your whole field of vision as a translucent illusionary layer, and minimized back to its original size at will. And speaking of the word translucent, if you ever want to look through any EFS element and see what it's slightly obscuring, it'll fade out even more than usual for you. That's a neat little feature.

Let's see, what else is there to talk about…

Audio can be recorded, using the Pip-Buck. Radio broadcasts and songs can be copied and replayed at will, and burned onto new Cassette tapes. Audio can be cut up, copied and pasted, amplified, reversed, automatically 'Tuned' to any key or notes of your choice, sped up or slowed down in a manner that also raised or lowered the pitch of the audio, sped up or slowed down with a technique that did not alter the pitch of the audio, and deleted on the fly, though it'll take about a minute for your finished audio file to be saved and compiled into a small, easily-shared audio file.

Oh, and it also boasted advanced Pip-Buck tracking technologies, enhanced hacking capability, a DETAILED PRE-WAR MAP of Equestria in FULL EYE-POPPING 16-BIT COLOUR and an alright 2d display that could pan around and rotate slightly to turn into AN INCREDIBLE ISOMETRIC 2.5D DISPLAY that allowed the user to rotate the map and see 2d icons rotate to face the camera, it even had the ability to automatically assign tags to saved locations and temporarily stop displaying locations with those tags, or focus only on those tags! You could even assign tags to your friends, and filter out certain tags to stop them from appearing on your map! It also boasted a motion sensor, and its map updated itself in real-time, so if you were heading for a monument or some other landmark and it just didn't exist any more, the map would update itself for you.

And the Pip-Buck could be made to glow like a flashlight. A really bright flashlight that shat all over the mediocre flashlights lesser Pip-Bucks could double as in a pinch.

And now, to tell you about the big guns. The best guns. The coolest, best, and most important feature of this Pip-Buck model, when it comes to combat.

There was a time when these Pip-Bucks came with a feature called "S.A.T.S.", something called a Stable-Tec Arcane Targeting Spell. Somewhere down the line of time, somepony must have realized how stupid it is to name something used for shooting and killing/Home Defence' after a meaningless brand name that used to stand for Scholastic Aptitude Test. Seriously, who came up with EITHER of these names? Pre-War Scholars went to Schools and Colleges so they could learn more stuff, and the names of the tests they performed on their students shouldn't've sounded like they specifically only tested whether their students had the 'Aptitude' for what they were being taught or not. As for S.A.T.S., calling it a 'Targeting Spell' implies that there's a real, tangible spell a sufficiently skilled Unicorn could cast without the set-in-steel technological efficiency of an Arcane Science device helping them out. This new, upgraded feature with new and improved bonus features was known as O.A.T.S.

OATS, the Optical Adaptable Targeting System.
If you're familiar with standard Pip-Bucks, you know about the standard S.A.T.S. ability these things have, to slow down and almost completely freeze your perception of time while you queue up a sequence of all the attacks you can make on whichever body part of whichever foe in range you want hurt. It's as if time has stopped completely. Fire your gun, swing your sword, cast your spell, and shake a stick at a God. If it's an offensive action, you can Queue it up. No, rude gestures and dance moves don't count, for some reason. When you're ready to initiate the fun part of S.A.T.S., time resumes flowing and the spell takes over you, forcing you to perform that sequence of actions in what seems to be slow motion with unnaturally-perfect pre-programmed magic-assisted movements. It's a weird sensation, but the Pip-Buck doesn't instantly make you the God of melee, spellcasting, or shooting. It uses your own skills in these fields, but at their peak. The peak of your current skill level, that is, not your body's theoretical peak. So, if you're garbage at shooting and you're using S.A.T.S. to try and hit an enemy, you're going to be at your personal best, not at ponykind's best. Get better at shooting, and you'll be more likely to hit foes in S.A.T.S..

O.A.T.S. is basically exactly that, but with a better name. And the ability to calculate the firing lines of guns, the arcs of grenades, and the countdowns of those grenades. And instead of the traditional cap of 95%, your accuracy in O.A.T.S.'s Auto-Aim system is capped at 99%. Finally, you can open up a menu list containing categories that contain all the spells you know while time is 'Paused', and the top category is a 'Most recently used spells' list instead of an actual category like 'Fire' or 'Restoration', which every other category on your list is.

Oh, and you can use O.A.T.S. to slow time down. You retain your usual control over yourself, only slowed down like everything else. If you want to burn through your supply of Action Points faster, you can increase the 'Multiplier' that slows time down, and if you honestly hate having Action Points, you can decrease that time 'Multiplier' for yourself. Unfortunately, that part can't even be activated unless you have enough Action Points to spend more than a second under its effects, and most ponies don't. I didn't, at the start of this story. Still, it's hard to believe the programming for this was inspired by an old and jailbroken copy of S.A.T.S..

O.A.T.S. also boasted a maximum effective range so much larger than its stupidly-named predecessors, it could detect and assist in aiming at targets LONG before you got into the range where you or anypony else with a Pip-Buck had any hope in hell of actually hitting any targets outside of the traditional operating system's limits, even though that was really a somewhat useless feature when you thought about it. And in a real feat of Pony ingenuity, when its upgraded O.A.T.S. system successfully aided its user in hitting a target, luck energy generated by the pony that would normally flow back into the universe and fade away, diluting itself out into nothingness like urine in the ocean, would instead find itself absorbed back into the Pip-Buck and stored. This allowed ponies to save up or "Bank" their luck for things they really needed it for, like taking an O.A.T.S.-assisted shot they needed to turn out juuuust right, the wind and recoil and air resistance and all sorts of other things luckily just happening to turn out juuuust right, while any of your own natural errors O.A.T.S couldn't smooth out just fortunately happened to make your shot as perfect as possible, luckily ensuring that the bullet would not just hit its mark, but hit its mark in the most fortunate place possible. 'Banking a Critical' was what the Instruction Manual called this feature, and it said a pony's natural luckiness was what determined how quickly your Critical bar fills with each shot.

Finally, the O.A.T.S. system came with something confusingly called an 'Aimbot', even though 'Firebot' or 'Shootbot' would be a more appropriate name. If you toggled it on, any weapon you had equipped would automatically fire as soon as your EFS's crosshairs detected that you were pointing your weapon at a hostile target, and it would automatically stop firing as soon as the target was dead. Every shot fired in this manner would cost you some Action Points at a prohibitively-expensive rate, but if you don't like killing enemies in slow motion, it's a neat trick. Reloads costed extra Action Points while this was on.
I'd like to say the O.A.T.S. system used Action Points more efficiently, or could regenerate them faster, or could make all of your shots more likely to hit their mark, or could allow you to move around in stopped time for as long as you wanted, but all of these statements would be a lie. Still, the ability to pause time for everyone, including yourself, and the ability to slow time for everypony, including yourself, are these useful tricks to keep in your back pocket. There are times when, in the heat of battle, you need to pause time and strategize, take stock of your surroundings, formulate a new plan, or even give yourself a pep-talk. O.A.T.S. can let you do that at will without making you a target or a detriment to your team.

Finally, the O.A.T.S. system allowed you to link your Pip-Buck up with the Pip-Bucks of your friends and followers during combat, allowing you to use H.A.R.M.O.N.I.Z.E., The Helpful Armament Reorganization Matrix Of Networked Zeal Executable. Think of it like an activation of O.A.T.S.’s time-stopping limb-targeting ability, except you’re queuing up actions for yourself and your friends in a row. When you’re ready, you Execute the list of commands and queued actions, and each pony performs their designated actions in slowed time. You can make yourself and your friends take their actions in turns, or you can make yourself and your friends begin following each pony's respective queues at once. Oh, and you can set your Pip-Buck to automatically set the same command simultaneously for every linked Pip-Buck's O.A.T.S. action queue, if you want. Then you can rearrange, delete, or alter the action queues of specific ponies. While queuing actions, you can switch between viewing yourself and your teammates from a third-person perspective and viewing the general area from an isometric perspective. A grid of hexagons will also appear on the ground while you're doing this, mapping out the terrain's floor and helping you keep yourself oriented. You can also force the friends you'recommanding to move from one of those hexagons to another one, expending Action Points in the process. It can only be activated by whoever the group has designated as the Group Leader, and while he or she can queue up any of the standard combat actions for any targets and against any target, each commanded unit gets the chance to agree with, or reject, the commands given before the 'Fun Part' of O.A.T.S. can begin. If one unit rejects their H.A.R.M.O.N.I.Z.E. commands, the Group Leader will see a little square in his EFS display with text on it, warning him about how many targets rejected their commands and who they were. The Group Leader then gets three options: He can either Clear their current queue of commands for all units and make a new one for each one, Clear the queue of commands for those who rejected their queues and try again, or to command the ponies that accepted their commands to go obey their orders and start shooting while those who rejected their commands do their own thing.

Pretty cool, eh? Well, it's about to get even cooler. You probably know what a Radio is, and you probably know about radio broadcast towers and even two-way radios, with speakers and microphones hooked up to them. Well, my Pip-Buck contains the technology of something even more advanced than that. This tech might seem a little 'Out there', but I'm going to have to ask you to suspend your disbelief for a moment.

It's called a Pip-Phone, named after Phonetic Communication (The supposedly-enlightened pseudointellectual's needlessly ostentatious word for 'Talking') and as cool as it might sound, trust me, it's even more useful than you'd think! It uses the device's on-board microphone and speakers, along with the microphone and speakers of whichever Pip-Buck you've wirelessly connected to your device using this feature, to create a two-way communication network. It's hard to describe this technology with words, especially since it was so new when it first came out, but... think of it like forming a portal in space, with you at one end and your friend at the other. You can now speak to that friend through that portal, even if he's far away. Yeah, that's a good way to describe it. It can connect to two-way radio systems, too. And if you're connecting to something older with this feature, like a radio station or even a one-way radio receiver, or even a robot, you can hijack its speakers and speak through it, even if it doesn't have a microphone. You can also transmit any data you want while the two-way magical link is active, such as stored notes. How can a Pip-Phone connect to one
particular radio set, or one particular Pip-Boy, no matter where it is or how factory-standard it might be? Magic. If you know who you want to call, you can call him or her quite easily, as long as that pony's willing to pick up whatever it is that starts ringing. It also has a Private Call mode that, when toggled on, ensures that only the pony you want to call can hear the 'Ringing' noise of a radio/Pip-Buck getting called by the Pip-Phone, and only the pony you want to call can hear your voice when the call is 'Picked up' and accepted.

The only real 'Downside' to the Pip-Phone is that instead of having its own tab somewhere, the function to open the Pip-Phone menu is programmed to be recognized by the standard OS as an item in your inventory with scripts attached to trigger when equipped, stuck at the top of your Armour tab, just above your Item Reorganizer button, which was forced to share the same unusual space. Luckily, the scripts programmed into the 'Item' recognize 'Run script when Equipped' and 'When equipped, unequip' as functions to automatically perform. Thanks to the 'jailbreaking' (Code-cracking, followed by insertion of additional code to add a script-extender) of the Pip-Buck systems, which happened many revisions ago, Pip-Bucks can be made to equip and unequip non-existent items without causing the whole system to crash.

Speaking of the Item Reorganizer, it'll open up a small menu with three options when you select it: Organize, Settings, and Close. Choose Organize, and it'll apply one of [These] tags to every item in your inventory whenever it's selected. Stimpaks and Healing Powder will find themselves renamed to '[Aid] Stimpak' and '[Aid]Healing Powder', while food items like Fresh Tomatoes and Grapes will find themselves renamed to '[Food]Fresh Tomatoes' and '[Food]Grapes'. As for weapons and armour, they get multiple tags. A '10mm Pistol' would find itself renamed to '[Small Guns][Pistol][10mm]10mm Pistol', while a sledgehammer would find itself renamed to '[Melee Weapons][Heavy][Blunt]'. There would also be a star there, on the right end of its name, if it had been modified in any way. The same applies to pieces of armour. For example, a Technician or Repair Pony's Utility Barding that, according to the Pip-Buck, increased the arbitrary number assigned to how good you are at repairing things, would be renamed to '[Light][Skill]Utility Barding'. If you selected Close, the Item Reorganizer's menu will close, and if you selected Options, you get to mess around with the order in which tags appear, whether certain items or types of items will be ignored by the tagging system or not, if there are any additional category tags you want to add to items, and so on. It's so useful, I'm surprised the original inventor of Pip-Bucks didn't include this function as standard.

Finally, it boasted an in-built music player, The X-Cell System, a sickeningly excessive and officially decadent-as-fuck sixty four gigabytes of storage space, which is great for storing over a thousand hours of these things called 'Listeners', audio recordings of ponies reading books to you. The X-Cell system was a little something installed in all modern Pip-Bucks, something that the 'Most Elite of the Elites', a group known as the Creme De La Creme or 'The Crèmes', had assisted in creating.

…Well, they supplied the idea, and that was as much as anypony with sense could expect from those egotistical rich idiots. They said they wanted something, they set a deadline and expected it done, and it was up to the technological sector to provide it for them or face their wrath.

The X-Cell System kept tabs on its wearer's actions. It did not report them to anyone, or pass judgement on them. It simply counted how many times something was done, like how many books you'd read in your life, or how many pieces of bread you'd eaten in your life. Once you'd done a certain task a certain number of times, or carried out some specified difficult task once, a tiny amount of magic would be taken from the Pip-Buck's battery and inserted into your body, enhancing your ability to do that thing, or something relevant to it. What that necessary number of times would be depended on the task in question and what kind of boost the system was offering: Some challenges wanted you to do something five times, some challenges wanted you to do something ten times, some wanted you to do something fifteen or thirty times, some wanted you to do something fifty times, and some wanted you to do something one or two or five hundred times. Harder challenges
like "Get a perfect score at the firing range" or "Cast a Level Six Fire Spell" usually gave you a boost after five or ten successful attempts, while easier ones like "Go to sleep on time and wake up on time" or "Go a day without breaking any laws" required a good few hundred successes.

Challenges could be submitted by the people, and while the Head Pip-Buck Technician supposedly had the final say about what challenges did and did not get into the game, that Creme usually delegated this task to his many underlings, letting the ponies of wildly-varying ages choose which challenges did and did not make it into the next weekly update for all Pip-buck systems.

It was easy enough to see why the thing was wanted, and why the technological sector all the time and resources that had to be spent making perfecting it, while jobless ponies were allowed to be temporarily drafted as maids and grunt workers to be ordered around. On the surface level, it encouraged living life to its fullest, it encouraged excellence, it was the final piece of the puzzle for a device designed to aid and assist ponies in becoming greater. Beneath that surface level, it was a good way of bringing the Elite's way of thinking into reality, while making that way of thinking seem kind, benevolent, even generous. Even though the Elite's way of viewing the world was: If it could accomplish something, it was worth teaching and training and improving, and if it wasn't, it was garbage. It didn't deserve help, it deserved to be thrown away. It was a dead end, best not to be checked out or even looked at. If it was good, it would be one of us, and if it isn't one of us, it can't be good.

This ideology might seem attractive on paper, to some. But what would have happened if the ponies destined to make great discoveries were culled before their time? Wealth isn't some arbitrary concept that exists on the planet, manifested in its pre-existing limited resources, to be hoarded by the worthy and taken away from the unworthy so it cannot be misused. Wealth is created whenever somepony somewhere finds a use for something that was once thought useless. Diamonds were considered useless until somepony realized how hard they were. And they were considered stupid, gimmicky things exclusively for high-end power tools and the jewellery of mares and stallions everywhere, until the day ponies invented the art of infusing spells into gems and enchanting items. Even worthless things like snake oil and dog crap could be converted into poisons by Zebras, so even they were able to create wealth. Of course, Zebras didn't contribute anywhere near enough to the world to make up for what they took from it, and Earth Pony chemists quickly discovered some interesting Potion-related secrets through experimentation. I'll leave them for later, to hype up somepony who saved my life more than a few times.

In addition to the previously-stated benefits of the X-Cell system, there was one more side benefit, something those in Vault Security loved quite a bit: By counting everything that you ever did, the system also counted your misdeeds. Should a Crème, Elite, or Vault Security pony ever check the Pipbuck of a hard-working Worker, a Tech-Sec scientist, or a jobless Deadender, a pampered Elite, or even an extra-pampered fellow Crème, that pony's achievements and crimes - curfew violations, pickpockets, thefts, assaults - would be tallied up for all to see... provided that the pony getting the Pip-Buck Examination didn't have Sunrise's custom-made mod installed for those numbers. He couldn't make the system think he'd achieved more than he had and give him all the bonuses and magical enhancements he wanted overnight, because he had no idea how to hack the program himself... and if he did, he would give himself all the achievement bonuses in an instant and reap the massive unearned rewards. Still, he could quite easily use the beginner-level programming knowledge he held to rig a program up, and have it define some variables as zero or some other low number chosen by the user and then force the Pipbuck's screen to display those designated variables in place of the actual stored numbers of minor and major crimes stored in its memory banks. It certainly earned him favour with the less rule-abiding citizens of the vault, especially those who thought he had forever abandoned them and the Black Stars way, and assisted considerably in his epic quest to create a gang large enough to get him out of here, so he could finally pull off some REAL achievements for the world. Yes, I had a sizeable faction of followers that thought the same
as me, or wanted the same as me, or had been swayed by my charisma and promises of a brighter world for all, free of culls to satisfy the appetites of the parasites that ruled us, but I held no illusions regarding the moral character of my rulers. I was privately hoping for peace, but planning for all-out war in the event that my plans for an attempt at a swift and decisive coup would fail.

Well, that was it for the Pip-Bucks. Oh, wait. Finally, the Pip-Buck 7000 was considerably tougher than older Pip-Buck Models and seven whole grams lighter than the Pip-Buck 3000, and its screen lacked the usual screen-flickering visual effects and 'Scan Lines', because when you wanted to call something an improvement over something else, it has to be better in every way that could possibly matter to anypony willing to test everything about the new model.

Aaand now that's everything.

I'd like to say the one I wore had some custom modifications that made it even better than every other Pip-Buck 7000 in the world. I'd like to say its inner circuitry had been modified, allowing it to draw mainly from its own multi-century magical power supply, rather than the energy of my own body, when it activated O.A.T.S. or tried to slow down time. I'd like to say this allowed it to stop time indefinitely, while allowing me to walk around as if time was flowing normally, the exponentially-worsening drain on the device's magic not bothering it in the slightest. I'd like to say it could passively absorb the motion of air moving around it as I walked around, and then transmute that kinetic energy into something stronger, and channel that energy into a deadly ray of merciless lightning that, thanks to magic, moved even faster than regular lightning, at will. I'd like to say it could form a shield that would render me immune to all damage, until said shield's battery ran out. I'd like to say it could let me evolve into an exponentially stronger version of myself every time I spent a few weeks training with guns, or magic, or whatnot. I'd like to say it could let me unlock my latent potential, instantly making me as strong as I would be if I spent the rest of my life intensely studying magic, weaponry, and pretty much everything else, with no breaks to eat, sleep, or shit factoring into the equation. I'd like to say it would let me become a one-pony army, and then make that version of myself into an army, each one pony in said army a one-pony army in its own right.

But no, I'd just inlaid three rows of seven small diamonds along the lower end of the device in a straight line, equidistant from one another horizontally and about a quarter of that distance from one another vertically, and just beneath the device's three main built-to-last rubber-coated hard-metal buttons. They weren't enchanted; they were just there to look cool, and to make ponies wonder what amazing things I would have enchanted my Pip-Buck with. In all honesty, I understood the basics of enchantment, but at that point, I was about ten years of practice away from calling myself a master, at the very minimum. I wasn't about to potentially break my Pip-Buck by trying to put spells into those gems until I'd gotten myself a lot of practice.

Oh, and I'd ripped off somepony else's idea, code, and programming to give myself what some Tech-Sec Pony invented five years ago. Hey, my ability to talk one of the Tech-Sec ponies I had in my room as Personal Assistants into hacking that guy's Pip-Buck wirelessly and copying all of its data onto mine, letting me pick through its data and copy-paste the vital parts at my leisure, counted as 'Reverse-Engineering' that feature, right? If not, then sure, I ripped him off. But hey, it wasn't as if he was using what he'd given his Pip-Buck: The ability to make his device, as he called the function, 'Go Dark'. This feature rendered my device invisible to any and all networks and trackers at a moment's notice. It even confused my marker on the Pip-Bucks of my foes, letting me disappear from their devices until the next time they saw me, which re-added me to their EFS Display as a life form without a Pip-Buck.

If anypony asked me why I'd made the modifications, I'd act like I'd made the device even better. I'd boast about the advanced technology within my subtle yet ostentatious masterpiece while giving nothing vital or tangible away, buying time by talking up this shining example of Ponykind's
mechanical insight. Or, if I was talking to someone that wouldn't find that charming, cute, or admirable, I'd say I only made the modifications I knew how to make, because I wanted to show off that I could. And if I was talking to somepony who would ask the hard questions, I'd just admit it; I wanted the right to call this thing the Pip-Buck 7777. The Pip-Buck 7K. The Pip-Buck Seven Seven Seven. I would then claim that it didn't have any 'Real' upgrades or improvements, because why advertise your ability to negate one of the Overseer's best ways of tracking any theoretical ponies who somehow broke out of and left the Vault?

I'll be honest, I am aware that 7K means Seven Thousand, rather than Seven Thousand, Seven Hundred and Seventy Seven. However, it's my Pip-Buck and I can call it whatever I want. I'll admit, I was somewhat tempted to name it the Pip-Fuck, but upon looking that up, I'd found that some whore Midfielder(The local term for middle-classer) had somehow scrounged up the caps to pay a Worker(Someone with a job) to make something called that for him. It was just a Pip-Buck with a dildo mounted on the side like a metal spike. The dildo didn't even vibrate. What a fucking casual.

My Pip-Buck was the exact opposite of casual. My Pip-Buck was the distilled essence of cool, fortified with his own brilliance, and marinated in grand-mother-fucking glorious arcane science. Its black colour was a darker shade of black, because of course it was. The device was an extremely dark non-glossy non-reflective black, like the scorch mark a laser shot left behind, and the three buttons on its face weren't little red things with lights in them ready to light up when pressed, they were black and lightless, and with no writing under them to remind me which button did what. When it was active, the screen's background was not a greenish black, or a greyish black, but an absolute jet-black that made the text pop out beautifully. Rather than green, or amber, or any other colour, the on-screen text was a deep vibrant blue, like a blue flame. Those annoying scanlines had been removed. When you changed menus, the screen did not distort or flicker, it just changed, and quickly. So quickly, the sheer speed took a short while to get used to, the first few times you switched menus. Its name was not plastered somewhere on the side or top in large letters, its name was placed discreetly beneath the radio knob, written with a mechanical, precise font favouring straight lines over anything else, written in a deep, dark royal purple. It did not make that annoying humming sound older models subtly made when active until you stopped noticing it, and it didn't make that weird distorted sound older models made when you changed menus. But if I wanted to begin playing a recording of that noise for the sake of nostalgia, I could. No sound played when I changed menus or scrolled down. Not even a click. It had sixty-four gigabytes of storage space, because the number thirty two was for ifilthy fucking casuals/. The thick glass was protected by a thinner second layer of glass layered over it, enchanted through the arcane circuits themselves to repel dust, water, and bodily fluids, and to become unreadable to anyone besides himself whenever he wanted.

Yes, this meant that nopony could peek over my side and read what I was reading.

This also meant that the Torchlight Function, also known as 'That thing that makes the Pip-Buck glow in the dark like a very bright lamp or flashlight', could create a light only I could see and use. Thank you, magic!

One final thing – I promise, this really is the final thing – The powerful magical battery that powered the Pip-Buck 7000 was a few magical voltage grades stronger than the standard Pip-Buck Battery, not that it mattered much when a normal Pip-Buck's battery life was so absurdly long... But if scientific progress stopped when ponies said "Ok, I think we've gone far enough", it would have ground to a screeching halt centuries ago, on the day ancient ponies realized how great ploughs were for farming and proceeded to laugh at how pointlessly convenient things like water pumps near the farm or in the center of town would seem to their outdated sensibilities.

Well, I've told you a little bit about Pip-Bucks. I've told you about myself, my love, my home, and
my future. I've told you about my past, the past of my Vault, and the past of my world.

There are a few other things I should tell you, but they aren't that important. The story will get to them, eventually.

There are so many things I need to tell you in this story.

But most of all, I need to tell you one thing…

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**Level Up!**


**Chosen Attribute: Charisma**

**STATISTICS**

- **Strength**: 7 (+2 Early Bird=9)
- **Perception**: 7 (+2 Early Bird=9)
- **Endurance**: 6 (+2 Early Bird=8)
- **Charisma**: 7 (+2 Early Bird=9)
- **Intelligence**: 7 (+2 Early Bird=9)
- **Agility**: 6 (+2 Early Bird=8)
- **Luck**: 8 (+2 Early Bird=10)

**TRAITS**

**Gifted**

You have more innate abilities than most, so you have not spent as much time honing your skills. All stats have a +1 modifier. All non-spell skills are lowered 10 points. You receive 4 fewer skill points per level.

**Early Bird**

Hey early risers! Enjoy a +2 to each of your SPECIAL attributes from 6 am to 12 pm, but suffer -1 from 6 pm to 6 am when you're not at your best.
"War… Has changed," Sunrise Stardust's deep tones could be heard all around the Stable, not through the omnipresent loudspeakers built into the smoke detectors in the ceilings of every room, or the larger shielded loudspeakers in the ceilings of the hallways between rooms every mile or so, but through the Pip-Bucks on the hooves of almost every pony in the bottom 70% of the Vault, and many of the upper percentages had their Pip-Bucks tuned into this broadcast, playing it silently while recording the audio input to be played back later. A speech of his was playing on multiple synchronized radio stations, but only one would have an interview with him after the speech was over.

"The ancient Zebra tribes waged war to gather slaves and wealth, but without freedom or innovation, their culture and society stagnated. Corrupt and moronic, not even all the Foreign Aid in the world could stop them from being a horrifying example of what the whole world would be like without Ponykind. The Griffons built an empire from its lust for gold and territory, but as soon as it had unified its homeland, the Griffons lost their shiniest gold trinket and fell from grace, shattering apart and becoming a fractured, tribalized society of poverty-stricken, bickering nation states unable to provide for its lazy, cruel citizens as their hearts grew cold. Princess Celestia and Princess Luna solidified a shaky alliance between three small tribes in the middle of a frozen wasteland and transformed their trust in the Princesses into a scientific, cultural, agricultural, and economic superpower far beyond any founder's wildest dreams and fantasies, a shining beacon of hope and harmony in a world in dire need of it. But despite their status as the supposed moral victors of the war, their hubris and inaction allowed the Zebras to ensure that the whole world lost."

In the crowded lower levels of the vault, where families of nine and fifteen lied down in hallways around the few ponies with a Pip-Buck and waited for their next meals, and rooms full of multiple families with twenty or so ponies of all ages each silently and eagerly watched and listened to a small, simple, boxy homemade radio, Sunrise Stardust's voice was heard.

"The ponies of old, who ran and hid or died crying when following their principles bit them not only in their asses, but in the necks of their entire species and the heart of their world, may call themselves the moral victors of the war, or even the true victors of the war. Maybe they would call themselves something even more infuriating, if they were still around today. But when your inaction ensures that half of your foals die, and the other half stagnate as they are forced to hide underground like rodents, all because you're afraid of getting your hooves dirty so that the hooves of your offspring can remain clean, can you really call yourself moral at all?"

Over the crackling scream of constant electrical flow and the overdriven jingle of audible magic so strong you could hear it in your ears and feel it in your teeth, as row after row of fifty sweaty and tired adult Unicorn males and females standing on either side of a massive blast furnace-like device poured all the magic they had into focused, continuous beams of energy aimed at the device's many pylons, slowly recharging the thousands of magical batteries plugged into the device, Sunrise's voice came on a Pip-Buck with its volume hacked to a number far beyond the maximum volume, and his voice was heard.

"When old ponies dirty their hooves and break their backs to plant trees so that their foals, and the foals of their foals when they grow older, and all the other foals of equestria can relax in the shade of those trees, society is prosperous. We must be what our ancestors were not, and what their ancestors were! We must be builders, warriors, weaponsmiths, and more. We must care for crops and the world, we must plant trees and plant flags! To make Equestria great again, we will need to war, in the name of driving out our enemies and the enemies of life itself, and securing a lasting peace our
foals, and their foals, and their foals can enjoy!"

Over the dripping of water systems, the faint rustling of leaves, and the burning hum of artificial solar light, the farmers and gardeners of the Agricultural Floors were silent and still as his voice was heard.

"War… War has changed. There was a time when war was waged to protect a country's civilians. To gather land and resources, for the good of all. To protect a country's interests and secure a brighter future. But now, war… War has changed. It's no longer about nations, ideologies, or ethnicity. Outside these walls, wars are fought for survival. And inside these walls, a war is fought for control. There was a time when you would have had to defeat a country in a war, crush its soldiers, and decimate its resistance before you could get its ponies to accept the conditions we're living under! Then again, I suppose we have been defeated in a war. Perhaps that's why we're treated like second-class, third-class, or even fourth-class citizens in our own homes, by the offspring of those who stopped us from winning the war! Those who ruined our world were not only the savage Zebras, but the selfish, stupid elites who sought to aid them and stand in the way of Ponykind's deserved victory, to line their own pockets with profit, at the expense of their country, its ponies, and its future!"

Over the constant pitter-patter of hundreds of keyboard taps per second, the legions of ponies at their desks on the dedicated science and programming floors, their Pip-Bucks were blaring his voice loudly enough for all to hear, and his voice was heard.

"Why are we still here? Just to suffer? Every night, I can feel the loss of our homeland, our Equestria. Every day, I can feel the loss of the basic rights our grandmothers and grandparents signed away for the sake of 'Ensuring Stability' and preventing a coup for the sake of preventing the supposed scariest thing in the world, violence. Well, when you look at what Stable Security is doing to us every day, can you way what our grandparents did to us prevented violence? Our grandmothers and grandfathers signed away their rights, their mothers and fathers were complicit with this because they let this happen, and our mothers and fathers were complicit with this because they did nothing to stop this when it was their turn to take the reins of society and inherit the messes their parents left them. They all sold their rights, and our own, and the rights of our future fillies and colts. We were put in this Vault so we could carry the flame of ponykind's knowledge, morality, and culture. We were put in this Vault so that one day, when the background radiation and magical degeneracy decayed to safer levels, we could rise up and reclaim Equestria for ponykind, and purge it of the rapists, the murderers, and the rats biting at its wounds so it can never heal. But instead, our forebearers chose temporarily stability and a broken system that puts us in chains over life, freedom, and the very purpose of life itself. We were born into a world that mocks us with talk of excellence and virtue, competition and evolution, rights and freedoms, as we lie here, trapped like caged animals! We were born into a world that mocks us with talk of earning your keep when there aren't enough jobs to go around, because the lazy ponies at the top of the pyramid don't feel like allowing competition to threaten their monopolies, their strangle-hold on our Vault's goods. And for what? So that while some live… No, while some exist in squalor and hopelessness, others can slave away for the benefit of those living the high life, draped in gemstones and gold, wasting the resources we need to survive? Those at the top control the food supply, the military, you, and your thoughts. They own your parents, and your offspring. They have the power to take your foals away from you and kill them in front of you, just because they didn't like the eye colour of one foal. You are their property, and you will remain their property until you're willing to stand up and fight! They own you! And if they don't own you, well… It's time you prepared yourself for the day you're going to prove it."

As legions of Diggers toiled and dug at the ground and walls around them, his voice was heard.

"I'm not calling for violence, because I don't have to. It's going to happen anyway, whether you like it or not. They're going to come for you, whether you follow the rules or not. I'm not calling for a
pre-emptive strike against what we all know is coming, because I'd be shot by Stable Security in front of you if I did so. I'm not telling you to kill them before they kill you and everything you love. I'm telling you to be prepared for when they get around to coming for you. If you're listening to this, you're capable of individual thought, you're capable of greatness, you're capable of rebellion, and our current leaders want you and those with your genes dead for it. It's up to them whether they'll come for you tomorrow, in a week, or in a few months, and it's up to you whether you'll go quietly to the execution podium when it's your turn, or prepare for the next time another innocent is hauled in front of a crowd of civilians who, if they had a single just bone in their body, would do something about the mockery Stable Security makes of justice, society, and civilization itself with their perversion of Equestrian law, and rape of the Equestrian ponies. I'm calling for preparation, and for readiness. Start preparing for an all-out war like your life depends on it, because it just might. Remember, you have no homeland, in their eyes. You are nothing, in their eyes. You are their cattle. You have nothing to offer them but a lifetime of service or the moment of pleasure they'll get from crushing you like an insect while your friends and family watch helplessly. You have nothing to live for, in their eyes. And if they win, you really won't have anything to live for, or anything you need to live. Resource shortages have turned the world outside of this Vault into a constant scramble for survival, and inside it, resource shortages have been used as an excuse to slowly starve you to death to thin your numbers and reduce the damage an armed uprising could deal. There is a reason why the ponies who made this Vault gave us all weapons, not just the thugs in Stable Security. Do you really think you'll be spared the horrors of war, and the horror of actually having to fight for your rights, if you smile and go along with what the Elites in power are doing to you, your family, and the hope of Equestria's future you were meant to represent? You aren't safe. So lock your doors, hoard whatever you can, and prepare for the next food shortage. Prepare for the next riot, and the next excuse by the 'Elites' to initiate martial law. Prepare for the next time they dream up some bullshit excuse to not only continue treating you like cattle, but to treat you even worse than they did a month ago. Instead of preparing your excuses for doing nothing, and your reasons to say 'I always know that damn Traitor was no good! Ponies like him or her are the reason why the Elites mistreat us!', prepare for the day you'll start fighting back in the war they declared on you seventy years ago. They're going to kill you, if you let them, and nopony will be able to mourn you, for fear of being next. Are you going to be next?

In the highest floor of Vault 177, one of the few uncrowded floors in the whole Vault, a floor that felt abandoned and empty as a result, his voice wasn't heard. And in one far-off corner near the Overmare's home, there was one wide, long room, divided into ten segments by steel-reinforced glass walls. There was a holographic targeting dummy at the farthest end of every segment, waiting to be shot. There was a stallion with a .45 calibre pistol, who crouched down for stability and aimed carefully down the weapon's sights before his utterly-bored marefriend.

There was a single gunshot, followed by the sound of his bullet hitting the far wall, and the hologram releasing a high bell's "Ding!" tone to announce that it had been hit.

"Not bad," Emerald Dawn purred beside the shooter, and she looked gorgeous in her bone-white evening gown, the necklace a master Jewelcrafter – The combination of a gem enchanter, gem grower, and jewellery crafter, one of the highest-paid and most prestigious professions in the Vault – had made by magically phasing two twisted bands of "Gold" and titanium through a bunch of identical grape-sized diamonds, and the a metallic-silver-painted leather strap on her right foreleg, which held the metallic-gold-painted leather holster for a pistol she rarely bothered to shoot. It had been an ordinary .45 ACP semi-auto pistol, at one point. And then she'd intentionally designed and requested the gaudiest customizations she could think of, hoping that in its excessive opulence and extravagance, its notably high killing power would be ignored, a tactic that worked marvellously. A polished and reflective gold finish had been electroplated onto the upper long-slide chunk of the weapon, the bit you could slide back to chamber the next round after firing. The rest of the weapon
had been coated in anodized titanium – You know that thing where you put titanium in an electrolyte solution and proceeded to use precise voltages of electricity to fuck with the metal until it changed colour, and it turned all prismatic and rainbow-coloured if you really knew what you were doing? That - which gave the metal a wonderfully nonuniform rainbow tint, and it made the weapon's golden trigger even more eye-catching. The weapon's thirty-three-round extended magazine had been electroplated with a fine golden coating, keeping to the gold theme that stood out more when so much of the weapon was prismatic. The weapon had been damascened – You know that thing where you inlaid a metal like gold or silver onto a different, usually-darker metal, using the fancier metal like ink to create beautiful patterns? That – with flame-like patterns using a magically-synthesized metal by the name of Photonium, something that had been nicknamed 'Activated Neon' by the scientific community, it frequently seen at late-night parties called 'Raves' before the war. Activated Neon was like a molten metal ink that glowed in your choice of colour at will once dried and fully charged with a small bit of magic, less than you'd need to lift a pear. She'd chosen to have the semi-magical ink constantly loop between every colour in the rainbow at maximum saturation, even when it was holstered. The weapon had a silver-plated underbarrel attachment in the form of a flashlight, and its light was obscenely and dangerously bright at 7 whole kilowatts. Thank you, oh steamy love affair of science and magic, for making it possible for such a dangerously bright light to come from such a small thing! And just like the Activated Neon in her weapon, the flashlight could cycle through any colour in synch with said magical metal's hues. The weapon's grip, something that was basically already decorative on a gun when you could wield it with magic, was not something mundane, like magically-grown leather or a fine old wood. Or something like that, only better, such as leather taken from an ancient and long-extinct magical beast, or wood from some historically, culturally, and magically significant tree. No, the weapon's grip was obsidian on the right side and white sapphire on the left, two large gems fused together and hardened with magic. On the right gem, a magically animated image could be seen within the black gemstone, an image of the head of Princess Luna sadly and wistfully looking up at the starry night sky, her mane billowing beneath her. On the left gem, a magically animated image could be seen within the white gemstone, an image of the head of Princess Celestia's head lowered in misery, her eyes closed, her mane billowing beneath her. Finally, the weapon's rear sight, a little metal chunk that normally stuck up at the back end of guns to 'Fill the gap' left by two similar chunks at either side of the weapon's business end to help you aim straighter, had been altered. Instead of a rectangular chunk, the weapon's rear sight had been swapped out with a five-pointed star, and small triangular chunks had been taken out of the weapon's small and rectangular frontal sights to match it. Rainbow Sun was the name of this weapon.

The mare, however, was even more beautiful. Her body was a bright emerald green that, through the application of cosmetic magic, held the toughness and beautifully unique colour of emerald gemstones even as it continued to move and feel like an ordinary green-furred body. Her bone-white evening gown concealed her "Fucking big emerald" Cutie Mark nicely, and her "Gold" (Gold Anodized Titanium) and regular titanium necklace suited her mane and eyes nicely. Her right eye was golden, and her left eye was silver. Her mane had been split into two well-brushed lengths of hair in two different colours, a main silver streak that curved up and around the right side of her face to almost hide her golden eye from view, and at its end, it abandoned its graceful curves and ended in a double-spiked jagged lightning bolt. The other, golden length of her mane hung down and twisted in a spiralling downwards drill before ending in a curved point near the crock of her right forehoof. Leaning into the shooter and nuzzling him, Emerald Dawn spared a momentary glance at something she considered far less important and interesting than him, and she saw the glowing crimson marker on the holographic blue target's frontal shoulder, which marked where the figure had been hit.

Sunrise, however, had been aiming for the target's center of mass, the chest.

"I can do better," Sunrise Stardust's focused low growl purred to himself and her, his horn aglow with the vibrant golden light of his magic, which pulled the top segment of his .45 calibre pistol back
with a satisfying click and released it with an even more satisfying click. With how wonderful this weapon was, he felt a crushing sense of pressure on him to use it effectively and prove that he was worthy of it. The next bullet slid into place, ready for action, and while his weapon was still a work of art, a real piece of precise magical engineering that still pushed the boundaries a bit with its customization, so to speak, it seemed positively mundane when compared to hers. His semi-automatic pistol had the same anodized titanium coating, but thanks to the consistent electrical charge that had been used on it, rather than the carefully-controlled and precisely-varied one used on Emerald Dawn's, the whole thing was a consistently bright golden shade that, in his personal opinion, conferred upon him all the visual and stylish benefits of gold without any of the downsides, such as gold's weight, softness, and all-around general crappiness. The weapon's barrel was tipped with a nickel-finished fluted compensator of stainless steel. What the weapon lacked in glowing lines and moving images inlaid upon giant gemstones, it made up for with its black polymer and steel 100-round-total twin-drum magazine. And its black-coated steel underbarrel flashlight attachment, which matched his marefriend's gun's light in intensity and size, but not in currently-selected colour. A dignified pure white was the colour he could choose to unleash from his flashlight at any moment, and to his surprise, this flashlight internal mechanisms were actually compatible with his Pip-Buck's operating system, letting him turn said light on and off using his Pip-Buck. Three rows of seven diamonds ran along either side of the pistol's comfortable Black Mamba snakeskin grip, equidistant from one another vertically and slightly further apart from one another horizontally, as if you'd taken the pattern seen on the 'Six' side of dice and 'Turned it up a notch' while keeping the pattern intact. Speaking of the snakeskin grip, while it looked and felt like skin taken from a real Black Mamba – According to written accounts of this pre-war technique needed to make these, at least, as Sunrise had never seen a Snake before outside of pictures in books – The skin had been magically transmuted out of regular fabric, reconstituted into the desired form. Black Sun was the name of this weapon, and while this model of weapon was completely unfamiliar to a pony used to hitting shooting ranges with nine millimetre revolvers and improvised pipe pistols, he was a quick study.

As for what he was wearing... Vault Suits were seen as three steps below nudity that revealed an unimpressive and unflattering body in the Upper Levels, when it came to what you wore, so the pony wore a stylish black suit that had been tailored to perfectly accentuate the powerful musculature of his body, but he'd gone without the typical white undershirt, a choice that teasingly exposed the frontal pectoral muscle-valley of his powerful chest. He'd also gone without a tie, as he'd always hated those damn things. Copies of his Cutie Mark had been sewn onto the flanks of his rear, and his shoes... Well, the shoes his Farrier had drilled into his hooves were regular steel, once upon a time. Then he'd moved on up in the world, and mere steel was seen as too low-class for a pony's hooves, so a professional high-class farrier had offered to remove his current horseshoes and replace them with something a bit more acceptable in High Society. He'd been offered solid gold, like many young foals, but he'd chosen the unnaturally-occurring and incredibly tough Tritanium, a Titanium-like metal thirty times tougher than titanium, three times lighter, and just as easy to work with as steel. However, upon finding the metal unnaturally and off-puttingly light, he'd had the stuff mixed with Titansteel, a metal many times tougher and heavier than Tritanium. From then on, his Tritanium-Titansteel alloy shoes felt just two or three pounds too heavy at first, until he got used to them and grew older, and then they felt right. However, the 'Outer Shoes' he wore around his lower legs were a set of four matching golden anodized-titanium plate armour boots, with thick black rubber bottoms to reduce the noise. The rear boots reached higher up his rear legs than his frontal boots, which were really more like gloves that reached to one's wrist, rather than one's elbow like his rear boots. He supposed they would make fine additions to a set of plate armour, but when worn on their own, they were eye-catchingly tough and very, very stylish.

Emerald Dawn flinched in shock as he fired once again without warning, and she frowned. She spared a brief glance to see that he'd aimed for the holographic target's head, and had missed completely, the shot flying too far to the upper right of the blue figure. "Remind me again, why do
you play around with these toys so often?" She asked. For one who could create a group of emerald gemstones tougher than Tritanium but less tough than Titansteel, each one the size of an apple, and launch them with more force than a cannonball, guns were quaint little things for the history books and non-magical folk, when they weren't opportunities to project an image. In her case, she projected the image of the ditzy, wasteful mare who seemingly saw weapons as fashion accessories, like so many other Upper-Level ponies. After all, when you had 'Earned' the right to carry deadly weapons, why choose to carry ones that look like the kind of 'Boring' things a Stable Security pony might occasionally pull out and use to protect themselves, their lives, and their property if they didn't mind a visit from Stable Security afterwards?

Whenever Sunrise thought about how barely-above-mediocre he was with most guns, even after years of regular practice with pistols, he wondered the same. And pistols were all he really knew, for he hadn't seen or touched a rifle or energy weapon until his ascension to the Vault's higher levels. Still… "Guns don't run out of energy, that's a tactical advantage no amount of magic practice can replicate. And guns will fire whether your concentration is broken or not. Sure, they don't shoot around corners, but a mage can't stockpile twelve-hundred Level Seven Spells in preparation for an upcoming match."

"You're right, guns don't run out of energy," She noted. "They run out of bullets, and those don't grow back faster after a good meal. Or at all."

"Then I'll be sure to carry plenty of bullets, when the time comes." Determination was clear in his voice, and he fired again.

While she normally liked it when he talked about his dreams, or alluded to them, something made her seem uncomfortable in response to that, and she decided to change the subject, but only slightly. "Speaking of guns… Are you enjoying your early birthday present, dear?"

"Hell yes," He said, a grin spreading across his face. His birthday was in two days, but he would be willing to wait a hundred years for a weapon this amazing. Still, he was glad that he didn't have to wait that long, because it meant he would have more time to look at this gun, fire it, and appreciate it in every way. Gods, the design, the weight, the power, THE FUCKING KICK FROM EACH SHOT! And the wonderful, beautiful work of art this gun had been turned into, without compromising on its efficiency or lethality at all! Perfectly balanced, accurate, very sexy, and shockingly powerful, even when he didn't load in magically-infused rounds with magical crystals in place of gunpowder, or ordinary rounds he'd taken apart and loaded with a far stronger magically-made version of gunpowder and far more of it than the bullets needed. And because liquid magic had been infused into the Anodizing solution, he could charge his gun with magic to make it fire faster, harder, and more accurately, at the cost of slowly burning magic over time and burning a big chunk of magic with each shot. The perfect weapon!

"Are you going to show me how much you're enjoying it?" She cooed hopefully.

He holstered his gun for a second, the gun's twin drums shrinking and curling into the magazine so the magical bullet clip looked and functioned like an ordinary bullet clip, making the weapon far easier to put away in a standard holster. He turned around, and he snogged her like he was trying to break something, overwhelming her mouth with his lips and tongue. So forceful was he, she took a few steps back and he followed her, pressing on. It took her a few moments of shock before she melted into it and kissed back with almost as much force, which only made him press harder. He grabbed her body with his forelegs and spun them both onto the ground, on their sides, where he rolled on top of her and pressed his whole body against hers as his lips stroked hers and pressed the back of her head back into the ground.
The door to the Overmare's private shooting gallery pneumatically shot open, and to make up for his inability to slam a pneumatic door, the de facto head of Stable Security announced his presence with a loud roar of "FUCKER!"

Sunrise looked like he was ready to murder somepony, for the briefest moment, and then an incredibly kickable smirk formed on his face as he regained control of his face and decided to taunt that little bitch a bit more. "Fuck her?" Sunrise tauntingly wondered, turning his head around to look at the new arrival while keeping his legs firmly planted around the body of his mare, the Overmare's Daughter, something that always bit at the tempers of idiotic Upper-Level ponies who considered him an aberration and an affront to all of their high society's rules and perceived refinery, rather than an inspirational and life-affirming rags-to-riches success story that made them feel like they'd also 'Earned' the positions and power and riches they only had because they were born into those riches. "Well, I was going to, but-!"

"Shut the fuck up, Traitor." The black stallion in black Stable Security armour, the helmet cast aside and forgotten to reveal his unusually-bloodshot golden eyes and "Let lawbreakers see the true face of death before I kill them" in his own words, spat hatefully as he marched into the room with a fucking 5mm minigun in his golden magical grip, pointed right at Sunrise. While the whites of his eyes had the usual red bloodshot cracks, the golden part of his golden eyes had far more crimson lines, a symptom of the overuse of one particular drug cocktail. Have you ever crushed up some Party-Time Mint-Al tablets and Buck steroid tablets together using the flat end of a Vault Elevator key card, swept the powder into a pint glass containing two shots of whiskey and the entire mixture of saline solution, bio-stim fluid, and healing potion you found inside the average Stimpak, which you had to squirt right into the mug? Have you ever done that, and proceeded to knock the whole thing back and down your throat before the taste got to you? If the answer is no, don't ever try it. Mint-Al Sundowners. Not even once.

The gun shook and jittered slightly, his magic wavering and flashing and flaring in an eye-catchingly unstable manner, but his body was perfectly still, aside from the fall and rise of his chest. Three armoured Stable Security ponies flanked him on either side, their faces concealed by long, rounded helmets with their darkened and reflective one-way-glass visors turned down. Each one had a rifle of their own in their magical grip, with the exception of two Earth Pony guards, who had twin double-barrelled shotgun-model Battle Saddles. Battle Saddles were… Saddles, only armoured, and with guns mounted on them, their triggers connected to a mouthpiece hidden behind their helmets. The inclusion of mirrored visors in standard Stable Security armour had been a recent-ish development, one around twenty years old. According to the Stable Security's head, they blocked laser fire from Energy Weapons, such as Laser Pistols and Plasma Rifles. They also made sure that when one cruelly broke your legs with a Baton for 'Resisting' too much, you saw your own terrified face as you begged for mercy and got those armoured bastards off, rather than a pony you could ever seek out and attempt to get revenge on.

"Finally, you reveal your true colours. Let me praise you, before you die…” Black Lightning spoke with an irritating and feigned voice of calm, polite, smug murderousness. And then, the mask slipped, revealing spite and fury, his minigun threateningly spinning up. "You had us fooled for this long! But no longer, Sunrise!"

This was bad, Sunrise realized. A kill squad had shown up here, with what was probably, judging their leader's expression, intent to kill. Then again, that bastard Black Lightning always looked ready to kill someone when he wasn't smirking and sneering around with that stupid 'Cordial and polite and dignified high-class killer' voice he liked to pretend he naturally had, and hadn't just ripped off from some old book or holotape. Beneath that mask that wore another mask, everypony knew this stallion was just a whiny spoilt brat who loved throwing tantrums almost as much as he loved feeling strong, and had to bully and kill others to feel that way.
Sunrise knew he had to separate the group from their leader somehow, in case Black Lightning gave the order to attack. Something the current head of Stable Security, Night Blade, would likely not mind in the slightest, considering how the rapacious brute delighted in bad things happening to those around him who weren't vitally important to his continued abuses of power.

And considering that this killsquad's apparent leader was Black Lightning, one of that current Stable Security's head's many, many sons... This overgrown and mentally-underdeveloped foal wasn't the oldest or strongest of Night Blade's sons or daughters, but he was the cruellest and most magically-gifted. A combination like that, alongside his father's political pull when it came to what restricted and forbidden spells he could and could not use, made him a very dangerous opponent, even when he wasn't backed up by six armoured and heavily-armed soldiers and a fucking minigun.

"I know you're still mad that I fucked your foalhood crush," Sunrise's face and tones spoke of disapproval, and he spoke as if this wasn't the first, second, or even the third time Black Lightning had tried something like this. He got off his mare, letting her rise to her hooves, but staying close to her to keep her in their field of view. "But are you really going to drag this Strike Squad into our fight? What, were your usual flunkies not cutting it?"

If his verbal jab had worked, the statue-like armoured ponies didn't show it, and Black Lightning chose to ignore it. "We heard your little speech on the radio, Traitor." Black Lightning growled.

"What speech?" Emerald ditzily and innocently wondered.

"I've been here for two hours, practicing my gunplay with my best pony, while I broke in my new early birthday gift."

"Your what?" Black Lightning asked, and his minigun stopped spinning.

"My new golden gun. Chemical electric shit was done to the stainless steel's outer titanium coating, so it looks like it's made of solid gold. Is it alright if I take it out and show it to you?" Sunrise asked.

"Go ahead," Black Lightning smirked, expecting something underwhelming for some reason. Maybe he thought Sunrise would whip his gun out and point it at Black Lightning, getting in one shot before getting chewed up by his minigun's bullets. Why in the goddamn…

To demonstrate the weapon, Sunrise drew and showed off his .45 pistol, making sure not to point it at any of them and give them an excuse. He considered trying to shoot at a holographic target dummy from this range, but at this angle, he didn't have a hope in hell of hitting his mark. Sure, trying to hit the mark and failing might entertain them, but he didn't want to look weak, not when there was a chance that this might make them more likely to attack, considering Black Lightning's love for abusing the weak.

"Damn," One muffled and low mid-twenties female voice came from a clearly-impressed armoured mare on the far right.

"Forget the gun!" Black Lightning yelled. "That bullshit speech on the radio, that was your voice!"

Sunrise groaned in exhaustion, which wasn't a reaction anypony was expecting. "Oh, for the love of... Did some low-down tunnel snake get some idiot to magically shapeshift into me, with the aid of a Polymorphic Potion, so he can push anti-establishment propaganda with my voice again, hoping to give that ridiculous slander some sort of authority and weight?"

"Ridiculous?" Emerald wondered innocently.

"Of course! Everypony knows a government needs to govern its citizens and regulate what they can
and can't do, so they don't tear each other apart. For all of everypony's bellyaching about personal freedoms, what is a law if it's not an encroachment upon your personal freedom to hurt others or hurt society? Somepony's always going to be in the top spot, that's why all revolutionaries who think they can change anything with violence are idiots. And in times of crisis, governments have to tighten the belts of their citizens and keep things running smoothly while they ride out the storm."

Black Lightning's three bodyguards hadn't shot yet, so it seemed they approved of what Sunrise was saying, but Black wasn't buying it. "Cut the crap and-" Black Lightning began to spit.

Sunrise brought his Pip-Buck up, turned to the Radio tab, and turned his radio knob until he'd tuned into Crashendo Radio, one of this Vault's many radio stations. Then, he turned the volume up.

"-though, I must admit," Sunrise's voice said on the radio, while Sunrise himself flatly stared at the invaders. "I've always been partial to homemade explosives, when it comes to improvised weapons. Those padded cloth and Kevlar armour suits our Stable Security thugs wear might block the fire of small weapons, their helmets might let them shrug off strikes from pipes and thrown metal boxes, and they might have enough Auto-Inject Stimpaks to keep them in the field even if someone penetrates their armour and puts a hole in them, but they can't stop bombs from blowing their legs off. Every Stimpak they have is the auto-inject kind, so they can't rescue a teammate or stab one into a blown-off limb. An extension of their self-gratifying pseudo-ideology. Every pony, and every Stimpak, for himself."

"You heard it here first, folks!" The distorted voice of an unknown probably-male pony announced. "Even the score, throw some bombs, and do to their legs what they love doing to yours! Remember: Nails, Baking Soda, and Crushed Orichalcum for improvised explosive boxes, cans of gunpowder for improvised dynamite, and an open Sparkle Cola bottle of homebrewed alcohol with an old rag on fire for what I like to call a Twilight's Asshole! Light the rag, throw the bottle at someone trying to beat your foal to death in front of you, and watch that puckered glass bottle burn those Kevlar gimps to death!"

"Do you think I'm an idiot?" Black Lightning yelled over the sound of the radio.

"You can probably guess the answer to that," The 'Real' Sunrise shrugged. "I just tuned into Crashendo Radio, feel free to tune your own Pip-Buck to that and check it out for yourself."

Black Lightning aggressively twisted the knobs and dials of his Pip-Buck until his machine perfectly matched Sunrise's in the audio output department.

"Poetic justice, at its finest," 'Sunrise' approved openly on the Pip-Buck Radio, which the real Sunrise turned off. Black Lightning did the same.

"Looks like you've got yourselves an impostor to track down, and tracking down somepony who can impersonate anypony, even you, should probably be a higher priority than this little attempt to act tough in front of my mare," Sunrise shrugged, holstering his weapon and turning his radio off. And to himself, he not-so-quietly wondered as he rolled his eyes and walked back to the shooting gallery to silently inform them that the conversation was basically over, "Seriously, who the fuck calls Manehattan Cocktails that?"

Black Lightning loudly growled and turned around, marching out of the room and taking his armoured soldiers with him. "My father will hear about this!" He snapped.

And now that Emerald Dawn was no longer being watched, she shot a chunk of emerald at the panel beside the door to close it, while she allowed her ditzy mask slip away from her features.
"I swear this on my life," Emerald Dawn promised with fire and fury in her eyes, "That bastard WILL suffer the consequences of pointing a gun at you."

"There's the Emerald Dawn I know and love," Sunrise grinned, and he snogged her once again.

"Mmf," was her response as she melted in and kissed back before regaining control of herself, just a little.

"Hey," She said between kisses, "How did you do that trick with the radio?"

"I hacked his Pip-Buck when nopony was looking," Another kiss, "And had it play the same recorded message I was playing at the same time," Sunrise boasted.

"Really?" She was impressed.

"No, every radio station in on this was playing a pre-recorded speech, followed by a series of recorded lines to weave into an on-the-fly fake interview. Every radio station not in on this just got the main speech, and somepony the listeners would want to hear in an interview, after the main speech. Not all of those someponies work for me, I had to have some friends call in favours to get some of them on the air, but it was worth it. Even radio stations that primarily cater to people who hate the Black Stars gang found themselves with an interviewee either sympathetic to them, or opposed to them in a way that makes my those among my opposition that can be saved more sympathetic to me."

"I still think you should have put on some kind of mask or fake voice, when giving those speeches. That whole 'You can't prove I did it, and if I was doing it, I would have worn a mask because I am not a fucking idiot' defence won't hold out forever."

"But it doesn't have to, because now, you can discipline Black Lightning and all the other Stable Security ponies that have gotten away with too much, for too long."

"All of them?" Emerald asked in confused surprise. "Sunrise, he only brought six with him. What am I supposed to do, punish all of them for his mistakes?"

"Punish the worst of the lot for his mistakes, and make it clear that he is why they are suffering. After all, you can't just pick six armoured ponies at random to punish, and neither of us could tell who the only one who spoke was. So you'll Nonlethally Decimate the whole force for letting this idiot think he could just bring a Kill Squad into the Overmare's Daughter's private training room and threaten her lover and get away with it. Because the alternative is looking so weak, Stable Security will think they can get away with this and worse for the entirety of your term as Overmare. And you'll just happen to 'Randomly' pick the worst of the worst among their number, and give them the most humiliating duties you can think of. In fact... How does having the worst rapists and power-abusers shovel shit for the Vault's waste filters sound, while the lesser criminals get more mundane duties, such as lower-level patrols?"

"That sounds delightful!" Emerald beamed. "It won't make up for what my mother lets the whole force do, but-"

"But it's a start," Sunrise nodded. He decided not to tell her what little surprise he'd leave for those ponies in that room. It was better that way. "And it'll teach them to respect you, when it's your turn to lead."

She seemed saddened by hearing that. "Yeah, because nothing says 'Respect me' like the threat of being forced to shovel shit in a small room on pain of death."
"The way they'll see it, they're being punished for displeasing you. They're being hurt, for going against your desires. And in their little world of 'The strongest is whoever can pick on others and get away with it', that makes you top dog."

"Maybe I don't want to be a dog, Sunrise!" She snapped. "Maybe I want to change more than who's calling the shots. Maybe I want an end to the shots."

He hugged her. "I want that, too. But sometimes, you have to end the shooting by ending the shooters. Not all life can be saved, no matter how much we might wish it could," He spoke solemnly. "Think: If Zombies were attacking, and you only had time to save one pony, would you save Black Lightning first, or somepony who's done nothing wrong? If you could only save five ponies, would you save Black Lightning and a few of his goons, or would you save some healers, mechanics, and other ponies who could help the rest of the survivors continue to survive? We want to make a better world for everypony, and part of that means dealing with the ones who'll get in the way of that for their own selfish and stupid reasons."

And then, the serious tone went away, and he chuckled. Levity had returned "…Why am I talking like I'm trying to convince you it's alright to publically execute them, in the manner they regularly do to starving civilians, rape victims, and witnesses? You're going to sentence power-mad tyrants and rapists to a few weeks of hard labour. It isn't even a fraction of what they deserve. Punishing them like this only feels like a big deal because it's the most they've ever been punished. Your mother usually lets them do whatever they want, as long as they don't upset any of her precious 'Elites', but you don't want to be like her, right?"

"No," She growled, disgusted at the thought.

"Then you're safe," He said, hugging her and stroking her mane with his right forehoof, just the way she liked it. His horn lit up with a blazing and warm golden glow, powerful and mighty and benevolent like the sun, and his magic gently lifted her tail. He sent waves of mana through her tail, straightening and brushing it just the way she liked, and she smiled and purred as she practically melted into him.

After enjoying this treatment for a few seconds, she mentally tried to resist and hold on to her thoughts, just long enough to voice her concerns. "I know, it's just… Well, we're not getting any younger. I'm probably going to rule the Sta- The Vault some day soon. And I'm afraid… I'm terrified that while I might start out with good intentions, I'll end up forced to make compromise after compromise, until I end up just like my mother, or worse."

"That'll never happen," He said compassionately and reassuringly, placing a forehoof on her shoulder. "No leader on the planet could be worse than your mother."

She burst into laughter, and her mood had instantly found itself more improved than a thousand words of meaningless hope-speech friendship-speech drivel could leave it. "You jerk!" She laughed, and shoved him away.

Sunrise casually hopped with the force to land about a foot away, serene and unbothered. His horn lit up, and he started playing with his Pip-Buck's radio controls. "I wonder if Crashendo's playing my music yet…"

A distorted and echoed voice spoke, screamed, and whispered from his Pip-Buck at the same time. "-been a great interview, thanks for coming!"

"Any time!" Sunrise's voice came from his own Pip-Buck, and a pony could be heard as he got up and trotted away, leaving the recording booth.
"And that's it for today's interview!" Crashendo's obnoxious radio-personality voice blared out from Sunrise's Pip-Buck, a way of speaking he'd copied from old pre-war holotapes. "Remember, Crashlings! Make sure you and all your Crashtastic friends are tuned to Crashendo Radio tonight at 9PM, because we're testing out a new Payload Injection System, courtesy of Sunrise Stardust himself! What does that mean? It means free books if you tune in at 9PM, no matter where you are. That's right, no more waiting for forms and other bullshit to let you head to a floor with a terminal full of free books! No more waiting around for months for someone on your Vault floor to get a copy you can copy! With this, there'll be free books for all, as soon as they're released! Well, if this goes off without a hitch. Tell your friends, tell your enemies, tell your granny, tell everypony! And if you know anypony whose musical tastes are more 'Trash' than 'Crash', grab their hooves and fix their Pip-Buck tunings yourself if you have to. Crash into you later, Crashendo out!"

Comprehension dawned on Emerald's face. "You recorded your responses in that interview, and had Crashy there play them when the time was right."

He nodded proudly.

"But how did you time it so perfectly?"

"Remember that time you took me to a Stable-Tec Vigor Tester Machine to measure my intelligence, and the machine burst into flames?" He asked her.

"No, but I remembered when you started telling ponies that happened."

"It adds to my mythical image," He shrugged. "Anyway, I had ponies watching Black Lightning at different points in the Vault, communicating through Pip-Buck calls to tell Crashy where he was, how close he was getting, and when he needed to make the bulk of my speech play, giving me the biggest window possible for that synchronized-Sunrise-voice moment."

"Impressive," She purred, getting closer to him.

"I have to head to the Tech-Sec personally, soon," Sunrise quickly said before she could jump him, "That radio injector script was the down payment for some high-end CRAKs."

That surprised her for a moment. "You paid with the radio injector? You barely did anything to make that."

"True," Sunrise admitted, "But the guy I'm buying robots from won't know that."

This confused her. "Wait, why would a Tech-Seccer want their books to be distributed for free?"

"Uh… Because it's morally the right thing to do?" Sunrise pretended to guess, because she didn't need to know all of the details behind this transaction. "Information isn't a finite resource, like gas or coal. Copying a file won't reduce its value unless you're giving the copy away for free, and the copy customers read can't make them want to pay you for letting them read it anyway. Besides, if you're writing a series and you give away books one and two for free, that's free advertising for books three through six. Also, some larger publishing companies are starting to get a monopoly on what books can and can't say. Well, they've had that monopoly for a decade, but they're starting to get so obnoxious about having that monopoly, even the worker drones can see it. Crashing that market with no survivors is the only way to keep information free."

"Wait, how does that script work again?"
"The Pip-Buck locks onto a radio frequency, the frequency broadcasts information instead of sound, the radio station's name is changed to some commands for the Pip-Buck to execute, so that it can read the audio data as actual data. The data pouring in sounds like shit, and it injects a new file into your Pip-Buck's Notes section, with the Holotapes. That new file is a book, but I could probably repurpose this to inject viruses. If I could get my victims to listen to a certain radio station at a certain time."

"So are all books going to be free now?"

"Honestly, just the ones we choose to distribute. We'll prioritize the best and most important books. Things on magic, first aid, education, and so on. Honestly, as morally upright as this is, it's also a demonstration of power. A 'We can make any book you want to sell worthless at will, and everypony will love us for it, even Stable Sec' kind of deal, to take the Publishing Firms down a peg and remind them that they serve the information in books, not the other way around."

She started to see the big picture. "That'll convince them to stay out of trouble. And the goodwill this will generate for that Radio Station you practically own…" She trailed off in approval.

"Is a nice side-benefit," He purred with a smirk, and he swung his head around to make it seem like he viciously snapped at the tip of her ear, but when his teeth made contact, he only gave her flesh a gentle squeeze, making her moan out anyway.

"Please, don't tease," She begged.

Like he was whispering sweet nothings in her ear, he replied, "Why not? You're my wife, so I ain't misbehaving."

He lifted his head and dragged his teeth along her eartip before letting go, and when her ear was free, she lunged at him, knocking him over and snogging him.

Their horns blazed to life without either pony's instruction, their burning magical lights and their very souls leaping at each other to dance and grind and swirl around their horns, overwhelming their very essences with a level of intimacy and sexual pleasure no mere sexual organ on the physical plane could give anypony.

Still, he wanted to try. He wanted to add to the experience, he wanted to fuck her, he wanted to let his Big Iron spring forth and tear its way out of his suit before slamming it right into her Lone Star, and jackhammer it until it felt like a ring of fire, or he could go for what was beneath it, down yonder, and shove his crimson into her clover. He could go river-deep inside her and leave her mountain high, and then he'd take her higher and higher. He could ride her nice and easy, or he could shove his wild one right into her mouth. And oh, what a mouth she had! She'd give him some satisfaction, alright.

Sure, he could go for a bit of a twist and shout right now and give her insides some good vibrations, until her insides would end up like a white room, and he could fuck her again to turn her insides a whiter shade of pale. He could fuck her until they were eight miles high up on the stairway to heaven, he could fuck her until it was certain that when they were done and she asked "Where did our love go", the only proper response was "Absolutely fucking everywhere".

But he had to get out of this place, he knew, before he lost it and fucked her until it looked like he was having a psychotic reaction, humping her like a white rabbit.

With a great deal of willpower, he started to pry her off him, and then he gave into it and snogged her for another minute or two, before finally deciding he'd waited long enough. He forcefully
gripped her and pushed her off him, holding her at forehooves’ length, and she stared hungrily into his eyes, panting deeply, her dignity and pride gone, her precious hair a mess.

"One more," He decided, and they went back at it for five minutes, because if you didn’t come up for air halfway through, it still counted as one.

Finally, when he was pinned to the ground and she was dominating his mouth with her own, he decided it had gone on for long enough. He swung his hind legs up and, like he was tapping a horse with his spurs to spur it on, he delivered synchronized kicks to her Cutie Marks, and with an unusually high and dainty voice, she screamed, going to pieces as she twitched and convulsed like she was having a life-threatening seizure, soiling her beautiful dress with gallons of mare fluid as he gently rolled her helpless body to the side and left it there while her face, oh, her face. Eyes rolled back, mouth opened wide, screaming, it was like a parody of the act of a mare’s orgasm, rather than the real deal, but he’d seen it enough times to know this was but a taste of what he could do to mares when he really wanted to play them like fucking scream violins.

He could feel his own Big Iron drooling inside his pants, waiting for him to give it permission to break out and stand proud, but he shook his head and thought of emptiness and the cold void of space until his balls stopped burning with unspent seed. He had somewhere to be, and he knew he always passed out for a few hours after ejaculation anyway. Stupid fucking sleep problems, getting in the way of his ability to give his wife a quickie without forcing her to drag his comatose body to the nearest bed once she could walk again.

Good thing she could actually move him after he passed out, unlike most mares.

He kept thinking about the desolate and lonely void of space as he hit the door’s open button and shut the pneumatic door behind him, and he left his mare to her great squirting display of joy.

He thought of the cold, sunless world outside his Vault, of destroyed buildings and irradiated seas, and those unsexy thoughts were aided by the coldness and lifelessness of this Vault floor, each hallway eerily hollow and empty and deathly cold. He was used to seeing hallways full of bodies, and feeling their collective warmth whether he liked it or not, so this was a shock. Taking a cold shower to cool yourself off? That was for filthy fucking casuals. Try taking a long walk through an area that felt like it had escaped into the real world from a horror story only a Vault Pony could understand some time.

His hooffalls echoed through the deafening silence, dull thuds of rubber-tipped metal that just sounded wrong without countless voices, the sound of clothing rustling against clothing, the sound of somepony, somewhere, popping the top of a glass bottle of water, or a can of something, be it a soft drink or hard drink, untainted or with some drug or spice added to it for flavouring and to enhance some kind of experience.

Finally, he made it to the six Vault Elevator doors, though only one could open, and the rest had been visibly welded shut. He hit that Vault Elevator’s call button, and waited for the elevator to greet him. He tried not to think of his wife/soon-to-be-wife or whatever she was while he waited. He tried not to think of her wonderfully firm ass while he waited. He tried to focus on the area around him, and see it surround him in his mind’s eye as he closed his eyes. Every colour besides black, light purple, and dark purple left the world as he chose to see things as his other senses saw them, wireframe versions of walls, ceilings, and the elevators appearing in his vision. The flames of life faded into view, and he saw indistinguishable walls of multi-coloured fire beneath him, each flame having a different colour to represent each pony’s magical glow blending together to create blobby walls he couldn’t make heads nor tails of.

He could still make out lifeless objects, such as the walls, floors, and doors beneath him, but the
flames of life were like thick rainbow smoke clouds that got in the way of making out any fine details.

Turning his head back to where he left his wife, he sensed and 'Saw' her white-sparkling emerald magic blaze out like a sparkling bonfire as she continued her convulsing fit, though it was starting to die down and leave her with not a mere pleasant afterglow, but a proper high that would take quite a while to fade.

He smiled proudly, as if the state his mare was in was a nice story he'd spent hours planning, crafting, and writing, something he'd worked hard on and had finally finished.

"I did that," He said to himself, regarding her overwhelming, almost divine orgasm.

Finally, the elevator dinged loudly and its doors opened, a cold steel cube of a room greeting him. He entered and gazed upon the control panel, one with only one button. Hitting the button, the doors of the elevator closed, and he began to descend one floor.

Sunrise waited around for a bit inside the elevator. "Outside these walls," He began to softly almost-singing to himself, not putting much effort or air into it but getting the notes right anyway. "Madness lies, in a world of constant war. A genera-

The doors opened to another eerily empty room, but this one, he knew, had more than two or three ponies on the floor at any given time. This one simply had so few ponies, they could all fit inside their own private bedrooms, without any overflow. He left the elevator and turned right to find another elevator, and he hit its call button.

When the elevator arrived and opened itself up to him, he entered its cold cube interior and hit the Down button. The doors slowly closed, and the metallic cube descended on rails of magic, like all other elevators in the Vault.

"A generation of revenge will rise to even the score," Sunrise absent-mindedly sang to himself. And then he decided to bring up his Pip-Buck and scroll over to the Radio Menu. A list of over fifty stations greeted him, and most of them could only be accessed up here due to the weaker radio transmitters these floors used for the sake of feeling as exclusive as possible. They kept their music and radio hosts to themselves, considering these things 'For High Society Ponies only!', with the exception of tracks they would occasionally send down to lower-floor radio stations they hated, with angry letters attached. Angry letters full of all kinds of fancy-sounding but utterly banal shit-tier insults you'd expect to see used by a supposed young genius in a really, really crappy Young Adult novel. Generic insults with no substance to them, designed only to make their user feel more special and intelligent and enlightened than he would if he or she had simply yelled "You're fucking gay and so's your mother!" instead, something that would express the same sentiment and require far fewer words, which required far less ink.

Speaking of angry letters, they served as excellent things to trade away for food and other necessities, when the usual flow of supplies to your level had been restricted for whatever reason. Some strange ponies liked to collect angry letters from the supposed 'Elites', and anything else connected to them. Perhaps they liked the way the phrase 'Go off and fornicate thyself' looked when it was written in fancy curly letters using green ink that had real emeralds or sapphires or rubies crushed into it for the sake of ostentatious show-offery.

But the names of these radio stations, however…

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*Level Up!*
New Perk: Mare-derer - In combat, you do +10% damage against female opponents. Outside of combat, you'll sometimes have access to unique dialogue options when dealing with the opposite sex.
The names were just obnoxiously self-absorbed. 'Exquisite Tunes for Dignified Intellectuals', 'The Thinking Hour', 'Classical Tunes for the Cultured Genius', and names even worse than that assaulted his eyes and sensibilities. When your regular income of rations wasn't tied to how many thousands of ponies you could get to regularly tune into your radio station over the hundreds of other radio stations in the Vault, it seemed modesty and self-awareness went out the window and came back as changed concepts. Modesty because a weapon, a virtue you could immodestly signal about supposedly having for the purposes of boasting and self-aggrandization when you could say you had more of it than your equally boastful competitors, and self-awareness mutated and devolved after injecting multiple doses of irony and sarcasm directly into its veins, descending from the baseline, the fundamental basic thing that separated Pony from Animal, to some sad parody of itself that knew it was a failure, but felt giggling at its own failure made its lack of effort charming. It didn't exactly take long for the title of the "Most self-aware" radio station for rich ponies became a fake title, and the pursuit of that title became as hollow and meaningless as an attempt to try and be seen as the "Most dignified" radio station.

Out of all of these radio stations, his favourite one had to be 'Regal Tunes for the Enlightened Mind', and it simply played centuries-old music on loop, with the radio host only deigning to pause his playlist for ten minutes every hour as he reminded his audience what radio station they were listening to, and then proceeded to give a very snooty, spin-doctored version of current events in the Vault. His pre-recorded messages would repeat perfectly on schedule, if they were not changed ahead of time and updated with current events.

Sure, this station was one of the stations under his control, and he had a few of his own classical-style piano compositions in this radio's playlist just so he could say he had done so, if he ever felt like telling anypony. And sure, he still made sure that the radio host, or the 'Narrator' as he called himself, gave events a subtly and inconsistently pro-Black Stars spin.

While the narrator couldn't outright condemn Stable Security and fully support the Black Stars without alienating most in the audience he was meant to slowly win over across a long period of time, and permanently alienating almost all of the ponies he hadn't already won over, he could take an overwhelmingly smug and negative tone to pretty much anything corrupt, abusive, or incompetent done by Stable Security, anything wasteful or stupid done by the 'Elites' who weren't too popular or powerful to criticize without getting fined, arrested, or even killed, and best of all… He could give not-so-subtly-sarcastic overwhelming praise to the current Overmare and her policies. After all, the Vault had anti-defamation laws that were used exclusively to make it illegal to criticize high-up ponies and accuse them of carrying out any sort of crime, but good luck wording a ban on sarcasm that couldn't be circumvented.

Sure, many of the ponies up here didn't care if the ponies beneath them starved or died or found themselves forced into a food shortage so severe they had to kill each other and take each other's rations to amass a proper meal, but they did fear the threat of rebellion from below and a coup from the military. After all, such horrible, ghastly events happening, or even both events happening at once or in a sequence, one after the other, might temporarily disrupt or even permanently end their ability to laze about in the lap of luxury while ponies beneath them worked in their name, and wouldn't that just be simply dreadful?

They might even be forced to work for a living. Oh, the horror! The horror!
At the same time, the narrator could put on a pleasantly-surprised tone whenever he was talking about something big the Black Stars did, and take an excessively negative tone when it came to describing anything carried out by any other gangs or organizations.

Continuing to scroll, Sunrise Stardust eventually chose the relatively simply-named Diamond Spectrum Raindio, and halfway through a bar, some harpsichord song was playing some kind of fugue.

Not bad, Sunrise supposed. This fugue had plenty of notes, he supposed, and they were played quite well. He was still learning the ins and outs of proper music terminology, but he'd rate this Fugue a "Decently Fugue-y" seven out of ten.

He still thought his own music was better.

On the fourth floor down, his elevator stopped, and the door opened into an impressively-decorated floor, even by the standards of the 'Elite'. Crystal chandeliers hung from the ceiling, blooming flower bushes with impossibly prismatic rainbow flowers had been placed on the corner of each corridor, and a deep royal purple and wonderfully fluffy shag carpet filled the cold, sterile metal ground of this Vault's floor. And every door, Sunrise noticed, had many Cutie Mark-esque symbols on it, to tell everypony which marked ponies lived where.

Sunrise didn't need those door-symbols, as his mind had long since gotten used to remembering the paths you took perfectly to keep your bearings and find what you were looking for in a Vault where most rooms, most floors, and most walls and ceilings looked exactly the same. But still, it certainly looked nice.

The fugue was his companion as he walked through the eerily silent vault floor. But he knew exactly where to go and why he was going there, so nothing could scare him off. Besides, he was at least ten years too old to be scared by things like silence.

At the end of a corridor, he rounded a right corner and headed down another corridor for two blocks, and then he turned again, and made his way to the right…

A mare intersected his path! A mare five years older than him walked past, a beautiful honey-gold shade of yellow offset nicely by her snow-white evening gown, whose marvellous curls of ocean-blue hair in her mane, and especially her wonderfully massive tail, threatened to take hold of his vision for life. And that ass... It was covered, but still, that ass! That ass looked like you could bounce a water bottle off it, and have the water bottle land perfectly on its base. His girlfriend and/or wife had her beat in every department, he decided, except for the ass. If every mare had an ass that great, he'd understand why some degenerates enjoyed anal sex.

She stopped, offended by his wandering gaze, and he quickly sobered up and regained his wits, taking stock of the situation.

Curses! If he was caught checking a mare out this high up, and she was the type to scream "Waaah, heeeelp meeeeee! I'm being attaaaakkkaakked! This is literally sexual haraaaaaasssssssssmeeeeeeyyyyyyyyyyent!", he could be executed without trial. And if she was the type to run away and tell everypony who'd listen that he was checking her out, it would be counted as a Scandal, a code word for "Another fucking stupid and incredibly minor event that only somepony as retarded and pointless and starved for excitement as a Crème would care about", and he'd have to kiss his right to officially marry his wife one day or ever even see her again goodbye, if he wasn't just executed on the spot for the hell of it.

"Honey Lemon?" Sunrise asked, pointing a hoof at her. "Is that you?"
"No," She flatly clarified, and pouted, her opinion of him visibly dropping by the moment. Funny how her opinion of him seemed to drop visibly when he went from potential monster who dared commit the crime of checking out a hot mare, to a simple idiot who thought she was somepony she wasn't.

"Oh, my mistake," He shrugged, turning around and continuing to walk on, following his own path.

She gave a long-suffering and overly dramatized version of a simple roll of her eyes, amplifying the gesture as if she believed if she overacted hard enough, she could will ponies into existence to look at her and admire her for putting up with such an awful social interaction that somehow hurt her precious feelings and inconvenienced her so, granting her the social capital, the pity points, she so desperately craved and felt entitled to.

'Crisis averted!', Sunrise smugly thought to himself. 'Damn, I'm fucking smart!'

Still, considering what little he'd seen of her behaviour, he changed his mind regarding that mare, and mentally shifted the image of her in his memories out of the "Fantasize about fucking her with my lover's permission and approval when my lover is busy during her dry spells" folder and over to the "Fantasize about bitches like this one getting humiliated, humbled, broken in, and absolutely fucking FUCKED by degenerate mafiosos and their degenerate thugs in a degenerate manner before I swoop in and save her" folder.

Walking, walking, walking. Sunrise's path shouldn't feel this long, he felt. After all, he was only going to see-

Some other mare crossed his path. His age, with a milk-white coat of fur, a singularly-coloured white tail like the tail of an arctic fox, ears an inch longer than a normal mare's ears would be, and her mane was a faint pale blue so incredibly soft and light that it was almost white, but not quite. The saturation of her mane's colour was high, but its lightness was even higher. Her eyes were a deep indigo, and she was walking around in a striking black ballgown outlined with gold and enhanced with golden highlights. Instead of a proper Pip-Buck 7000, she had the screen of a Pip-Buck mounted upon a pair of titanium rods that circled her left forehoof like a bracelet. This was the Pip-Buck 7000 Lite, the durable plexiglass screen of a dismantled Pip-Buck 7000 that had been backed and bordered by beautifully shining titanium, and it had all of the technology and functionality of a modern-era Pip-Buck magically infused into the metal-backed glass with the power of some strange ritual Sunrise had no idea how to replicate. If he did know the spell that transferred the chosen properties of one or more things into another thing of his choice, he was pretty sure he'd use it to try and make his customized Stable Suit tougher than a thousand suits of Power Armour.

Her name was Arctic Wind.

"Arc," Sunrise nodded respectfully with a charming smile, and she turned to look at him. Only then did she notice him, and who he was.

She stopped.

"Sunrise, my darling!" The mare greeted loudly and in an overblown manner, leaning forwards for a second twice, kissing the air on either side of his face each time, her lips loudly "Mwah"ing over a foot away from his actual cheek each time as the confused Sunrise simply watched her. "When is your next performance?"

"In two days," He grinned, "So make sure you come prepared, and in your best Black Stars clothes. It's going to be the greatest show we've ever had!"
Her breath caught in her throat and her heart almost stopped. "That's in two days?"

He remained patient and friendly with her. "Didn't anypony tell you? We're going to have the performance to end all performances. Make sure you wear your best clothes, and buy all the merch you can, because I don't think anything we do is ever going to top this. Not for a month or two, at least."

Horror dawned on her face, as the double meanings of his word choice and phrasing sank in. Oh gods… That was happening THIS MONTH, in just TWO DAYS?

"Of course!" She insisted, turning around and running back to her home. "I simply have to finish some last-minute adjustments to my outfit," He insisted over her shoulder, and ran faster.

He hoped she'd be alright. His upcoming show would certainly be one to die for. It would also be one to make others die for.

He walked on, away from her, and turned to the right. At his next left, he ignored it and walked straight ahead. At the left after that, he turned left and carried on to his destination, knowing it was a straight shot from there, with no additional twists or turns.

Nope, no twists or turns at all. Just ignored intersection… after ignored intersection… after two more ignored intersections, he felt the urge to turn, and the necessary willpower to resist the natural urge to turn somehow increased with each step, until he shook his head and shrugged off the mental effect, focusing himself on getting to his destination.

Finally, Sunrise made it to a particular door with just three symbols on it. On the top left, there was an ordinary brown-handled brown-haired paintbrush, tipped with a bright emerald. On the top right, there was a bright pink flower he didn't recognize, but it was a huge one with a bulging center, and a hole in the center of that center.

Above those two symbols, a battalion of over two hundred far smaller symbols in seven rows took up a small amount of space on the top of the door, like stars in the sky. He was pretty sure those smaller symbols were the Cutie Marks of this family's dead grandparents, aunts, uncles, great-aunts, great-uncles, cousins, and so on and so forth.

Below the armada and below both of the two main symbols, centered between them and equidistant from one another, there was the head of a pink-haired paintbrush tipped with a pale white pink, emerging almost like a strawberry from a long, thin plant stem with a single leaf on its left side, near the base.

He pressed a button on the metal blast door's right that swhooshed it on up, metal mechanisms jump-starting pneumatic machinery on the blast doors into life, though a more traditional and outdated wooden door had been installed just behind it, on its own cute little doorframe and everything. A marvellous mahogany door, with four panels carved into it like the panes of one of those pre-war glass windows with plusses on them. Pointless raised swirly bits swirled around the outermost border of the mahogany door, and the long door handle on the door's right was made entirely of solid gold, though the internal mechanism was likely some other, tougher metal.

Just as he'd read about characters doing in the pre-war era, Sunrise Stardust raised his right forehoof and gave it four firm taps in a row, the knocking sound of hoof on wood echoing and strange to his ears.

He focused, and concentrated on his speech, his breathing, and all other aspects of how he presented himself.
"Who is it?", the clipped and snooty tones of an irritated rich mare in her late fourties who deemed the whole world beneath her asked.

"Hello, it's Sunrise Stardust, the overmare's fiancé," He spoke in a focused and polite manner, using the Prancian term 'Fiancé' to please her. That word meant 'The male a female is engaged to, and will soon marry' over in Prance, before the war. Not to be confused with Fiancée, which meant the female a male was engaged to. Or was it the other way around? He couldn't quite remember. Strange how he didn't remember that, but the myriad and arcane rules of the Vault's Pip-Buck games and card games stayed fresh in his mind.

Come to think of it... Well, considering what happened to Equestria, who knew what happened to smaller countries like Prance? "Is Evergreen Sage here on this fine morning?" Sunrise asked.

"Certainly!", The fourty-something mare declared, and there was some whispering Sunrise understood quite easily. "Go," She whispered to her daughter. "Go and get him!"

Sunrise smirked. It was cute that the old hag had hated him, until he gained the affection of the Overmare's daughter. This caused her to switch her beliefs around in a hilariously instantaneous manner, and begin encouraging her only daughter to try and take Sunrise's attention away from the Overmare's daughter and towards the daughter of some high-class painter. The hag claimed she believed Sunrise's ascent from nopony to new Elite simply 'HAD' to mean he was some sort of secret long-forgotten heir to some fortune, or an incredibly powerful chosen one of some sort with an impressive destiny that included becoming some sort of incredible creature far beyond the ordinary pony.

Why on earth, Sunrise wondered, would he ever give up the love of his life for the sake of some painter? Sure, he didn't hate the mare, but she didn't offer him more than his current mare. She didn't even offer him as much as his current mare. And in this high-class world of manipulations, lies, and pointless societal games, was what a pony could do for you not all that mattered?

Sunrise suspected that the old mare didn't really believe any of those lies, and simply wanted her daughter to go for Sunrise because it might cause a scandal that would ruin his reputation up here, and might threaten or even break up his relationship with his lover. And if he was cast down back to the lower levels for that, his chance at bettering his Vault and the world above gone for good, the ponies down there that loved the rich upper-level ponies loathing him would be the least of his concerns.

"Thank you, Mother," The refined and Canterlot-accented voice of a mare Sunrise's age 'Politely' (With just enough restrained anger to be audible only to those used to hearing those tones and sensing the anger, while sounding presentable to others, even though there would only really be a point in using that voice when enough, perhaps even most ponies around you could sense the anger) as she walked to the door, clicked some lock open, and opened the door.

Before Sunrise's eyes stood a remarkably beautiful Unicorn mare, with a remarkably unusual hairstyle for a level this high up. Her body was a softer green than the body of his girlfriend, and her body was thinner, with a slightly pointed and toned arse with not a single pinch of fat to be seen there. Her arse bore the lower Cutie Mark he'd seen on the wall, the paintbrush flower thing with a plant stem. Her eyes were a bright pink. Her mane and tail had the same pink colour. Her tail was long and thin, tapered to a point as it nearly touched the ground behind her, and her mane... The hair on the back of her head had been combed up to join the hair atop her head, which had an array of curved spikes pointing straight upwards, almost like the petals of a flower. One spike near the front of her horn noticeably stretched down a bit towards her right eye before spiking back up. All in all, that haircut was probably a pain to maintain and keep straight, but it certainly made her stand out on
a floor where most mares had long, elegant curls, or long straight hair curled with curlers into curls.

The green mare smiled upon seeing him, and put on a small, fake gasp of pleased rich-pony surprise for the benefit of her mother. "Ah, Sunrise!" The green mare, Evergreen Sage, declared.

"Shall we walk and talk?" Sunrise seductively offered, extending his right forehoof to her.

"We shall!" She agreed heartily, taking it for support and trusting him fully to not flip her or drop her hoof as she walked out of the open door frame on three legs, left the wooden door open, and closed the big metal blast door behind her.

She didn't hear her mother scream about closing the damn wooden door, and she didn't care to hear it, either. She took her hoof away and sighed, and Sunrise let his raised hoof fall to the ground. They walked together, but not too together. A few steps apart from each other's sides, and Evergreen Sage walked quicker to get a few steps ahead, so that nopony would think the two ponies were really together.

They knew where they were going, and why. They ducked into the doorframe of a room with a gold-filled purple circle painted onto it, rather than any actual Cutie Mark, and she slammed her hoof into the door's open button like she was trying to break it.

They both stepped into a communal area that would be hauntingly empty, if it wasn't full of splendour and needless opulence. Two blast doors on either side of the communal room couldn't be changed, but their interiors had a dark midnight-blue coat of paint. Striking ocean blue shag carpeting, large and decadent purple plush sofas and hoofchairs here and there, a two glass tables with fancy curvy twisted legs and a spiral on the end of each leg, and a fission battery-powered coffee maker and seven mugs resting on each table, and a row of many mahogany cupboards had been built into the furthest wall, over a long and continuous inch-thick chunk of marble mounted on the wall using a triangular steel frame with heavy screws. It was like those kitchen tables you used for food preparation, for ponies who thought regular tables were too mainstream. A mahogany Snooker table with a green fabric game board, or whatever you called the green bit of the snooker table, had been set up with two pool sticks and a whole triangle full of pool balls. Each of the fifteen balls came in a set of two, those sets bore the same colour between them, and each set was a different colour. Sunrise had absolutely no fucking idea how you really played Snooker, but he noticed a white ball near the triangle, and from the power of observation, he had learned that you had to jab the ball with the stick like its tip was the tip of a jousting lance to knock the coloured balls into the ball-sized pockets with attached nets here and there around the field. Each colour of ball was worth a different number of points, but fuck if he knew which ball was worth how many points.

"By the fucking Godesses!" Evergreen Sage declared as soon as the blast door was down, leaping over to a sofa and collapsing onto it in exhaustion. "Does that hag ever stop her whining?"

"Probably not," Sunrise noncommitally shrugged in a way mares up here tended to go wild for as he pretended to listen, again, in a way mares up here tended to go wild for, as he made his way to the coffee maker. Sure, normally, he'd be all smiles or all concerned and caring looks, but he knew this mare well enough to know that she preferred to just rage for a while at the start of the conversation, venting her frustrations before she was properly ready to talk about them or pretty much anything else. He fucked around with the coffee maker's stand's touch screen and settings in a manner he didn't understand, pressing buttons he didn't recognize labelled with foreign-ese words from pre-war France he didn't understand, in an order he'd copied from some other pony he'd seen use one of these machines a few years ago. He knew how these machines worked on the inside, he knew how to take them apart and strip them, he knew what to sell for the highest prices, and he knew the modified medium-quality low-output Vault-made Water Talismans these things used to create a near-infinite
coffee supply could net one hell of a high price if you knew where to sell them and who to sell them to. But while he'd absorbed some random pieces of coffee-related trivia over the years, and he'd even swiped one of these machines and hidden it somewhere in one of his room's magical storage seals, which only he could access and operate with the aid of his own Pip-Buck, he still knew jack shit about coffee, how to make it, how to brew it, and how to properly operate one of these stupid fucking machines. These fuckers didn't just use a foreign language on their buttons and screens, they were also programmed in a coding language that was entirely foreign to him, so that one time he tried scanning the shit's stupid-ass coding with his Pip-Buck and trying to hack it didn't work out. It didn't end in disaster, he was just unable to hack it. So he saved a copy of the foreign program, planning on examining and reverse-engineering it later, potentially with the aid of somepony who understood this language, but he never actually got around to doing that.

"It's just so, so, so so so, so stupid!" Evergreen shouted, working herself up into a right old frenzy, so she could properly vent.

The coffee took ten seconds to brew, thanks to magic, and when he was done, he poured perfectly black coffee into two perfectly clean white mugs. And then he used his Pip-Buck to drop a thirty six gallon ceramic beer barrel sculpture that worked perfectly well as an actual beer barrel, and he poured the rest of the machine's coffee into that barrel, just fucking tipping it over and dunking the shit right in there. When he was done, he put the coffee maker back on its stand and repeated the procedure, getting more of that sweet, sweet 100% Saint Bright Spark coffee into his coffee barrel. The stuff was wonderful, with a wonderfully fragrant caramel flavour that carried a lovely hint of citrus. A magically-reconstituted copy of a famous, rare, and delicious pre-war coffee made with Saint Bright Spark coffee beans, and the method for making it had been invented by the great Saint Bright Spark himself, the greatest Prancian emperor of all time and one of the finest military generals the pre-war world had ever seen. He'd discovered the beans on some tiny island he conquered, in the middle of some ocean near the west coast of Zebrica, way before the war and during the early days of Equestria's founding and halfway through the period between Saint Bright Spark's coup and officially-recognized crowning of himself as Emperor, while Prance was frantically trying to conquer territory at random in an attempt to match the unquestionable dominance of Brittaneigha. He couldn't quite remember the dates and figures of that part of history, but later on in the timeline of the world, yet still before the war that ended in Megaspells, the costs of getting boats out to and from this island and getting ponies to farm the beans on the island were high, but very much worth it, as rich ponies would be willing to pay upwards of seven hundred bits for a single pound of these beans.

"She's trying to use me like I'm some low-born whore who lives to be used up and thrown away!" A pony Sunrise was currently ignoring yelled.

The coffee was complete, and Sunrise poured it straight into his big ceramic beer barrel, quickly emptying the coffee maker and repeating the process that refilled the machine with the drink he wanted.

Evergreen sighed in an overblown and overdramatic attempt at sounding long-suffering and exhausted. "Really?" She asked.

"Of course," Sunrise answered. "Coffee's good got energy, and mages need energy."

It also sold like hot cakes laced with banned drugs on the black market, because what greater luxury for a low-level Vault Pony who'd worked hard and saved his rations and water tokens up could there be than to drink Coffee? That stuff was a barely-addictive drug that gave you a pleasurable rush of energy while dehydrating you, forcing you to drink more water, which was practically a better form of currency than actual water tokens on Vaults where most ponies instantly exchanged their water tokens for water anyway. It was also a lifesaver when you were up late at night, trying to stay awake
and energized as you slaved away on some project, wishing the Overmare would institute some kind of six-hour or eight-hour work day limit system where one job could be done for twenty four hours a day by four or even three ponies at different times during the day, meaning nopony had to suffer through a ten-hour work day followed by another six hours of "Optional and voluntary" unpaid Overtime you'd lose your job if you said no to.

This coffee maker still amused Sunrise, in a way. Sure, the magic and technology to recreate this coffee stuff and its fancy bean brews cheaply and efficiently had existed back then, for about ten or twenty years before the war, but the fancy ponies of that era had believed themselves too fancy to drink anything some horn could make in great quantities, rather than something nature and fancy soil made slower. Meanwhile, those who wanted to sell great quantities of magical copies of the fancy stuff on the cheap to less financially-dominant clientele found themselves struggling to make ends meet in that market, as who would want to buy a little taste of what rich ponies drank every day when their local coffee-making pony could brew stuff that's just inherently better using any old ingredients, by virtue of simply having a Cutie Mark of coffee or something related to coffee?

"At all hours of the day, she bitches about this and that, whining that I'm not the kind of daughter she wanted. Well, Mother, I'm sorry to break it to you, but perhaps, if you wanted one of your foals to play the part in that quaint play you've dreamed up for how your life should go, you should have had more foals! Perhaps one of us would feel like indulging your pathetic, mindless fantasies!"

Anyway, now it was the rich pony who happily owned a coffee maker, it was the vault that had communal coffee makers in "Rec Rooms", recreational rooms anypony could activate for their own choice of drinks, and it was the rich pony who didn't really need or want these for anything other than another way to buy a fancy drink and show off what wasteful and absurdly fancy drinks they could get out of the machine and slowly sip.

"The Highborn have decided to have as few foals as possible, to preserve the prestige and exclusivity of their little subculture. And that's all it can be, now that they're so outnumbered by the Lowborn! We are where we are because we're the best of the best, the crème de la crème, or the descendants of those who were Crèmes. We should spend our spare time breeding to make more Crèmes, not simply mating for pleasure."

Sunrise didn't look up from his coffee as he poured it into his barrel. "It's because the current generation of adults make this generation's newborns look mature," He said, surprising her.

"Oh?" She asked with a coy smile. "Do tell."

"Before the war… Well, religion fell out of fashion centuries ago, but we'd always had Princesses Celestia and Luna. Those among us genetically or psychologically predisposed to fanaticism and idolatry, and those who need divine guidance and the instruction of a higher power to live their lives well, simply shifted their focus from an imaginary God or set of Gods with their own ideals and commandments to the living demigoddess Princess Celestia and her set of ideals and laws. Divine decrees became unquestionable laws. Holiness became Harmoniousness. And then the war came, a problem she wasn't prepared to deal with came with it. A problem so far out of left field, her usual problem-solving methods didn't work. A problem friendship and friendly magic couldn't solve. And then she had her heart broken by Zebrakind, shattering her image as a benevolent and merciful, yet still invincible and unquestionable diety in the flesh, the ultimate legal and moral authority. And then it was Princess Luna, somepony who tried her best to be a tougher version of her sister despite having failure in her past and a thousand years less experience, while the world fell apart around her. Her Ministry plan gave ponies the ability to choose their favourite Ministry, but it didn't fill the void left by the lack of strong centralized leadership that represented a strong, kind, thriving society and the rules that created it. And now, in this Vault… Well, if you want something or somepony to
believe in, your choices are the current Overmare, her wishy-washy cutie of a daughter whose heart is too soft to lead as anything other than a figurehead, ancient and dead dreams from dead ponies in books about what the pre-war world was supposedly like, a local hero, some radio host, nothing but your own whims and wants, or myself and The Black Stars."

"I know which one I've put my faith in," She muttered.

"And that's the issue. Faith, in oneself and one's purpose. We're Ponies, Evergreen Sage, and we need a purpose in life, that's why our magic forms marks and brands on our rears to tell us what our role in society is. But this society… Well, what role do we have in it, besides making clothes for the upper one percent, making food for the upper one percent, and making machines for the upper one percent, and making things for each other when we're done with that? What role do we have in it, if we're too low-down and poor to get a job in one of those roles? What are you meant to do with your life when society has no use for you and no place for you as anything other than another mouth to chew food and consume manufactured goods? No wonder so many turn to simple pleasures, to distract themselves from this. What's the point of life?"

She answered with hard eyes and conviction in her heart. "Because we're here to clean up the mess upstairs and make Equestria beautiful again,"

"True," He confirmed with pride in his little Black Star, glad that she'd taken his sermons- I mean radio speeches to heart. "Life exists to give itself a purpose and choose its own path, and that's the purpose life has chosen, fixing mistakes. Life's inherent desire to fix mistakes is why evolution exists in any capacity. But a lot of ponies don't like that. They don't like the idea of leaving behind a world where nothing has purpose to help create and maintain a world where you're responsible for yourself, your family, and your effect on society. They don't like the idea of leaving behind a society where you're a number and a rank to join a society where you have a role and your contributions to society in that role matter. There's no purpose to anything about a life lived without purpose, and meaninglessness can be a blessing and a curse. The blessing is that you don't have to worry if you're doing something wrong or bad or stupid, because nothing you do, good or bad, will matter to you, but the curse is that nothing you will feel like it matters. And that hollowness, that hopelessness, it eats at ponies. We weren't meant to live that way, as cogs in a big machine ruled by an incompetent and selfish cunt-"

Evergreen Sage gasped.


And this time, they noticed, she didn't gasp at the mention of the word 'Cunt'.

Sunrise went back to the coffee machine, and brewed some more coffee. She was silent as he began to pour it into his barrel.

Sunrise began to speak over the sound of pouring liquid. "…Some incompetent overmare who'll do anything to hold onto her power. But the ponies who notice that hollowness growing inside of them and starting to hurt them, they notice that the ponies who talk about it tend to become depressed, suicidal losers who are no fun at parties. So when dumb ponies start to see what's wrong, they pretend they're too stupid to see what's wrong. After all, their shallow lives ensured that they never developed the emotional and intellectual depth necessary to understand their situation or their own feelings on the matter, or why they feel the way they do. They continue on in their shallow imitations of pre-war life, desperate for a semblance of normality and the ability to pretend to be perfectly fine, and perfectly normal. When they aren't instead pretending to be the bestest little pony in the whole wide world, of course. They're actors in a play reading lines they didn't write, playing the roles they
think they were given, and cannot change. That's why it angers them when others deviate from what they think life's script is."

"That's my Mother, then," Evergreen Sage said sadly. "Another actress in this grand play."

"One of those pre-war sluts who got the job by lifting her tail," Sunrise smirked.

Shock and horror were clear upon her face, as she gaped wide, as if she was trying to fit three dicks in her mouth. The introspective mood had been ruined. "You vile fiend!" She laughed.

He smirked. There was a reason she and so many others liked him. Well, there were many reasons. He was an honestly, genuinely kind person, for one thing, and he always knew the right thing to say. It took quite a bit of service before he was willing to trust you with anything big, and this mare had served him well over the years as his link to the world of high-class Agricultural Management. The company her mother's marriage ensured she would inherit owned many, many floors in the Vault known as A "Anyway, how goes your garden?"

She smiled. "If anypony asks, terrible, and it's the water rationing system's fault."

"That's the way," Sunrise said with clear approval. He sat down on one of the nice-ass chairs to face Evergreen Sage, and his horn lit up with a gleaming golden light as it continued to remake coffee and pour it into his beer barrel. "How much BS do we have?"

BS… A brilliant code phrase, truly. After all, as most expect it to mean BullShit, something not formed or crafted, but simply excreted carelessly by a lowly animal only good for its ability to impregnate useful cattle, who would ever suspect that it could ever mean anything else?

In this instance, it referred to Black Flowers and Sander Roots. BS: Black Sander. The two ingredients vital for brewing a simple and powerful healing potion, the standard recipe used by old pre-war Stimpak factories.

Now, you might be wondering what Stimpaks are. Well, before the war, there was this one political movement of cheats and scoundrels, thieves who'd lie to your face and the faces of your children while picking your pocket and trying to shut down factories, especially weapon factories, to try and weaken Equestria.

The Watermelons.

…What are you giving me that look for? You know it, I know it, everypony knows it. Watermelons are evil little bastards, and trusting them is a mistake.

You know, fucking Watermelons. Lying, cheating, greedy little watermelons who hate our society, our culture, and the prosperity it gave us. As if success is not a part of nature as natural as failure, but a crime we commit against the world whenever we succeed at something. You know what I'm saying, right? Fucking watermelons. Green on the outside, red on the inside. Watermelons, the slur given to these groups after their façade started to falter, and ponies started to catch on to the lies.

There was this myth called The Finite Mana theory, before the war started, but it really picked up traction and mainstream acceptance during the war. These liars, and the crazy ponies who believed them, swore that all the magic in the world had to come from somewhere, some kind of source, some finite supply. These liars swore that when the magic ran out and dried up, the whole world would be destroyed. Ponies would drop dead, Pegasi would fall from the skies, weather would act of its own volition and turn against us, and our pets would attack their owners, returning to their natural, feral, wild state.
They rallied against the use of magic in food production, house construction, weather management, and more. They wanted Ponykind to stop using magic altogether, and they wanted to ban a pony's right to teach another pony magic.

Scientists fought these lies for a long time, but they had infiltrated much of academia, and they were difficult to remove. They made those who believed the earth was flat and Australia wasn't real look reasonable, moral, and open to honest debate and discussion. When you showed them evidence that they were wrong, they called you a science-denier and a monster. When you debunked their lies, they called you a shill for Big Factoria, their nickname for the big companies with big factories who supposedly also have massive buildings of actors taught to say convincing "Lies" that disagree with "Their Truth".

Finally, Princess Celestia put a bounty on the idea. Any pony who could prove these lies were truthful before the end of the year would gain ten thousand bits, but if it couldn't be done, the lie was officially a lie. Any pony who could find a unique way to prove these lunatics wrong would get a thousand bits as compensation.

And then, suddenly, everypony was a scientist. Everypony had their own presentations, their own speeches, their own books to reference and scientific discoveries to reveal, even if they had already been in books for decades. After all, Celestia didn't say they had to find and present new or unique information, only that the information had to be presented in a unique way. Songs were written, picture books with simplistic words and big pictures were crafted, cakes were baked with scientific facts written on them in icing, massive musical numbers with legions of ponies singing and dancing took to the streets to sing about the wonders of the digestive system and how burned calories fuelled a Unicorn's magical reserves, parades with floats bearing big Papier-mâché textbooks open to an important page

Meanwhile, those who believed in Finite Magic Orthodoxy were unable to prove anything. They could only cite information their friends and forefathers in this field of lies had been fed by their forefathers, who had been fed lies by their forefathers, who had been fed lies by a cabal of professional liars with a talent for seeming far more intelligent than they are, and attracting gullible people who desperately want to be seen as intelligent.

When this nonsense was finally debunked, those fucking Watermelons changed their tune in an instant and pretended to believe this new lie had been what they were really saying and believing all along. They changed their "Magic could destroy the world!" propaganda, but not its overall tune and end goal.

The myth of "Global Innervation" was born. The belief that when a Unicorn consciously chooses to charge magic to his horn and cast a spell, or a Pegasus unconsciously sends magic to his wings to fly, and his hooves to walk on clouds and push them around, and an Earth Pony unconsciously wraps his body's internal musculature in magic to strengthen and reinforce it, or radiates magic to the crops he grows to strengthen them and force them to grow bigger, faster, and healthier, magic is created from burned calories and the soul's energy, and then it's just… Left there, in the world, rather than being infused into something with a purpose given to it by Ponykind. The belief that magic is not a natural state of matter, such as liquid or gas, or a psionic energy psychically created by a Pony's highly-evolved brain and controlled by a pony's magnificently complex nervous system, or a foreign and malleable energy-based form of transformative matter from an array of other dimensions and worlds that leak into this one, or a strange and variable mixture of the three that will never be fully understood, only increasingly understood over time, but instead…

This is the belief that magic is a deadly and uncontrollable force that remains world after each invocation of magic and use of magic. The belief that magic can build up in the world over time,
choking its 'Natural Mystical Energies' or some such nonsense. The belief that when the world has "Too much" magic in it, the world will be destroyed and shattered apart if we're lucky, and if we're unlucky, our foals will become hideous mutants malformed by magic for whom life is eternal suffering, each successive generation of ponies becoming worse off as the exposure to "Too much" magic continues to damage their bodies like some sort of inherently-radioactive energy.

It was nonsense. Complete nonsense, but this time, the cabal of lunatics and liars who believed and peddled this nonsense had learned a lesson. Not THEIR lesson, the lesson intended for them, but "A" lesson. The lesson that honestly and openly going up against Princess Celestia's ponykind ends in failure and disaster that will be great fun for them, and a nightmare for you.

So they teamed up with a bunch of other cults that followed other long-dead evil lies used to seize power, and a bunch of agents from Zebra hell-bent on Equestria's downfall. And together, they decided that all of Equine society is inherently evil and phallocentric, the fancy term for penis-obsessed, and patriarchal, the fancy term for male-dominated. Yes, the Anti-Equestrian Coalition decided that because Equestria is ruled by two all-powerful and benevolent female dictators, while most local leaders such as Mayors and Sherrifs are either male or female depending on who in the general vicinity is the most qualified to lead, the whole world simply must be dominated thoroughly by males. And what of the many, many females in positions of power? They decided the females in power only try to get and use their power for the good of all… To impress men.

That little Anti-Equestrian Coalition also decided that science and logic are evil things the evil ponies with minds corrupted by magic's sweet siren song use to dupe others into buying into their lies. Yes, they literally decided Science and Logic, Reason, Evidence, and other foundations of rationality and rational scientific examination of the world around us, are evil things to be ignored, forgotten, and shunned.

Why more ponies back then weren't able to see through this charade, I'll never know.

They even decided that virtues like Kindness, Loyalty, Honesty, Laughter, Generousity, and other uniquely equine values are evil things! Yes, just because Kindness CAN be shown to evil beings and wasted upon them, Loyalty CAN be shown to the wrong side, and Honesty CAN hurt the feelings of your best friends and lead you to give information to your enemies best kept hidden from them, Generousity CAN lead you to give up your only blanket so another pony won't go cold, an act seen as a bad thing by selfish beings following a selfish ideology, and Laughter…

Well, you need a high IQ to understand why what ponies call 'Laughter' can be considered a virtue, and that's one of the many things their soulless cabal of villains lacked. So they simply decided Laughter is a silly dumb silly stupid silly thing for silly ponies only. They decided they were too smart, too smug, and too enlightened for things that were simply 'Funny', not when a book could instead obnoxiously smile and wink at the audience until the Postmodernists in the audience had smugly chuckled enough between sips of their stupid shitty sprinkly foam-coated pink soy-bean soy-milk coffee.

In any case, they all came to the conclusion that because Equine society wouldn't "Do the right thing" by bending over backwards for them, their entitled asses, their selfish greed, their short-sighted policies, and their crazy beliefs, and their inability to be mature, Equine society was evil and had to fall, so the Zebras could take over and do what all of their insane allies demanded at the same time.

Yep. That'd happen. The Zebras certainly wouldn't ever turn on the Useful Idiots after aiding them in the destruction of one of the few societies willing to hear their insanity out and even enable their insanity. Nooooppe, not at all! Certainly not. …He said sarcastically.

And so, the idiots who believed in Magic Innervation became another "Activist Organization", one
of the many loud, lying voices screaming in Princess Celestia's ears that she wasn't smart enough, wasn't fast enough enough, wasn't kind enough, wasn't tough enough, wasn't good enough, and just wasn't enough. And another "Activist Organization" dedicated to standing in the way of Equestria and its interests. This one stood in the way of education, Equestria's magic-reliant infrastructure, the release of new technology, the building of new schools, and so on. Many historians believe these lunatics were the ones who leaked the location of Littlehorn to the Zebras, enabling their armed military assault on the civilian school and their slaughter of the underaged foal students and unguarded teachers present.

They protested around factories, blocked city streets, lied to foals about how magic work… Pinkie Pie had her hooves full un-ponying these criminals, let me tell you. Experts believe they were a big part of what forced her shift from making parties and bakeries in sad low-income areas to having those who opposed Equestria and wanted to create more of these areas kidnapped and violently 'Disappeared'.

Anyway, The Stimpak was something Twilight Sparkle invented with Applejack serving as a consultant. She made this to try and placate these lunatics, back before they'd gotten too crazy, and had pushed Pinkie too far by rioting in one of the shitty areas of one city she was trying to help. Long story. Equestria's war with the Zebras was a long, long story.

You know what Healing Potions are, right? Nice little glass vials of a magical potion that heals the user when imbibed. Either a cork stopper to keep the liquid from spilling out, or the glass vial's top ends in a long, thin tube of glass that ends in a round end, meaning you have to smash that top bit off if you want what's inside it. The liquid is stereotypically a bright red, due to most common Healing Potion recipes seen in most books, like the Beginner's Guide To Alchemy, favouring the recipes that give the liquid its signature apple-red colour. However, other colours of healing potion can exist, depending on the recipe you use. Sunrise wasn't sure how potions worked, but he'd memorized three potion recipes: The one for making healing potions, the one for making general all-purpose magical antivenom, and the one for making glue.

Speaking of Alchemy… There's Equestrian Science, where we test stuff. We figure stuff out. We blow stuff up. When we find a lethally poisonous element, we figure out how much of it is necessary to kill a pony by creating an unthinking and unfeeling magical simulacrum of a pony out of magic and some nearby element. We're naturally appreciative of the beauty in the world, and to truly appreciate something's beauty, you need to understand something fully. So we're curious. We're not as bad as the Cats, but we're pretty bad.

We're bad dudes. We invented guns and Megaspells. Don't fuck with ponykind!

…Oh, my sides. That concept still amuses me to no end. I didn't write down my laughter just now, but I laughed a lot upon reading that. Does anypony else find it odd that it's the species with the most capacity for love and kindness that invented tool after tool after tool designed to change the world around them for the better? We've got ploughs for the farms, picks for the mines, guns for the Griffons, and Megaspells for the Zebras.

Where other members of another species might look at a big red button with "Warning: If This Is Pressed, The World Ends" painted onto it and stay away from it, we'd press it to see what happens, on the off chance that we'd spend 22 minutes going on an amazing adventure and learning some incredible and important life lessons that make us better ponies. We've got curiosity, and we've got it bad.

Then again, why call it bad when it's worked out so well for us? We invented lights, lighters, guns, and so much more. We invented pretty much everything, ever. We invented so much, there was this
one crazy ahistorical history-related conspiracy theory that claimed we were all actually a biologically-engineered super-species made by a biologically-inferior species that evolved its way from crap to greatness, made us, and then died because it had nothing else left to do or invent, and we made our amazing technomagical breakthroughs over the years because we had a head-start in the form of leftover "Relics" from ancient non-pony civilizations.

Sure, ancient long-dead pony civilizations exist, and have neat relics made with forgotten technology. But a non-pony species? That's crazy talk. Only something with as head as big as a pony could ever figure out science, or magic, or logic, or civilization, or anything else.

Now, long ago, Equestrian Science was called Alchemy. We tried to convert lead and copper to gold through chemical reactions. We dumped random shit into cauldrons and noted the effects in pre-war Pip-Bucks called notebooks. (Sunrise's Note: I'm being sarcastic there, I know what a notebook is!) Where Pegasi typically wanted to make better weather factories and Unicorns typically wanted to make better spells, Earth Ponies that weren't satisfied with a life spent farming or raising chickens took to the field of Alchemy to figure out how to make what we called "Potions", but were really more like powders and soups. Powders and soups made with ingredients that contained Chemicals known as Active Ingredients.

You know how there used to be a certain plant out there in the world, and I've forgotten its name, but if you chewed on it, you would feel less pain for a while? Well, that's because the plant contained an Active Ingredient, a special chemical that naturally grew in special plants like those, like how apples grow on trees and ores and gemstones grow in mines. Perhaps the chemical would have a name like Aspirin, for example. If you crushed up a lot of those plants and magically extracted the special Active Ingredient chemical from the plants, you'd eventually get so much of the chemical, you'd be able to solidify it into tablet form. Or, if you wanted it in powder form, you could make a small capsule (somehow) called a pill and put the powder inside that, to make it easier for ponies to swallow the pills and get all of the special chemical or powder into their stomachs.

Anyway, it was through Alchemy that ponies discovered the world, how to reshape metals, how to turn stuff into other stuff, and so on.

And then, we met Zebras. Zebras, and their Zebra Alchemy, where putting dog poo, some dirt, and a few drops of your own blood into a cauldron full of water while stirring it counter-clockwise eight times followed by three clockwise stirs on the full moon while bouncing around the cauldron on one leg and chanting "Omgo bongo, omgo bongo, mmm-belly go mon dodongo!" over and over will somehow eventually turn the mixture into a bright blue liquid that turns you invisible or makes your cock and balls triple in size when drank.

Zebra alchemy sucks ass, and everypony hated it. So we let them have the term alchemy, and we started calling what we did "Science". Alchemists became Scientists, and Master Alchemists became Doctors and Professors.

Zebra alchemy was like an insult to everything pony alchemists had scientifically discovered. Where we noted our findings, they left their own bullshit a mystery for everypony for the sake of greed and egotism. Where we made life easier on our fellow scientists, they actively sabotaged the discoveries and experiments of others to prevent them from making certain experimental and powerful potions first. Where we spent our existence evolving stronger magic and more control over it, along with a strict system of morals and a deep understanding of ourselves, nature, the world, and our places in it, their magic was wild, nonsensical, and uncontrollable at the best of times.

Where we were ponies, cheerful and merry and kind to a fault, they were like big, impatient, stupid foals that never grew up, and never stopped living solely for their own selfish needs, wants, and
Where we did real pony science, they pretended to do science, and their stupid zebra magic made up the difference.

Where we'd make a smoothie out of a bunch of fruits by blending them together with one of those awesome machines that use spinning blades in a big glass container, they'd boil their fruits in a cauldron until they got a bright green potion that allowed you to fly. And if another Zebra did the same, but their Not-Cutie Mark was different, they'd get a different potion out of the same recipe. And if the recipe was changed in any way, if the Zebra did one too many stirs in one direction, the potion would explode, or turn into acid that would melt the cauldron into useless slag, or turn red and become a potion that makes anypony who drinks it see dicks everywhere for a few hours.

Sometimes, it almost makes sense. It makes sense for a bat wing to be added to a "Give the drinker bat wings, flight, and pointy fangs" potion. It makes sense for an acorn to be added to a "Transform the user's outermost layer of skin into incredibly tough tree bark" potion. But the other ingredients in the potion, like the blood of pigs, the hooves of a goat, some cat shit, and a strand of hair from a pony who was angry when you got the hair, they just don't make any sense at all. Some Zebra Alchemy potion recipes even call for some random item that could be anything, as long as it has deep sentimental value to you.

It's insane. It's stupid. Nopony understands how it works. Well, except for one pony, and I'm not it.

Seriously, fuck Zebras! Did you know that the Zebra language lacks terms like "Very big", "Colossal", "Massive"? If they want to tell you about a fucking big tree, they'll tell you they found a "Big tree". They have no terms for getting those sorts of concepts across. You either want something now, or you don't want it at all. You either have lots of something, one of something, or none of something.

Now, back to the story.

Stimpaks are fucking cool.

The Stimpak, short for Stimulation Delivery Package, was designed to be the fully non-magical answer to the Healing Potion. The petals, the head, the flesh of the stem, the roots, and the liquid inside the stem of the Black Flower, when combined with a few of the unique and stupidly long-named chemicals found within the Sander Root's turnip-like flesh, make for something great to spike traditional Intravenous Fluid with, when those plant parts are dissolved and mixed into a Saline Solution, a mixture of salt and water.

As for what a Stimpak looks like… Well, it's harder to describe than a simple glass bottle or metal flask filled with a red liquid. A Stimpak is a modified hypodermic needle made of metal, with a sharp and sturdy pointed spike for a needle that gets wider the closer to the fluid-carrier it gets. Instead of the usual head of a Hypodermic Needle, something Sunrise honestly believed was called 'The Hyperdermic Button' because you pressed it like a Pip-Buck's button when you injected the pointy end into the body to inject the fluid into the body, there was a metal hexagonal bolt at the end. This was connected to a horizontal strip of metal, kind of making the Pip-Buck resemble a T. Like jet engines on experimental planes, a little metal nub stuck out of each of the strip of metal's far ends, and from the metal strip's center, a little cylinder of metal emerged. Atop that cylinder was a cylindrical glass-covered pressure gauge that faced the user, a thin plastic arrow-like spike inside the glass to point to the green 40% on the right, the central yellow 20%, or the red 40% on the left. Two thin yellow plastic tubes emerged from the sides of this pressure gauge to connect to the Stimpak's horizontal metal strip's far-away nubs.
They're sturdy. Shockingly sturdy. You probably couldn't break one of these things if you tried. Early models of these things were made out of simple glass and plastic, with metal needles, but by the time they started mass-production using factory-farmed ingredients, they were designed to be tough. Tough enough for combat, and so simple to use, a shot-up Earth Pony pony dying of blood loss, with just one hoof remaining, could still operate these things well enough to get him back into the action or to safety. They don't magically and instantly regrow lost limbs, but they do help heal limb damage shockingly quickly. They certainly shat all over the cumbersome and tricky-to-use Magical Bandages soldiers had to do with during the war, before Stimpaks were mass-produced.

This thing doesn't have any buttons. This thing doesn't have any pretentiousness. This thing doesn't have any fucks to give, either. You stab it into someone, and the device will somehow sense that you've stabbed it into somepony. It'll jizz out its healing juices, and it'll heal that pony. You can stab it into the legs, the shoulders, the back, anywhere. Except the spine. For the love of fuck, do NOT go for the spine with this thing. Best case scenario, the fluid heals the spinal cord damage you just did. Worst case scenario, it'll take a few more Stimpaks to heal that damage.

Stimpaks… They're not magical, and they don't use Zebra Alchemy or Earth Pony Science in their construction or designs, but with how incredibly powerful they are, you'd be forgiven for assuming that they were made with Alicorn jizz and the tears of the moon itself and other magical crap all along. They made basic healing spells look like nothing in comparison. Though stronger healing spells still left them in the dust, you couldn't stock up on thirty healing spells before a big fight.

There's a common urban myth that says one day, a blind Pegasus stabbed herself in the eyes with two Stimpaks at the same time, and when she pulled them out, her vision restored itself. That's probably bullshit.

It's possible to rig your Pip-Buck so it'll automatically inject you with the Stimpak fluid when your health lowers below a certain threshold, but at this point in time, I wasn't entirely sure how to do that and I wasn't about to waste Stimpaks trying to figure it all out through trial and error.

Sunrise wanted to know how many Black Flowers and Sander Roots she, her farms, and her farmers had been able to produce on the sly, without tipping off anypony who'd happily expose her or her farmers for farming something other than the oats they were meant to farm. I know, I know, it would truly be the scandal of the century, the most shocking thing to ever get reported to Stable Security for.

However, it would certainly suck ass if Evergreen Sage or one of her workers got reported and arrested for doing it. If Evergreen herself was caught as the one who organized this, she'd get an opportunity to defend herself in a court of law. Well, a court with the Overmare serving as a Judge, a band of backstabbing politicians eager to take her family out serving as the Jury, and Stable Security thugs hoping they'd be ready to serve as the Executioner. If one of her workers or middle-management staff found himself or herself blamed for all of this, well, that pony wouldn't be as lucky as her. Suffering the threat of Execution, followed by being given a "Do this little highly-illegal favour for me or my troops, or die" order, would be the best case scenario for that pony.

Sunrise decided he'd try to keep that in mind as he prepared himself to hear a low, low number.

And then, he felt… Something. Something odd, something strange, some kind of strange little sensation that wasn't something you touched, smelled, tasted, heard, or saw. His Sixth Sense for the use and manipulation of magic, something uncommon but not unheard of in Unicorns with considerable magical power, wasn't what detected this sensation. It was something strange his seventh sense picked up, something he'd never told anypony about. The strange, indescribable sense that detected luck, and allowed him to sense lucky occurrences and the inherent luck of things in a
way the skin might sense heat or cold.

He felt… Lucky.

Really lucky.

And his expectations for what was to come rose. He hadn't felt Lucky like that for a good few weeks, which meant the universe must have spent this time cooking up something good for him.

"We've been able to produce between three hundred and four hundred hundred pounds of BS per floor, per month," Evergreen Sage explained, "Seventeen floors, sixteen months, one oh eight, eight hundred… We've farmed one hundred and eight thousand and eight hundred pounds of Black Flowers and Sander Roots, combined, from the floors under my control. In addition, we've 'Lost' around four thousand, five hundred additional pounds of Razorwheat, over the last sixteen months or so, and I do hope we find them soon."

That surprised Sunrise for multiple reasons. "I thought you only had eight floors."

"I did, and then one of my rivals in the Oat production business got caught with two colts half my age in her sheets, so she was shot. Her floors were divided up between the remaining agricultural families, and as you're aware, my family is an agricultural family."

"Understandable," Sunrise nodded. She'd already told him the real story behind that sudden change there a few years back: Some farming baron tried to rape her mother twenty years ago, her mother killed him in self-defense, his previous victims came out of the closet to help her get away with it and forge a letter stating that he was leaving all of his property to the rape victims. And then half of the victims killed the others, motivated by greed, and then they turned on each other. Evergreen Sage's families was the only survivor, and when Evergreen was born, she grew up watching her parents try to organize farming operations they knew nothing of. A few years of intense study later, she'd learned her stuff and taken over the operation. Before long, she'd grown into the actual owner of those Agricultural Floors and the farms that spread out to engulf them. Vertical farms, hydroponic farms, all managed by Earth Ponies. The food grown here was fed sunlight by a combination of light from the weak and temporary fake suns made by a revolutionary and experimental new technique invented by Unicorns and Pegasuses working together, and the semi-magical artificial solar lighting made by Earth Pony/Unicorn Technology. Then, the homeless "Serf" slave ponies lucky enough to not get jobs farming in the dirt would begin packing farmed vegetables into big wooden boxes, to be transported by Earth Pony or Pegasus to the designated Magic Zone, where the many Unicorns who knew the necessary spell would magically increase the farmed fruit, vegetables, and grain in size so that they could be sent down to the Processing Floors.

Processing Floors were like Factory Floors, but there were fewer of them, and instead of a whole floor getting taken over by forges, assembly lines, recycling plants, and any other things you'd expect to see in a factory district, the whole floor was dedicated to assembly lines that took magically-engorged fruits and vegetables and chopped them up. There were also assembly lines that took grains, especially the magically-enhanced genetically-enhanced plant known as Razorwheat, and turned them into cereals somehow. The magically size-boosted fruits were what he was interested in, and he loved watching as colossal fruits bigger than three ponies standing atop each other were reduced to massive piles of regular-sized fruit chunks, which went into tins made from recycled metal, which were then shipped to the Supply Core's food supply, to be distributed around the Vault unevenly and unfairly. He didn't think he'd ever get tired of watching the finesse, the style, the sheer artistry of those Unicorn Fruit Butchers on the assembly line as they swung their multiple massive blades with their horns and magical might, usually around three to ten depending on the butcher. With their incredible skill, they sliced fruits precisely, evenly, and finely, and in their incredible
boredom, they added blade-twirls and pointless flourishes and guard poses to the dances they were forced to go through, day after day.

Regular shipments of raw food would also be sent to the Kitchen Floors, where ponies lived to cook, slice, dice, fry, flambé, and more. Those fancy meals made by chefs would be sent up to the rich ponies, who sent money and orders down in nice little envelopes that very rarely got lost along the way.

Overall, the Vault's mechanisms for growing and distributing food was strangely beautiful, Sunrise thought. He doubted robots could do it much better. After all, they were better suited to the jobs magic didn't make you any better at, like the "Put fruit chunks and fruit juice in tins" stage of the process.

Sunrise felt lucky again, which surprised him. He couldn't quite remember the last time he'd felt himself feeling lucky again so quickly after his luck spiked upwards.

"And then one of my rivals in Carrot production was found dead on a floor far below here. He'd been stabbed and robbed on the way to the Tech-Sec, and his killer wasn't found. So his lands were, once again, divided between us. And this pony had a lot of land, so I came into ownership of quite a few new floors."

"Excellent," Sunrise smiled.

And then he felt lucky again. Which was starting to make him feel curious, and a tad nervous, though he didn't show it. What in the world did fate have in store for him today?

"And then somepony I hadn't even considered a rival made the foolish mistake of marrying Viper Widow."

"Who?" Sunrise checked, just to be sure.

"Forest Frenzy," She explained. "Short, stumpy little rich stallion in his late fifties, going through enough of a mid-life crisis to marry a murderer in her early fourties."

"No, Viper, who is she?"

"I haven't told you about that bitch yet?" She asked, surprised.

"You've been preoccupied with talking about other bitches whenever bitches and current events came up," He smirked.

"Well, there are a lot of them!" She insisted, throwing her hooves in the air and letting them fall beside her. "And they're all disgraces to their lineages, their pedigrees, and their society."

"You said it, not me," Sunrise grinned approvingly, relaxing back in his chair, clopping his two forehooves behind his head to make a nice chair. Who is Viper?"

"The bitch who murdered her last four husbands for their money, and got away with it because she can lie to a lie detector's face and temporarily believe she's telling the truth. She can even recall events incorrectly, on purpose, and believe them with such conviction that she can dupe a mind-reader, memory-recaller, truth serum brewer, and anything else Stable Security tried to throw at her."

"Her," Sunrise growled, remembering who she was. A living argument against the inherent virtue of Ponykind, some might say, but he saw her as what happened when a pony ignored one's natural genetic inclination to be good. She had no friends to work with or aid, and no society she loved. All
that mattered to her? Her own power, prestige, and funding, because that was all she had, and could want. "Tell me she got caught with the murder weapon."

Evergreen smiled. "Yes, she was caught with the murder weapon. In her right eye."

"Come again?" Sunrise wondered.

The music stopped, and the irritating voice of some mare came from Sunrise's Pip-Buck. "Such a lovely tune. That was Arpeggio's Fugue in D Minor. And now it is time for another riveting instance of my favourite segment, Story Time With Poison Pen."

"Nope," Sunrise swiftly said, switching his radio over to Delightful Melodies For The Discerning Ear. Yet another motherfucking fugue greeted his ears, and- Oh, good, it stopped, and was replaced by a lone violin. Not bad, he supposed. Actually, it was pretty great. Whoever was playing this was fucking dominating that pentatonic scale!

"She stabbed him in the back halfway between a sexual encounter in the sheets. Yes, she decided to stab him while he was 'Stabbing' her, as they say in the vernacular. He was surprised, and then he got angry. He pulled the knife out, and died while penetrating her hilt-deep in more ways than one."

Sunrise burst into laughter. "The absolute fucking madpony!"

"She'd amassed quite a bit of funding over the years, and while she was a hoarder, she was also rich. My off-duty farmers are still going through her boxes of personal belongings, even after a whole year!"

"Your off-duty farmers?" Sunrise asked.

"Unofficially off-duty. They have to work an extra unpaid hour once their shift ends, thanks to my company's contract with each worker, a contract they have to sign when they get the job. However, my company's contract doesn't say they have to spend that hour performing hard labour. I like assigning them lovely leisure activities, such as listening to music. I particularly enjoy assigning this to the hard-working dolts who hate taking time off to take care of themselves, for whatever reason."

"Music…" Sunrise thoughtfully said to himself. "You know what's bullshit about the elites? Rather than appreciating music that says something, they cling to the repetitive tunes of the past for the sake of feeling like classy old ponies, because they believe listening to that sort of music is what classy old ponies do. They have free and easy access to so many places… Gyms, Swimming Pools, and more… That they just don't value these places at all. You can't really value something if you don't give something else up to get it. And who would hit the gym and work hard when there's no social benefit to doing so, and any health benefit would barely matter with how little they use their bodies anyway? They have nothing to do except show off to their friends and enemies when they aren't treating the Vault like their sexual playground, because our society has reached the absolute pinnacle of decadence."

That caught her attention, and raised an eyebrow. "The pinnacle of decadence? Surely, the first ponies to live in this Vault reached that stage, when most of them did nothing apart from breeding all day."

"I respectfully disagree, as those ponies simply played the hooves they were dealt. The elites of now enjoy this unsustainable lifestyle at the expense of lower-level and lower-class ponies."

"I suppose so," She shrugged.

"I wonder if there is a term for that thing these Elites tend to do, where they hit a certain age and feel
old and uncool, and then they regress into a foal-like state, abandoning their duties to the greater society for the sake of satisfying their own whims, desires, and impulses, as if acting in an adult manner was always simply a game they've grown tired of playing, and they're ready to pretend they're young and stupid again. I wonder if it stems from an inability to truly understand and appreciate what you have after a long and fruitful life of maturity and emotional stability. After all, contentment and hope for the future are alien concepts to these spoilt brats playing dress-up and pretending to be adults for a while. They hate personal responsibility almost as much as they hate when they don't get what they want. And what they want is to 'Enjoy' their wasteful lifestyles and endless entitlements, no matter what it costs the little pony, or the ponies of the future. The Future… Do these idiots ever stop and think of what effects their actions will have on the future? Have they ever chosen to go a day, or even a few hours without satisfying their needs, for the good of others?"

She didn't say anything.

And then, he felt something. He felt like there was luck somewhere in the aether, waiting for him. Waiting for him to reach out and take it, if only he said the right thing.

But what could that be? He guessed it had to be…

"In any case, I must say, you've done a fine job gathering those pounds of BS. And to get the maximum yield from each floor, even though you would have had to have had those floors you obtained over the months under your control from the start to get those numbers, is truly impressive. How did you get that number so high?"

"Well… Are you familiar with Hoofheld planters?"

"Those pre-war toys designed to get foals into gardening, plastic trays with pots for dirt, a row of hinges keeping a glass lid with round egg-like bulges above each plant, nicknamed Egg Planters." Sunrise nodded, confirming that he knew what they were.

"One of my workers got lucky at a perfectly-legal game of strip poker, and came into a small fortune. Inebriated, and remembering that he normally worked on an Agricultural floor and was one of the ponies I trusted to grow a lot of Black Flowers in secret, he decided to find the nearest florist, and order twelve thousand of these planters to be sent to his room."

Sunrise chuckled. "Isn't his room already full of planters?"

"Well, he always was a tad retarded, and the alcoholism didn't help matters," She shrugged. "In any case, my underlings loaned them to ponies they trusted on other floors, to grow those flowers in secret. We now have more Black Flowers than we have Sander Roots! After all, they're easier to grow, faster to bloom, and easier to justify with the lie that because we are Black Stars, growing Black Flowers should be a new tradition, like the Neighponese pre-war Samurai and their dwarf trees."

There was no judgement in his voice, he was simply a cheerful friend making an observation. "You didn't come up with that."

"I did not," She proudly admitted, "One of my friends thought of it. I must say, you were right about the wonders of befriending lowborns. They might not understand the nuances of higher Vault politics, but at times, that can be a blessing! And the ideas they think of, now and then… Truly, they think of the most outside-the-box solutions."

He smiled, glad that she'd taken his words on trying to be nicer to her underlings to heart. Sure, she was still an insensitive stuck-up bitch with less tact than a bull in a Zebra shit shop, but she was
trying now. She didn't think merely calling the bitches up here bitches was all it took to make her a better pony any more, and that was progress.

Ah, life was good for him.

And soon, when he was done visiting the two other places he had to visit today, life would be great for him.

And soon enough, he would make life great for everypony in Equestria.

Level Up!

New Perk: Critical Banker- You're a patient battlefield tactician, and can save a Critical Hit, to be used in V.A.T.S. when you need it most.
After finding out how well the Nature Division Leader of his Supply Core had done, filling up five ceramic beer barrels of fancy-ass coffee he knew a certain somepony liked, and filling up twelve more ceramic beer barrels of Sparkle Cola Black (Standard high-sugar Sparkle Cola mixed with black coffee made with a fine Ligma Bean Roast. Restores a decent amount of MP when consumed. It was technically a coffee flavour, after all, which meant that the machine could give it to him!) before eventually exhausting the coffee machine and breaking it, meaning somepony would have to come up and repair it and soon, and pressing a wall button labelled Call Repair Pony to summon that somepony, he was done up here. Sunrise knew where he had to go next, but it wasn't a place he was fond of visiting. It wasn't on a floor he was fond of visiting, either.

He went back to the elevator, entered it, and went down.

Down, down, down, to floor one hundred and six.

A mid-to-low-level floor that had been taken over by miniature drug cartels, ruthless mobsters with armies of well-paid and somewhat-well-trained gunners and grenade-throwers on their side, addiction and debt serving as the two shadowy hands on stretchy shadow arms that grabbed ponies and enslaved them. Homeless ponies from other floors desperate for work and with little else to offer gravitated towards this floor. Debt slaves and homeless wage slaves smuggled up from lower floors farmed, guards stood with guns to make sure the slaves didn't eat or smoke or snort what they farmed, and chemists looking to make some extra cash got taken into the world of drugs, never again allowed to leave.

Then, everything changed when the Black Star gang attacked.

Only the Chosen One, master of all fifty elements, could stop them. And when the world needed him most, he vanquished.

About five years had passed since his gang – "Certainly" not on his orders, of course! Nope, not at all! …Okay, yes, entirely on his orders – had carried out a surprise attack on the two biggest gang families at once, taking out the leadership and telling the remaining grunts that they could obey the Black Stars and help them dominate the other families, or die like their bosses.

Things went pretty well for a while, as the other families settled into their new roles in the power structure on this floor. And then, because backstabbing types can't get off or sleep with a smile unless they're tricking somepony or planning on backstabbing somepony, they tried to pull a coup on the Black Stars, which didn't go well for them.

The Black Stars were now the unofficial owners of this floor, something that didn't sit right with Sunrise at all. He didn't like drugs. He didn't like alcohol. He didn't like any of that shit. It had no place existing in Equestria. He didn't like how drugs seduced you, lured you away from the fulfilment you got after an honest day's hard work and tempted you with promises of incredible, unearned highs you'd never experience after a hundred days of hard work or a thousand hours of non-stop fucking.

And yet, he knew that if he shut this makeshift agricultural floor down and shifted it to food production, he'd only create another drug farm elsewhere in the Vault, with its own cartels, its own enslaved addicts put to work in the fields, and its own army of killers to deal with.

But that wasn't it. That wasn't enough to make him compromise on his morality. He didn't care how
'Convenient' it was to let this drug-farming place go unchanged.

The desire to not start a war against a gang that would be prepared for any surprise attack was a big thing that held him back when it came to changing this floor's purpose, as he wanted to save his army's strength for The Big Day. But the biggest thing that stopped him from going all "Thou shalt not suffer a bitch to live" on this floor?

Drugs can be traded for goods and services. A pony might pay some water tokens for some food he needs to survive, and a pony with seven water bottles might trade away one for a good meal now. But while some foods can get old, rotten, and mouldy over time (okay, not that last one because our Vault's air talisman erased all mould spores a long time ago), water will last forever.

Some drugs will last forever, some won't, but a pony willing to trade away several days of food or water or some nice clothes or batteries or a day's hard work or hoof-made crap that can be sold on other floors for even better goods or services won't save his or her drugs for a rainy day. They'll be eaten, snorted, smoked, or traded away or whatever as soon as possible. After all, Stable Security might show up, take the drugs, and use them. And then execute the druggie.

Drugs can be sold for a high price. Drugs can even be traded to a number of secret rich assholes with drug problems, a number that was entirely unexpected. And by unexpected, I mean completely expected!

Still, Sunrise made sure that he only had his floor farm the ingredients for drugs that were beneficial. Well, to the extent that the drug plants, when brewed into useful pills and potions and powders in capsules called 'Chems' through the magic of equine science, could be.

He would not permit any explicitly poisonous drugs, such as tobacco, to be farmed on his floors.

But the plants you used to make Med-X, Sleeper, Party-Time Mint-Als, X-Cell, and some of the lesser-known stuff used in the best drug cocktails? The stuff you used to make the mostly-benevolent Chems, whose only downsides were the addictions one might develop after taking them? Those were acceptable on this floor.

And so were the magically-altered ultra-high-energy experimental wheat plants known as Royal Grain he was farming. He'd given them that name after the marvellously golden colour they developed. Not golden as in yellow, brownish-yellow, or yellowy brown, but golden as in "Are you sure nopony painted some gold paint onto the best part of these wheat stalks in some strange, arcane prank?". He wished he could honestly say he'd invented or created those plants, but honestly, he had simply hired Evergreen Sage to invent the stuff for him, while offering himself and a few other ponies as test subjects for her different strains of the stuff. The experiments were secret, and Sunrise slapped his own name on the product, claiming he'd invented it to keep Evergreen's identity and affiliation with the gang a secret. He'd checked the idea to do this over with her ahead of time (He was going to do it anyway, he simply wanted to know her thoughts on the matter), and she'd loved the idea. After all, her high-ish position in the Vault's upper levels made her useful for gathering information on what the Elites and Crèmes were doing, and why. Even if she could only really get information others had decided to share as gossip.

A week or two of diarrhoea and unexpected magically-caused health problems that removed Sunrise's guilt over the matter and made him feel he'd quite earned the right to take credit for this plant later, Evergreen Sage had finally created a sufficiently powerful strain of wheat that didn't turn the imbibers anus into the nozzle for a boiling liquid shit pistol, and that was the strain that received the cool name from Sunrise.

Ah, Royal Grain. He was pretty sure it would have replaced the Vault's own magically-altered
unnamed strain of wheat if his Black Stars gang didn't brag about inventing it. Stupid political bullshit. He could have probably lessened the food shortages in severity if he'd gotten the whole Vault farming this shit!

In any case, Royal Grain… That stuff was great to eat raw. It was surprisingly tasty, and it restored a lot of MP. And something about eating long strands of plant matter strongly appealed to a strange, animalistic, long-forgotten part of Sunrise's brain that loved acting like ponies did before they developed the tech to invent chocolate bars. But when you added some Trail Mix, some peanut butter, some dried chunks of other fruit, and turned the whole thing into a nice cereal bar, you ended up with something special. Something special that restored even more MP. And those bars were tastier, more nutritious, and easier to carry around, too.

They also made for nice things to sell, and when you wanted to outfit every rebellious teenager and adult you could get your hooves on with a gun or two, a melee weapon, and a bunch of Stimpaks, and a Pip-Buck if he or she didn't already have one, you needed funds and you needed things you could reasonably sell for multiple weapons at any gun store who understood the value of restoring one's own magical reserves. After all, one Sunrise Sunshine Cereal Bar could give a Unicorn at least three more uses of a Repair Spell, Reforge Metal or Reshape Metal spell, or Heat Object spell.

They also accelerated the refractory period exclusively in Unicorns, and exclusively for horn orgasms. Sunrise and his mare's main hole, which often ended up glowing in the dark after riding his horn for a while, could definitely attest to that.

Finally, the door opened to a world of green. Disgustingly sweet scents and scents his genetic memory screamed at him to avoid hung heavy and humid in the air, as ceiling-mounted solar lamps kept the many planters of strange drug plants fed. Many planters were stacked atop each other, and mirrors had been arranged for their benefit, bouncing light that would normally go unused over to some plants that would normally waste away in the shade of other plants.

However, some drugs on this floor preferred darkness, he knew, and they were typically grown in rooms that were once bedrooms.

Only a few rooms on this floor were still bedrooms, and he was heading towards one of those today. Forwards, right, straight ahead, left, straight ahead for two more intersections, second door on the right…

He took in a deep breath. A very, very deep breath, because he knew how badly the room he was about to enter smelled. He knew it from experience, and he hated coming in here, but the checks he had to make today were too important to leave up to a courier.

The part where he trusted a courier with an incredibly important task would come later. For now…

For now, it was time to fucking barter.

And with a heavy heart and determined stare, he hit the button that swooshed the blast door open, and he took a few steps back as the warmth rushed out of the room, carrying with it a scent so powerful you could almost taste it and feel it with your skin. Stale, strong piss. Shit. Burned sugar. Sweat in weeks-old clothing. Alcohol. And the distinctive sugar-water scent of Sparkle Cola, as if it had been spilled on the black carpet floor at one point and forgotten about. "Drugguy!", he called, and waited for a few seconds, waiting for the worst of the scent to leave the room until he felt it was safe for him to walk in.

The walls were like shrines to a long-forgotten foalhood, but the floor seemed to scream that its owner's foalhood had never ended. Empty glass bottles of Sparkle Cola and empty aluminium cans
of SparKill(TM) Sparkling Power Drink(TM) energy drink littered the floor, along with unwashed
clothes, some of which had differing levels of particularly vile stenches coming from something
inside each one. Twelve plastic gallon jugs with lids firmly screwed on tight, each one full of dark
yellow pony urine, were placed around the bed, equidistant from one another like sentries standing
guard over the bed and the distracted body of their owner atop it. A thirteenth gallon jug was
separate from the rest of the jugs, half-full with its lid unscrewed and resting bottom-up beside it like
a shot glass, with a long tube of plastic – like the one a beer bong might use – waiting in its lid. The
tube of plastic reached up onto the bed and around the neck of its owner, before eventually ending in
a wide plastic cone for a head, one its owner's sad, comparatively small, deflated, and uninterested
cock was currently flopping into. A fourteenth half-full gallon jug of clear water was on the floor,
thankfully far away from the piss bottle, open and waiting to be lifted up and sipped from when its
owner got thirsty.

The owner of this room was currently playing some game on his Pip-Buck, oblivious to the world.

Over in another corner, there was a chest of drawers, and the scent of drugs wafted strongly from it.
A table next to it had a bunch of separate chemistry sets, empty needles, beakers, and other sciencey
shit. And some beakers of piss, just… left there.

Sunrise's horn sparked to life, eager to burn the uncleanliness away, but he willed the magic away,
and his glow dissipated. He couldn't lose it, not now, and he forced himself to look elsewhere.

The walls. He decided to look at the walls. He didn't see any shit on the walls.

The walls, however, told a different story of the room's owner. Every foot or three of space, a framed
certificate, or a picture of the room's occupant with some kind of trophy on his back. After all, who
could buy a trophy for use in a tournament and then give it away to the winner, permanently, when it
would mean never getting to give that trophy to another pony again? When you won a trophy in this
Vault, unless you were seriously rich, or the tournament organizer was seriously rich, you simply
earned the right to call yourself a winner and have a picture taken with the trophy as proof. Some
pictures were of this room's owner with first place trophies, some pictures were of second or third
place trophies, just as some certificates were Participation Certificates for regional and Stable-wide
Duel Monsters tournaments and others were First Place or Runner Up certificates.

The sound of forceful liquid splashing against plastic caught Sunrise's attention and made his ears
twitch.

Sunrise turned his head towards the source of the noise, and saw that the distracted, zombie-like
pony was pissing into his cock-funnel, its attached transparent plastic beer bong tube having turned a
solid yellow as it looped around its attached jar before pouring straight into the rim.

In addition, the pissing pony hadn't noticed him open the door or come in.

His seventh sense of luck told him to say nothing and wait until the pony was done, but something
about the display of the unwashed slob urinating into a bottle with the aid of a beer bong, the sound
of it echoing through the room as the scent of stale horse piss in the room's battalion of vile smells got
even worse… something about this situation pissed him off.

Sunrise forced his eyes away from the sad display, and his eyes drifted to one picture at the center of
the room he was looking at. A young indigo Earth Pony just eleven years old had turned his side
towards the camera he was grinning at. He had a short, messy forest-green mane and bright honey-
brown eyes. On his back, there was a gold cup trophy bigger than he was. The text engraved upon
the cup's stand's metal plate proudly boasted that this was the Vault-Wide Championship Cup, and
when Sunrise used a bit of math to determine when this picture had been taken, he knew the pony in
this room, one twenty six years old, hadn't taken this photo that long ago, in the grand scheme of things.

Fifteen years ago… That was a good year for Duel Monsters. It wasn't a good year for Sunrise Stardust. He remembered being young, hated, stressed-out, and eager to die. He remembered powering through long nights and longer training sessions with a sad, quiet, treacherous part of his own mind hoping he'd die trying to achieve his goals, so that he could say he'd died better than the other ponies of his Vault whenever he went to wherever souls damned by the sins of their fathers and mothers go.

He remembered suffering to get where he was right now, and there was no way in fuck he'd waste his opportunity by losing control here, in the room of his most important Chemist.

Sunrise's eyes drifted towards some empty cans of SparKill Sparkling Power Drink near the chemistry table.

He rather liked that stuff. Twilight had invented it. Well, sort of.

Once upon a time, after some long nights spent studying and not of an entirely sound mind, Twilight Sparkle decided the delicious taste and refreshing mana-restoringly high sugar content of Sparkle Cola just wasn't enough, so she hired some friend the history books avoided speaking of – for some reason. Sunrise had no idea why - to make an energy drink with a more aggressive kick, a more aggressive flavour, and a more aggressive marketing campaign to make everypony buy this and help fund the Ministries, instead of the fickle private energy drink companies, many of which outsourced their labour overseas to Zebrica, putting thousands of ponies out of work and pumping out liquid shit so quickly, small businesses couldn't compete. However, a benevolent government-backed mystery pony believed he could compete quite easily, if Twilight gave him money. The energy drink known as SparKill Sparkling Power Drink was born, and it came in six flavours: Standard, Mighty Mana, Mighty Muscles, Mighty Memory, Mighty Midnight, and Mighty Meaty. Each one boasted that it was dosed with a Masterwork-Level Mana Restoration potion made with real equine science.

Standard tastes like you took some Sparkle Cola and added some artificial flavouring to make its taste stronger, to cover up the other crap that went into it. Mighty Mana contains no sugar and a pleasant grape-like taste, and is dosed with three additional and different kinds of pony-made energy-restorative potions, to give you energy, not flab. Mighty Muscles came with multiple shots of protein powder. Chocolate protein powder, enough to turn the liquid chocolatey. Mighty Memory contained a refreshing citrus flavour and mind-enhancing herbs, plus a hint of some experimental magically-modified plant supposedly designed to keep the mind focused on what matters. Mighty Midnight tastes of cinnamon, and contains a transformative potion that, when imbibed, transforms the user into a sleepless being that gets stronger and smarter in the darkness, though the effect only lasted a few hours and was too expensive to produce for it to be simply sold to the military at an affordable price. Mighty Meaty was designed to attract Griffons and their wallets, granting them energy, protein, and a dose of the mind-enhancing chemicals used in Mighty Memory in the form of a canned drink any Griffon can open and knock back in public, without having to worry about the judgement from ponies they'd normally get if they ate steak, hamburgers, or a whole well-cooked chicken in public. Each 500ml can of the stuff contains savoury chicken broth and liquid beef blended into a smoothie and added to the energy drink.

The stuff was massively successful, even if it was too strong and aggressively favourful for most ponies. Mighty Mana was quite a success among college students and the workforce. And Mighty Meaty proved to be a colossal success in Griffon lands, though it couldn't be sold in vending machines or Griffons would raid them. Something about the drink just made them go wild for it, and
they couldn't get enough of the stuff. SparKill Sparkling Power Drink: Mighty Meaty Flavour could only be sold in pony-owned stores around Griffonstone and the other Griffon kingdoms, and only pony-owned stores with heavily-armed pony guards. After all, Griffon guards… You didn't need a gun to beat them, only your wallet. Wave it around and they'd turn on their employers, hoping you'd have more money to offer them than you. And if you didn't, well… Sure, they'd attack you, but Griffons aren't exactly Pegasi in terms of speed. Griffons can't dodge bullets.

Finally, the sound of piss splashing against plastic and piss stopped. It was time for Sunrise to shine. Well, at least as much as he could, in such a dung-heap.

"Green Star," Sunrise greeted with a big smile, and he considered it a testament to the incredible charisma he had, and had worked so hard to obtain, that he could still remain friendly while every cell in his body screamed at him to burn the impurities away before somepony got infected and came down with something. "How's it hanging?"

"Into a tube," The owner of the room grinned dopily, eyes flickering down to his cock for a moment. He was an indigo pony with a green mane, though his mane wasn't vaguely star-shaped any more. He had a long, uncut and unkempt head of hair that lacked any sort of hairstyle or consistency. It was greasy, tangled, and unbrushed. His eyes were still brown, but they looked like shit, and you know why. His name was Green Star

And what Green Star said took Sunrise by surprise. The Unicorn struggled not to laugh at the awfulness of that joke, because the less of this disgusting air he had to breathe, the better.

Gods, this place was disgusting. This pony was disgusting. He was once a genius at chemistry and card games for foals everypony cared way too much about alike, but now, he had fallen so far…

"Did you get enough Silly Sugar for the Lucky Penny family?" Sunrise asked, referring to one of the few mafia-like families Sunrise was actually willing to work with. They'd feuded with a certain other family for generations, and they'd killed it completely, aside from one filly, which fell in love with one of their colts before the genocide happened. Anyway, they promised the Black Stars plenty of high-powered guns and shields, and a lot of scrap for the robot-builders, if they got enough Silly Sugar. It was an alright deal, Sunrise supposed, but he still hated that he had to sell a drug so easily abused. Hell, even when administered safely and legally, it was supposed to be given out by trained doctors only, and only to those who needed the stuff to survive.

"Yeah," He dazedly smiled.

Silly Sugar… That stuff's one hell of a drug. Pinkie Pie helped make it when she went through her "Maybe other drugs can help me see the future! Maybe I won't have to choose between abandoning Equestria and losing what's left of my mind! Maybe I can invent a new drug!" phase. Take some Poison Joke, and magically fuck with it. Take some Sugar Cane, and magically fuck with it. I don't know how it goes, but you fuck with both. Eventually, you end up with a sugar cane plant that makes Silly Sugar.

While it grows like ordinary cane sugar, its effect on ponies is anything but ordinary. You're supposed to take a tablespoon of it per day to improve your overall mood, making the bad parts of life seem less terrible while also making the good parts of life seem better. But if you sprinkle a lot more of it on something you eat, and when the drug takes hold of you, everything starts seeming funny. Your life, your sorrows, your pain, how much you care about this or that, it all starts to morph into something hilarious. Things stop mattering, and while you don't stop feeling pain, you do stop feeling pain from experiencing pain. It's like… You know how, when you're high on Med-X, or its stronger brother Med-XXX, which was designed for dragons and those too tough for Med-X, you can feel it when dentists drill holes through your teeth but you don't feel pain from it? It's like that,
but for pain itself. You still feel pain, but it doesn't bother you, or even register as an unpleasant thing. Everything becomes such a hilarious novelty on Silly Sugar, even pain becomes hilarious. And if the ponies around you judge you, or laugh at you, or stare at you in confusion, that just makes it better, because laughter becomes the most wonderful and hilarious sound in the world, and confusion becomes the most hilarious thing in the world. Right up until the next stimuli you experience becomes the most hilarious thing in the world, at least. Followed by the next one, and the next one…

It's like being drunk on a special kind of alcohol that won't let you get depressed or angry or anything other than amused, and when you're on it, you won't even care that you won't be able to remember anything but your own laughter when it's over.

If you want a stronger high, you take more of it, and you laugh harder. You start doing stupid things, for stupid reasons. You'll shoot your guns and swing your melee weapons just to experience the feeling of using them, you'll break your own limbs for the fun of it, and you might even try to molest somepony, not caring whether you succeed or not because life is fun for you either way. It makes a popular date-rape drug for its ability to make the victim enjoy it, and many mares in the Vault with "The Oldest Profession" as their jobs down some of the stuff before they fuck whoever they're being forced to fuck today, to make things more enjoyable for everypony involved. And if you don't mind the risk of death, you can snort the stuff straight up your nose with the aid of a straw, and end up laughing yourself into unconsciousness or even death. I hear you have some really fucked-up and utterly amazing, life-changing dreams that'll reveal the secrets of the universe to you if you pass out while on enough Silly Sugar, but I've never touched the stuff. I've seen too many powder-nosed ponies laugh about the supposed hilarious pointlessness of life before shooting themselves to even try that shit.

Of course, the aftertaste is a bitch. And the comedown… When the drug fades away, you laugh less, and you start coming down, and everything feels wrong. Your ability to laugh and smile and enjoy life is fading away, and it'll never come back to the high you just experienced. It's like you spent hours laughing at a hilarious joke you've finally gotten sick of, and you feel a sense of sadness in your heart because you know that joke will never seem funny to you again. At that point, you can either spend your life chasing that high while your mind rots and your diaphragm decays and you steadily lose the ability to care about things and view anything as any more than a curious and amusing novelty, or you can quit for good and try very hard to continue enjoying life when you know you've already experienced what felt like the truest happiness possible, and could never be experienced again without that evil powder.

Sunrise noticed that his drug-making friend here was playing some game on his Pip-Buck again.
"Are playing Faulty Recall right now?" Sunrise asked.

"Nope, I'm into stronger stuff," Green Star bragged.

Sunrise idly wondered if Green Star was actually this stallion's name, or if he'd chosen that at some point in his life. He much preferred to speak to Ivory Blaze when it came to getting chemicals that had assorted effects on the equine body and mind. He actually liked that pony. That pony was awesome, a living testament to the greatness of ponykind. He was also a fucking riot when he was blitzed.

And then, Sunrise heard something he didn't expect.

"I'm into Pokémon now," Green Star said. "And I'm chaining shinies right now."

"Nice!" Sunrise beamed in approval. What the fuck was 'Chaining Shinies' supposed to mean? He wasn't about to ask that question and look less knowledgeable in front of this pony, though. "I love
that game. How many gyms have you beaten?"

"All of them."

"Yeah, me too," Sunrise lied. Hey, so what if he still hadn't beaten the sixth gym? He didn't exactly have much time for those stupid video games that required a lot of time to be invested in the system before your numbers got big enough to compete with other Trainers! So what if he still hadn't completed the main story of any regions? He could crush any gym he wanted with the level one hundred Pokémon he'd hacked into his Pip-Buck. It would barely take half an hour, and nopony could defeat him at Pokémon. So who cared how little time he'd actually spent with that game open? Also, why did so many Pokémon fans get mad over hacked Pokémon? The game was stupid.

Okay, the game was awesome, thanks to its awesome part. But still, it had one very stupid part.

What was the awesome part? Everything except the stupid part!

Pokémon was a game had three hundred and sixty-something Pokémon to battle, capture with Pokeballs, and trade with friends. Wait, was it three hundred and sixty-something, six hundred and ninety-whatever, or twelve hundred and who the fuck knows? Ah, whatever. Every game was a portable eight-megabyte file on the Pip-Buck that stored its save data in a separate ".SAV" save file. Long ago, this game had been played on rudimentary Personal Computer systems, but technology had allowed these awesome eight-bit barely-in-colour games to be ported over to the Pip-Buck Operating System.

It was a game where you were a new Pokémon trainer, just ten years old. You started in your region of choice, and got one of three Pokémon of your choice. The region's Starter Pokémon. Typically, there would be a Fire Pokémon, a Water Pokémon, and a Grass Pokémon. All Pokémon have one or two of eighteen types. Fire, Water, Grass, Ghost, Poison, Steel, Fairy, Electric, Normal, Fighting, Flying, Ground, Rock, Bug, Psychic, Ice, Dragon, and Dark. Pokémon had Types, their Moves had types, and if a Water-type Pokémon used a Water-type move, it would be stronger than a Fire move getting used by a Water-type Pokémon. 1.5x stronger, to be precise. That's the STAB, the Same-Type Attack Bonus.

And there's a very complex system that determines which types beat which types, gaining a 2x damage boost on that type. This system also determines what types deal 0.5x the usual damage on certain types, and what types deal 0x the usual damage on certain types. Water-type attacks deal bonus damage to fire-type Pokémon, Fire-type attacks deal bonus damage to grass-type Pokémon, and grass-type attacks deal bonus damage to water-type Pokémon. Ice beats Grass, Grass beats Rock and Ground, Ground does nothing to Flying types but Rock beats Flying types, Flying types beat Fighting Types. Dark beats Psychic, Psychic does zero times the usual damage on Dark, meaning it does no damage at all, but it beats Fighting, and Fighting beats Dark. Dark beats Ghost types, which take no damage from Fighting or Normal types. Normal types take double the damage from Fighting types. Dragon takes half damage from Fire, Grass, Water, and Electric, but double the damage from Fairy, which takes double the damage from Poison and Steel. Steel is immune to Poison, and...

This is getting too long, but trust me, there are a lot of type interactions. And a Pokémon can be a Dual-Typed Pokémon. For example, Wingull, a Pokémon-ified Seagull, is a Water and Flying type Pokémon. It will get STAB, the Same Type Attack Bonus, when using Water moves and Flying moves. It counts as both types at once for the purposes of damage calculation, so it takes no damage from Ground attacks like a Flying Pokémon, takes less damage from Fire attacks like a water Pokémon, and takes double damage from Electric-type attacks due to its Water and Flying types, which means it takes 4x the usual damage. It would also take Neutral, or 1x, damage from Grass type attacks, because Grass does double damage on Water types and half the damage on Flying
There are also Weather Conditions. Moves like Sunny Day and Hail set them up, instead of dealing damage to the opponent. Fire-type moves deal more damage when it's sunny, and the move Solarbeam charges in one turn instead of two. In the Hail weather, all non-Ice type Pokémon lose a small chunk of their health at the end of every turn. Something similar happens in the Sandstorm weather, where all Pokémon besides Rock, Ground, and Steel Pokémon lose a bit of their HP at the end of every turn. There's also this glitchy weather condition fans have nicknamed Acid Rain. No comment on that for now.

Speaking of moves not dealing damage directly, there are moves like Calm Mind, Growth, and Stockpile. They raise your stats instead of dealing damage. Then there are moves like Growl and Leer, they lower the stats of your enemy instead of dealing damage. Then there are moves like Will-O-Wisp, Thunder Wave, Poison Powder, and Toxic, they inflict Status Conditions like Burned, Paralyzed, Poisoned, and Badly Poisoned. Getting Burned halves your attack, and you lose one sixteenth of your Hit Points at the end of every turn. Getting Paralyzed halves your Speed, and every time you want to use a move, you have a chance to miss your turn instead. Getting Poisoned means you lose an eighth of your Hit Points every turn. Getting Badly Poisoned means you lose one sixteenth of your Hit Points at the end of the first turn you spend Badly Poisoned, two sixteenths at the end of your second turn, three sixteenths at the end of your third turn, and so on. The damage inflicted by the poison gets worse over time.

Anyway, you ran around in the tall grass, surfed over oceans, fished in ponds, ran around in caves, and did some other stuff to find Wild Pokémon. When you found them, you'd send out your own Pokémon and fight them in a turn-based RPG system where whoever's HP reached zero first lost. You could also throw a Pokeball at a Pokémon to catch him or her, and add that Pokémon to your team or collection. However, if you threw a Pokeball at a healthy Pokémon, it was likely to escape. You had to whittle an opponent's HP down low, but not to zero, if you wanted to make an attempt at capturing that Pokémon more likely to end in success. There are regular Pokéballs, and then there are better balls, like Great Balls. They're more likely to succeed in catching Pokémon when thrown at them. They're also more expensive. Then there are Ultra Balls, which are better and more reliable than Great Balls, but they're more expensive, too. You get money in the game by beating enemy Trainers. Then there are gimmicky balls, like the Heavy Ball, which works better on heavier Pokémon, and the Timer Ball, which starts off crappy but its success rate goes higher with each passing turn, up to a maximum of 4.0 or something. I think that's a success rate equal to the Ultra Ball, but I don't remember. Personally, I prefer the Dark Balls. They're like crappy regular Pokeballs during the day, but in caves and at night, they're as good as Ultra Balls for a small fraction of the price. I don't exactly do well during the night, however, so I like to mess with my Pip-Buck's internal clock to get its Pokémon game to think it's midnight when it isn't. I turn my clock back to normal afterwards, when I'm done catching Pokémon, but as I said before, I don't play this game often.

Rumors say there's this thing called a Master Ball, a Pokeball that can catch any Pokémon, but that's probably bullshit. However, I did find code for it in the game while hacking it.

You could have up to six Pokémon in your team at once, and any extras you caught went in "Your PC", a big collection of all the Pokémon you caught magically stored onto your in-game character's PC, which could be accessed from the PCs in any Pokémon Center, a special building you can visit to fully heal your Pokémon for free.

You can also battle other Trainers, ponies with Pokémon in the game. NPCs, Non-Player Characters, who will attack you with their Pokémon on sight. Every time one of your Pokémon wins a match, you gain EXP, Experience Points, and when you have enough, you Level Up, increasing your stats.
and potentially learning a new move. It depends on what level your chosen Pokémon is programmed to learn moves at.

Speaking of moves, there are these in-game objects called TMs and HMs. Technique Machines, and Hidden Machines. Both can be used as many times as you want, but only on certain Pokémon who were programmed to be able to learn certain moves from certain TMs and HMs. You can't teach Ice Beam to a Fire-Type, for example.

Having six Pokémon in your team, that's where the strategy comes in. Your foes will also have up to six Pokémon, so it's up to you to win by using the right Pokémon for the job in every situation, and make sure that Pokémon has the right moves. All Pokémon can have up to four moves at once, by the way. If you want your Pokémon to learn a new move, but your Pokémon already knows four moves, you have to throw away an old move of your choice.

All Pokémon can hold one Held Item, something useful like a Berry, or a Life Orb, or a Choice Scarf. Your Pokémon will eat a berry he or she is holding when he or she runs low on HP, but doesn't run out of HP and faint. Some berries heal the user, some berries boost the user's stats, and some berries confuse the user. Fuck that last one. Life Orbs boost the power of your Pokémon's moves by 30%, but your Pokémon loses 10% of its maximum HP after using a damage-dealing while holding a Life Orb. Choice Scarves boost the holder's speed by 50%, but only allow you to use the first move you chose after sending the Pokémon out.

If you want to be a sneaky little fucker, you can use this one move called Trick to swap your held item with your opponent's. This can be a great way to take your opponent's usually-useful item away and replace it with a Choice Scarf. If your opponent uses a stat-raising move while holding a Choice Scarf, he's fucked! All your opponent can do is either repeatedly use that stat-raising move, despite not being able to attack or do anything with those stats, or Switch that Pokémon out for one of the other Pokémon in his team, throwing away the boosts to his stats and resetting the "Choice Scarf is locking the holder into X move" flag. And Switching a Pokémon out for another one uses up one turn, which means you'll get a free hit in on whatever your foe sends out.

You can also make your Pokémon hold something useless, like some mail or a Pokeball, something your Pokémon can't use. Or even something detrimental to the Pokémon, like a Poison Orb, which Poisons the holder. That's good for Trick strategies and Pokémon with the Ability known as Poison Heal, which turns health that would normally be lost due to Poison damage at the end of every turn into health gained.

Speaking of Abilities, all Pokémon have one. Some abilities, such as Own Tempo, which stops the user from suffering the unofficial status effect known as Confusion, and Clear Body, which stops the opponent from lowering the user's stats, are only useful in a few situations. Then there are more useful abilities, like Water Absorb and Flash Fire. Water Absorb makes water attacks heal you, instead of hurting you. Flash Fire makes Fire-type attacks do nothing to you, and this ability also boosts your Attack or Special Attack by 50%. Some abilities, like Run Away, which guarantees that you'll succeed when you attempt to run away from a battle with a Wild Pokémon, aren't useful against NPC trainers or other players of the Pokémon game at all. Some abilities have downsides, like Dry Skin, which makes water attacks heal you, but it also makes you 2x weak to Fire attacks. And some abilities are fucking broken bullshit, like Contrary. It turns what would be lowered stat effects into raised stat effects, and raised stat effects into lowered stat effects. Which means if your opponent sends out a Pokémon with the ability Intimidate, which lowers the Attack of your opponent's Pokémon when you send out the Mon with Intimidate, your Attack stat will get bigger instead of smaller. It also means that if you use a powerful move with "The user's Special Attack drops by 2 stages after using this" as its only downside, such as Overheat or Leaf Storm, your Special Attack will rise instead of being lowered. Yes, this means you can repeatedly use that attack,
Stats-wise, the Attack and Special Attack stats boost your damage output. Attack makes you do more damage with Physical moves, and Special Attack makes you do more damage with Special (Long-Range, usually) moves. Typically, a Physical Fire move will be something like "Flame Charge: Wreathe the user in flames and crash into the opponent! Raises speed by 1 stage", and a Special Fire move will be something like "Flamethrower: Breathe fire at the opponent!". HP gives you more Health Points, an indicator of your Pokémon's current health and how much pain he or she can take before running out of HP and getting Knocked Out. The Defence and Special Defence stats adjust how much damage your Pokémon takes from incoming attacks. Defence lowers the damage taken from Physical attacks, and Special Defence lowers the damage taken from Special attacks. Whether a move is Physical or Special depends on what little icon it was programmed to have in the Moves tab of the Pokémon Status Screen. Finally, there is the Speed stat. If my Pokémon's Speed stat is higher than your Pokémon's speed stat, even though we'll both select our chosen moves from our own respective menus at the same time, my Pokémon will use his move first.

Stats are raised in stages. A stat can be raised or lowered by up to 6 or -6 stages above or below zero, the standard stage. Each stage is worth 0.5, so a Pokémon with a +2 modifier to Special Attack and a +1 modifier to Defence will have his Special Attack multiplied by 2 and his Defence multiplied by 1.5x. I think negative numbers that lower the user's stats matter less. What were the exact numbers, again? Oh, right. At -1 Attack, your Attack stat is at two thirds of its usual number. At -2 Attack, your Attack stat is at two quarters of its usual number, and it goes down to -6, where your Attack stat ends up at two eighths of its usual number.

Also, there are no stat-raising or stat-lowering moves that alter how much HP you have. There are moves like Recover and Softboiled that heal the user's HP, however.

So, that's how Pokémon battling works. Pretty cool, eh?

In the game, you choose a Region, and play through that region. You'll run around, catch local Pokémon, talk to some NPCs and fight enemy trainer NPCs, raise your Pokémon, and go from town to town in search of eight Gyms. Gyms have stronger Pokémon Trainers in them, and they're ruled by a Gym Leader, a master of a certain type. A Gym Leader will usually only use Pokémon of a certain type, and it's a type the whole Gym is themed around in some way, so they test your knowledge of type matchups. Gyms will usually also have simple puzzles in them, often based around switches you have to press to move platforms, open doors, or remove obstacles, and those switches tend to be placed in areas you can only get to if you beat the game's NPC trainers in the way, so you'll have to beat all of a Gym's trainers before you can get to the Gym Leader. Beat a Gym Leader, and you get a Gym Badge.

Oh, and along your Badge-hunting route, you'll run into some evil team who wants to do crimes, or destroy the world, or do some good-sounding thing that'll actually end in disaster, or whatever. The important thing is, you have to stop those evil bad guys who are up to no good! Defeat them with your Pokémon, and save the world!

When you get eight Gym Badges, you can head for Victory Road, a very tough route that travels through a cave full of strong trainers and strong Pokémon. If you get through that, you can get to the big end-game area where the Elite Four are, along with the Champion. You have to beat all four members of the Elite Four in a row, followed by the Champion, and they're some of the toughest battles you'll ever face. Usually.

When you're done with that, you'll do whatever "Post-Game" stuff is in the area, then you'll move on to some other Region. A Patch File to update your game and add some new regions and Pokémon to
it is distributed for a steep forty-bit price every few years. But if you don’t have any bits, you can trade food or water or clothes or whatever for the equivalent price to the pony releasing the patch, or anypony who bought the patch and knows how to copy it over to other Pip-Bucks, either for free or for a smaller fee.

Remember how the game allowed you to choose a Region to start in, at the start of the game? Well, you can go through the other regions afterwards, and the Wild Pokémon and enemy Trainers in those regions will scale to your level! So if you go in with Pokémon around the Level 40 to Level 50 mark, the weak early-game trainers and early-game Wild Pokémon will start off at around level thirty-ish, and get stronger from there. After going through that region, beating all eight of its Gym Leaders and getting their Gym Badges, beating the Elite Four, Champion, and local evil team, you move on to another region. Or re-visit a region you already beat, and it’ll scale to your level every time you visit it.

So if two friends start off in different regions, and upon beating their regions, switch over to the region their friend already went through, they’ll find that the region they’re going through now is tougher than the one their friend went through.

The true goals of Pokémon? To catch all the Pokémon! Or to go through every region and beat every trainer, Gym, evil team member, Elite Four member, and Champion in them. Or to make a great team and battle people in reality with them. It depends on the player.

And yes, you heard me right. This game can let your Pip-Buck connect to other Pip-Bucks wirelessly, letting you Trade Pokémon with other players, and battle your opponent's Pokémon team with your own team! There's also a "Mix Records" option, but I have no idea what that does.

Anyway, Pokémon is a pretty popular game in this Vault. Which makes sense, because almost everything about it is brilliant!

Almost.

The game isn't exactly balanced. Some Pokémon, like Salamence, are just objectively better than Pokémon like Butterfree. Some Pokémon are unfairly overpowered. Some groups of friends have unofficial rules where they agree not to use certain moves, certain Pokémon, or even any Pokémon above a certain "Tier".

Some groups of friends use hacked versions of the Pokémon game, to add new Pokémon and new Regions, or just adjust and enhance existing Pokémon while weakening some Pokémon that are just too good, like Mega Lucario and Toxapex. Some groups of friends even use modified versions of the game that adjust main game mechanics, such as allowing you to use more than six Pokémon in your team, or letting your Pokémon's nickname edit your Pokémon's current type, or letting any Pokémon use any Pokémon's Mega Stone.

Shit, I forgot to tell you about those. Well, most Pokémon in the game can evolve once or twice. Some Pokémon can evolve into one of two, three, or even sixteen different things. Bulbasaur will evolve into Ivysaur at level 16, and Ivysaur will evolve into Venusaur at level 32. Tyrogue will evolve into Hitmonchan, Hitmontop, or Hitmonlee whether its Attack stat is greater than its Defence, equal to its Defence, or lower than its Defence, respectively. Wurmple can evolve into Silcoon or Cascoon depending on who-the-fuck-knows-what. Silcoon will evolve into Beautifly, and Cascoon will evolve into Dustox. Eevee will evolve into Flareon, Jolteon, or Vaporeon if it’s given a Fire Stone, Thunder Stone, or Water Stone respectively. Or, if it’s sufficiently happy, it’ll evolve into an Umbreon during the night, or an Espeon during the day. Or it’ll evolve into the Fairy type Sylveon if it levels up while sufficiently happy and while also knowing at least one Fairy-type move. Or it’ll evolve into a Glaceon if you level it up near some special chunk of ice. Or it’ll evolve into a Leafeon
if you level it up near some special mossy rock.

Some Pokémon have these things called Mega Stones, which allow a Pokémon to Mega Evolve when held. That's a temporary evolution that temporarily evolves your Pokémon to be 100 Base Stat points stronger, though you don't get to control what stats those points are added to. When you Mega Evolve a Pokémon, it stays Mega Evolved until the end of the battle. It turns back to normal afterwards.

Mega Evolution changes your Pokémon's appearance, and will also often change your Pokémon's Ability to be something more useful. Personally, I like Mega Evolutions, even though a lot of people hate them. I feel they were a good way to make some weak Pokémon stronger. I just wish they decided on a specific Base Stat Total number for Megas, instead of giving all Pokémon with Mega Evolutions a flat +100 upgrade, because some weakling like Mawile with its Base Stat Total of 380 won't be able to compete with some behemoth like Salamence, who has a Base Stat Total of 600. Add 100 to 380, and you get 480. Sure, it's still higher than 380, but it isn't any higher than 600, which just got buffed by Mega Evolution to 700. Sure, Mega Mawile gets Pure Power, which doubles its mediocre Attack stat, but Mega Salamence gets Aerialate, which boosts the power of all Normal-type moves by 1.2x and turns them into Flying-Type moves. This is more useful than it sounds, trust me.

Also, there's one really stupid thing about Pokémon.

One really, really, really fucking stupid thing.

The stupid part? Well, there are these things called EVs and IVs.

When you encounter a Pokémon, whether it's through hatching a Pokémon egg, finding it in the Wild, or having it traded to you by an in-game NPC, the game uses stupid calculations to determine a number that affects each of the Pokémon's main stats: HP, Attack, Defence, Special Attack, Special Defence, and Speed. Six numbers in total, and they could be anywhere from one to thirty-one. Wait, could they also be zero? I have no idea. Anyway, those six numbers were your Pokémon's Individual Values, or IVs.

There is no way to look at, or edit, your Pokémon's IVs. If your Pokémon has crappy IVs, your Pokémon will always be crappier than another Pokémon with better IVs.

There are also EVs. Six numbers, for boosting your Pokémon's HP, Attack, Defence, Special Attack, Special Defence, and Speed. They start at zero, and your Pokémon can earn up to five hundred and ten EV points before being unable to get any more.

Vitamins and Wings can raise one of your Pokémon's EVs by 10, until it reaches 100, or 1, until it reaches 252, respectively. Different Vitamins, like Calcium and Zinc, and different Wings, like the Muscle Wing and Resist Wing, are programmed to raise different Stats when consumed by Pokémon. There are also certain Berries that increase your Pokémon's happiness, while reducing their assigned stat's EVs by 10, until they reach zero.

You can also raise a Pokémon's EV by 1, 2, or 3 points by having that Pokémon defeat an enemy Pokémon with a high statistic. If your Pokémon defeats an enemy Pokémon whose base Attack is its highest stat, you'll gain one IV. Or two, if its base Attack is pretty high. Or three, if its base Attack is very high. I'm pretty sure that's how that works, anyway.

A Pokémon can have up to 252 EVs in any one stat, and for every 4 EVs a Pokémon has in a certain stat, that stat is raised by 1 point. This means 63 is the maximum number of extra points your EVs can add to a certain stat. A Pokémon's stats and whatever adjustments the EVs should do to them are
Recalculated upon levelling up, so make sure you max out the EVs you want maxed out and distribute those points however you want before hitting level 99, so you can finish your EV training by hitting level 100.

You get Vitamins by buying them in a store in the game, and you get Berries by getting at least one and growing them in-game. These things aren't exactly cheap. I forgot how you got Wings.

There's also this place in Alola, the least fun region in the game, where some guy will use "Hyper Training" on your Pokémon in return for a Bottle Cap. This won't properly adjust your Pokémon's IVs, it'll just replace one IV of your choice with a perfect IV of 31 per bottle cap. And yes, getting a Bottle Cap isn't exactly quick and easy.

Anyway, at no point in the games are these systems ever properly explained to the player, so many players will have absolutely no idea about them or how they work.

Same goes for Natures. Your Pokémon can have one of many natures. Lonely, Brave, Adamant, Modest, and a few others. Five natures are Neutral, and the rest will slightly boost one stat at the cost of another. There is no way to change a Pokémon's Nature, which is generated randomly.

Personally, I think it would be better if there was some kind of facility in-game where you could directly alter your Pokémon's EVs and IVs, because you don't really want Attack IVs on a Special Attacker.

Because IVs are randomly generated and a pain to set to the maximum, and EVs require you to keep track of how many of a certain Pokémon you've beaten and keep track of numbers you can't even see without hacking your save file to check, a lot of people will pay ponies with the right programs and know-how to hack their Pokémon save file, getting Pokémon that would normally be locked behind "Special Events planned by the company that made Pokémon, Neightendo. These were usually massive tournaments where the winner got a certain level 100 Pokémon added to their save file for free, and all non-winners and audience members got a level 1 Pokémon added to their save file for free. Or one of those massive parties designed to celebrate the release of the most recent Pokémon movie, which existed to advertise the most recently-released Event Pokémon, which you could only have added to your game by a Neightendo employee at the party for the movie, or at certain selected major cinemas around Equestria that showed the movies.

For obvious reasons, there hasn't been a single Special Event planned by Neightendo since the Megaspells fell.

Which means that if you want to legitimately get certain "Legendary Pokémon", ultra-strong hard-to-find Pokémon considered too strong for regular friendly battles against peers unless your opponents were also using Legendary Pokémon, or Mythical Pokémon, exclusive Pokémon you can only get from certain Events, you were screwed.

Of course, if you didn't mind cheating in a manner that isn't really cheating at all, when you think about it, you could pay somepony to hack a Pokémon you can't normally get into your game. And if anypony asked, you could say it was a family heirloom one of your many-times-great grandparents got legitimately, before the Megaspells fell. Or that it was a family heirloom somepony else owned, before you won it as part of a wager you made on some match. Or that this method was how one of your parents legitimately obtained it, before trading it to you.

You could hack any Pokémon into the game, with any move, any ability, any level from 1-100, and any number of EVs and IVs. Sunrise just wished you could also hack a Pokémon's typing. That would be cool.
In any case, there were two schools of thought when it came to Pokémon hacking. The school of thought that said you should avoid triggering the game's hack-detection systems, avoid cheating, and avoid giving yourself an unfair advantage over your opponent, only using hacking to minimize the unfair advantage over you any opponent with more free time on his hooves and more time to catch and breed Pokémon in search of one with the perfect nature and IVs could get, and one that said FUCK SUBTLETY, because the game's hack detection doesn't trigger when battling against Pip-Bucks added to your Pip-Buck's friend list. Which means there ain't no reason to go all-in, balls-out, cock-out, flapping in the breeze or rock-hard, it doesn't even fucking matter!

In addition, the Vault only has laws against cheating against ponies above your class. Which, in effect, means the Vault only has laws against low-class ponies cheating in games against high-class ponies who lost and were willing to admit they lost, even if cheating did factor into the loss. After all, for every one honest rich pony who'd tell the truth on whether he or she thought cheating had happened, there would be a hundred more dishonest ones who'd throw the rich pony under the bus in any court of Vault law to try and minimize his or her number of rivals.

Green Star believed in the latter school of thought, which meant he wanted hacked Pokémon.

Bullshit, cheaty, obviously-hacked Pokémon.

And for the price of a fucktons of Silly Sugar he could trade away for guns and robotic scrap, Sunrise Stardust was ready to deliver.

"I'm ready," Sunrise Stardust said as he brought up his own Pip-Buck, moved over to the Misc tab, selected the Pokémon game(The Pip-Buck believed it was an item that Couldn't Be Dropped Or Traded, rather than a file, but that didn't really matter), and loaded the game up.

Low-quality eight-bit instruments played, and he couldn't tell what the instruments were, but it was like they were different instruments in an orchestra starting to play their bits, first apart, and then together.

*Doot doot doot, doot doot doot, *

**DIDDLY DOOT DOOT!**

*Doot doot doot doot, *

*Bom bom bom *

**BWAAM BAAM BAAM BAAAAAAM**

*Ba na na naaa! *

**DIDDLY DOOT-DOOT!**

*Ba na na naaa! Ba na na naaa! *

*Dananana,*

And then, the fucking trumpets. The only instrument in the game's MIDI soundfont the game developers felt like using proper Soundfont technology for, instead of "Traditional" eight-bit beeps, bleeps, boops, sine waves, square waves, and other shit.

*Pa-papa-da, pa, pa-papa-daaa!*
PA-PA-PAPAAAAAA!

Doot doot doot DOOT doot doot doot,

PAPA-PAPA-PA-PAAAAAA-AA!

Did-diddly deedly diddly diddly

BAAAAA, NA NA NA NAAAA NAAA NAAA NAAAA, PAAAA, BANANA NAAA!

Aaand that was enough of that. He tapped the touch-screen, it registered that as an emulated input, and the game skipped the rest of its intro and jumped to the title screen. Once upon a time, the Pip-Buck's emulator for old games had shown an L and R button on the left and right respectively, two face buttons on the right below that labelled A and B respectively, an eight-directional direction pad on the left below that, and two grey rectangles labelled Select and Start respectively below the A and B buttons. However, he'd gotten used to where the directional pad and buttons were, so he felt confident enough to turn off the visibility of the on-screen buttons, like all other adults who regularly played emulated formerly-for-PC-only Pip-Buck games like this one.

Pokémon's Title Screen just barely managed to get out the first BAAAAAA, BANANAAAAA, BANANAAAAA, BADADA DADADA DADA DOOT DADADA BWOOOOM BANAAAAAM, BAAAAAA NANANAAAAM-ing notes of the main title screen before Sunrise pressed A, going to the Main Menu, which was beautifully and artistically silent and simple. When you moved from one of the tasteful minimalist options to another, there would be a faint, slightly-echoing "Bling!", the same sound that would play if you selected an option.

From the top down, his current options were: The details of his current save file, a rectangle labelled New Game beneath it, and a rectangle labelled Options beneath that.

He selected his current save file, and the game truly began as he appeared in the bottom floor of Lilycove's Pokémon Center, a tiny 8-bit rendition of a red Unicorn with purple eyes and a fully-purple mane in an 8-bit rendition of Twilight Sparkle's manestyle, because the game's character customization system was still pretty lacking.

"Are you ready to trade?" Sunrise Stardust asked Green Star.

"Yeah, just let me run back…" He said, tapping his screen to make his character run, probably. Sunrise didn't exactly have a good view of the guy's screen from where he was standing.

He assumed that the guy was somewhere near a Pokémon Center, because he didn't simply use the Hidden Machine-granted move known as Fly to basically teleport back to the Pokémon Center in any town of his choice, provided it was one he'd already visited.

"Alright, I'm at the Pokémon Center," Green Star said.

"Right, let's do this," Sunrise said, walking his little red Unicorn left, towards the escalator stairs that activated when he stepped upon them, sliding him up. The screen faded to black, and the next room faded in as he went up the escalator on the left, and stepped off it.

That had always bugged him, to be honest, and he'd never told anypony about this, but… Fuck! You go into a Pokémon center, and you're presumably facing north. Then you walk left, to an escalator facing left, towards a wall. You walk onto the escalator, and it takes you left. You then appear on the next floor up, stepping off an escalator that's still on the left, but facing towards the right, just like the escalator! What the fuck was up with that? Did the in-game map's almost-top-down perspective change every time you went up a floor, or did that only happen on some floors?
"Wait!" The guy yelped out as if a gun was pointed at his balls, surprising Sunrise. "I still need to change out my team," The guy dazedly finished.


The pleasant tunes of the Pokémon Center music came from Sunrise's Pip-Boy, and he was glad Green Star didn't have his music on, or the two versions of the Pokémon Center music playing at different points in the melody would sound like shit.

The pleasant tunes helped him stay patient as Green Star (Presumably) slowly switched out the Pokémon in his team for some random crappy caught Pokémon he wouldn't mind never seeing again in return for getting the greatest hacked Pokémon team Sunrise could think of. Sunrise went up to the in-game clerk NPC that handled trades, talked to her, told her he wanted to trade, saved the game, and waited. And then he chose to Make A Trade Room.

"I'm ready," Green Star said.

"Great, get ready to join the room," Sunrise said as he waited.

"Wait, I just made the room." Green Star said.

"Then back out of it, talk to the mare again, and tell her you want to join a Trade Room."

"Okay."

After a few seconds of waiting, Green Star did so, Sunrise guessed, and finally, somepony joined his Trade Room, which meant he could see GreenStr - xXxGreenStarBlazeIt420XxX appear as one of the names in a box that could display up to four names at once. Sunrise selected that sequential Trainer and Pip-Buck name, and the trade menu appeared.

At the same time, on both screens, Sunrise's character and a green Unicorn with a green Rainbow Dash-ish mane and green eyes appeared, side by side. They appeared in a grey-floored room with greyish-blue walls and one big green screen on the wall at the top of the screen, furthest from the entrance on the bottom of the screen. A slightly vertically-stretched red octagon was painted on the center of the floor, around a machine that was like two armchairs, back to back, only mostly painted a pale plastic white. The right side had its center painted red, the left side had its center painted blue, and green screens could be seen on both machines.

Both Pip-Buck Screens were synchronized perfectly as they both made their way to their respective sides of the Trading Machine.

Sunrise always found this incredibly cool. Two Pokémon players, moving around on the same map! This setup would be perfect for a Wireless Multiplayer Mode that forced two or more Trainers to work together to beat different super-strong enemy Pokémon Trainers and try and make it to the end of whatever randomly-generated dungeon the game made up for the players! He knew it would be perfect, because he'd helped make that by working with 23 other programmers who'd honestly done the bulk of the work.

Finally, the Trade Screen appeared. On the left and right side of the screen, the Pokémon currently in either player's team could be seen. Sunrise had a very complicated and hard-to-describe team you'll see in more detail shortly, and Green Star had a team of six level one Eevees.

Sunrise guessed the guy must have been trying to 'Breed a Shiny'. If you leave two Pokémon of the same Egg Group alone in this one area called a Day Care and leave the building without them, they
would eventually mate (Offscreen, of course, but mods for the game exist to make this an on-screen affair) and produce an Egg. Unless one or both Pokémon were in the Undiscovered Egg Group, the group of Pokémon that cannot produce Eggs. This egg, when hatched, would produce a level 1 Pokémon of the mother's species, with any moves the father learned from TMs or HMs, plus a random selection of any Egg Moves from the father's species the baby Pokémon was programmed to be able to learn. Or, if you put a male or female Pokémon in with a Ditto, that Ditto would become an oppositely-sexed version of the Pokémon to breed with it and produce an Egg of that species.

Anyway, every time the game generates a Pokémon, whether it's a Pokémon currently in an egg, a Pokémon found in the wild, or a Pokémon generated by the game and given to you/traded to you by an NPC through some event flag programming bullshit he still, even now, understood about 80% of and couldn't decipher without a file full of notes to say what hexadecimal numbers and letters meant what in terms of what Pokémon or item was where, the game would calculate the Pokémon's individual Weight and Height, and whether that Pokémon was Shiny or not.

A specific Pokémon's Height and Weight could be up to 40% greater or smaller than the Pokémon species's default height and weight, which were always used exactly by the Pokémon of NPCs. No in-game Trainers would ever have Pokémon larger or smaller, or heavier or lighter, than the average instance of any given Pokémon would be. However, Wild Pokémon, in-game trades, hatched eggs, and so on could still result in unusually large, small, light, or heavy Pokémon, and the percentage multiplier a Pokémon started life with would stick with it through its Evolutions. Rumors said there was a way to breed larger Pokémon together with larger Pokémon while holding certain held items to ensure the resulting Pokémon egg would always hatch into a Pokémon at least as big as their parents or bigger, but they were bullshit, just like the identical rumours about ways to guarantee that a Pokémon's egg would hatch as small as their parents, or smaller.

A Pokémon's height and weight had no real effect on battle. They were purely cosmetic, and anypony who says the lightest Pokémon is more likely to move first in the event of a speed tie is lying to you. Speaking of which, when two Pokémon are equally fast, and either neither are using a Priority Move or they're both using moves with the same Priority, a Speed Tie happens, and which Pokémon moves first is selected randomly.

Moves like Low Kick, which do more damage on heavier Pokémon, calculated damage using the target Pokémon's Species's average weight, not the actual Pokémon's individual weight. The same would go for moves that did more damage against tall opponents, if such a move existed, because the game already had unused coding in the game for it.

As for Shininess… Every time the game generates a Pokémon not owned by an enemy NPC in-battle, there is a One in Eight Thousand, One Hundred and Ninety Two chance that the Pokémon will be "Shiny". This means that the Pokémon's Pallete will be different, changing the colours used to draw it. Bulbasuars become a pale shade of green instead of pale blue and their evolutions get yellow flowers instead of pink ones Charmanders become yellow and evolve into yellow Charmeleons, which evolve into black Charizards with the inner blue parts of their wings turned a dark wine-red, Squirtle become a slightly lighter shade of blue and evolve into a light purple Wartortle, which evolves into a light purple Blastoise, and so on.

Sunrise was quite proud of the shiny Treecko he'd gotten when he started his Pokémon adventure in Hoenn, but he was even more proud of his Shiny 7.34-feet-tall Gardevoir, one he'd caught as an unusually-tall and +23% Weight shiny Ralts long ago. Sure, he'd "Legally hacked" her to boost her straight to level 100 after getting tired of grinding EXP with her around the level 60ish mark, and to give her the EVs and IVs he wanted her to have, without giving her anything impossible and cheat-y such as moves or abilities she wasn't meant to have, but she was still a legitimate maximum-size Pokémon AND a legitimate Shiny Pokémon when he'd caught her.
Sometimes, he was surprised Stable-Tec Vigor Testers didn't burst into flames when he walked past them, because sometimes, he didn't just get lucky, he got stupid lucky.

Gardevoirs were tall, thin Pokémon with pale-green skin, green hair that curled around to form a frontal upper diagonal downwards-pointing hair spike and one lower forwards-pointing hair spike on each left and right side respectively, white dresses, and long and very thin arms. Two whisker-like spikes emerge from the left and right sides of their faces, four in total, as if their faces are face-plates mounted on the green hair. They have beautiful red eyes. A reddish-pink fin-like spike emerges from their chests, stretching from the top of where their breasts would begin if they had any down to the top of where their belly button begins. Which isn't visible, due to their dress starting around that area, below the spike. Their spike-fin-thing is sort of like a Guitar Pick with its point facing backwards. The insides of their dresses are green. Three long splits form from the bottoms of their white dresses, one on the left, one on the right, and one on the back. A longer frontal split rises up towards the crotch, but in such a way that suggests these Pokémon don't have legs, crotches, or hips, judging by how they look in-game and how their flowing dress covers them. But when you look at them in versions of Pokémon that support 3d models, and you turn the camera around, you can see that they do indeed have hips, crotches, and legs. Incredibly thin, dainty white hips and shockingly thin stick-like white legs that end in rounded points. But judging from how the sticks bend in two during animations, it can be deduced that Gardevoirs have knees and feet, they just walk around on pointed toes like their pre-evolution, Kirlia.

Oh, and from the armpits of the Gardevoir down, there are rounded segments of visible green skin, like stretched ovals of fabric are missing from the dress. They stretch down to the thinnest point of the hips, before a curved section stretches around her belly to meet each other. And their necks are shockingly pencil-thin.

A Shiny Gardevoir? The exact same thing, except instead of pale green arms, and hair, and a pale green dress interior, that colour has been changed to a slightly more saturated, but still pale, blue.

But when they Mega Evolve, the differences between them become a bit more prominent.

A Mega Gardevoir's body doesn't change in size, but it turns almost completely white, and its hair is the only part of it that remains green. Its beautiful red eyes remain the same, and its dress gets longer, wider, and bigger. The frontal seam vanishes, and the dress gains seven equally long seams in total. The dress starts to puff outwards, like a bell. It's as if some sort of stretched-semi-spherical crinoline is keeping the dress in that shape, but her legs remain as thin and dainty as ever. The whisker-like facial spikes on the sides of its head grow larger and begin to curl upwards. Its hair is slightly shorter and its rear spiked curls curl a bit tighter, around its facial spikes. Finally, the frontal part of the spike-like pinkish-red fin opens up, extending to the sides like a pair of scalene triangles, only rounder, almost like butterfly wings, but just the top bits of them.

A Shiny Mega Gardevoir? The same thing, except the green hair is as blue as the regular Gardevoir hair, and the white dress turns black, like the kind of dress you wear at funerals.

Green Star finally decided on one of his Eevees to select, and Sunrise selected the first of the six hacked Pokémon he was going to give away today. He had with him a team of six Pokémon, each with a maxed-out 252 in every EV and a maxed-out 31 in all IVs.

First and foremost, there was the first one to be given away, a Pokémon he'd ripped off after it was used to almost beat him in a match where some rich bastard cheated, the star of the show…

A Chansey. A Normal type Pokémon. A stupid little pink thing with an egg-like body and tiny, stubby limbs. What made this useless little piece of crap useful? She had quite a bit of HP, even though her stats were terrible, and she could hold an Eviolite, an item that doubled your defences if it
was held by a Pokémon that could evolve, but had not yet evolved. This doubled its defences, and its ability had been hacked, to change it over to Impostor. Impostor was usually an ability only seen on Dittos, little blobs of pink slime, as it forced the user to instantly transform into the opposing Pokémon. Normally, a Ditto would have to survive one turn against that opposing Pokémon, use its chosen move last because it was slow and shitty, and use its only move: Transform, which turns the user into a copy of the opponent, granting the user all of the opponent's moves all of the opponent's base stats, aside from the user's max HP. Of course, a Ditto would usually just become a weaker version of whatever it turned into. But a Chansey with Impostor? It would turn into a better version of whatever it was up against, as soon as it was sent out. It would have more HP than pretty much anything it was likely to turn into, and it would have double the defences of the opponent.

Transform and Impostor also copied any stat-boosts the opponent currently had, so it made for a great ace up your sleeve to pull out against a "Setup Sweeper", an enemy Pokémon using the classic tactic of "Raise my stats, and then KO as many Pokémon as possible with them".

There was a variant of this strategy that used Pikachu, the "Light Ball" items a Pikachu could carry to double its offensive stats, but Sunrise considered it inferior to the Chansey.

The only downside of this strategy? You can't use Transform on a Pokémon behind a Substitute, a Pokémon that had already used Transform, and a Pokémon currently using the ability Illusion to seem like the Pokémon in the back of your Pokémon team.

Some might say moves don't matter on a Pokémon with Impostor, as they'll only get replaced anyway, but Sunrise disagreed. The Chansey's moves were Whirlwind to get rid of whatever it couldn't transform into, Parting Shot to escape when Whirlwind isn't an option, Fake Out to stun whatever it fought for a turn if it couldn't transform into anything, and Final Gambit to kill itself and make the opposing Pokémon lose HP equal to how much HP Chansey lost when it killed itself.

Then, there was something far more visually intimidating.

Mega Rayquaza. Yes, some idiot at Neighendo decided that Mega Evolution, the thing designed to be given to popular but weak Pokémon to help them compete with the best Pokémon, should be a thing the mighty Legendary Pokémon known as Rayquaza can do.

And because the Rayquaza is hacked to always be in its Mega state, it could hold other held items, in addition to having impossible abilities and moves.

Mega Rayquaza with 252 EVs in all stats, including Speed and Special Attack, plus the 50% Special Attack bonus from holding Choice Specs, using Draco Meteor…

Plus the +2 Stat Boost Stages you would get after each time you used Draco Meteor, due to having Contrary, an ability that turned all positive stat adjustments into negative stat adjustments and turned all negative stat adjustments into positive stat adjustments…

Well, it was going to fuck somepony up.

Also, it was faster than Base Gengar, but not Mega Gengar. Which meant if your opponent was one of those filthy, disgusting cheaters who loved sending out a Gengar with the ability Normalize, using Skill Swap or Entrainment to give your Pokémon the ability Normalize, and then Mega Evolve into Mega Gengar, who'd always have his ability replaced with Shadow Tag, which prevents you from switching out – and this was an infuriating strategy because Normalize turns all of your moves into Normal-Type Moves and Normal moves have no effect at all on Ghost type Pokémon, meaning you're stuck using a Pokémon that can't hurt your opponent unless you planned ahead and predicted this situation while hacking your Pokémon into existence – Your Mega Rayquaza could out-speed
an opposing Normal Gengar and likely kill it in one hit before it could Mega Evolve or give you Normalize and pull this bullshit.

Mega Rayquaza's other moves? Overheat, V-Create, and Core Enforcer.

Draco Meteor has 130 base power, 90 accuracy points, and a negative effect: Your Special Attack stat is reduced by 2 stages after using it.

Overheat has 130 base power, 90 accuracy points, and a negative effect: Your Special Attack stat is reduced by 2 stages after using it.

V-Create has 180 base power, 95 accuracy points, and a negative effect: Your Defence, Special Defence, and Speed stats are reduced by 1 stage after using it.

Core Enforcer has 130 base power, 100 accuracy points, and a unique effect: If this attack is used on a Pokémon that has already used at least one of their moves in the turn it's hit with this move, that Pokémon's ability is Surpressed, negated, for as long as that Pokémon remains in battle.

Then, there was a Mega Gengar. After all, the game only lets you Mega Evolve one Pokémon per match, but it doesn't have anything in place to stop you from using multiple Pokémon edited to permanently remain in their Mega forms!

Held item? Choice Scarf, for the 50% speed boost, which made its speed stat higher than most Pokémon in the game, even when hacking entered the picture. EVs? 252 all around. IVs? 31 all around. Ability? Adaptability, which takes your STAB, your Same Type Attack Bonus, and turns it from a 1.5x multiplier to a 2x multiplier.

Its moves? Moongeist Beam, a Ghost-type attack. It hits hard with a base 100 power, a base 100 accuracy, and the added effect of IGNORING YOUR OPPONENT'S ABILITY COMPLETELY, which is a useful trick against gimmicky Pokémon like Shedinja. Normally, Shedinja have just 1HP and the ability Wonder Guard, which makes the Shedinja invincible to all attacks upon it that are not Super Effective or better. This move can beat those Shedinjas. It can even beat a Shedinja hacked to have Sturdy, an ability that makes the Pokémon immune to One-Hit KO Moves, and ensures the Pokémon will always survive with at least 1HP if it would be knocked out in one hit. Of course, Shedinja only has 1HP, so instead of simply granting you an extra turn alive like Sturdy does for most Pokémon designed to get Sturdy, Sturdy makes Shedinja normally immune to literally everything, ever. Well, except for weather damage, Stealth Rocks/Spikes damage, Toxic Spikes poison, damage taken from Status Effects like Burns and Poisoning, and a few other tricks. And moves like Moongeist Beam, which ignore abilities.

Secondly, there was Volt Switch, an Electric-type move with 70 Power and 100% Accuracy. Sure, 100% accuracy was a bit of a misnomer for Pokémon, since even supposedly 100% Accurate moves could miss, and only moves like Aerial Ace, which were specifically programmed to never miss, wouldn't have a chance of missing. Anyway, Pokémon moves that say they have less than 100% Accuracy, such as 90% or 70%, have an even bigger chance of missing. Sunrise preferred to think of the Accuracy Number as how many Accuracy Points the move had. Anyway, Volt Switch dealt electric-type damage to the opponent, and it would switch the user's Pokémon with a Pokémon of the user's trainer's choice afterwards, and that different Pokémon would be sent in to get hit by whatever move the Opponent had chosen, if Volt Switch went first. If Volt Switch went last, it would switch the user's Pokémon with a Pokémon of the user's trainer's choice after

Thirdly, there was Sludge Wave, a Poison move with 95 base power and 100 Accuracy points. Not as strong as Moongeist Beam? Sure, but it hits all Pokémon in Double Battles, where the two Trainers send out two Pokémon at a time, all adjacent Pokémon in Triple Battles, where the two
trainers send out Three Pokémon at a time, and it has a 10% chance to poison the opponent.

Finally, there was Simple Beam, because fuck anyone with a gimmicky ability that deserved to be Simple instead. Simple doubles the effectiveness of positive and negative stat boosts on the holder of this ability, which makes it perfect for ruining the day of any Pokémon with Contrary and a set of moves designed to rely on it and work better for having it.

The third Pokémon? Deoxys-S, the Psychic-Type Pokémon known as Deoxys, in its Speed Forme. Forme is what Pokémon's idiot creator thought was the fancy way of spelling Form. Anyway, Deoxys-S with Safety Goggles for a Held Item, the ability Mold Breaker, and four moves. Light Screen, Reflect, Sticky Web, and Spore.

Spore to put whatever your opponent sends in to sleep. The ability Mold Breaker lets you ignore things like the ability Vital Spirit making Pokémon unable to be put to sleep, the ability Magic Bounce forcing all gimmicky bullshit stat-affecting and status-granting moves to affect the opponent instead of the user when the user is targeted, and a few other things, which means a Deoxys-S with Spore is the ultimate cheap piece of shit to rub in your opponent's face if you're the type of bastard who deserves to be tortured to death on live TV. Seriously, fuck Deoxys-S with Spore and Mold Breaker. The Pokémon's other moves include Sticky Web, to apply an Entry Hazard to your opponent's side of the battlefield that reduces the Speed of all incoming enemy Pokémon by one stage, Light Screen, to half the damage your team takes from Special moves for five turns, and Reflect, which halves the damage your team takes from Physical moves for five turns.

The fourth Pokémon? Well, there's this Pokémon called Wishiwashi. It's a Water type Pokémon, and it's shit. But its ability, Schooling, activates at the start of the battle and at the end of every turn where its HP is above 25% of its max HP, as long as its level is also above 20. This changes its forme from its mediocre initial "Solo Form" to its much cooler and far stronger School Form, which means it goes from one tiny little fish to a massive fish made out of tiny fishes! Pretty cool, eh?

It has a downside, however. If the Pokémon is in School Form, it checks if its HP has fallen below 25% at the end of every turn, and if it has, it changes Wishiwashi back to its shitty Solo Forme unless you heal it.

Other Pokémon can't get this ability normally, and if you hack it onto them, nothing happens to it.

However, if you hack a Wishiwashi to be in its massive School Form already, and then you take away its ability, it stays in that form permanently. Or until you edit the ability back onto it or hack it to change it back, I suppose. Anyway! Moving on! Guess what ability is best on a Wishiwashi. No, not Wonder Guard, even though I'm well aware of that one strategy where you use Soak on a Shedinja to change it from a Ghost and Bug type to a pure Water type, reducing its number of weaknesses (And the number of types it can be hit with) to just two: Grass and Electric.

You give the Wishiwashi Water Bubble, the ability of Araquanid. This is a Bug and Water Pokémon, and its ability reduces the damage it takes from Fire-type moves by 50%, prevents the user from getting a burn, and DOUBLES THE BASE POWER OF WATER TYPE MOVES USED BY ARAQUANID.

You give the Wishiwashi Water Bubble, and this big blue behemoth with 600 BST spread in the form of fourty five base HP, ONE HUNDRED AND FOURTY base Attack, one hundred and thirty base Defence, ONE HUNDRED AND FUCKING FOURTY BASE SPECIAL ATTACK, one hundred and thirty five base special defence, and 30 speed. Which, notably, is 10 points lower than the otherwise-shit Wishiwashi's 40 speed stat.
Anyway, fuck its speed stat, you don't need speed when you're slapping your opponent in the face with a thousand fish cocks at once hard enough to kill him.

And then you give this rapefish swarm a Life Orb, for even more damage.

The moves of this storm of fish penis? Water Shuriken, Bouncy Bubble, Water Spout, and Oceanic Operetta. Each of these four attacks are Water type moves, which means Water Bubble will double their power.

Water Shuriken has +1 Priority, meaning it'll ignore the opponent's speed and go first unless another Pokémon is using a move with +2 or more Priority. It has 15 base power and 100 accuracy points, and it'll hit the opponent between two and five times in a row whenever it's used. There is a 33.3% chance that it will hit only 2 times, a 33.3% chance it will hit 3 times, a 16.7% chance it will hit 4 times, and a 16.7% chance it will hit 5 times. Provided that the move does not miss, it will hit 3.167 times on average, giving the move an average power of 47.5. Each strike made has an equal chance to be a Critical Hit, too.

Of course, that's the average power the move has BEFORE Water Bubble doubles its power.

Bouncy Bubble has 90 base power, 100 accuracy, and it heals the user's HP equal to 50% of the damage this move deals every time it's used. The only Water type HP-Draining move, and my Wishiwashi has it. Or rather, what would soon be Green Star's Wishiwashi had it.

Oceanic Operetta, a Water type move with – for its Accuracy, 1PP, and 195 base power. Normally, only a Primarina holding a Primarium Z could use it, and only if the Trainer activated that Primarium Z with the Trainer's own Z-Ring, which the trainer had to have, to upgrade Sparkling Aria, which the Primarina had to know, into Oceanic Operatta. Z-Moves can only be used once per battle, and it doesn't matter whether you're using a specific Signature Z-Move like this one or a more general Z-Move like Fightinium Z, which would upgrade any chosen Fighting-type damage-dealing move into All-Out Pummelling, or add a bonus effect to any chosen fighting-type status move to a Z-Status move. The power of those general "Typed Z-Moves", such as All-Out Pummelling and Tectonic Rage, and whether those moves become Physical or Special moves, depends on the move upgraded for one use per battle by the typed Z-Crystal the Pokémon had to hold.

When you hacked a general typed Z-Move directly onto a Pokémon… Well, I don't know what would happen if you did that, because I've never tried it. But if you hacked a Signature Z-Move directly into a Pokémon's four moves, you'd end up with that move in your Pokémon's movepool without needing to give your Pokémon a Z-Crystal to hold, or needing to use up your one Z-Move per battle, or anything! The move would only have 1PP, sure, which means you would only be able to use it once, but still, a 195 water move that will always hit isn't exactly bad. Plus, if your Pokémon held a Leppa Berry, your Pokémon could eat that berry after using that move to restore 10PP, Power Points, to all of its moves.

PP or "Power Points" is this system in the game that usually doesn't matter. All moves have PP, and using the move once uses up 1PP. Or two, if the opposing Pokémon has the ability Pressure. When your move runs out of PP, you can't use it any more until you restore that PP with an item, or by going to a Pokémon Center. You can't do either of those things during battle, so a move without PP is useless. When all of your moves run out of PP, your Pokémon is forced to use a normally-inaccessible move called Struggle. It deals ?-Type Damage, which hits everything neutrally and takes 25% of the user's max health away as Recoil Damage.

Its fourth and final move is Water Spout. Water Spout has 100 accuracy points and a base power somewhere between 1 and 150 depending on how much of the user's health has been lost. The higher the user's current percentage of health is, the higher the Base Power of this move will be. At
100% health, the move's base power will be 150.

And then there's Buzzwole. A hideously exaggerated artist's rendition of what the mythical "Human Male" supposedly once looked like, only now, it seemed less like a tribute to the anthropomorphic form and more of a parody of it. Its torso seems humanoid enough, albeit crimson and with fists clad in markings that resemble white fingerless gloves, a yellowing gradient on the inner sides of its pectorals, a spike on each elbow, and two spikes on the top of each shoulder, the inner spike taller than the outer spike. Its head is like a small semicircle with two antennae and one long sword-like mosquito spike thing for drinking your blood. Two translucent orange wings are on either side of its back, and it has four pairs of legs that end in spikes instead of hooves or feet. At some point when looking over this hideous abomination, you notice that muscles seem more like bulging blobs filled with blood, and when it drinks your blood, that's why its muscles get bigger.


Horn Leech, a Grass type move with 75 base power, 100 accuracy points, and the effect of healing the user for half of the damage dealt.

Drain Punch, a Fighting type move with 75 base power, 100 accuracy points, and the effect of healing the user for half of the damage dealt.

Leech Life, a Bug type move with 80 base power, 100 accuracy points, and the effect of healing the user for half of the damage dealt.

Why the theme for three of these moves? Because Triage is an ability that gives +3 Priority to all "Healing Moves". The game wanted this ability to go to Pokémon that would use Healing Wave on teammates, but moves that restore the user's health equal to half the damage dealt count as healing moves! This means you get to out-speed moves with +1 Priority like Water Shuriken, and moves like Quick Attack and Extremespeed with +2 Priority! Brilliant, eh?

The fourth move is the reason why Buzzwole holds a Scope Lens. The Scope Lens adds +1 stage to the user's Critical Hit Ratio, which gives all of your moves a one in eight chance to become a Critical Hit.

The fourth move, Focus Energy, adds +2 stages to the user's Critical Hit Ratio. Normally, this would give you a 1 in 2 (also known as a 50%) chance to score a Critical Hit. However, two plus one is three (There's some quick maths for you!) and a +3 Critical Hit Modifier results in every move having a 100% chance to be a Critical Hit!

An attack that becomes a Critical Hit deals 2x the damage the attack would normally deal, and it ignores all defence-boosting effects the opponent might be using, such as a +2 stat boost to defense, the damage-halving effects of Light Screen and Barrier, and the damage-lowering effect of any penalties to Attack or Special Attack you might have when you score a Critical Hit. The halved attack effect you get from being Burned is also ignored, and any positive stat boosts to Attack or Special Attack you have are not ignored.

With this setup, you can either roll the dice and attack right away with your +3 priority physical attack moves that heal you and have a 50% chance to crit, or you can use Focus Energy first for some guaranteed high-impact critical violence.

You've got a Chansey, you've got a Mega Gengar, you've got a Mega Rayquaza, you've got a Wishiwashi, you've got a Buzzwole, and finally, there was a Mega Mewtwo, and finally, there was a Kyurem-White, a Dragon and Ice type Pokémon.
Kyurem-White looks like what comes out of an Egg after a white swan fucks a grey dragon, and then covers its right arm from the elbow down in ice armour, gives long ice claws to that armour, forms a shoulderless and sleeveless jacket of ice around the chest, forms tiny pieces of armour on the thighs out of ice, and forms a longer and sharper upwards-swirling hooked claw on the central second toe of its three-toed feet. Its tail is like a fancy golden chalice with four decorative blades running along its sides, but the chalice is grey, two white circles run around its perimeter, equidistant from one another and near the rim, and the chalice just keeps the wildly-jagged white fur of Kyurem-White's tail back.

But this isn't just any Kyurem-White. This is a Kyurem-White with Choice Specs for a Held Item and Refrigerate for an ability, and Refrigerate is ability that turns Normal type moves into Ice type moves and multiplies their power by 1.2x.

Boomburst is a normal type attack, it has 140 base power, which is boosted to 168 by Refrigerate, 100 accuracy points, and no special effects. Actually, I think this one can hit Pokémon hiding behind a Substitute, but I'm not sure. Substitute is this one move that sacrifices 25% of the user's maximum health and puts a Substitute in front of the user with that much health, making the user immune to status effects and other gimmicky stuff until you deplete the Substitute's HP, destroying it and letting you attack the Substitute user next turn. Coming off a base 170 Special Attack stat, before the effects of 252 EVs in everything, being at the maximum level of 100 like all other Pokémon in this team, and the effects of the held item, the held Choice Specs.

Fusion Flare is a Fire type attack, it has 100 base power, 100 accuracy points, and an effect that raises its base power to 200 if Fusion Bolt was used just before this move was used.

Moongeist Beam is there to ruin the day of Shedinja, especially Sturdy Shedinja, even though a Moongeist Beam user was already in the party. Like I said before, 100 base power.

And finally, the Kyurem-Black's final move was Switcheroo, which is there to trade the user's Choice Specs for whatever the opponent's Pokémon is carrying. A handy trick to use on stat-boosters, as the effects of holding Choice Specs don't go away when switching out, and all that's lost is whatever the game does to remember the move Choice Specs is supposed to lock the user into. Switcheroo is basically identical to the move known as Trick in every way that matters, Sunrise just liked this move's name more. And it had more PP. At least, he was pretty sure it had more PP.

Each of these six Pokémon, Sunrise Stardust sent to Green Star, getting back a crappy level 1 Eevee each time.

And when all six amazing hacked Pokémon had been given over to the druggie, and Sunrise's own team was full of level one Eevees, Sunrise left the Trade Menu, left the Trading Room, and left the Pokémon Center altogether for the hell of it before saving his game and closing it down.

"Alright, six hacked Pokémon, good to go!" Sunrise cheerfully exclaimed with a grin.

"Holy shit..." Green Star said in stunned awe more suited to some young colt as he presumably went through the Status Menu for each Pokémon, checking them out. "All of these Pokémon look great, but why the Chansey? Their stats suck."

Sunrise talked like he was trying to sell him something, even though he'd already sold it. "Out of all Pokémon that are not fully evolved, Chanseys have the highest max HP stat in the game, and the second highest HP of all Pokémon overall. Base 250. Evolving to Blissey just gives her Base 255 HP, which doesn't matter much. Not being fully-evolved means she can hold an Eviolite, get the boost to her Defense and Special Defense, and keep it and her great HP when the ability I gave her, Impostor, activates as soon as she's sent out. Impostor instantly turns Chansey into whatever you
send it out against, Ditto-style, and her high HP, combined with her Eviolite defense and Spuh'Deff boost, means she becomes a tougher and healthier version of whatever she's sent out against, before any moves can hit her."

"Nice!" Green Star grinned.

"And if the opponent has any stat boosts going on, she copies them," Sunrise boasted. "So you're going to send the Silly Sugar where it needs to go, right? Over to the Lucky Penny mafia family?"

"Yeah, I know. And don't worry about me bailing on you. I remember what you did to the last guy who fucked with you."

Sunrise grinned cheerfully, even though he wasn't really a fan of violence at all. The act weighed heavy on his heart, and even when the violence was righteous, necessary, and just, he would still wish there could be another way for a day or two, then he'd get over it. Mostly. Only when Green Star looked back to his game did Sunrise stop grinning.

"Have you also got those Med-Xes, PuriFires, Stimpaks, Firestormers, Menterrors, Party-Time Mint-Als, Brain Refrains, Buffouts, Ghost Jumpers, Shitstorms, and Zoom Booms I ordered?"

"Sure. I hid them somewhere, but your Alicorn Princess courier can have them."

She wasn't a fucking… Ah, forget it, Sunrise decided. He supposed, when there was no official, real Equestrian monarchy or diarchy in place, anypony who looked like a Princess or called themselves a princess of something, somewhere could count as a princess. After all, with no official Princesses out there, what makes one unofficial Princess more official than another one?

Sunrise turned around, and got ready to leave. "Well, it was nice seeing you again. Take care."

And then, Sunrise felt lucky, so he started to move slower.

"Hey, wait. Want some Mysdick?"

"Some what?" Sunrise asked, stopping and turning around.

"Me and the boys invented a new drug called Mysdick. Like Mystic, but dick. Pills that make your magic stronger, and lets Unicorns channel magic through their dicks and cast spells with them!"

"Bullshit," Sunrise smirked.

"No bull, this is legit. I'd take it myself and show you, but it just gives other types of ponies massive boners for a few hours. Magic Smoke says it makes sex feel better for Unicorns, too, but he says that about everything."

"Huh," Sunrise said, deciding to seem like he was thinking of something besides wondering if he had ever, in his life, encountered a Unicorn actually named Magic Smoke. Nope, he decided, he didn't remember that pony at all. Come to think of it, he supposed it would make sense for a dick to feel better when it had magic running through it. After all, a Unicorn's horn only became the hypersensitive magical mayonnaise dispenser it was when a Unicorn had his or her magic running through it. Though that raised the question of why Earth Pony mares and stallions could outlast Unicorns and Pegas in the bedroom. "Alright, I'll take some."

"Nice," Green Star grinned and pointed at a drawer in his chest of drawers. "Third shelf down, little purple tablets with tiny Ms on them. Take one and let the magic flow through you. But I'm still testing this shit, so don't go overboard. And tell me how it works for you! You've got fire and the sun
on your ass, Magic Smoke has a lit blunt on his ass, so fuck knows how that messes with things. I
need more scientific testing. On the drugs."

"Fair enough. So I should just take one?" Sunrise asked.

"Yeah, it's strong stuff. I don't know if you'd make your dick explode if you took more, or whatever... But you like magic drugs, and my other clients like sex drugs, so I made something for both of you."

"Huh. So do you want me to take one and eat it when I need it, or take a couple so I can test it for you better?"

He thought for a moment. "Sure, take ninety. One for every day of the week."

"Nice!" Sunrise grinned, deciding that he'd only swallow one when he was in a controlled and sterile medical environment, and only after he'd gotten the chance to magically analyse these things and find out if they were safe for anypony to consume. Sure, he'd once survived having a drink spiked with some really bad homemade Party-Time Mint-Als once during some rich-pony party, even though his doctor was certain the dose and improper ingredient ratios should have resulted in a lethal poison, but he didn't want to risk taking a potentially bad drug that advertised its own genitalia-based effects. His dick had to repopulate Equestria with strong, smart, healthy Ponies once his whole Vault moved out and into the greater world, after all!

Sunrise moved over to his chest of drawers, opened the one he was told to open, and took the ninety pills he'd been told to take from the pile of a few hundred similarly-looking pills. He was glad the many other piles of pills in this room were different colours, and had different letters or symbols on them.

He probably could have taken some of those other pills, too, but... Nah. He wasn't a thief. Not when it came to ponies he liked, anyway.

And then, Sunrise felt lucky again. He waited for a few seconds, but nothing happened.

"What are the other pills?" Sunrise asked.

"Huh?" Green Star was confused for a moment, as he looked away from his Pip-Buck to stare off into space. Ten seconds later, he remembered something, and looked back to his Pip-Buck. "Are they blue and green?"

"No, there are some blue pills here with an M on them, and some red pills with a H on them."

He grinned. "Yeah, I know. I was just testing you. Those are HP-Ms and MP-Ms. I brewed super-strong health potion and mana potions into some pills!"

"Nice!" Sunrise grinned.

"Yeah, take fifty of each," Green Star decided.

"Thank you," Sunrise said, and he began taking pill after pill, storing them in his Pip-Buck.

And only when he was done taking all those pills from their creator did he feel lucky again, which surprised Sunrise. Holy shit, what was his luck doing today? Did he eat something different recently? Was he on some weird pill cocktail? Was something new put into his wife's perfume? He didn't feel like any drugs were currently affecting him. It had to be something, because this luck spike felt seriously strong. Fate wasn't just smiling at him right now, it felt like she was turning around, lifting
her tail, and presenting herself to him.

What could it be? How would the universe arrange an insanely unlikely coincidence to benefit him today?

"By the way, sunrise?" Green Star called out without looking up from his Pokémon game. "A friend of mine OD'd here and died yesterday, his stuff is in the second shelf up. He would have wanted you to have it."

"Really?" Sunrise asked, confused. Did he even know any of this pony's friends?

"No, but fuck it, you like having stuff. And I don't want it. So here you go. Take the shit. Quickly."

"Thank you!" Sunrise cheerfully and gratefully said with a warmed heart and a small, genuine smile as he closed that drawer and opened the recently-mentioned one, looked inside, and…

Oh.

Never had he felt so many "FUCK YEAH!"s and "WHAT THE FUCK?"s at the same time.

"There's a lot of stuff here," Sunrise's confused voice wasn't sure what to say.

"Everything in there is yours now. Take it, keep it, take it out of here and bin it, I don't care, just get it out of my room."

"Alright," Sunrise decided, and he began to take the objects in the drawer.

Two black-painted ten millimetre handguns with long scopes, extended magazines, silencers, and bladed bayonets with chunks cut out of the pointy end. Instead of ending in one long point, the shape of a five-pointed pot leaf had been cut into the tips of each blade, forming the shape through Negative Space. A weed leaf had been painted on both sides of both guns, and the long-slide upper mechanisms were painted grey, with orange and red flecks painted at the frontal end of the long-slide mechanism to make it look like they had been painted up to resemble a lit blunt.

A compact and high-capacity Heckler & Kek G7KA8 assault rifle chambered in 7.62mmx51mm rounds, with a shorter barrel, collapsible stock, and extended magazine. And a scope, just for the hell of it. The whole thing had been painted black, and at least 320 7.62mm rounds had to be here, in extended magazines next to the main gun.

Five messy, squished-up black linen T-shirts with green linen patterns sewn onto the chest of each one, in the shape of a five-pointed weed leaf.

Four plastic lunchboxes containing twenty cereal bars each, and a fifth that was almost empty. In total, they contained seventy-seven cereal bars made with oats, rasins, and… Kelp? How the fuck did he get Kelp down here?

And then, he set his sights on three things that really caught his eyes.

Three tiny toy ponies on tiny statue bases that seemed like gold coins with slightly rounded edges. A lowered circle had been carved into the bases, though an untouched wide vertical strip and a thinner horizontal strip went through the circle and met almost right in the circle's center, but the intersection had been pushed a bit to the front and right of the toy pony on the base. The bases were identical, but the toys were different, and they caught his eyes with just how shockingly well-made they were. What were those things made of, painted ceramic, or painted steel? Had a machine, a Unicorn's magic, or a chisel and hammer made these things? They were almost mesmerizing in their perfection.
One was of a . One, he recognized right away. Orange body, brown hat, blonde hair tied up in the back with a red band, green eyes… That was Applejack, one of the Ministry Ponies, no doubt about it. And thirdly… Well, he wasn't sure.

In any case, after picking each one up, he felt a little… different. After picking up the first, . After picking up the second, some tiny uncomfortable-ness in his back, between his upper shoulderblades, just teetering on the edge of officially counting as pain, went away.

And then, there was what was, to some, or perhaps even many, the most questionable thing in this drawer.

A fucking long and fucking thick and utterly fucking massive sky-blue rubbery (Though he had no idea what it was really made of) pony penis dildo with an abnormally large pair of pony balls in a saggy and slightly-wrinkled and finely-sculpted pony nutsack on one end, and the nutsack ended in a wide base. That base ended in an unusually wide injector, the things typically seen on hypodermic needles, and he assumed the thing was full of either real semen or fake goop that felt like semen. Perhaps it was even one of those fancy dildos that had a Semen Talisman stored in the balls.

But most of all, this dildo… it was way too huge. Hell, it easily looked big enough for an actual Stallion's decently-sized or even somewhat large penis to be thrusted into the thing's urethra, fucking it like a…

He looked at the end where the cock’s flared tip and urethra should be, and… What the fuck? Instead of a cock-hole, it was tipped with a very realistic sculpture of a mare's almost-completely-closed love tunnel, and above it, a realistic sculpture of a mare's puffy and pouty wrinkled anus. His horn lit up and he nervously pushed the fake marehoof’s lips aside, only to see that its internals were sculpted entirely like the inside of a marehood, only made from whatever the fuck sex toys were made of instead of real flesh.

He stared at the thing in confused horror.

What the fuck… Was this thing some centuries-old pre-war heirloom? Or was it something that had been made recently?

"Yeah," Green Star grinned audibly, and Sunrise looked over to see the druggie looking right at him and grinning. "I knew you'd like that."

Well, Sunrise wasn't about to look a gift horse in the asshole. Marehood, perhaps, but not the asshole. "Thank you," He said, and decided to take the cock… vagina… dildo… marehood on a stick… thing. The fuckstick. He decided to take the Fuckstick, and store it in his Pip-Buck.

His Pip-Buck changed the name of the unknown sex toy to The Fuckstick, and decided to store the thing under the weapons tab, and class it as a melee weapon.

Sunrise chuckled. Well, if he ever decided to strike an opponent with this, it would certainly damage more than the enemy's limbs, head, or torso.

Well, he was done here. He'd traded away what he came to trade away, and he still had a copy of the hacked Pokémon he'd given this guy, so he didn't really give up anything, besides the time it took him to make these hacked Pokémon and fine-tune them after a series of battles in the "Hacked Pokémon are legal here" bar of the Tech-Sec, the Glitchy Ghost. He'd even gotten some nice extra shit.

Still, something welled up inside him. It was almost like a craving, but no, he'd craved things before.
It felt like something in him was negotiating with something else inside him. Something about being around so many drugs reminded him that he, or any of his other spellcasters, might get addicted to Party-Time Mint-Als, or even regular Mint-Als, which were a lot easier to produce, but still, the more he had of them, the better.

He needed more.

But he didn't want to ruin what he'd have, so he'd phrase it simply.

"How much for five hundred more packs of Party-Time Mint-Als?"

"That'll cost a fuckton, they're selling big lately, a lot of rich ponies have gotten addicted to them, they're taking them regular so their symptoms don't give them away, and I've given you most of my stock anyway. You've got a big army and everypony's got something to give, but I don't want any more hacked Pokémon, all your scrap is going to your robot-maker guys, and you're hoarding all your food and water. So… sorry, but I don't think you have anything I'm interested in."

"I'll let you listen to part of an in-progress upcoming song I won't release for six months," Sunrise offered with a tempting smirk.

"That's something I'm interested in," Green Star admitted, putting his Pip-Buck down, sitting up in his bed, and twitching his cock out of the funnel he'd put it in, so that it would start to slowly 'Deflate' further and shrink back into its furred sheathe.

Sunrise flipped his Pip-Buck screen on over to the Misc tab, and over to the Audio sub-tab, where he had fragments of audio stored. Scrolling down to the audio files with names that started with U, followed by a space, and proceeded to display descriptions of what the audio files were, he found his track. Between "U GuitarLoudRiff21" and "U GuitarWawaToScreamRise 1", there was "U Guitartest76IsMGS", which he selected.

This might have been an in-progress track, but it certainly didn't sound like it. It started with a high bass guitar note going down with a weeeeeew, and then it rapidly shredded some low notes with a Bananannananana, nana, Bananannananana, nana, Bananannananana, nana, and then a louder BAAA NA NA NAAAA NAAA!

Everything came in with a mighty crash as the drummer fucking attacked his cymbals, and the lead electric guitar, and the second lead electric guitar, and the "Diddly diddly diddly diddly" arpeggio electric guitar, and the rapid notes of a fugue played on a pipe organ, a constant pounding timpani beat, and the long notes of a low male choir wailing coming from the same septuple-deckered electric keyboard, and an ocarina, and a violin all came in at once with something loud to add to the song.

One bar, two bars, three bars, four bars of this screaming orchestral orgasm blaring from his Pip-Buck, and then, Sunrise's voice was heard over it, and while his singing voice normally sounded more suited to a pre-war boyband than metal music, he was adding enough intensity and just enough of a hint of aggression to his singing to make it work.

"The light's as artificial as this world, so it's time to evolve!

They try to steal my life from me, but I steel my resolve!

Putting aside the wailings of ghooosts… looong… paaast…

We turn our heads towards the sun for a future built to last!"

And then, it got better. With each yell of the first word, a choir of many voices joined in.
"Metalheart! Your heart is hardened, yet it beats for me!

Metalheart! Tell me, blinded sage of iron, what is it you see?

Metalheart! Flesh or metal, in the end, are we all just machines?

Metalheart! When you close your eyes, what plays out in your dreams?"

Sunrise paused the track, and smiled at Green Star's stunned face.

"Woah," Green Star gasped. "That was… incredible."

"I know, right?" Sunrise grinned. "I'm really proud of that ocarina. Figuring out how to telekinetically shove air through it and force that air to exclusively emerge from the holes I wanted it to come out of wasn't easy. It was like the opposite of learning to play the Ocarina, because instead of choosing holes to block, I was choosing holes to shove air through, meaning every step of the way, my magical muscle memory was working against me."

Green Star stared through Sunrise, the lack of that song leaving him even more dazed and confused than he normally seemed to be. "I'll give the princess your drugs, too."

"Thank you," Sunrise said, and he started to leave.

And then, he didn't feel lucky, but he didn't feel unlucky, either. He just got interrupted.

"Hey, you still duel, right?" Green Star asked. "How about a duel for fun, just you and me?"

GODS FUCKING DAMN IT, COULD HE JUST GET OUT OF THIS TEMPLE OF FILTH ALREADY?!

…Hey, 'Temple of Filth' would make an awesome song name!

Temple of Filth, Temple of Filth! Uh… Zebras sacrificed captives to their fake gods in the, Temple of Filth, Temple of Fiiiiilth…

No, that didn't work.

"Yeah, but not as much as I used to," Sunrise admitted. "My Dragon deck's still a little rusty."

"What, dealing with those rich ponies and their stupid fake cards made you go soft?"

"No way!" Sunrise declared brashly, because he'd been pretending to have issues with turning challenges down and resisting it when he was doubted or called chicken when not in the presence of his fans for a while now. It made him seem easier to manipulate, which made rich ponies less likely to suspect that he was manipulating them. "But I've got someplace to be and another deal to make, so how about we make this an old-style duel? No Synchros, Links, or XYZs, 2000 Life Points each?"

"Hell yeah! If I can go first."

"Go ahead," Sunrise shrugged.

Because moving unnecessarily was anathema to this druggie, he scrolled through some Pip-Buck menus and activated its Duel Disk function. A flat blade-like chunk of metal poofed into existence and stuck out of the side of the Pip-Buck, which gained two new slots: One rectangular black hole that slid further into the device, and one chunk designed to hold a deck of forty cards. Rectangular patterns formed on the side, almost like they were painted to show where cards were meant to go,
and rectangular holes formed just below them, on the chunk's outer edge.

Fourty brown cards bordered with yellow, a black oval in their center.

Sunrise scrolled through his Pip-Buck’s Misc menu, scrolled down to the item labelled “{Misc Functions}, and scrolled down to “Duel Disk Mode: OFF”. He selected it, and it changed to Duel Disk Mode: On.

Illusionary golden magical flames burned around his Pip-Buck as it grew a flat grey protrusion that curved like a blade, five golden rectangular slots for cards appearing on it, and five extra slots for cards growing along its edge. The flames grew along his Pip-Buck, seeming to build a Deck Zone and the sliding hole of the Card Graveyard before his very eyes. The Saved Deck Profile he’d designated as his Equipped one long ago appeared in his Duel Disk’s holder, as if growing from the very metal itself.

Their Pip-Buck screens changed to display the Life Point totals of each player in big yellow numbers on a swirling background of blues and purples.

"Duel!" Sunrise declared, and Green Star echoed that statement a half-second later.

They drew five cards from their decks, and held them at the same time.

I could tell you exactly how you Duel opponents in games of Duel Monsters, but I could also not do that. This chapter is long enough as it is, and besides, this duel isn’t really all that long or complicated. I’ll explain the rules of the game later, before a series of duels happens in a row, and then this story won’t contain any duels for a very long time.

Besides, you can probably figure out the basics from what happens in this duel. Hopefully, I can bore you with the precise details of exactly how to play the game and why I’m so good at it some other time.

"I draw!" Green Star declared, drawing a sixth card.

He frowned, because he didn't seem to have any good cards.

"I set a monster," Green Star said as he placed one of the cards he was holding sideways on the card rectangle on the center of his duel disk, its back facing up, whatever was on its front side obscured.

In the space between Sunrise Stardust and Green Star, but closer to Green Star, a large illusionary image of a sideways and face-down card appeared, hovering a foot or two above the ground.

"And I end my turn.

"My draw," Sunrise declared overdramatically, getting way too into it because that made this more fun.

"I summon Luster Dragon, in Attack Mode!" He announced as he slapped one of the cards he was holding down onto his Duel Disk, on the central rectangle, face-up. It was a yellow-bordered card with some text and numbers and symbols on it here and there, and a big picture of a badass deep-blue dragon was near the top.

In front of him, a bigger illusionary version of the card appeared, and then the Dragon displayed on that card appeared in a flash of light with a mighty roar, standing upon the card as if it was a floating platform.
One thousand and nine hundred, said illusionary yellow numbers on an illusionary blue display that appeared next to it. 1900.

And then he started doing stuff at a speed too fast to describe, his magic shoving cards into slots here and sending them to the graveyard and then into a formerly-hidden temporarily-opening slot on the other side of his Duel Disk.

"I play Future Fusion, which lets me discard certain monster cards from my deck to the graveyard, and Fusion Summon a monster with those discarded monster cards listed as fusion material. I discard five monster cards, and then I play Dragon's Mirror, which lets me Fusion Summon one dragon-type monster by banishing Fusion Material monsters listed on it from my side of the field, or my Graveyard. And I remove five monster cards from play, to summon Five-Headed Dragon!"

Whatever he did, it ended with a purple-bordered card appearing on the right of his yellow-bordered one, and the monster above it was a lot bigger and a lot more intimidating. Yellow reptilian skin on a massive dragon with huge bat wings, their upper edges tipped with tooth-like bone spikes. It had two legs that ended in sharp-clawed feet, and two arms that ended in sharp-clawed hands. On five long, snake-like necks, it had five dragon heads. One was a water dragon, blue, with rows of spiked blue and purple fins almost like sails. One had a longer head and was made entirely of flames. One was a bright gold, leaking golden light from its flesh, an array of sharp and thin spiked horns growing from the top of its head and wildly spiking upwards in a Mohawk. One was a dark blackish purple with glowing crimson eyes, a row of black horns growing from the upper back of its head and spiking back. And one had a neck of segmented metal armour, tipped with a head of sharp, pointed metal, its eyes glowing a bright pale green as blue flames gathered in its mouth. Two spikes grew from the side of its metal head, and two longer spikes grew from the top to stick out and back.

Five thousand, said illusionary yellow numbers on an illusionary blue display that appeared next to it. 5000.

"…Fuck…" Green Star said in awe at the big number. After all, it was a very impressive number.

"My Luster Dragon attacks your monster!", Sunrise declared, and his monster obeyed his commands. It opened its mouth wide as a ball of blue flames formed, and then it spat that ball of blue flames from its mouth at Green Star's face-down sideways card.

The card flipped over, and a monster appeared atop it. It was a short, fat ball cactus, with two arms, two legs, and an unnerving grin on its noseless face. Its yellowed red-irised eyes stared unflinchingly at its own demise, and the pink flower growing from the top of its head burned first before the rest of it burned and charred. The illusionary depiction of the monster shattered apart into triangular shards of light and monster, which faded away into nothingness as the card below it met the same fate.

"And now, my Five-Headed Dragon attacks you directly!" Sunrise announced, and his five-headed behemoth of a dragon obeyed his orders. All five heads stretched high into the air, before darting down at Green Star and blasting him with five streams of five elements. Raging fire from its fire dragon head, high-pressure water from its water dragon head, writhing and coiling darkness from its darkness dragon head, blinding light from its central light dragon head, and twisting wind from its mechanized metal dragon head.

It was a good thing this monster and its attacks were illusionary, or Green Star would be fucking dead.

As it stands, the attacks only did one thing: Force Green Star to stare in stunned awe at the display of colours as they washed over him and the Life Point counter on his Pip-Buck Screen counted down from two thousand to zero.
When the stream of elemental attacks ended, so did the match.

The monsters vanished, and Sunrise Stardust turned and walked away.

After that battle, one thing was clear… Sunrise didn't fuck around, not even when playing for fun.

Sunrise wasn't sure what to say, so he didn't say anything.

He just walked out of the room like a badass.

"Thanks again for the Pokémon!" Green Star called out.

Sunrise couldn't resist the natural pony urge to be polite. "You're welcome!" He cheerfully announced, and then he left like a badass.

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**Level Up!**

*New Perk: Midday Madness Power Hour - Mister sun came down, and he smiled on you! He said it's gonna be a good one, and you know what to do! You temporarily gain +1 to all S.P.E.C.I.A.L. attributes from 11:30 to 12:30*
Slow Ride

Floor three hundred and sixty eight, that's where Sunrise Stardust needed to go next. The Main Floor of the Technological Sector, The Tech-Sec. Not to be confused with Floor two hundred and sixty nine, a whole floor full of sex-robot brothels called the Tech-Sack. In Sunrise's personal opinion, the robo-hoe brothels there didn't even remotely compare to the competitively-priced and always unexpectedly-unique Tech-Sec's ones.

His descent to that floor was swift and long, like his dick was when it fucked his wife. Speaking of his wife, he wondered if she was done orgasming yet. She probably was. He didn't think he'd kicked her Cutie Marks that hard, but then again, something about sex just brought out the beast in him and made him forget just how strong he was. He knew it was something he had to keep in his mind, even when shagging. He still remembered that one time he'd accidentally shattered his wife's pelvis while "Dancing the horizontal breakdance", so to speak. Thank fuck for healing spells!

He decided to use his time alone in the elevator to recap what he'd done so far, and go over what needed to be done. After all, at this state, a single missed state of preparation could be disastrous.

He'd gotten the leader of his Supply Core to shave some food output off what they planted and grew for their usual jobs, and he had at least a few months of food ready and waiting for the Big Day. But food could be lost if someone with better guns than you showed up, so he decided to trade the brilliant custom-made guns of the Lucky Penny family (Made by ponies with Cutie Marks in gunsmithing for that extra kick!) for the best designer drugs and standard combat chems Green Star could cook up, in addition to the supply of healing, mana restoration, and combat-enhancing drugs he'd gotten out of the guy.

His potions guy was hard at work, he knew, and had nothing to report on his end. He didn't need to check anything on that end, because if anything had gone wrong, his potions guy would have sent somepony to tell his Supply Core leader, Evergreen Sage. After all, she had some of her planters plant plants of their own in planters. Or to put that another way, she had her paid farmers, paid farmers who used to be hobos from lower floors but were still technically called Temporary Workers even though their complete lack of job security made them functionally identical to regular paid farmers, who also lacked job security, plant mages, nature mages, general mages, and "Agricultural Experts" farm plants of their own in pots, back in their homes. If they had homes. If they didn't have homes, then they couldn't really do much, unless curling up in sleeping bag in the hallways with a planter next to their bags counted as doing their part. Which, to him, it did.

Guns, performance-enhancing potions, performance-enhancing drugs for emergencies, energy drinks, magic-enhancing and energy herbs, health and mana potions, food, water, and... Well, there was only one thing left. Besides ponypower, sheer numbers, which he was sure that he'd gained. Thousands showed up to his rock concert, hundreds of thousands heard his songs on the radio and loved them almost as much as what their lyrics said, and the living conditions on the lowest floors were pretty bad, whether the badness on a particular floor was visibly apparent or not.

There was only one thing left to add to his army, and that was robots. Disposable, yet reliable, automatically aiming, automatically targeting, and automatically firing guns on mobile mounts. Of course, his Vault had more than one kind of robot, and while he would have loved to get an assembly line together and mass-produce some "Black Starbots" that would be small, fast, deadly, airborne, at least armoured enough to resist small arms fire and preferably armoured enough to resist the standard weaponry of Stable Security, and able to swing around some deadly high-power armour-piercing energy weapons with an explosive-launching backup weapon for use in a pinch.
Something fast and deadly that could travel in swarms, tearing armies apart from the front, sides, top, and backs all at once, flying far out of melee range and slightly out of reliable gun range, but not out of laser weapon range, moving just fast enough for most enemy shooters to have trouble reliably hitting them, but not so fast that you’d have to compromise on armour or weapon power to reach that speed.

However, the resources available to him and his friends weren't anywhere near reliable, plentiful, or homogenous enough for such an operation. So, it was time for him to get some more robots for his army, and an excuse for his favourite Courier to go from floor to floor, distributing robots and smuggled laser pistols among the many different groups of Black Stars on the many different floors of their Vault.

Sure, laser rifles weren't exactly high-power high-capacity assault rifles, but when you needed something easily-smuggled in parts to help different divisions and groups of a divided and spread-out group kill any heavily-armoured enemies in their path on the way to each other, where they could get their big guns, they would do their jobs well enough.

Soon. Soon, he knew, things would change. His plan would begin, and he would leave this Vault with an army at his back, ready to take back Equestria.

And it was quite simple and reliable, when compared to the plan that made him a rockstar, magical genius, military mastermind, and beacon of hope to all the young ponies trapped in a prison built by their foolish parents, grandparents, and great grandparents, and the not-uncommon parents of those ponies who still had something approaching a functional head on their necks.

He decided to change his outfit, bringing up his Pip-Buck and flipping over to the Armour tab of the Inventory tab. Scrolling up, he switched his outfit out for something more comfortable, something with higher damage resistance, something that just felt... Right.

There were outfits you wore for talking, when you wanted to seduce ponies and talk them out of things, like his Black Suit, which boasted an enchantment his Pip-Buck identified as "+1 Charisma, +5 Speech". Not bad, for having absolutely no Damage Resistance, Energy Resistance, or Elemental Resistance whatsoever. It earned its keep, and made up for its Weight Cost of one pound.

Weight Cost... That was how he looked at it, when he had to ignore the stupid urges of seductively terrible ideas and talk himself out of walking around with as many guns and ammunition as he could carry, while decked out with the toughest and most visibly-badass armour he owned. Weapons were heavy, armour was heavy, some drugs and potions got pretty heavy when you carried around twenty or thirty at a time, and carrying around too much at once would get in the way of his ability to carry around more stuff. That was another thing he had problems with, but that was a minor psychological thing, not something life-altering like his problems with sleeping, or his irritating habit of firing quickly and aiming carefully while firing when it was time to shoot some guns.

Sure, he wasn't exactly low on maximum carry weight. He was a strong guy, after all, with a strong back. But that just meant he had a bigger "Potential Weight" section of his "Weight Budget" that he could fill up with new stuff, if he didn't already fill it up with old stuff.

Besides, while he wasn't much for sneaking, he still liked having the ability to sneak around, should the situation call for it.

He carried around a few weapons: His amazing and beautiful new .45, his old and reliable 9 millimetre concealed near one of his legs, a Switchblade for fast and spontaneous knife fights and quiet kills, a Super Sledge for out-ranging knife-swinging idiots and making a fucking statement out of fools when the situation called for it, a formerly-ordinary double-barrelled shotgun that had been
turned into a semi-automatic drum-fed beast with three barrels and some deadly armour-piercing 12 gauge slug rounds, and the crap he'd picked up today when he'd visited that druggie's home: A dildo long and hard enough to be used as a bat, two small guns, and a pretty nice rifle.

As for clothing, he was a simple pony with simple tastes.

Well, he was one. Now... Well, he liked to think he brought his nice, simple, reliable and honest charm with him when he adopted his current dress style.

In his armour tab, he had something named "0 - Black Suit", which was what he was wearing now. Then, he had something that seemed to be a second copy of the same thing, only it was named "0 - Dapper Gambler Suit". If he chose to put that on, the outfit's primary colour would change from customized black to the standard brown default a Clothes Talisman kept somewhere in this Vault (Probably near the Cloth Talismans, wherever they were) could put out. His formerly-black now-brown jacket would open up, and he would regain the v-necked beige sweater vest and white buttoned-up shirt he'd chosen to go without. He'd gain an unusually long black bowtie around his neck, and no Damage Threshold bonus. Or any enchantments, for this outfit lacked the concealed and enchanted diamond on the inside of his Black Suit's back. One pound of weight, and no positive bonuses besides the fast that they were still pieces of leather armour.

After those two suits, he had a disguise. All he had to do was select "0 – Dr Red" and he'd suddenly find himself wearing a pristine white suit. A small ruby concealed on the inside of the white suit, on the back, added an Illusion effect to the wearer. Until he switched his clothes or entered combat and suffered enough damage for his Pip-Buck to deem that he'd lost 70% or more of his health, he would appear to all those in the world as a nondescript and forgettable Watermelon-green Unicorn in a Stable 177 Vault Suit. His mane would be a cherry-red ponytail in the shape of Applejack's semi-famous mane, a darker-green band holding the back of his mane back, and if his suit's zipper was undone enough to expose his firm ass-cheeks, which would appear as mediocre and forgettable ass-cheeks instead of his own unforgettable flanks, his Cutie Mark would appear to be half a watermelon, sliced vertically and turned in a three-quarters view, so its flesh and its outer shell would be visible. To magical, biological, mechanical, and even magically-enhanced and mechanically-enhanced biological eyes, he would appear not as his true self, but as a perfectly average and forgettable background pony who, if anypony asked, was named Red. Red Dawn was his full name, but who would ever ask for such a name? Getting a fake Stable ID in this identity so that travel between different floor classes while disguised was a bit of a pain, but hey, we all had to make sacrifices to do our part for a greater world.

Also, it was strangely... liberating. Something about putting your true face and its layers of fake masks away to become a new pony under a new mask, with no expectations or responsibilities, no reputation to uphold or notable abilities to show off, no solidly-defined character traits that would make him any more memorable than he had to be... Something about putting on a mask that could be thrown away and replaced at any time was just so freeing! If Red Dawn ever pissed off the wrong ponies and got himself a bounty put on his head, sending all the angry knife-wielding hobos and starving orphans in the Vault after him, he could walk into the bathrooms and come out a changed pony. Literally!

Wait, no, they had cameras in the bathrooms these days. So... The bedroom, then. He'd walk into a bedroom, head for the blind spot, undo his disguise, and sneak out of there when the timing of his departure would be less suspicious. Perhaps, if he had pursuers who'd rush into the room after him, he'd do something to make the situation awkward for whoever burst into the room he'd entered, making the intruder in pursuit more likely to want to back away and leave as soon as possible.

The disguise cost one Weight point.
In his clothing menu, under that disguise, he had a second and third disguise. Because who ran around with just one disguise? If it failed, if somepony saw through it, it became useless. And if you walked into one room and walked out of it as another pony, anypony who saw this happen would potentially have the ability to put two and two together. Of course, if ponies thought Disguised Pony A was really just Disguised Pony C all along, who was either Disguised Pony B or E or G on weekends, nopony would ever know.

His second and third disguises were white suits with rubies hidden in the backs, on the insides, same as before. But the ponies he turned into were as different as could be.

His second disguise, "0 – Dr Fe", would appear to onlookers as a yellow Unicorn mare three years younger than Sunrise, with a purple mane in the style of Rainbow Dash, though rather than a chromatic progression of seven colours, her mane was a singular progression of purples, from the lightest blueish-purple, through deeper and richer purple tones before heading into pink territory, ending in a pink location on the colour wheel that approached redness, but didn't quite reach it. Her eyes were pink, her Stable 177 Stable Suit was completely ordinary, and her Cutie Mark was missing. Well, she'd never had one to begin with. Her asscheeks were as yellow as the rest of her, without any sort of symbol, image, pattern, or sigil. This loser, this "Blank Flank", this absolute nopony went by Purple Iron, a name the lidded-eyed, gloomy, sarcastic, slightly-whiny mare with a faint rasp considered utterly stupid. This one lacked a Travel ID, but she had a concrete personality: Obnoxiously gloomy bitch. Usually, anyway. Her gimmick is that she doesn't feel happy often, but can appreciate it whenever somepony tries to cheer her up. Something about her dour nature triggered the natural response in other ponies to try and cheer her up, which meant the occasional gift from ponies here and there. He made a point not to abuse that, however. If he got gifts, he got gifts, but to avoid leading ponies on, even if doing so and seducing useful ponies to turn them into slaves and exchanging illusionary images of camera-fooling illusionary genitalia for favours and supplies would be incredibly profitable, he decided that Purple Iron should crush on Sunrise Stardust, and crush on him hard with an unwavering devotion no nice little boxes of homemade food could sway. Any whorish nonsense just didn't sit well with him at all.

His third disguise, "0 – Dr Pond", would cause him to appear to onlookers as a blue earth pony with a blue mane. His body was a light blue, though more saturated than the famous Rainbow Dash's sky-blue hue, and his short and averagely-spiked male mane was a darker, deeper, richer blue. His eyes were a paler blueish-purple. The odds that he'd get such an unusually blue-focused result from the genetic lottery weren't exactly ultra-rare, but such an appearance wasn't exactly common, either. His appearance was somewhat odd, if you looked at him for a while. But if you didn't, you'd see him, think that his appearance was a bit strange, but nothing worth looking into, and move on. He didn't have a defined personality, and he didn't talk much, he just walked to places. He was an enigma wrapped in a mystery, nothing but his head and dick sticking out so he could fuck a puzzle and eat out a cryptogram's pussy.

And after those three outfits, he had a sequence of armour pieces he started to put on as his elevator continued to descend.

First, a fine set of leathers, custom-made by his leather guy and tailored perfectly to fit him. They were expensive, shockingly expensive by his standards, but he was pretty sure they, the protection, and the power they conferred unto him were worth it.

He started by putting on a Shadowed Ultra-Light BioEnchMesh Concealed Heavy Leather Chest Piece. Coming in at 14 whole pounds, though reduced to 10 pounds by the effects of the Ultra-Light Build design choice, which also granted the user a bonus 10 Action Points, his Pip-Buck claimed in its own strange and arcane number-based way that this chest armour boasted 24 points of Damage Resistance and 36 points of Energy Resistance, according to his Pip-Buck. The Shadowing treatment
(He knew it involved Shadowweave cloth, but he had no idea how) added 9 Damage Resistance and 17 Energy Resistance, and improved stealth in dark areas. The BioEnchMesh, or Biological Enchantment Mesh, would increase the duration of all taken Chems and Drugs for 50%. This included beneficial potions and drug-based health and mana restorers, extending the time health and mana restorers spent doing their job and restoring his health/mana without impacting the amount of health or mana they restored over time. Quite useful, that. The chest's total of 35 Damage Resistance and 53 Energy Resistance was also quite useful.

Then, there was the Shadowed Ultra-Light Elementium-Lined Concealed Heavy Leather Leg: Front Left. A leg coated in leather armour, magically altered to be far lighter than it should have been, without compromising on protective ness at all. It was also magically altered to be a wonderfully silent, dark, and non-reflective blackish grey. "Tougher against Guns and Energy Weapons than regular leather, and improves stealth in dark areas!" its crafter boasted, "They can even darken a radius around you at will. And when concealed, it'll still work that way because of the Shadow Weave spell I used on these!"

After that, he equipped the Shadowed Ultra-Light Elementium-Lined Concealed Heavy Leather Leg: Front Right. Again, leg coated in leather armour, magically altered to be far lighter than it should have been, without compromising on protective ness at all. It was also magically altered to be a wonderfully silent, dark, and non-reflective black. After all, if it was great for one leg, why not wear it on two legs? According to his Pip-Buck, his two leather legs weighed seven pounds each. They also provided 11 Damage Resistance and 18 Energy Resistance, plus an additional 4 Damage Reduction and seven Energy Resistance from the Shadowing, plus an additional 10 Radiation Resistance, Fire Resistance, Water Resistance, Ice Resistance, and every other important element's Resistance from the inner Elementium Lining, and from the choice to go for "An Ultra-Light Build", each front leg provided an additional +5 Action Points. Oh, and both legs were reduced in weight by two pounds.

So, he gained +15 Damage Resistance and +25 Energy Resistance, 10 Radiation Resistance, +10 to all elemental resistances, and +5 Action Points from a single front leg, all for the low Weight Cost of 5 pounds each. Take the two together, and one gained +30 Damage Resistance and +50 Energy Resistance, 20 Radiation Resistance, +20 to all elemental resistances, and +10 Action Points.

After that, he equipped his Shadowed Ultra-Light Muffled Sleek Custom-Fitted Strengthened Concealed Heavy Leather Leg: Back Left, and his Shadowed Ultra-Light Cushioned Sleek Custom-Fitted Strengthened Concealed Heavy Leather Leg: Back Right. They both weighed 7 pounds; they both had 11 Damage Resistance and 18 Energy Resistance; they both gained 5 Damage Resistance and 9 Energy Resistance from the Shadowing process, they both traded away 2 points of weight for +5 Action Points each, one allowed him to mentally "Toggle" whether his hoofsteps made any noise or not on and off and the other reduced damage he would take from falling by 20%, they both reduced the Action Points and Stamina cost of sprinting by 10% each, they both increased his crouched movement speed by 10% each by "Just being that sleek", and they both reduced incoming limb damage by 15% each. That last thing was the kind of thing only magic could do for you: It did not reduce actual damage his body would take from attacks, but each instance of that effect did make his limbs, such as his legs and head, 15% tougher for attacks to damage.

In total, for 5 pounds each and ten pounds total, his set of two rear-leg leather armour pieces gave him +32 Damage Resistance and +54 Energy Resistance, +10 Action Points, -20% Sprint Cost, +20% crouched movement speed, "Muffle Toggle", -20% fall damage, and they reduced his incoming limb damage by 30%.

Not bad, when taken with the pre-existing leg and chest bonuses.
And then, above all the Super Ultra Hyper Turbo Fuckoffinium-lined bullshit, Rainbow Edition and Fuckles featuring Fuckoff from the Go Fuck Yourself series, he equipped something simple. Something everypony reading this will recognize. A little something known as…

The Stable 177 Jumpsuit.

You all know what a Stable Jumpsuit looks like. A one-size-fits-all jumpsuit of blue denim, covering the ass, all four legs, your chest, and some of your neck. A yellow strip ran down the throat and down the center of its chest, reaching down to the belly button before splitting at a ninety-degree angle to wrap around the back and fuse together there. A metal-clasped belt of segmented metal rectangles with internal elastic sometimes adds some style to the outfit, when it isn't thrown away and replaced with a very visible leather holster or two. On the backs of the blue denim outfit, the Stable's number is visible. In this case, big yellow numbers were on Sunrise's back: 1, 7, and 7 again.

Fun trivia, that famous Stable Suit's yellow stripe is actually a design holdover from the days where that yellow strip was made of some reflective material, and the health-monitoring functions of experimental early Pip-Bucks only worked when you wore that outfit. For some reason, they needed to read information from that reflective almost-metallic strip on your body. I guess they didn't know how to properly scan biological material with magic back then.

In any case, Sunrise's Stable Suit was a modified Stable 177 Jumpsuit. It was the same thing as the usual Stable Jumpsuit, only the blue parts were black. The yellow strip was still yellow, but the blue parts were black, so it was cooler. Also, no belt.


After putting on that Stable Suit, he put on a black leather jacket.

No, not just any leather jacket, *his* leather jacket.

A stylish magically-crafted leather jacket in the style of a pre-war and vintage leather jacket, the kind a biker gang might wear. His shoulders bore pre-war golden epaulettes with golden string hanging off them, though they had been merged with pre-war military General Epaulettes upon which lay seven shiny black metal stars per shoulder, a vertical row of three with a row of two stars on either side, each adjacent star equidistant from one another. A grey Titansteel shield-like disc of a badge was pinned to the right pectoral of his jacket, the frontal half of a five-pointed star mounted upon it, its center extending furthest from the badge.

Upon the jacket's back, embroidered onto it in golden-yellow thread, a seven-pointed star in a golden circle around the size of the Vault's number rested within a thin and circular golden border. 12 diamonds were studded into the jacket, arranged around that golden border circle and equidistant from one another, like the numbers on a clock. The number "177" was embroidered upon the top of the circle in golden-yellow thread.

This was the "Black Stars Leader's Jacket", according to the name he'd given it in his Pip-Buck. Five pounds of weight, a damage threshold of 17, a Damage Threshold of 21, and despite its current lack of enchantments, it had one natural effect upon it, one pre-existing magical enhancement that was already upon the garment before he made his changes to it: +1 Luck.

When Sunrise put that jacket on, he could feel it. Oh, yes, he could feel it. This jacket was lucky enough to kick his luck into overdrive!
Or at the very least, increase it by a tiny, negligible amount.

In total, from each individual element of his current ensemble, he gained…

+35 points of Damage Resistance and +53 points of Energy Resistance from his leather chest, and an extra 10 Action Points along with 50% longer Potion, Chem, and Drug effects from the chest's BioEnchMesh.

+30 points of Damage Resistance and +50 points of Energy Resistance, 20 Radiation Resistance, +20 to all elemental resistances, and +10 Action Points from his frontal legs.

+32 points of Damage Resistance and +54 points of Energy Resistance from his rear leg leathers, along with +10 Action Points, -20% Sprint Cost, "Muffle Toggle", -20% fall damage, +20% crouched movement speed, and -30% incoming limb damage.

And slightly better stealth in the shadows from all of the above.

+0 points of Damage Resistance, +25 points of Energy Resistance, and +35 points of Radiation Resistance from his Stable Suit.

+17 points of Damage Resistance, +21 points of Energy Resistance, and +1 Luck from his Black Stars Leader's Jacket.

And in total, from his current ensemble, he gained…

114 points of Damage Resistance, 199 points of energy resistance, 55 Radiation Resistance, 20 Elemental Resistance, +30 Action Points, 50% longer Potion, Chem, and Drug effects from the chest's BioEnchMesh, slightly better stealth in the shadows, -20% Sprint Cost, "Muffle Toggle", -20% fall damage, +20% crouched movement speed, -30% incoming limb damage, and +1 Luck.

Not bad for somepony trying not to go all-out on appearances and throw on the biggest, shiniest, most ostentatious metal armour he could get his hooves on. After all, he wanted to look cool and distinct, notably different from the crowd and yet still able to slip into the crowd. And at the same time, when he stood at the front of crowds to give them his speeches, he wanted it to look right. Decently protected by his concealed leather, and decently imposing with his black leather and dual-time-period military shoulders, he was pretty sure he couldn't look any better without throwing on a suit of Power Armour. With a hole drilled into it, for his horn, of course. Some kind of magic-enhancing matrix spiral drill thingy to go over the horn, protecting it from harm and enhancing its magic, would be even better. He wished those things were real.

He also wished he had the resources to test out his "Neo Battle Saddle" idea. It was a complicated thing to explain, but to put it bluntly…

Well, Unicorns lift guns and use them with their magic. Earth Ponies and Pegas… If they can't hold the guns with their teeth and pull the trigger with their tongues, or reload and aim a gun with their forehooves and pull the modified larger trigger with a larger trigger guard, or no trigger guard. And if those don't work, Pegas and Earth Ponies use Battle Saddles, saddlebags with guns where books should be. Miniguns, Shotguns, Sniper Rifles, or any other gun, what matters is that they're locked straight ahead and set up with a mechanism that fires both guns at once, right in front of you, when you bite down on a mouth trigger.

This system isn't exactly ideal, for a lot of reasons.

Putting aside what a pain it is to reload Battle Saddles, when they aren't enchanted to draw from your personal supply of ammunition and teleport it into the gun, and putting aside what a pain it is to get
them on your body and off it, and putting aside what a pain it is when your Battle Saddle breaks down or overheats and you can't do shit to fix it…

Where a sitting Earth Pony can lie down and fire straight ahead with a sniper rifle held in front of himself, a standing Earth Pony with two miniguns, one on either side of his body… Well, imagine two of them, facing each other, twenty paces apart. Imagine that they both bite down and open fire on one another, launching two streams of bullets directly ahead… At each other's miniguns, rather than each other.

That's right, you've now envisioned and understood the worst weaknesses of the Battle Saddle, and you will never be able to forget them, no matter how hard you try. They will point straight ahead, on either side of your chest, and fire when you want them to fire. If you want to aim at something to your side, you need to bodily turn around on your four hooves and aim one of your two guns at that target, while the other gun wastes ammunition firing at something else. If you want to aim at something above you, you need to rear up and keep your body in a raised position that's just raised enough to hit your mark, and if somepony without an equine body is reading this: Believe me, that's harder than you'd expect.

Imagine an Earth Pony with two Miniguns opening fire on a crazy bandit with an axe, who just runs straight at the Earth Pony, between the two streams of fire!

Imagine that the Earth Pony turns around, hoping to catch him with a stream, only for the bandit to duck down below the sweeping stream and roll to the side, like the Earth Pony is a slower

Imagine that the Earth Pony angles the front of his body down to aim towards the bandit and raises his ass up a bit into the air like some kind of second-rate skunk, sticking his chest and neck out towards the bandit and whatever weapons that bandit is carrying in the process.

Even if the two miniguns point towards each other to intersect on the target… How sharply will they angle towards each other? You're just making one point where death happens in front of you, using two badly-angled streams of death on either side of you. If the target is too close to be hit by both streams of bullets, neither stream will hit the target, and if the target is too far away to be hit by both streams of bullets, once again, neither stream of bullets will hit the target. The only option for the theoretical shooter in that situation would be to shoot straight ahead with both guns and bodily pace around to try and hit the target with one of his bullet streams, while his other bullet stream is firing aimlessly into the distance and hitting a wall, or an ally, or a hostage you want to rescue, or just flying off into the distance before falling who-the-fuck-knows-where. The only upside to having your guns angle their muzzles closer together and force their bullet streams to intersect would be getting rid of the wide weak spot in front of you by putting the intersection of two bullet streams somewhere in front of you, giving up your ability to shoot straight in the process.

And forget trying to shoot from behind cover. Where the Unicorn can hide behind a wall, float his gun out from behind cover and open fire on his enemies, the Earth Pony with his Battle Saddle can only do that if he moves to the side of the cover and sticks his Battle Saddle out of cover to fire, hoping he hits something. An Earth Pony can't peek above cover and fire, not without exposing his head so much that he purposefully exposes his entire upper body, and takes a second to re-adjust his body's angle before firing at his enemies with those locked-in-place weapons. A sitting duck for anything, even an Earth Pony fiddling with a hoof-operated shotgun or even a Zebra with a shit-tipped throwing spear.

If the non-Unicorn is lucky, he or she will own a functioning Pip-Buck, know how to use it, and own one of those ultra-expensive robotically-controlled S.A.T.S./O.A.T.S.-integrated Battle Saddles that swivel their guns about a bit in front of you to aim for you. But at that point, why not go the last
foot of the mile and integrate triggers into your Saddle or Pip-Buck's enemy-detection system, removing natural pony error and the milliseconds a pony needs to notice things and react from the equation?

Sure, Battle Saddles are pretty good in the air, when high-capacity high-speed high-velocity anti-aircraft guns can be mounted on the sides of Power Armour-clad Pegasi flying at Mach Whatever, and a flying Pegasus could easily spin around and shoot at foes approaching from behind while letting the momentum of his flight carry him forward, before he hits his mark and spins back around, but that's the only situation in which they excel: Firing at other Pegasi and large ground targets while flying through the air. And even then, they can only really fly upwards, forwards, and backwards quickly. Trying to fly sideways is awkward and not something most Pegasi can do as quickly as they can go forwards. And even then, unless they're angling themselves down for a dive, Pegasi still can't aim their Battle Saddle guns down with one hoof mechanism and fire them with the other. Sure, an extra rocket launcher or two on your Battle Saddle makes a single armoured Pegasus into a better dive-bomber, but what's stopping a Pegasus with a Pip-Buck able to lift two hundred and forty pounds from flying up, far above a foe, far out of the reach of his enemy army's weapons, and dropping a two-hundred-pound bomb straight down?

Battle Saddles aren't good for Earth Ponies, and if I recall correctly, I think Battle Saddles might have actually been invented by an Earth Pony.

Hell, let's be real here, Battle Saddles were terrible ideas from the start, but some absolute fucking moron in some retarded Ministry didn't feel like thinking about them for more than a second before having them approved and mass-produced. Because why think about the logic of the world and how different types of ponies move around, and how strong they are, and what they can do, and what unique advantages they have over other creatures in the world when you could instead put two single-shot buckshot-sprayers on the sides of an Earth Pony and send him off to die in a war that should have been fought exclusively with tornadoes and extreme magically-altered hellish weather conditions and Pegasus snipers firing from the tops of Cloud Bombers to deal with the Zebra soldiers, Pegasus snipers firing from the tops of Cloud Bombers and tornadoes to deal with the civilians, and invisibility-cloaked explosion-planters to deal with any anti-air guns threatening Equestria's natural air supremacy.

Meanwhile, when teleporting Unicorns with silenced sniper rifles and silenced .22LR Pistols aren't taking out the enemy's chain of command, sowing confusion by mind-controlling generals into thinking they're meant to give incredibly stupid and self-defeating orders today "As part of a new strategy the po-nees will never see coming! Don't question it or disobey orders or you die!", or unleashing all manner of magically-summoned monsters upon the less-advanced Zebras (Who, might I remind you, had no protection for such things! Sure, they started using Fire enchantments on sniper rifles to deal with armoured foes, but that was all), using long-distance portals made and aimed by Unicorns A through E, with vital aid in the form of coordinates from scrying unicorn A, to let firing squads of assorted other ponies launch bullets and spells and explosives through temporary portals that will only exist for as long as the firing squads have ammunition, magical energy, explosives, and enemy forces to "Scry Snipe" in this manner.

If specific battlefields have to be fought for and won physically, and air supremacy backing up Earth Ponies rolling around at the speed of sound in those experimental mechanical and magically-amplified "Tanks" (Think a Pegasus-Drawn Cart, also known as a Pegasus Taxi. You know, those wooden sofas with big wooden wheels on the bottom, sticks connecting the sofa to harnesses worn by the Pegasus pilot or multiple Pegasus pilots, magic enhancing those sticks to stop turbulence or physics or the wind produced by high-speed flight from messing up your wonderfully comfortable and safe "Flight", or rather, your ride on somepony else's flight. Now imagine that Cart has got some old apple cider-burning metal boxy thing called an Engine that somehow produces power needed to
turn the Cart's wheels on demand, without need of an Earth Pony or Pegasi to pull it or a Unicorn to
ride atop it and magically pilot it. Now imagine the Cart is made out of some very thick metal, with a
nice sloped design full of sharp points sloping here and there (I honestly have no idea how to describe
this thing), "Tank Treads" that are a bit like stretched-out scarves but thicker and running around the
wheels like one massive cart's rubber tyre stretched across many tyres, and a very fucking big gun
front and center, something even a very buff and fit Earth Pony would have trouble lifting and firing
reliably) can't win the day in an instant, there's a third trick that could be used.

And that third trick? Earth Pony-raised animals can be raised en masse by professional Cutie Marked
animal farmers and animal breeders, and ponies with Cutie Marks in dealing with animals can train
those animals effectively. Then, those animals could be transformed into fast and deadly naturally-
armoured shock troops by Unicorn magic. Flying teleporting monkeys with assault rifles? Airborne
sharks that fly twice as fast as a pony can run, swimming through the air without need of wings?
Regular bears big enough to make cities look they're only a model? That's beginner-level stuff.
Imagine Tortoise-shelled Spitting Cobra-fanged Wolf packs running at the speed of sound, still
naturally performing synchronized takedowns on their foes? all kinds of "Hero fights giant monster"
stories and rudimentary ten-frames-per-second Pip-Buck Animation Files could be re-enacted upon
Zebra land, except the monster would be the hero.

What could be better non-magical ballistic weapon than a Battle Saddle, if your job is to think of
these things and your retarded Executive decided you simply NEED to produce something ballistic
any Earth Pony and preferably also any Pegasus can wear on his or her back or else? Well…

During the war, Zebras used a lot of trained animals as soldiers. A lot of trained and heavily-
armed gorilla shock troopers with sledgehammers, and a lot of assault rifle-wielding enraged
chimpanzees with a vague idea of how guns worked. A lot of Zebras riding on the necks of trained
Giraffes, whole squads of gun-toting monkeys shooting from the backs of rampaging elephants, six
to ten monkeys to an elephant, that sort of thing.

And the chimpanzees with guns were far more deadly than you would ever expect. With the
bendiness of their arms and torsos, they could aim pretty much anywhere around them in a three
hundred and sixty degree radius. They could jump through the air and climb up trees, which made
sniping Pony soldiers a total breeze.

You know what would be better than that?

Well, not a robot monkey with machine gun hands and a flamethrower tail, screaming sonic bolts
from its mouth as it rides ponies into battle, even though that would be pretty epic. That's a different
idea I had, for something completely different.

And it's not one absolutely massive Battle Saddle with no less than thirty guns, missile launchers,
miniguns, and energy weapons mounted on a massive family tree-like structure of deadly weapons,
all linked to one mouth trigger. That's a different idea I had, for something completely different.

You know how robots can detect enemies and fire assorted weapons at them, such as miniguns,
rocket launchers, grenade launchers, and so on?

You know how typical and humble rotating Turrets can detect enemies from a further distance away
than most commercial pre-war robots and fire far stronger weapons at them, with a much greater
energy supply, due to not having their processing power or power supply used up by other stuff, like
calculating the best position to move to during a fight?

You know how turrets can detect enemies without needing visible eyes or any sort of metal face?
You know how some turrets have miniguns, and others have stronger energy weapons with higher "Calibers" of light beam thickness, a faster fire rate, and more damage output?

You know how some turrets can only rotate from side to side, unable to look up or down, and some can swivel and move freely on one or even two or three ball joints, letting them aim at – and fire at – pretty much anything they detect?

Imagine an airborne Pegasus with a very fast Robotic Turret on his back, raining impact-detonation grenades and big bolts of rapidly fired Plasma or thick beams of light down on his foes as he soars high above his enemies and off to the side.

Imagine a slower and heavily Earth Pony with an even bigger and bulkier Robotic Turret on his back, blasting an area with explosive rockets or laser beams thick enough to drill holes through walls and any cover enemies might be using.

Imagine a Unicorn whose array of laser pistols mounted thin segmented metal limbs interspersed with many ball joints shoot that Unicorn's enemies while he focuses his magical might on healing spells, shield spells, battlefield-altering spells, and other mighty spells to give his teammates the kind of advantages only a trained spellcaster on your side can give you. And just for the hell of it, imagine him with two longer segmented metal limbs, still interspersed with ball joints, only more of them, and the metal they're made from can magically morph and extend and twist and flick, and they're tipped with magical energy swords that obliterate all they come into contact with, destroying incoming ballistic, light, plasma, and magical spellbolt-based attacks.

Oh, if only such wonderful magical laser sword thingies existed!

Well, they do exist in a prototypical form, but nopony was able to find a power source good enough to keep their energy blades going for more than a second or two before the war ended in a rain of Megaspell Fellfire.

Sunrise decided that he needed to make some of those turrets and experiment with them. If they worked well for his troops, they could massively increase the combat effectiveness of every soldier! Their programming systems would probably require new drivers before they could properly make use of ball joints, but until then, they'd just ignore their ball joints and act like normal turrets. And normal turrets, while many pre-war models are infamously slow to turn and track their targets, when properly aimed at a target they detected, they can detect enemies and start firing at them at an insanely rapid pace. There was a reason why those who cheated at those pre-war arcade games with built-in toy guns often did so with "Aimbots", small magical and technological coin-like devices that detect certain arrangements of pixels on the screen and automatically twist the gun in the air to fire at those arrangements of pixels before sending the controller's "Trigger has been pulled" signal almost instantaneously.

Yeah, that would be fucking epic. No doubt about it-

Ding!

FUCKING FINALLY! The elevator doors finally opened and Sunrise Stardust stepped out into the Tech-Sec, and the shock of seeing this place never got old for him.

Visiting the Tech-Sec wasn't like stepping onto a different floor, it was like walking through a magical portal and ending up in a whole other world.

New scents, new sights, new sounds. New fashions, new ponies, and so many more of them than you'd normally see on any but the lowest of floors. While travelling from the Vault's upper levels and
lower levels showed you the rich-to-poor spectrum so bluntly and visually, the place often felt like some kind of theme park at times, this one little area… This specific level was like a bubble-shaped portal into another time and culture.

The music was different, for one thing. The Overmare's omnipresent shielded ceiling speakers had been hijacked by this floor long ago, and they were pumping out a steady, pounding bass line on a strange instrument Sunrise didn't recognize. But he did recognize the swing music played atop that bass, played on violins, trumpets, full brass bands throwing their all into the music! And every so often, some kind of 'Synth Keyboard', a cooler high-tech piano he'd read about once or twice, would start slamming some notes and injecting some futuristic, almost alien sounds into the music.

And the clothes! So many ponies, and so many of them dressed well, or dressed poorly in a stylish way that told all onlookers that he or she chose to dress this way on purpose! Why dress in some Stable Suit, or dress like some pre-war ponies in denial about the end of the world, when you could make new outfits and new fashions inspired by the pre-pre-war ponies who lived long before the generation that let the world die on their watch? Outfits from the often-forgotten chapter of Equestria's history that involved steam-powered zeppelins and black top hats had been recreated faithfully and mixed with accessories that had certainly never existed in that time period, such as pointless and decorative rotating assemblies of gears and steam-powered pistons on your chest, or an enchanted copper smoke-spewing pipe sticking out of the side of your hat, like a diver's snorkel. Most of those magic-smoke pipes spewed smoke that dissipated and had no real effect on the pony body, but he knew of some more expensive hats that spat out clouds of red healing smoke, just for the sake of one-upping those with lamer smoke-pipe hats.

To Sunrise, these outfits certainly looked better than the disgustingly gaudy and often-impractical outfits Upper-Level Elites wore when they wanted to try and 'Outshine' the ponies of the past.

The ponies here lived in their own little society, not fully closed off from the rest of the Vault, but not overly concerned with it, either. When they competed, they competed amongst themselves for recognition from each other, not for the fickle and wandering eyes of the Elites. And when they worked at their hobbies and turned them into careers, it was not with the maddened and frenzied pace you'd see elsewhere, but with a strange sense of… It was as if everypony had decided to take it easy and enjoy their hobbies. To enjoy creating, researching, theorizing, and more. And then, when others saw opportunities to stop taking it easy and turn it into a competition to become an 'Elite' of THIS floor, things really kicked into high gear.

This place was a wealth of opportunity for lower-levelled ponies. If you were potentially going to be picked by lottery (Or by Stable Security/The Overmare) and forced into a gladiatorial fight to the death, why not get some practice here, ahead of time? Why not get hired on as a full-time gladiator? Why not work out your growing rage and frustration at a system nopony left had the power to change in the arena? If you're going to die anyway, why not die a legendary gladiator, or an absolute madpony who willingly went up against a death-robot designed to tear apart metal foes?

Metal foes that could have its worst damage slowly repaired magically at the end of every round, and fully serviced and brought to perfect working condition at the end of every fight, that is. You'd think robot battles would be wasteful in a Vault where resources were scarce and precious, but while scrap metal was still a currency here in the way food was on other levels, whatever you built your robot from could always find itself fixed up after a match. Bullets and Missiles still used resources that couldn't be magically unused, however, so most fighting robots were equipped with either Melee Weapons, such as buzz-saws and pneumatic fists, or Energy Weapons, such as laser guns and plasma rifles. Or, in the case of dedicated and formalized Custom Robots, magical weapons that were called things like 'Bombs' and 'Pods' based on where they were mounted on the robot, even though they all launched pre-programmed magical projectiles.
And the gambling… Oh, the gambling! You could bet on fights between small robots, big robots, ponies with nothing but their hooves, ponies in homemade Power Hooves, ponies in Power Armour, and fights between one of those with another. You could even bet on how long some idiotic caught criminal or desperate Vault Dweller who was done playing it safe would last against a swarm of deadly robots! That was used as their own form of justice around here, because why contact Stable Security and ask for their help with 'Internal matters', such as dealing with thieves, murderers, and worst of all, those who threw matches in the arena to rig gambles? As far as Stable Security and the Tech-Sec were concerned, the more the two groups stayed out of each other's way, the better.

Of course, this floor's ponies weren't the only ones who gambled. Rich ponies and poor ponies, they all came here to watch some fights and add some real excitement to their dull waiting-for-death lives. Worker ponies, they came here to watch some fights, gamble, cheer, maybe even join in on some fights to work off some stress after a long week at work. Poor ponies wanted to see some violence against ponies not from their own levels, and rich ponies wanted the "Prestige" and "Honour" of "Sponsoring" a Gladiator or a "Commander", one who directly controlled and guided his or her robots in the arena. Rich ponies would throw regular sums of money at Gladiators and Commanders in the form of rations they could eat or exchange for goods and services, and whoever paid a Gladiator or Commander the most was that particular fighter's "Main Sponsor", a meaningless title that gave rich ponies bragging rights.

When it came to books, to help out the lower-level ponies who couldn't move, many ponies had started their own Independent Publishers, turning digital notes written by poor ponies into physical and digital books sold in rich areas. All you had to do was get access to the one Multi-Floor-Access-Enabled Terminal on your floor, which hopefully still worked or would be fixed some time this decade if it wasn't, and connect to a Multi-Floor-Access-enabled terminal on this floor. And impress somepony with your books, of course. If you couldn't write well, you found an underexploited niche, preferably with a small fanbase already present and you exploited that niche until you died.

It was amazing to think that this all came about naturally, from the day this specific floor was chosen at random by many smart ponies who could have been separated and scattered across higher floors, but had requested to stay here. This had rapidly turned itself into the unofficial "Smart Ponies who don't care what the Elites think of us and have fun making robots fight for glory and honour" floor, and eventually, it became this.

Sure, it was still crowded. Sure, it was still noisy. Sure, most rooms down here were places of business the owner and his or her workers slept in, so you wouldn't see any sweet little overcrowded family rooms here and there. And sure, you couldn't even sleep on this floor if you didn't have a regular and reliable job working somewhere for somepony here, something that meant far fewer homeless ponies slept in corridors. But due to the "Lenient" stance the Vault government was all but forced to take with these floors, stupid Minor Jobs like "Hold tools and pass them to the workers when they ask for their tools" counted as real jobs here, so long late-night commutes between this floor and floors far beneath – and rarely, above – it were rare things, usually reserved for ponies who already had a nice enough sleeping spots or dedicated sleeping rooms someplace else. Even if those nice sleeping spaces were often just reserved sleeping bag spots near friends and family members.

And the Entertainment District they had here… It was incredible! Have you ever wanted to watch small, nonstandard, homemade robots fight, Commanded in battle directly by the ponies who built them, each using nonstandard and homemade remote controllers? How about watching incredible War Gaming battles between the best gamers in the Vault, mirrored live on a hundred terminals in one randomly-selected spare room? Getting to that room in time is half the fun, let me tell you. Well, a quarter of the fun, the other quarters are watching the games, gambling on them, and getting your butts kicked by the Pros during these things they called 'Open Weekends', where they would take on any who challenged them, regardless of status. It didn't earn you food-money, but it did earn you
prestige and popularity, which were more precious than gold around here.

Speaking of War Gaming, the most popular game is a recently-released 'Strategy Game' called Warzones Supreme, and it's so incredible, standard holotapes aren't good enough for it. If you want to play this, you'll need a custom-made brand-new type of holotape that can store two hundred and fifty six whole megabites of graphical intensity! These graphics aren't eight-bit. The pixels are smaller, and there are more of them. A lot more! This game has high-quality cutting-edge 'sixteen-bit' graphics!

You customize your Commander, you pick what he's good at and what he sucks at, you pick a default country to rule or you make your own one by picking good and bad traits. The fewer Creation Points you spend on good traits and the more Creation Points you gain by giving your country things that suck about it, the more land you can give your country before the game starts. Many battles are won and lost as early as this stage. When you're ready, you lead the army of the country you have near-total control over to victory over all other countries, including the ones controlled by other players. I have that game, and let me tell you, I am... moderately good at it. Nothing special or miraculous, really. When I'm not exploiting 'Broken' bullshit, as it's called, to win, that is. 'Broken', that's a fairly new term. It refers to those tricks in the game that give you such an incredible advantage, they 'Break The Game' by removing its balance and fairness, rendering the game a one-sided affair. The spirit of fair play is left 'Broken'. For example, there's that one trick where you dick around with Division Templates to put one Heavy Tank in with seven infantry units and two artillery units, giving the overall unit the hardness of a Heavy Tank. And there's a trick where you stack Research Time Modifiers to reduce your research time as quickly as possible, so you can 'Research' and unlock the best guns and tanks in the game decades ahead of everyone else. And those are just two of the tricks I know. When I'm exploiting all the broken tricks I've figured out through trial and error, I'm an unstoppable boulder that starts an avalanche, an aggressive, screaming wave of glitchy fury that will overwhelm your army and shit all over any defense you try to mount. Don't even get me started on the Teleportation Glitch. Or that trick where you mass-produce two-width Armoured Pegasus Paratroopers with as many Support Companies as possible, letting you Divebomb down onto as many of the enemy's Victory Points – Capture land your enemy owns, and if it has a Victory Point, your war score increases. If it's a certain percentage higher than your foe's, or you conquer your opponent's Capital City, you win! – as soon as the war starts, immediately taking said land with said Victory Points and overwhelming the game's way to calculate which side is winning the war.

And that was just one of the many games this level had to offer! There were even these new things called "Fighting Games", where you controlled one sprite-based depiction of a fighter and your different buttons caused him or her to perform different attacks. I loved them, and my favourite one was this one called "Kings of Wrath", where all of the characters are classic historical figures and culturally-significant real and fictional monsters, only reimagined as fighters and brought to life on the game's big screen. The game's core gameplay was simple: You had to get close to your opponent and hit him, without getting hit more often than you hit him. The tricky part? Light attacks such as jabs are faster to perform than the slower and stronger medium and heavy attacks, such as weighty kicks and wide weapon-swings. But light attacks do less damage than Medium and Heavy attacks. Heavy attacks do the most damage, but the time it takes you to start and end one of those attacks leaves you open for a counterattack by a smart opponent. Light attacks can be "Comboed" into a "Combo String", letting you hit your foe with a Light, a Medium, and a Heavy attack in a row, but a "Combo Scaling" mechanic meant each successive attack on your foe during a combo dealt slightly less damage than it normally would. You had to be smart and hit your foe whenever you got the opportunity. Simply charging at your foe and hoping to get off a big "Combo", a combination of attacks, would result in you getting your ass kicked by a smart player who knew when to use stronger attacks. To add another layer of strategy, Light attacks tended to have shorter ranges than
Medium and Heavy attacks, so hitting your foe with a Heavy attack while he tried to rush in for a high-damage combo would deal more damage than it would if that Heavy attack came after a Light or Medium attack. Your character also had two secret "Special Moves" that could be performed with a certain sequence of button presses and controller movements. Some directed your character to launch fireballs from his or her mouth, or launch projectiles from a gun. Some directed your character to perform a certain melee attack, evasive manoeuvre, or weapon swing. It really depended on your chosen character and what he or she could do.

Oh, and both fighters had these things called "Power Meters". Performing attacks and hitting nothing slightly added some "Power" to your "Meter". Performing attacks and hitting your foe added to your meter. Getting hit by your foe's attacks also added to your meter. When your meter was full enough, you could perform faster and stronger "EX" versions of your usual special moves, and when performing them, your character would just ignore any attacks that happened to him. He'd still take damage, but he'd power through the pain and continue his attack, no matter what! They're great for getting closer to a fighter who likes to keep you out of your attacking range, while also keeping you in his larger range, letting him throw out weak but long-ranged attacks at you while keeping you from retaliating. And if you got hit, but you had enough meter to burn, you could perform a Pain Cancel, instantly breaking out of the "Ow, I just got hit!" animation your character played automatically after getting hit, so you could quickly counterattack and beat up your foe.

This game was so incredible, no single Holotape could contain it and no Pip-Buck earlier than the 6000 model could play it. And the version of the game that could be played on the Pip-Buck 7000 was a smaller, slower, lighter version of the game with fewer characters and only two "Stages", static images in the background of your fight 'Painted' with pixels to give the illusion that your fight took place in a real-world location, such as on the main stage of a pre-war boxing arena or in the middle of some random airfield, barely-animated ponies in the background cheering you on. You needed a full Computer Terminal with two custom-made controllers built into the front of it, if you wanted to play this game! These types of Terminals were called "Cabinets", and they were named after how they sort of resembled the kind of cabinet you'd keep clothes in. Many of these Cabinets were sold to ponies in other levels of the Vault, and they were massively successful. I, myself, had a pretty big stake in one of those cabinet-related businesses. We produced semi-legal circuitboards that could be temporarily added into the internals of Cabinet Games to replace existing circuitboards, causing our desired modifications to the game. The Circuitboards themselves couldn't be made illegal, but installing in your game was SUPPOSED to be something everypony frowned upon. Of course, countless ponies loved "Mod-Boards", as they added new experiences to games, along with more replay value and often-better design choices. Adding new characters, adding new stages, we could do that. We could even directly modify the core mechanics of the game, causing the game to run faster or slower, making certain characters stronger or weaker, and so on. I was the Magic Specialist and spare Programmer of the group, but I'll be honest, I didn't exactly do much. The real powerhouse of my group were the artists, animators, and above all, our miracle-working Lead Programmer. You'll meet them later.

My favourite "Mod-Board" that I had a hoof in producing? One that added these things called "Death Or Glories" to Kings of Wrath, in addition to the standard "The game runs at one hundred frames per second instead of twenty, yet animations are paced out and slowed down to look the way they usually do, and Cactaur has been strengthened" changes. If you were careful not to spend any of the Power in your Power Meter during your fight, it would eventually fill up completely. At that point, thanks to my modified board, your Power Bar would begin to flash. At that point, if you hit all three attack buttons at the same time, your character would perform a "Death Or Glory" attack. If it hit, an absolutely incredible, stunning, breathtaking visual spectacle would overwhelm your eyeballs with a masterfully drawn and animated animation, a scene you watched in which your character absolutely annihilated your foe with one incredibly powerful attack. Or a lot of rapid attacks, in the
case of the faster guys. If your Death Or Glory attack landed and struck true, you would instantly
defeat your opponent. If your Death Or Glory attack missed, you left yourself open to a
counterattack after wasting all of your meter. It was a real all-or-nothing death-or-glory kind of
attack, and it made watching matches played with this game so much more intense and impressive! It
was a hype-generating machine, and as you all know, more hype means more paying viewers, and
more paying viewers means more gamblers. Which means more foodmoney in your cut of the spoils
when it comes to gambling, which means more foodmoney you can use to set up businesses that
employ ponies in lower levels, getting them to work for you, improving their economic situation, and
making them grateful to you as they produced goods you can exchange for other goods and assorted
services.

And those weren't the only games out there! There was this one called Space Spiral, where you were
a tiny spaceship with a few small auto-firing guns, viewed from a top-down 2d perspective, and you
had to survive until you just couldn't any more. You moved around using four basic directional
buttons, used one "Bullet"'s worth of your ammunition for your ship's Hyper Beam, Homing
Missiles, and Emergency Shield abilities with three additional buttons, and you fired by pressing
down the first mouse button. A "Mouse" was a unique game controller this game cabinet used, a
mouse-shaped controller you scraped around on its "Mousepad", so that an electrical charge from the
cabinet could detect where the mouse was. Only instead of detecting its actual position, it detected
movement. So if you slid the mouse from one corner of the screen to another, lifted it up, and copied
that same sliding motion, your ship's Aiming Reticule would move further than if you'd just slid the
Mouse around once. The Mouse was connected to the Cabinet by a thick rubber-coated cable, wires
that ran down the cable would also transmit motion-detecting data to the Cabinet for its game to
consider when moving your Aiming Reticule.

Your ship would turn automatically to face the Aiming Reticule, wherever you'd placed that, and for
as long as you held down "Mouse Button Number 1", the strangely large button that took up the
entire upper-left chunk of the Mouse, your ship would fire at that Aiming Reticule. Pressing down on
the upper-right chunk of the Mouse would use up one of your three "Bombs", sending out an
expanding circular wave of explosive energy to clear the screen of enemies. Those "Bombs" were
good for when you'd screwed up and you were about to collide with an enemy, such as an enemy
ship, a meteor, or any of the other things in "Space" that wanted you dead. Get shot, or collide with
an enemy, and you'd lose a Life. You started with three and when you ran out of Lives, the game
was over.

Press the Homing Missiles button, and your ship would launch seven rapidly-accelerating enemy-
seeking missiles. Press the Hyper Beam, and your ship would launch a big, thick, long purple beam
of flashy purple magic from its front for two seconds, something that was good for drilling into the
high Health Point meters the bigger bosses had. Press the Emergency Shield button, and your ship
would gain a thin golden circle around itself, becoming invincible. With this active, you could fly
straight through enemies and bullets without getting harmed by them. Unfortunately, this did not also
let you destroy enemy ships by ramming into them. That shield lasted three seconds, and you only
started with one charge of Emergency Shields. You started with three charges of your other
weapons.

And thanks to a recent update that came out just two years ago, two things had been added to the
game. First, a mechanic called "Grazing" had been added to the game. If you almost,
aaaaallllmooost collided with an enemy or meteor without actually touching it and destroying your
ship, your score would rapidly increase for as long as you maintained your dangerous proximity to
that deadly object. A multiplier would also be added to your final score, boosting it slightly for every
tenth of a second you spent Grazing a meteor, bullet, enemy ship, or anything else. Just a little
something to encourage high-risk, high-reward gameplay, shake up the High Score lists, and reduce
the likelihood that a single player would last for hours before losing all three lives. One time, Sunrise
Stardust got himself a large crowd of witnesses and played this game for four days straight with nothing but the game's standard three lives, shitting into a bucket and pissing into a larger bucket while using his own magic to grab food and water rations and put them in his mouth. He'd bet a lot of rich ponies that he couldn't pull this off, but through the subtle use of performance-enhancing drugs, he'd proven them all wrong and made himself richer.

Although… Was it really still a performance-enhancing drug when you put four Party-Time Mint-Als into what seemed like a needlessly large plastic container barely filled with a mixture of what was within two freshly-opened glass bottles of Sparkle Cola Rainbow ("Now with real Zap Apple Jam!", according to the old advertisements for them in archived Pre-War newspapers, but could it really be called 'Real' when you used a wasteful machine that devoured magical energy cells like a starving lower-level foal to recreate the stuff through nothing but enough pure magic to power all the lights in the Vault for a month?) and one freshly-opened glass bottle of Sparkle Cola Pink ("Made with real pink buttercream icing!" and "Contains fifty times an adult Stallion's daily recommended dose of sugar!", the old advertisements for this almost-poisonous sugar-water had boasted, as if that was something to be proud of), slammed the bottle shut before the mixture REALLY reacted violently to the Mint-Als and foamed up, waited until the mind-enhancing pills dissolved within the mixture, and proceeded to carefully and slowly open the bottle to allow the air inside to escape without letting the liquid escape and dilute your experience, before you eventually managed to fully open the thing safely and gulp it down before it had truly gone flat? Probably, as the recipe he'd ripped off from some upper-level junkies-in-secret did call for some real Party-Time Mint-Als. Come to think of it, he'd only ended the self-imposed challenge at the end of the fourth day because the bet had specified four days. At the time, he felt he could have easily gone for another day or two. And it was only a few days later when the deadly sugar high had worn off and crashed with enough force to put him into a coma for a few hours and nearly stop his heart, forcing him to swear off the stuff for life when he'd woken up and could think clearly again, his head no longer awash with thoughts too fast to comprehend.

Performance-enhancing Drugs. They're a hell of a drug.

In any case, second of all, in Space Spiral, you could design and modify your own ships. This would allow you to start adjusting things like the angles your ship's primary and secondary weapons fired at, how large or small it was, what damage multiplier the bullets had, and so on! Making your ship bigger meant giving your enemies a bigger target, but it also gave you more points to work with, which could be spent on increasing your ship's top speed, improving its acceleration and deceleration, adding a multiplier to the damage of your weapons, and so on.

Sunrise Stardust's spaceship was called the Space Boner. He'd designed and named it when he was younger, and for some reason, he couldn't bring himself to give it a more dignified name like 'Exellence' or 'Brilliance' or 'Magnificence' or 'Fuckockalypse: The Rapenning - Warning: Contains Space AIDS'. Rounded and red on its left and right side, each end coated in decorations that hid the main guns and side weapons all concentrated in a grey cluster in the center, on the underside, hidden from view by the central triangular cockpit. It looked like a pair of floating Stallion balls (Dragon balls are internal, impossible to see without cutting one open, and relative in size to their kidneys, which you wouldn't expect when you looked at how small their tiny pointy dog-like dicks were, compared to their overall size. Sure, a Dragon the size of a mountain would have a dick larger than any pony, but if you magically shrunk him down to the size of a pony, you'd need to line up four or five dragon dicks tip-to-tip on average before they could match the length of the average stallion, and you can forget about the girth, something unmatched anywhere in Celestia's animal princessdom. Truly, ponies are the ultimate species in all respects!) with a short and pointed dragon dick in the center until you started firing, unleashing a cascading flow of crimson and golden bullets from its center.
Despite the warship's vulgarity, or perhaps, even, because of it, it was quite the crowdpleaser when he played extra-long Survival Mode games at events, with ponies pledging to donate so many rations worth of assorted goods for every half-hour he spent alive. It was a nimble little rig with good acceleration for those split-second decisions, but its deceleration sucked, and you often had to wiggle the control stick back and forth to shake off your inertia after moving for a second or more in one direction. Quite the handicap in a game where precise movements and precise positioning won and lost challenges and high score attempts for you, but the high damage multiplier he'd been able to slap on his singular stream of deadly bullets was so, so worth it.

Speaking of Sunrise Stardust's Space Boner, the bullets it spat from its pointed Dragon Cock-shaped tip were as deadly as they were precise. Where some ships spat out one main stream of bullets in the direction your ship could call "Forwards", relative to your cockpit, a stream of bullets backed up by smaller and thinner side-guns on the wings that spat bullets in wider angles to hit things your main stream couldn't, and some ships kept the spread-out weapon philosophy but angled the guns to fire "Straight ahead" from your ship's front, his Space Boner shot a thick stream of bullets forward from its center, focused and precise like a laser scalpel. It didn't spray bullets wildly, it gave its pilot a controlled stream of deadly devastation and trusted in the pilot's ability to rapidly turn around and fire where it needed to fire.

Sunrise Stardust's Space Boner was a tough thing to control, but if you knew what you were doing, you could do some great things with it.

Oh, this game was spectacular!

Best of all, it even had Pip-Buck Interactivity! If you plugged your Pip-Buck into a Space Spiral Cabinet, you could load one of your recorded audio files into the game, which would proceed to use numerical data from your song (Somehow) as the "Random Seed" (Don't get me started, or we'll be here for hours) in a sequence of incredibly complex algorithms to automatically generate a sequence of meteors, enemy ships, bosses, and so on to spawn and a sequence of patterns to spawn them in.

You could even save your personal high scores and ship designs to your Pip-Buck, too.

To say nothing of what a hub this place was for Duel Monsters players! Ponies came from all over the Vault to play this pre-war game, and while it required the use of cards many of their ancestors had loved and traded away for food and water at some point in their lives, there was a heavily-guarded segment of the floor somewhere in the upper floors of the Vault dedicated to the magical creation of new Duel Monsters cards. Strong cards for the 'Elites', weak cards for the lower-level ponies, and mediocre cards for those in between, though things were somewhat balanced by the Vault's "If your overall Deck Score, the combined total of the Card Scores of each card used in your deck, is above less than 150% of your opponent's Deck Score, you win one card of your choice from the loser if you win. If not, you get nothing but whatever else you chose to bet on the game!" policy, idiots often ventured into middling levels, expecting easy victories, only to lose their pride, dignity, and best cards to ponies they believed themselves inherently better than. And then, those ponies with Elite cards brought those cards here, to lose them in duels or win more!

The Tech Sec ruled!

You could play games, watch them, gamble on them, buy Cabinet Games to take home to your level and set up a "Pay me to play them" system down there for food and profit, fuck sexbots, get paid to clean sexbots, get paid to serve as an off-the-books Premium Option in a sexbot brothel if you were really desperate, watch gladiatorial combat between fighters, robots, robots and fighters, fighting robots, and so much more! Fortunes could be won or lost in an instant, all based on a single decision you chose to make, not a decision fate or your genetics made for you.
This place was so great for so long, it had been allowed to expand downwards 50 years ago, displacing the residents of the lower two floors further downwards while they drilled holes in the ground here and there and turned former homes of the rich into new places of business. Big holes in the floor/ceiling got two sets of staircases each, and small holes got ladders. Either way, they allowed the Tech Sec to create even more casinos, arenas, arcades, hoof-made assembly lines in the air-friendly almost-factories dedicated to the creation of custom robots, and so on. They expanded more over the years, and this Vault level was now essentially a whole level seven floors deep, with something for everypony somewhere. You just had to find it, and that was part of the fun! You wouldn't think wandering around in a new and exciting place where any shop that was there yesterday could be replaced by a different shop you'd find today could be that much fun, but for ponies so starved of new surroundings and places to explore, it was a godsend.

This Vault's level was so much fun, it almost distracted everypony from how dangerously well-defended this place was, especially in comparison to so many other levels, with all the weapon-toting civilian-owned hobbyist-built robots and all the 'Spare Parts' taken from weapons that were manufactured regularly on a 'Factory Level' a few floors down, and how potentially self-sufficient this place could be in the event of a siege or war with the upper levels. It wouldn't even be hard for this level's ponies to break the Vault's elevators, lock the Elites upstairs to cut off their water, food, and ammo supply, and spread their industry outwards and downwards though the Vault, recruiting and drafting layabouts and putting them to work on rapidly-constructed assembly lines to mass-produce the army of robots you'll need to deal with a pissed-off company of Battle Mages when they stop having to take the long "Multiple ponies are teleported to a location at once every few minutes" way down and break through the Vault's floors to pour in en masse.

Factory Levels are levels of the Vault where specific things, guns in this case, are manufactured by almost everypony on the level. Life is probably quite boring for ponies on levels like those. You know what isn't boring? My mission, and the reason why I came to this level. A reason I- Fuck, sorry.

A reason Sunrise Stardust found himself having to frequently remind himself of as he pressed his diamond-pierced ears close to his head and walked through a constant stream of ponies and tried to ignore criers in the center of corridor intersections and pressed up against corridor walls, some on soapboxes and some on bigger metal boxes. Each was offering deals, announcing their advertisements, and yelling about all kinds of interesting fights, both in the virtual wargaming world and the real one, and they were almost as much of a distraction as the stupid and strangely-classy outfits of those who walked beside him in his left lane, and those who walked in the other direction on the right.

"Do you want a Warbot dead? Really dead? Stop by the Silver Stone, and we'll give you the means to turn your Tin Can into a Tin Can Kill Anything! Just two blocks north!"

"Laser shotguns for sale! Laser shotguns for sale! They spit tiny beams of light and they're inaccurate as fuck, so they're basically shotguns! Perfect for small Custom Robots! Who says lasers aren't close-range weapons? Whoever your robot fights won't be able to say that, because he'll be fucking dead!"

"One night only, one night only, Stainless Sky, the undefeated Warzones champion, versus the deadly rookie, the raging beast from out of nowhere, Fuckme! That's right, Fuckme! This little bitch said his Commander Name was Fuckme, which means I have to stand here and say Fuckme! That's right, everypony, Fuckme! Fuck my life! You there, young mare, do you want to watch Fuckme lose to Stainless Sky? If I wasn't going to see it anyway, I sure would!"

Sunrise turned right around a street corner, and pressed on.
"Double-you-Tee-Bee 24 Sensor Modules, offering seventy-five MicroFusion Cells! Double-you-
Tee-Bee 24 Sensor Modules, offering seventy-five MicroFusion Cells! Fully-charged and ready to
go!"

What was the point in saying double-you-tee-bee? It had more syllables than "Want To Buy", which
was what it stood for. Sunrise turned around another corner anyway.

"Does anypony here have a free afternoon and want to earn some big money? One of my Workers
cancelled, and I need somepony who knows how to weld high-end circuits! Come on, I'll talk you
through it! I'll pay you in food rations or scrap, your choice!"

Sunrise was tempted, he'd haggled a good amount of scrap from jobs like that before, but he had
somewhere he needed to be.

"With the grace of a thousand swords, the hero of daylight! Facing down a thousand foes, never lost
a single fight! You've heard Sunrise Stardust's lyrics on his latest album, but are you ready to see the
Warbot who inspired them? Come on down to the Downward Spiral Arena, at six PM! Just three
blocks west of the nearest Level Ladder's hole!"

"Robot fighting is fun, but they could be used to save lives!" Some corridor preacher of a platinum-
blonde-bodied Stallion with cobalt hair shouted, ignored by all, and Sunrise turned another corner to
avoid being seen and pointed out by a preacher who'd likely want him to either stand with him to
give his words more weight, or stand and look sad while the preacher berated him for having access
to the Upper Levels and lacking the ability to magically give everypony infinite resources and space.
"Why sacrifice lives in the Mining Quarter when Robots could work harder for more hours, and for
fewer resources? Robots don't need to eat, sleep, breathe, or fear a cave-in! So why do our
untouchable 'Elite' rulers do this to us? Why, for any reason other than providing another form of
punishment our supposed 'Elite' rulers can use for being born lower than them?!"

"Hungry? Thirsty? Horny? The Atomic Penetrator has more robo-chefs, robo-bartenders, and robo-
whores than you can shake your dick at! Or your arse, if you don't have a dick. Or both, if you've
got both! Come on down, and assume the position! Just five blocks to the east!"

"Black Stars Rule!" Somepony shouted, and Sunrise's equine ears pricked up. Something the noise
made him regret, and they shot back down.

Sunrise's eyes widened at the sound of his gang's cheer, and he wished he'd worn a disguise. He
ducked behind a corridor's wall, paused, and waited. A few seconds later, he glanced around the
corner for a second, and pulled his head back. One of his Black Stars was preaching to a crowd of
twelve ponies, he realized. The Black Star was a brown Earth Pony, his mane white and gelled back,
with a black synthesized cow- leather jacket over his standard and classic blue Vault Suit. He wore
the standard uniform for the lower-ranking grunts of Sunrise's "Old" gang, the gang Sunrise
"Definitely" wasn't still a part of. The fact that this outfit was also the standard outfit of his band's
fans? If anypony asked, Sun would shrug and say it was because he liked the look, leading others to
think that in this one instance, he was either unoriginal, uncreative, or overly sentimental and
nostalgic for the "Wild and lawless" youth many rich ponies were sure he'd lived, because what else
could life in the lower levels be besides a "Fun" and lawless free-for-all, the kind of idealized fun
world a foal imagined where he envisioned a world without parents?

Ducking around a corner and heading left, Sunrise decided to take a slightly different route to his
destination, one that was only slightly longer than his original route in length.

"Experimental homemade Power Armour fight at the Green Light District! This time, the Power
Armour suits WON'T malfunction halfway through the fight and kill the wearers, we promise!"
"Twi-Night Model Sexbot for sale, only slightly used! Answers to the name of Whorecunt, because she was previously used when I got her! Please, somepony, buy this sexbot from me! I need the new Strawberry Shake model, have you seen the crotch tights on those things?"

Someone purple in a black hoodie got behind Sunrise and held a knife to his throat. "Give me all your-" The thief began, and Sunrise turned his head one hundred and eighty degrees to look behind himself and stare at his thief.

Immediately, the thief gulped and dropped his knife and backed away. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize it was you!" The thief stammered, getting his wallet out and throwing it at the floor, fleeing.

As he should have, because this was Sunrise fucking Stardust. Of course, the thief should have known better than to threaten somepony who'd clawed his way up from nothing to become one of the most powerful ponies in the Vault.

Sunrise considered pulling his gun out and opening fire, but right as he was about to move, somepony in the stream of ponies tackled him, an orange Unicorn stallion with a long emerald mane, who wore the outer jacket of a white suit with a black fur-lined white hood attached. Nothing covered his hind legs, his crotch, or his ass, which bore the mark of a big grey revolver. "I got him!" He yelled, while looking expectantly at Sunrise.

Sunrise checked through the wallet he'd been given, and found about nine thin metallic discs of metal. Water Tokens. The crimson Unicorn threw one to the pony who'd stopped the thief, as he knew the pony in question would get a far larger reward from whichever Warbot and Custom Robot fight club he turned the thief over to anyway, and Sunrise moved on.

And despite that little moment of excitement, everything swiftly returned to normal as ponies went about their day.

"Angle Grinders, I need Angle Grinders, nine charged MicroFusion cells each!"

"Five Plasma Pistols, I've got five Plasma Pistols! Who wants to trade them for something? Make me an offer!"

"You want guns, I've got guns, so come on! I'll trade you two nine-millimetres for a Plasma Pistol, right now!"

And then, something strange happened.

"Give me Thunderstruck, Blessed Blade of the Stormseeker!" Some random passer-by shouted.

"Did you just say Thunderstruck, Blessed Blade of the Stormseeker?" Another random passer-by shouted.

"I heard Thunderstruck, Blessed Blade of the Stormseeker!" The gun-seller shouted, grinning as if this was some kind of local in-joke.

"Shut up about Thunderstruck, Blessed Blade of the Stormseeker!" Another passer-by shouted.

"I will never be silent about Thunderstruck, Blessed Blade of the Stormseeker!" The gun-seller retorted loudly.

Somepony got in Sunrise's way and stopped him. "Do you have Thunderstruck, Blessed Blade of the Stormseeker?" Some grinning green foal of an Earth Pony with blue eyes and a short grey mane eagerly asked him.
Sunrise guessed what the right thing to say was, and pointed behind him with his tail and rear right hoof. "I heard somepony over there mention Thunderstruck, Blessed Blade of the Stormseeker!" Sunrise announced with fake cheer.

"He knows about Thunderstruck, Blessed Blade of the Stormseeker?" The Earth Pony excitedly yelled, rushing off in the direction Sunrise had indicated. And all the while, ponies around him echoed pointless questions about Thunderstruck, Blessed Blade of the Stormseeker, making sure to use its full name each time, the term echoing through the Vault's levels by finding itself repeated by every pony who lived here, worked here, or had somehow gotten the joke explained to them very recently.

Ignoring this oddity, and every other mention of Thunderstruck, Blessed Blade of the Stormseeker, Sunrise pressed on, faster than before.

"Do any of you Mother-Fuckers want to buy some Mother-Fucking MicroFusion Breeder Cells?" Some obnoxiously-loud shit-seller with a grey Earth Pony body, a white mane, and bright golden eyes perched atop a soapbox roared like his life depended on it, and Sunrise was almost glad to hear it as he pressed his ears down to his head once again. "They're fully charged! I'll trade them for six good pieces of Scrap Metal, or a Focusing Lens and some Wonderglue, or a new Welding Torch, pick one and give me the goods!"

While Sunrise walked, he noticed a cute yellow mare in the moving crowd with a big blue and white striped tail flagged high, her blue Stable Suit keeping this from being indecent. She had a curly blue mane with curling white stripes, and the four legs of her Stable Suit had been removed, just like her legs. She had four prosthetic magical hooves that started off as short cylindrical chunks stuck where her legs should be, and from that point downwards, her legs became swarms of floating metal prisms held together by magical blue lights and sparking blue electricity, different metal pieces in her legs clicking and clacking and turning together to let the mare stand and constantly propel herself forwards.

"Four water bottles for whoever beats me in a Custom Robot battle! Four water bottles, do I hear five? Five water bottles say I will destroy you in Custom Robot, cowards!"

Was that mare a Black Star? He didn't recognize her, but he hoped she was.

"WHORE FUCK SHIT PUSSY ASS BITCHES ASS RAPE SEX FUCK!" A small soft pastel-pink filly with soft yellow and pinkish-red curls for a mane, each curl tipped with white like frosting on a cake, barely ten years of age and standing atop a big metal box, gleefully chirped. It was if it was the only time she'd ever be allowed to swear without any grown-ups telling her off, and she was determined to make the most of it. A black schoolgirl's skirt covered her flanks, wrist-length black boots covered her feet, and nothing covered her chest. The harsh bright red of her eyes were as eye-catching as ever. "PENIS PENIS FUCK COCK FUCK! Now that I've got your attention, would you like to buy some Assaultron Assembly Kits? Just fifty water rations, and you've got guaranteed protection for you and your family! Which means nopony will ever fucking steal your fucking water and fucking rape your shitty virgin fucking asses again!"

Sunrise moved on.

"Somepony battle me, I don't care who! You, me, Custom Robot battle at the nearest Magirena table, winner buys the loser a drink!"

"SUNDAY, SUNDAY, SUNDAY! AND EVERY OTHER DAY OF THE WEEK! FUCK Warbots, FUCK Custom Robots, WE'VE GOT FUCKBOTS, and they are TEARING EACH OTHER APART! ONLY at Celestia's G-Spot! Want to watch METAL WHORES on TANK
TREADS try to FUCK EACH OTHER into submission? Want to watch big-assed mechs that look like mares with PNEUMATIC PISTON COCKS try to FUCK EACH OTHER TO DEATH? We've got that, we've got gambling on that, and we've got horny fans and sexy waiters and waitresses who love FUCKING fans while they watch that! Celestia's G-Spot! Because when you're at Celestia's G-Spot, IT'S SUNDAY EVERY DAY! Just four blocks to the south!

"Will trade Max-Charged Energy Cells for sucking! Suck my dick and I'll give you seven max-charged energy cells! Real mares over sixteen only, no sexbots!"

"We've got stuff we're not even allowed to sell, ponies! And we'll sell them to you anyway, for the right price! Only at Mac and Rails! Just two blocks north!"

Finally! That's what Sunrise thought to himself as he rounded a corner and fucktons of lumens of the unique light given off by electrified neon gas trapped inside magically-reshaped glass tubes that formed letters and the outlines of signs assaulted his eyes. He squinted as his eyes adjusted, and opened them when he could once again see.

"Seventh Heaven Robotics!" Bright yellow neon letters announced, wreathed in orange and red flames, the central piece of a sign made of many whitish-blue clouds. "Building machines stronger than the Gods since 2278!"

That sign had been set up above a standard Vault Door, similar to any other Vault Door you might see anywhere else in the Vault, except for the fact that it had been painted black. Nothing else could be done to the door, but many arrows with nearby words had been formed with glass tubes of electrified glowing Neon to point towards that door, each arrow's nearby words of the same bright glowing colour advertising a different thing. "FULL REPAIRS", "BEST PODS IN THE VAULT", "CHEAP CLEANINGS", "THE BIRTHPLACE OF THUNDER KINGS", "CHECK OUT BLACK HOLE COAL: THE NEWEST ROARING AVALANCHE!" "HI-POWER PLAS RIFLES", "CUSTOM PARTS AVAILABLE ON COMMISSION – COMPETITIVELY PRICED", "STRIKE YOUR ENemies FROM THE SKIES - YOU'LL DOMINATE WITH OUR STRIKE ENFORCERS!", this place had it all.

Over the din of shouting and cacophonous conversations and assorted other noises, Sunrise noticed somepony singing near him. Turning his head to check, he saw that the place had gotten its own Earth Pony musician to stand outside and bang out some distorted brass tunes backed by bass guitar, dramatic violin stings, and a complex drum loop he'd already programmed to match his playing. His only instrument was an electric keyboard with a microphone mounted on top, two speakers on either side of him. The Earth Pony was a bright whitish-grey, his mane an emerald shock of hair lined with darker-green streaks. A thick bronze pair of emerald-glassed goggles covered his grey eyes, and a black leather strap kept them on his head. He wore a variant of the Black Stars gang uniform that showed his high rank in the organization: Over his generic blue Vault Suit, he wore a black leather jacket with gold-painted shoulders and a golden sun engulfed in red and orange flame on the back, a black star stamped onto the sun to show ownership of it.

"Breathing in, it's the scent of burning steel!" The pony, Rave Moss, sang.

Eeyup, this was the place. Not the birthplace of robot battling, but or birthplace of Custom Robot battling, where robot-controllers known as Commanders used their Pip-Bucks to wirelessly command their own customized robots in single combat for supremacy and glory. But the family that had ran Seventh Heaven Robotics on another floor for decades was one of the first producers of Custom Robots, and the company's founder had been a Commander in the very first Custom Robot battle, a no-rules no-holds-barred free-for-all match between six Commanders and the modified Assaultrons they'd messed around with the day before that fateful day, when a battle between six
robots drew a crowd and turned robots fighting other robots into a long-standing Vault tradition.

"Fighting on, cause nothing else can make me feel!"

Peak Oil was the name of the founder of Seventh Heaven Robotics, his very name a reference to some doom-and-gloom utter-nonsense paper written to stir up fear about oil and other resources before the war changed Ponykind's perspective on such matters and fears of running out of oil in five thousand years stopped feeling like they mattered. A pre-war steel manufacturer with a passion for consumer robots and a dream in which every happy family had a servant robot in their home, Peak had made some brilliant robots in his time. And when ponies started to want their own Custom Robots for their own matches, he was the first to start selling Custom Robot Assembly Kits. Small boxes containing the partially pre-assembled parts you'd need to assemble your own functioning robot torso and head, along with the standard forehooves and rear hooves, or standard arms and legs if your robot was one of those exotic bipedal models, and the standard weapon your Custom Robot would use if you didn't replace it with something better. Other weapons could be given to your robot and mounted on it. Other arms, other legs, some that ended in hooves and some that ended in Draconian claws or Griffon claws, these could be bought from Seventh Heaven Robotics and other manufacturers quick enough and clever enough to get in on the ground floor of this rapidly-booming industry. Other heads and bodies were released, some with additional slots for weapons and some that were Enchanted to boast certain gimmicky magical features instead. Legs with small jets that would let you "Air Dash" in one specific direction for a pre-programmed distance once or twice every jump. Torsos that magically made the rest of your Robot faster or tougher, or magically improved the power of its weaponry. Heads that would let your robot perform an actual fucking teleporting jaunt through the aether, albeit one with an incredibly short range, in lieu of your usual Air Dash, or let your robot turn intangible for one second every hour, or form an illusionary and holographic copy of himself on either side, a trick that had fooled absolutely nopony since it was invented.

"As we march to our graves, are we masters or slaves?"

Over time, rules for official Custom Robot matches were formalized. Standards were formed, and limits were imposed. To reduce the risk of collateral damage and allow deadly high-yield explosive spells to be used, all finished Custom Robots were magically shrunken to around a foot in height, regardless of their original size. Good Custom Robots were bipedal or quadrupedal models with two rear hooves/lower legs with dedicated jets for Air Dashing or granting mid-air boosts of vertical momentum for the trick known as Air Jumping, one right forehoof or right arm with a Gun attachment or a Claw attachment that held a gun, one left forehoof or left arm with a 'Bomb' attachment that was enchanted to fire some kind of magically-crafted typically-explosive projectile of some sort, one 'Pod' launcher on the back that would deploy some sort of small magically-crafted projectile with complex magical programming... You could design your 'Pod' projectiles to remain stationary until a foe they could swiftly dart at approached, or to float in the air and wait until a foe they would dart at wandered near them, or to simply launch themselves in a specific direction until they exploded, either on contact with a foe or once a certain amount of time had passed. The only rule? No complex spells like time-dilation or self-repairing or any banned spells like magma creation, it had to be a simple directly-offensive spellbolt that had been given instructions on how to act once deployed. In addition, Custom Robots had one 'Body', a torso or chest of some kind, typically with some magically-enhanced attribute, and one 'Head' with some magical gimmick it could grant the robot when attached.

"Do we move like robots when we're dancing at raves?"

It wasn't an official rule that all or most Custom Robots had to look like they could double as cutesy and cool brightly-coloured action figures for young Colts if they were ever shrunken down to a small
toy-like size. It was an unofficial rule that many Custom Robot part manufacturers obeyed for the sake of marketing and visual appeal, and an unofficial rule many other Custom Robot part manufacturers made a point to break as they black lasers with decorative metal equine skulls on them, Bodies with shoulderpads coated in skulls, or even skulls to serve as shoulderpads, and so on.

"The ceiling keeps us dry, but it's raining where it counts."

All Custom Robot parts were subject to temporary or permanent banning and/or design modification by the Custom Robot Battling Board that had formed out of the main parts-producing companies, though this was used as an arbitrary limit on power to ensure that if some plucky young genius built a part that was too superior to what the main companies were currently producing and selling, that genius wouldn't destabilize the Custom Robot world by driving everypony to buy his amazing godly part to retain the ability to keep up with everypony who'd already gotten his part. This was also used to simultaneously calm down ponies who were afraid of Custom Robots being made that would eventually become "Too Strong" for Stable Security to stop, while also proving that the ponies here could realistically govern themselves without the need for an Overseer if the situation ever arose where that would be necessary.

"Every day down here makes me want to break out!"

When the Tech Sec had been founded, this company had earned itself some seriously-good real estate, and the walls between four Vault bedrooms were demolished to give more space to the place's factories and robot-assisted assembly lines. This company specialized in high-speed Griffonian forehooves, each joint and limb designed specifically to function like a trained Griffon assassin's clawed forelimbs. They could even be used to swing around melee weapons, or aim and fire ranged weapons that didn't have to be mounted onto the robot and modified to draw from its limited power supply! They also produced four of Sunrise's favourite Custom Robot models: The general all-round pretty-good General Soldier model, the slow but tough Strike Enforcer model that boasted a single "Long" (By custom robot standards. Barely three steps forward, really) teleporting Air Dash, the tiny and speedy high-offense low-defense low-health Rogue Warrior model, and the extra-slow extra-tough extra-high-damage Roaring Avalanche model. It was a shame they didn't also produce the Thunder Kings model, a medium-sized high-offense low-defence model that turned into a plane you could steer for a few seconds in lieu of a traditional Air Dash, while retaining your ability to fire your weapons. He loved that one, but the Neo Neon company produced that one, which made it prohibitively expensive, even by a relatively rich pony's standards. Often, their Custom Robots felt more like status symbols than actual consumer-grade magical and electronic weapons.

"We're spinning our wheels and we're grinding our gears, because our masters insist…"

Sunrise quite liked the griffon-claw models. Sure, not integrating your Custom Robot's Main Guns into his power supply meant you wouldn't get near-unlimited ammo for that weapon, but it also meant you didn't have to endure a Cooldown Period between each use of that Custom Robot's gun. A trade-off that was only really worth it if you could get your foe into a situation where a series of good solid-bullet hits would seriously damage your foe, letting you follow up with more shots until you'd won.

"On a show, but we're foals smashing toys together, as we try to pretend we exist!"

As for the models of Custom Robots, each Model had a different overall aesthetic for each of the individual Custom Robot heads and torsos in each model's lineup. General Soldiers were made to look like either Great War-era military units or the military vehicles the Ministry Mares had experimented with near the start of the war, only they'd been made bulier and brighter-coloured, slightly redesigned to be all cheery and brightly-coloured to appeal to young foals and other
beginners. Strike Enforcers were dressed like the holy Crusaders of old, heavily-armoured knights in shining armour that came in a variety of metallic colours. Rogue Warriors were all pointy, spike-y, and edge-y, covered in spikes and pointy edges, all dark colours with shiny black highlights and bone-white skull logos painted here and there. Roaring Avalanches were beasts, quadrupedal lions and tigers made of rock and gemstone. Well, made of tough metals painted up to look like rocks and gemstones, often with white-painted 'Diamond' segments with little blue lines running across it to make it seem more real. Those things were made to look like robots that weren't made to look pretty but to crush enemies and win fights instead, giving them a license to make those things look like they were designed to crush enemies and win fights instead of looking pretty. Thunder Kings were built like humanoid robots that could twist themselves about and fold their body parts to reshape themselves into pre-war planes, experimental aircraft models, sci-fi vehicles, mi-sci-fi vehicles, and anything else that flew, besides birds, which some other Custom Robot manufacturer had called dibs on and practically patented. What's Mi-Sci-Fi? That's Military Sci-Fi, something this Vault's writers had invented. Stories of warring with alien Xeno Scum over the unique resources of their worlds or your own, facing off against armies from the future or past while armed with nothing but the coolest shit your story's writer could think of, flooring it in god-tier tanks while utterly colossal behemoths of fictional metals ten thousand times better than steel marched into battle beside you… Well, when it came to what was called 'Soft' Mi-Sci-Fi. 'Hard' Mi-Sci-Fi stories were brutal, gritty, grim and dark stories about under-supplied and doomed troops with low morale desperately trying to hold on in the face of enemy assaults that could come from anywhere, at any time, and could come in the form of individual strike teams or mass wave assaults of angry warm bodies.

"Who are they to control us like robots, who are they to control our machines?"

The more recent Thunder Kings looked like bipedal fighters with plane parts sticking out of their body parts, parts that were used when they folded themselves up in mid-air to briefly function as fighter jets, that was to be expected. But in a somewhat controversial movement, as the place had started running out of old aircraft to base Thunder Kings robots on, they hadn't touched a real aircraft in forty years. The whole time, they'd used imaginary, theoretical aircraft that had never been built or used in war, and this month's newest Robot would only look like a realistic fighter or bomber plane if you were lucky.

"Who are they to cover up their evil with that shiny and chrome-y sheen?"

Sunrise personally felt this place should split up their Thunder Kings line into three separate models: First, the standard Thunder Kings model, which would focus on military aircraft and original aircraft that looked realistically 'Military'. Second, a heavier, slower, sturdier model based on bomber planes designed to be aerial juggernauts, immovable behemoths that ignored what you threw at them while they unleashed hell upon you. Boasting high armour, a low ground speed, and a longer, faster air dash, these things would be designed to function as flying walls that crushed you through overwhelming firepower or attrition, whichever came first. And third, a faster air-focused model based entirely around the more 'Out there' concepts this company had experimented with, and the alien-focused sci-fi literature. Spacecrafts, with long sloping segments and pointless artistic flourishes that also functioned as jets thanks to magic.

"HEY!" A furious filly's voice snapped from inside, and the music stopped as the musician froze up for a second. The drums continued for a moment, until Rave Moss hit a button to shut those off. "Play the music I approved, and nothing else!"

Rave moss groaned, hit some numerical buttons on his keyboard, and started playing something else with a keyboard that currently felt like pretending it was a big-ass band with far too many trumpets. It was bright, it was cheerful, it was cheesy and a little fake and it practically ordered you to dance. "My darling, tonight is the night! We can dance until the morning's bright! My sun is rising just for
you!

Sunrise decided he'd save that design split idea for next time he saw the owner of this place, however, as he had one hell of a reason to be here, and the sooner he got that over with, the better.

He shook his head to clear it of expository thought-recap, hit the door's Open button, and went inside.

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Level Up!

New Perk: Lucky Hit- You deal 5 additional points of Melee Damage for every point of Luck you have.
A pretty great establishment, a nice market stall for Custom Robot parts and frames in the massive pre-war market this floor sometimes felt like. At least, he was pretty sure that was what this place felt like. He'd never actually been to a pre-war marketplace. He would have loved to visit one, before the war, before the Megaspells fell. He would have loved to see all the different things on sale, from all the greatest minds in Equestria. He would have loved all the different ponies running around and buying them with those neat-looking pre-war coins called "Bits".

But there was one thing he would have loved a lot more than that. He'd often read of this thing in the Pre-War Era called a "World's Fair", where different countries all over the world sent out their delegates, their scientists, their famous celebrities, in a group guarded by their own guards, who existed to serve as living symbols of wealth rather than actual guards. All of these groups of the best minds the planet had to offer would be sent to Canterlot, like a worldwide version of the Equestria Games, but instead of competing in running speed, javelin tossing distance, or jump length, each of the foreign groups would set up a stall in one particular big building Princess Celestia owned, and they would compete with each other to show off the greatest and best thing their country, its culture, and its citizens were able to build.

You'd see technological marvels from some countries, pictures of big buildings and monuments alongside scale replicas of those things from other things, and no matter what amazing thing every other culture brought to this massive game of Show-And-Tell, it would always get absolutely, completely and utterly, violently and hilariously, spectacularly, sloppily, and soppingly dicked on by Equestria's latest technological marvels, arcane works of brilliance, and architectural triumphs. Each civilization would bring their best thing, whatever that best thing was this year, and Equestria would shit all over them by showing off what we naturally did better. We didn't even need to be told what other cultures were going to bring, so we could prepare something that would one-up them for the sake of political showboating, we'd just see what they had and then show them what we did better on our own before they showed up.

It was a wonderful tradition, Sunrise believed. While it didn't exactly embody the best traits of Equestrian society, it one-upped all other major players on the world's stage in every field each country prided itself on, and embodied the spirit of fair competition while displaying Equestria's natural superiority. Sure, some might have hated working so hard on a project you thought would be great, only to see it effortlessly one-upped by a whole race of ultimate life forms, but they knew better than to admit this. After all, if they called this acted-out metaphor for global politics unfair, manipulative, or even rigged completely, they would look like sore losers. And if they refused to take part, well, that would mean showing weakness and practically bowing out of global politics altogether.

Before the war, Equestria was a great country in more ways than one, after all. A country over fifty-seven million kilometres squared in size, easily standing above all other lands as the crown jewel on this beautiful planet known as Planet Equestria, a wonderfully fertile sphere 160,000 miles in circumference. Globally, Equestria was first in education, first in science, first in literacy, first in magical studies, first in equine rights and worker protections, first in infrastructure when it came to the Major Cities and who-gives-a-fuck-th when it came to the far-away rural towns in the countryside that chose to stick to the simple ways, and first in so many other things...

However, we weren't first in everything.
Such as crime rates! Ha, that was funny. It's funny because Equestria had barely any crime at all. The law was typically broken around one to twenty times per week, an impressive feat when most other countries have thousands of crimes carried out per month.

But in all seriousness, while we Equestrians weren't the first in EVERYTHING, it sure as fuck felt like it quite often.

Ah, to be alive back then, and to see Equestria when it was still a testament to Equestria's kindness, high IQ, and love, rather than a grim reminder that too much of anything can kill you, even things like forgiveness, love, pacifism, and mercy.

In any case, Sunrise thought this floor was a bit like what some books said about Markets, a bit like what some books said about Malls, and a bit like what some books said about Shopping Districts. He supposed this floor was a bit of all three.

Speaking of this place...

This place felt unnervingly empty to Sunrise, as only four ponies were in this room, not counting himself. Three young ponies and one middle-aged hag of a mare had been stationed at desks scattered around the room. The hag was using a brown cloth to polish a one-foot-tall quadrupedal Custom Robot, of the General Soldier variety. The robot was a model of a bright red mare with short cobalt hair in that hairstyle Rainbow Dash had, her eyes were green, and a green helmet was atop her head, a rounded short-brimmed semicircle of metal that stayed on her head because it had been masterfully welded on, lacking any sort of strap or cable. While that hag polished her robot, the other three ponies – Two stallions, one mare – were hard at work as they filled out page after page of digital paperwork using the brick-like Pip-Buck "Tablet" models, bulky things that could survive a nuclear blast, but couldn't handle you poking the touch screen a bit too hard without the touch screen's sensors glitching out and selecting the worst possible option currently on your screen.

Sunrise walked through, ignored, as everypony focused on their work.

His fame acted strangely here, as some ponies loved him for being great at games, some ponies hated him for being rich and famous, some ponies loved him for being a rich and famous pony who came from nothing, some knew nothing of him and made an effort to show off how little they cared about his fame on other floors, some ponies loved him for leading The Dark Stars, which had "Freedom" as one of its virtues and "Unregulated Free Market" as one of its promises for the world it would create when in power, a big hit with ponies who hated the current Overmare's policies on what was too good and too powerful for civilians to be allowed, especially when it came to Custom Robots.

Heading for another sliding door in the back, he hit the open button, heard the pumping pistons and whirring of a minigun before he saw the source, and when he heard an old mare screaming all sorts of stupid and tacky overblown profanities about Celestia and Luna and cunts and clits and anal lava sopping clopping fucky sucky triple cock orgasm rape blah blah blah, it was too late for him, because he had walked in on a cougar getting absolutely fucking devastated by the biggest sexbot he'd ever seen.

"MAXIMUS PRIIIIIIIIIIIIIIME!", She screamed.

It was a lurid scene, the bedcovers ruffled and genuinely soaked as if rampaging rioters armed with squirt guns and buckets of water had attacked the place, and puddles were here and there on the ground, reflective and glistening, thick and disgusting like some kind of yellowish soup. A full-sized Sentry Bot seven feet in height, built out of ultra-heavy extra-thick dark steel rounded segments, stood firm upon his three giant wheels and started to overheat from the strain as it pounded and thrust its right arm back and forth with such force, it was a good thing the bed was a steel-framed
one with its occupant tied up and chained to it, to prevent the skewered mare from rising up and getting stuck on the robot's arm like meat on the end of a fork. The Sentry Bot's right arm had once been tipped with a powerful 5mm minigun, and Sunrise could tell at a glance because he'd always been pretty good with machines, and because the overall rotary system had been kept intact for the colossal rapidly-spinning 155mm pink-rubber-coated stallionhood dotted with small draconic diamond nubs the war machine was violating the old mare with. He was pretty sure he'd seen mares in Sexual Education videos in the middle of giving birth who'd stretched themselves out less than this whore in her late forties and her eye-catchingly mind-scarringly stretched service entrance. Holy shit, forget fitting his whole hoof and muscular forelimb in there, he was pretty sure he could fit one of every gun he owned in there and still have enough wiggle room to consider trying to smuggle a rocket launcher inside her. He'd seen drawings of old cannons with a smaller bore than this mare's borehole.

It looked like the Custom Robot and Warbot servicer… was getting serviced.

As if the universe had decided to punish him for that pun, something happened.

With almost supernatural accuracy, a squirt of something arced from the mare's ruined end like a spray of blood from a large sucking chest wound, flying right at his face. If he was any less agile, he wouldn't have leaped back and to the left in time, and his marefriend would have some very awkward questions for him as she and every other mare in the Vault he walked past smelled her scent in particular on him, while every stallion he walked past simply picked up the scent of 'Mare'. Hell, considering the thickness of this mare's 'Maintenance Fluid' and its disgustingly intense scent, it might have even done serious and potentially-permanent damage to his eyes.

Sunrise rolled his eyes, his nose scrunching at the scent. "I suppose you're busy," Was what he meant to announce in stunned surprise with just a hint of hilariously elegant sarcasm and snark, though loudly enough for her to notice over the sound of gears whirring and pistons pumping and steam releasing and her own ancestors crying in shame, but more than a little disgusted anger crept into his voice as one of his forehooves slammed the door's button, swooshing the door shut. She looked back at him in shock, her black eye-makeup running from the tears running down her face, and she meant to twist her face look guilty and apologetic and she succeeded for almost a whole second, but then the repurposed war machine must have jackhammered her particularly hard or struck a slightly less dulled area of nerves, because her face was overwhelmed by a look of bliss so exaggerated, it almost felt like a twisted and bitter mockery of the real deal, her overblown groan crying out and suddenly silenced by her room's airtight and soundproof steel door.

Fucking FUCK!

She was just… she was just stretched so fucking wide! By a fucking robot!

He hated seeing shit like this.

He hated seeing shit like this, but more than that, he hated that he wasn't even able to have that much of a reaction to this kind of shit any more, after the shit he'd seen in the upper-class parties. He'd seen some serious shit. He'd seen mares grow cocks and fuck their husbands. He'd seen ponies nibble on and lick hooves. He'd seen equine centipedes of mares and stallions, dicks on each one, making cock-to-asshole conga lines that stretched for miles. He'd seen ponies take dumps while screwing. He'd seen ponies use sexual spells illegally in duels, forcing ponies to grow quivering cocks on their own faces, their screams of terror sending sprays of semen onto the caster.

And one time, at one disgusting orgy his wife forced him to show up for so they could be seen watching from the big fancy "Sex King and Sex Queen" thrones on the far side of the room...
Well, these were thrones the usual "Sex King" and "Sex Queen" stood beside, eagerly and hornily watching the action as they switched from watching the degeneracy to checking if their audience of two enjoyed the sight...

Sunrise and Emerald were here to act all casual and watch it all go down together for the sake of impressing some degenerates who'd made themselves a fucking "Sex Society" under the Overmare's nose, something like a worker's union except it was full of overly-pampered rich assholes with nothing better to do except fuck all day with their magically-defoaled and sterile genitalia when not banding together to act as a cock-obsessed voter block that would do anything to prevent anti-fucking laws from being passed anywhere...

On that day, he'd seen some yellow-maned white stallion use magic to not just turn his averagely-sized white cock into something he could use as a makeshift baseball bat with its thickness and hardness, but to also infuse it with transformative magic and turn it into a living snake-like creature that coiled and grew and writhed to get everypony's attention before snapping out at the nearest life form, some mare with a blue mane, light blue eyes, and a pink body, expanding its piss-hole like a mouth and swallowing that mare's pony's leg like a fangless version of the kind of snake that swallowed its prey whole, he'd forgotten what they were called, but... Fuck! He'd then seen the snake-ified cock proceed to expand and contract and tense up and relax in a rhythmic fashion to suck the captured life form further and further up through the cock, growing and expanding its 'Mouth' to engulf the rest of the barely-struggling pony's body, and he'd seen the most disgusting face of contentment, happiness, fucking bliss on the devoured mare's face before that was swallowed up, too. And then he'd watched, disgusted and stunned like a deer watching a meteor approach, almost fucking awed at the depths rich degenerates could sink to, as the absorbed pony was shrunken down during her trip down his cock, before being deposited into the expanding nutsack as if the nutsack was some kind of massive bloated stomach instead of every mammal's testicle storage area. He still remembered the sight of a part of that nutsack stretching out, around the captured pony's face and forehooves as she repeatedly slammed her forehooves on the fleshy walls of her prison in what almost looked like a futile attempt to escape, but he could see the fucking eye-holes and grinning lips in the impression her face made from the inside of his nutsack. And then her struggling face and limbs went away as the interior of that nutsack proceeded to digest the pony into jizz, as the pony attached to the magical cock and impossible nutsack lolled back like he was in some kind of blissful fucking food coma. And then some other mare with cream-yellowy-white skin and a shockingly-long floor-brushingly long mane of dark honey brown with matching brown eyes, who'd previously used magic to put additional puffy anuses here and there in her skin so she could service more ponies, drippingly walked over from the circle of cocks she'd dutifully finished off before lowering her untouched (Today, at least) real fuckhole down onto the swollen cock, barely needing to pump herself up and down more than twice before the end of what must have been, for them, the hottest thing these fucking animals had done all day...

Came.

Sunrise Stardust had watched, unable to turn away or think a single coherent thought, as the physical and metamagical assault on sex itself continued, her gut area swelling to an impossible and disgusting size as the magic of his cock seeped into her while the liquefied still-conscious white life form within that cock rushed into her, the white slime creature that retained its eye colour and almost retained its facial features fucking cheering and screaming like this was some sort of fucking rollercoaster ride. He'd watched the third worst performance art piece he'd ever been forced to sit through as it seemingly ended, the stallion's balls gradually running out of jizz as the mare leaned back and her gut swelled to a size that would have forced her to crush the life form beneath her through sheer weight of the volume of liquid stored inside the bloated womb now four times the size of her own body if the laws of physics themselves hadn't walked out of the room in disgust two minutes ago.
And then she just rolled off him, with ease that suggested she'd done this before, if not with him then with other ponies, her limbs and head moving up as she rolled onto the front of her monumentally bloated stomach as it began to slowly shrink down, her marehood magically unable to leak even a single drop. As if reality was a story composed by somepony who had pieced together an unnervingly inaccurate mental picture of how sex worked by the mind of a foal who'd heard fractured and disjointed bits and pieces here and there, he watched as her stomach shrank, as if the swimming pools of semen and the semen-pony merrily swimming through it were being absorbed by a big sponge somewhere inside her.

When her stomach had shrunk to the still-rather-bloated size of pregnancy's final day, she gave birth, right in the middle of the fucking orgy. She gave birth to a five-year-old version of the mare the stallion had absorbed, and she was excitedly screaming with glee as if this was the most fun she'd had in years. Before everypony's eyes – Well, the eyes of everypony who wasn't used to this shit, and was preoccupied with fucking the sentience out of themselves for a few more hours – the mare gradually grew by a year or two every few seconds, and then her rate of accelerated also began to accelerate.

And then Sunrise noticed that the mare had gained two new streaks in her otherwise-monotone mane, one from the stallion she'd recently entered the nutsack of, and one from the "Mother" who gave birth to her.

"Let's go again!" She shouted as a thirteen-year-old filly, before rapidly returning to her fourty-something age.

Then, and only then, could Sunrise Stardust vomit.

And then his marefriend fucking gently helped him out of there like he was a drunken asshole embarrassing himself at somepony else's wedding, making the excuse that some bad tuna he'd eaten was catching up with him.

And then, as they headed for the door and opened it, the two ponies saw a group of five scared foals huddled together, close to the hooves of one practically-drooling blue-maned green degenerate with his cock out, its tip dangling a foot from the ground.

And then the degenerates present cheered on the arrival, except for the "Sex King" and "Sex Queen" who looked shocked and terrified and guilty, but not even slightly as guilty as they should have looked.

Emerald was furious. If she was alone, she would have dropped the weak and helpless persona and lost most of her shit, pistol-whipping each degenerate to death in a row while warning them that if she was attacked or stopped from killing, everypony and their families would be arrested and executed. Only when somepony threatened to rat the worst out to save his or her own skin would she stop killing.

But she wasn't alone.

She knew that, and in every inch of her being, she could feel it as magic built up within her husband. She had a balefire megaspell of what was normally warmth and love and kindness, right next to her. And for the first time, she was going to see it go off.

Sunrise? Sunrise saw the foals. Sunrise remembered all that he'd seen before, and could imagine what he was about to see.
He could feel the rage within him, and it felt like his blood was boiling.

He remembered the first time he felt this way, and the ideas it had given him.

Ideas he locked away deep inside himself, next to the spells he'd rather pretend he never read.

Finally, he could act on those ideas.

Sunrise was ready to go beyond fury, and some strange part of him was almost fucking glad to see the foals, because it meant he could start killing the unclean.

And kill, he did.

Pure fury shot from his horn in the form of blazing golden magic, spiralling tornadoes of barely-controlled holy golden flame burning away terrified ponies and boiling all kinds of fluids within their fleshy containers, bodies became dried and eyeless husk almost instantaneously as his flames hit their mark, before their bodies crackled alight like dry wooden logs, spreading wildly as Sunrise chose making more flame over controlling what was already there. A small part of him endeavored to keep the flames away from his wife and the fleeing foals, but aside from that...

In that moment, the whole world could burn. This damn world, that had brought foals to such a place, where such disgusting things were being done... It could burn.

The foals fled, and so did the one who brought them, but a long stream of golden flame was sent out of the room after him, golden flames infused with blinding white light. The fire moved with a speed that approached bullets in flight, and as the fleeing pedophile galloped around corners and scrambled to keep his grip, the purified and purifying flame moved at harsh and sharp ninety-degree angles, always pointing right towards their target, the flames giving off gradually-fading trails of sparkling white light. As the pedophile picked a random Stable door and screamed, slamming the button that would open the sturdy blast door, the golden light within the flame's tip twisted and shifted to form the strong, stern, furious face of a dragon, whose maw opened wide to clamp down on the degenerate, its gleaming golden teeth biting the rapist in half. The pedo screamed, the door opened, he tried to drag himself into the door even as blood poured out of him and his intestines trailed behind him, but the flames caught up with the light and consumed him.

This terrified the family of four who owned this room and saw the death happen, right before their eyes, and they screamed even after the burning dragon of light and flame had dissipated.

But back in what was quickly becoming the world's most one-sided warzone, as every third spell from his horn destabilized and fizzled out halfway through being cast to be replaced with something faster and deadlier, Sunrise couldn't even think straight. His subconscious sensed the gathering magical enemies of degenerate spellcasters, some shielding themselves with flimsy shields and others trying to gather the magical strength needed to do all kinds of disgusting things to his genitals, and his flames sought them out next, melting and boiling them from the sensitive horns down. The screams and failed spells and foul scents, everything felt like it was happening to somepony else, miles away. And at the same time, all of this shit was happening around him, the screams and heat and flame and death spiralling around him and washing over his senses. All of this shit was disgusting enough, but real foals - something strange and unknowable in what he could only describe as his soul could sense what he could only describe as youthful energy within those foals, though it was small and terrified into submission in these poor things before he started killing - shouldn't be brought within a hundred floors of these creatures.

The room's security camera had been disabled long ago, but it wasn't melted into slag, it was burned into nothingness, it was consumed.
Right now, this room was his whole world, and everything dark and disgusting and wrong in this world was consumed by the glorious purifying flames of his hate.

When Sunrise's righteous fury had subsided enough for him to think clearly and once again see what he was doing, when a thought could be heard in his head besides "KILL", he saw a stained and blackened room filled with naught but the dying embers of his own light-infused flame, steam, bloody mist, blackened charcoal dust, himself, and one half-terrified green Unicorn in a sharp-edged rotating green pyramid of a shield, a shield that slowed and melted away as she collapsed in exhaustion, her magical reserves life-threateningly depleted from the sheer heat alone.

He remembered turning his head to look at her, and where a scared little filly would have begged for her life, assuming that he'd want revenge on her for arranging this meeting with the sex addicts masquerading as a proper organization and union with lobbyists and all, or that in his current state, he'd simply see another warm body to burn into nothingness...

Where a controlling or domineering pony would have been furious that he'd lost control, and by extension, she'd lost control of him...

Where a wannabe-lecturer would have berated him for losing control with an organization of beasts blackmailing each other to stay in the regular orgies, an organization that liked to think of itself as important...

Compassion and understanding were clear on her face, and sorrow, sorrow was there as well.

She was sorry for bringing him here. Not because what he saw him drove him to burn and kill, but because what he saw here disgusted him so much.

She was sorry for putting him through this.

And that, that was what snapped him out of it.

The guilt of making such a pretty face look like that.

He didn't collapse from exhaustion or faint or anything so cliche, he simply regained control of his body, and his horn stopped glowing as the agonizing electric shocks of pain running through his body served as his own form's protest against how life-threateningly hard he had just pushed his magic, and how much of it he'd burned through in such a dangerously short period of time. It was like the pain one felt after pushing oneself too hard at the gym, but so much worse. Still, he powered through the agony and focused on his breathing, refusing to scream even once.

In the coming days, they would lie about what happened here.

They would say this was an attempted sting operation, an investigation into the Sex Society and its suspected pedophile tendencies that went south when the degenerates attempted to beat down and rape the Overmare's daughter. They would say Sunrise Stardust heroically saved them by burning enough ponies to break Emerald free, and the two magically murdered the rape organization together. And as the rest of the Sex Society begged for mercy and swore on the defiled graves of their ancestors that what happened here was not normal for such an organization, Sunrise offered the organization the right to continue existing, and offered its members the right to continue living, if the organization turned over its pedophiles and "Tried to remain more vigilant, to ensure that something like this would never again happen under their noses".

Or, in other words, never touched another foal again.

They took the deal, and so many more of its members than Sunrise was expecting either turned
themselves in, or found themselves turned in. Could it be that somepony present survived the warzone long enough to tell others what had happened here, warning them with tales of his righteous anger and his prodigious proficiency in Light and Fire magic?

No, he decided, that was impossible. The strongest shield mage in the Stable nearly exhausted her magic trying to shield herself from the heat his holy fire was giving off.

Sunrise didn't awake, exactly, but when enough of the memory had passed, he noticed that he was still in Seventh Heaven Robotics. He blinked, and looked around, seeing ponies for whom this shit was completely routine continue to work in peace. He remembered the sexual shit he'd just seen, sure. And he remembered the bitter fucking parody of childbirth itself he'd seen in that fucking room...

He grit his teeth and an expression of disgust and pure rage overtook his face.

Fuck, now THAT fucking P-T-S-Dildo of a memory was back in his head!

That gruesome image... Every gruesome image replayed in his mind, and he tried very, very hard to think of the massive and mighty and grossly incandescent sun burning radiantly, alone in the void, instead of that room and the fucking erudite and scholarly argument against the theoretical existence of a benevolent deity it contained.

He tried harder to think of the sun, and all the planets around it in space. Sure, he'd gotten this mental technique from a book on sex and how to do sex better, and it said you were supposed to think unsexy thoughts to postpone your orgasm, and the book said you were supposed to think of dead puppies or some other unsexy thing, but he found the thought of the silent, lonely majesty of major celestial bodies served much better as a mental pallet-cleanser. Nothing was more humbling, more all-consuming, or more lonely than space, and even now, even after he'd made so many powerful friends and gained the adoration, fear, or respect of so many, the feeling of loneliness still haunted him.

Well, when the coup happened on the day he would leave and take his friends with him, he'd be sure to spend more time with his friends! He definitely needed to get to know each and every one of them better. When he'd built and secured some defences and proper food and water supplies for his army, of course!

Speaking of his astral method to keep bad memories and bad thoughts at bay, he didn't know of any PTSD-related books that mentioned this topic, and he knew that PTSD was something diagnosed and officially recognized rather late into the war, but he sometimes felt like making a book about that technique. Surely, it could help somepony out there who suffered with bad urges, or bad thoughts, or bad memories, or something.

Space...

The infinite spaciousness of space, and the majestic beauty of all that it contained...

How strange, wondrous, and delightfully paradoxical it was, that the planets and stars within space were so massive to one such as he, and yet, so small and insignificant to the universe!

Yes, space was such an awe-inspiring, breathtaking thing.

Certainly something so much more worthy of being thought about than that room and all that happened within it.

Speaking of the day he saw that fucking insult to reproduction, he thought of all the messages of
thanks he'd gained from members of the Sex Society, thanking him for purging the degeneracy from its ranks. As easy as it would be to think of the organization as a purely evil thing for degenerates who fucked all day, so many more of its members were mid-class ponies who'd been invited up and given passes to get there, allowing them to climb the ranks for a day or two and fuck for a while before descending back to their old floors with all kinds of stories to tell their friends.

So many just accepted and joined the organization to get laid, and had no interest in any of the more disgusting shit that went on in the higher-up rooms, where the more senior members did their things. He considered getting angry that so many of them knew something was wrong with their organization and failed to do anything about it, but no. No, ordering the rest of the organization killed wouldn't help anything. He wasn't even sure if he'd be able to pull something like that off again.

They certainly weren't going to invite him around for an orgy any time soon.

Still, many messages sent to him through his Pip-Buck were from young ponies who thanked him, yes, but also promised to never let such disgusting creatures get near the top again.

Soon, the Sex Society even drew up a formal list of allowed and disallowed fetishes. It was such a strange compromise of an argument, one that had probably been argued about within the leaderless organization, which was led by a Sex Council now that the elected Sex King and Sex Queen were dead. Yes to piss and hoof-licking, but no to shit and blood-letting. Yes to fake cocks, fake pussies, fake mouths, and inflatable ponies with holes, but no to licking assholes. Yes to vibrators, shock sticks, and beating willing partners who got off on and sexually enjoyed pain, whatever the fuck they were called, but no to verbally abusing them. Yes to owning and privately using cock cages and chastity belts, but no to being paraded around orgy rooms with those things on. Yes to bondage and violent beatings, but no to roleplayed rape. Yes to everything previously said no to, though exclusively in painted pictures and written words looked at and fucked to in a group, except for foalfiddling, which was so double-banned, even pedophilic works of "Art" were banned. Turn one in now for a quick cash reward! Create one now and you'll be fucking shot!

He thought of how the remaining Sex Society members loved him - and his wife, but mostly him - for purifying the organization like this and showing mercy to its remaining members.

Well, they'd probably love him as a leader even more when he removed the legal and magical restraints on their abilities to bear foals, on the condition that their "Experiments" in ALL forms of sexual deviancy come to a permanent end, so they can focus on raising foals properly.

Still, with the mental images of a mare made of semen and a mare stretched wide by a robot fist dancing in a taunting manner in his own mind, he missed when he'd been able to instantly vomit at the sight of even a little degeneracy, killing the mood for those engaging in it. Well, when he wasn't in the presence of degenerates who got off on THAT, too. Fuck, the absolute size of that mare's…

He didn't care how annoying it was when his girlfriend went into one of her thankfully-rare "I know it's silly for me to think this, and it's probably a dick move for a married mare to just up and say this to her husband, even though I only mention this in private with you and even though the alternative is to deal with these unwanted thoughts and desires alone and in silence, something I normally do anyway, and I know you'll fuck the stupid right out of me for bringing this up so that I'll never bring this up again for a year or three, but sometimes I wish I was a slightly-lower-class mare so I could be used at parties like a public-use fleshlight! I hate it and I hate these urges and feelings and desires but part of me still thinks that would be fun! Your giant cock satisfies me so well, but I have been culturally conditioned by my Vault to want to be a cool popular whore like all the other cool popular whores, even though I hate the thought of becoming a whore in general! Arg, the pain of being psychologically aware that my mind has been slightly fucked with through cultural osmosis! Oh,
being a poor little rich mare born with power just sucks the biggest and gayest and sweatiest of balls!” speeches. After that room, after that reminder of how bad a creature he could have ended up with for a wife, he could stomach fifty more of those rants, at least, before he decided to vent his building frustration with the topic by saying something hilarious and witty his social expertise told him she didn’t want to hear. Fuck, he was glad she was a virgin before she met him, and he was glad she’d remained faithful to him even when he was busy, and even though he was reluctant to do Anal sex on any day other than her birthday.

He had a lot of respect for the mare’s willpower when it came to resisting this Vault's fucking carousel ride of available cocks to ride for some spare change and a bite to eat or even a warm bed to sleep in.

And wasn't it strange that every unmarried, divorced, or unfaithful mare he saw above the age of twenty-ish tended to descend into degeneracy faster than a mare’s erotic novel's male protagonist's impossibly-huge cock shot forth from its sheath to slap loudly against the floor when it descended from its place of rest at the sight of whatever generic-ass plain-ass or unpleasant tight-ass bitch of a mare filled the protagonist role of this unreadable shlock by default?

Why?

Why was it that when stallions in this Vault fucked female-looking sexbots, they treated them nicely and respectfully (Usually. Mostly. A small minority beat, mistreated, and even broke their sexbots. But hey, that's why robots were made to serve those roles, not ponies) to the point where it became creepy for whatever low-level grunt was paid in food to clean them, but whenever mares wanted sexbots, their eyes drifted from the impossibly large and handsome models, the impossibly small and cute coltish "Pre-War Pop Band for teens" kind of models, and even the "Your Little Dragon" models designed to act weirdly foallike as they humped you, and even the "Hybrid Fantasy" models so many stallions went wild for(snake-ponies, horse-ponies, griffon-ponies, dragon-ponies… He was glad the Vault banned Zebra-pony models long ago! Somehow, to him, that felt even more degenerate than the idea of a forty-something mare shagging some tiny little baby dragon designed to act like the little brother/son/number one personal assistant you never had), and even the "Mares Packing Extra" models that were literally just sexbot mares with functioning cocks in addition to their usual equipment, their eyes drifted to fake cocks mounted on machine tools, power tools, the kind of things you'd expect to see on a pre-war building site, and… Well, Maximus Primes.

It was funny, he thought, that despite all of this, so many mares and books claimed Stallions were historically such sex-crazed dogs that mares had to evolve evolutionary advantages specifically for sex, like the ability to clench womb muscles to self-terminate pregnancies at will and the ability to "Clamp up" so tightly that not even a hammer and chisel could get in, let alone a rapist.

Why was there such a disparity when one compared never-talked-about hidden dildos and blatantly-obvious Sentry Rapebots with the kinds of sexbots stallions went wild for?

Perhaps, where most stallions bought one sex doll and emotionally bonded with it, seeing it as an opportunity to live out their "Having a loving sexual partner who will never leave me or betray me" fantasies, even if it was just a chunk of plastic and fake fur-coated rubber mounted on a mechanical steel frame, mares saw sexbots as an opportunity to live out fantasies no Stallion could replicate without the aid of some serious magic.

And who bothered to learn sex magic any more?

…A joke, of course. I'd accidentally learned- Fuck. Sunrise had accidentally learned far, far too much from watching rich orgy rooms and pretending to be unmoved by the sight, or even a little impressed by it at times, but far too shy and reserved and tied to my mare to do anything but watch.
He'd once gone through a brief phase when he was convinced picking up those degenerate spells could provide him with magical knowledge that could be useful in the crafting of proper combat spells, in addition to spells he could use in the event of a life-or-death emergency for an edge in combat.

But... No. Just no. There were some spells that nopony deserved to have cast upon them. Sure, there were some ponies out there who deserved even worse, but even now, the thought of casting Those Spells on any living and unwilling creature brought bile to his throat. Damn his natural equine moral clarity! While it allowed him to know it was right to slaughter all but the innocent in that room, damn it for not slipping up and allowing him to treat the evil worse than they deserved to be treated! Damn it so fucking hard!

...Where the fuck was this mare? Sunrise didn't keep track of how many seconds he'd spent staring at the front door to her room, but he was sure it had been too long.

He sighed. Why did this bother him so much? He'd seen ponies getting fucked before. He'd seen ponies doing far worse before. He'd seen fucking furniture dedicated to degenerate practices, ceiling hooks you could use when you wanted to hang tied-up ponies from the ceiling, fuck, he'd even seen constructs made from wood and metal designed to rapidly spank pony asses or shove one thing into their rears after another. He'd seen ponies chained up like slaves, enchanted vibrators keeping them on the edge of "The Finish Line" while enchanted cocks went to town on their asses. He'd seen sextbots getting used for gimmicky Warbot and Custom Robot matches, both in exhibition matches where the serious robot-users were paid to hold back and get their beloved murderbots molested by famous sextbots beloved for different reasons, and in serious matches where some sick fuck seriously used a steam-powered magic-enhanced crotch-mounted dildo piston weapon to defeat and humiliate their mechanical foes and those who piloted them, and shit like this wasn't even uncommon in these matches. He'd even seen the opposite, where customized Warbots were built with sets of sharp-toothed crushing jaws on the rear of their robotic crotches, designed to bite threateningly at foes and crush guns, limbs, and exposed parts into worthless scrap, breaking off and chewing up anything those robots got their "Rear Jaws" on.

He'd even seen robots designed to have both, but at that point, he was used to seeing shit like that. So seeing shit like that, and upgraded versions designed to launch oil slicks from this hole or that, and robots capable of expelling assorted magichemical fluids that could stick robots to walls or the ground, or melt and rust whatever touched the stuff, or could even get electrified at will for the world's most degenerate-looking ground trap, these were things he was gradually getting used to seeing.

He wasn't used to seeing what had to be the biggest robot-mounted dildo in the Vault, something that would probably own a World Record if that one old World Record Book-publishing company still existed, getting used to utterly destroy the mind and body of a mare who seemingly wouldn't be satisfied with anything less.

Perhaps, it was the unexpectedness of it all. He hadn't expected to see a mare get willingly violated by a titanic machine today, so he hadn't raised his mental shields. He hadn't chosen a song to forcefully play loudly inside his own head, or loaded up a pre-recorded song on his Pip-Buck, to drown out the noise. He hadn't entered that strange "Small movements, low energy consumption, minimal breath intake and output" mode one entered when used to vile smells and air even the Air Recycler Talismans had trouble purifying.

...Seriously, was the old mare stuck or something? How long did it take to yell a shutdown command, wriggle yourself off the end of a Plus-Magnum-Size Sexbot, and inject a few ml's of Stimpak fluid into yourself to heal up faster? Was she actually stuck? He was NOT grabbing onto
her and pulling her off, if that was the case. Not even if she offered a huge payment for doing this, and offered to pay extra if he used his magic to pull her by the hair, instead.

…Alright, if it was a really, really big payment, then… Maybe. But he wouldn't fuck her for cash, or do anything beyond that. Any sexuality she derived from any encounter between them could only come from her own body and twisted sense of sensuality, not from him. He had some standards, after all.

Hell, even considering how big he was where it counted and how hard he could slam with it, would that used-up mare even feel a thing?

…Then again, he was pretty sure he could use magic to expand his already-titanic cock to a size greater than the one that robot had used. He wasn't sure if he'd be able to move around with it, or if his heart would be able to take the strain, but the one time he'd used magic to expand his dong, neither had been too much of an issue for himself or his marefriend, as she treated that little something – no, that colossal something - far too big for her with respect, admiration, hell, perhaps even the term worship could be applied to how she caressed and cared for something that could make body pillows feel inadequate about not just the size of whatever fictional character was printed on them, but their actual overall size.

He shook his head to try and clear it of such thoughts, but that barely helped. Hoo, magic could let you do some crazy things in the bedroom. He just wished he didn't feel like such a stick-in-the-mud when it came to doing things like sticking himself into her mud. Hole. Her mudhole. Her butthole. Her anus. He couldn't stomach doing anal unless she'd showered and given herself an enema beforehand, something that he often felt guilty and inadequate about. Sure, there was plenty of weird magic shit you could do if you were willing to let magic temporarily mess with your body, or the body of your lover, or both at the same time. But aside from cock growth, the only experimentation he'd done in that field was the time he'd checked with his fiancé if the 'Give selected mare a cock and balls' spell did when cast on his mare. Turns out, it gave her a dick. He wasn't willing to touch it, despite her clear disappointment, so they decided to check what happened when it was cast on him. Turns out, it added two testicles to his nutsack and slapped a second penis on his crotch, above the first, matching its senior in length and girth. It was weird, and she clopped him off with both forehooves while her own cock throbbed and begged for attention, something she seemed to enjoy more than she probably should have. Then again, she'd never had a cock before (Hopefully), so every sensation it brought her was a strange new novelty for her.

And that alone made him feel weird for weeks.

And aside from that… Well, what was there? He hadn't really experimented with magic in the bedroom again after that. Sure, he knew spells to prevent this and that, spells to postpone this or that, spells to make this and that only possible for you when you had your partner's permission to do this and that, but he didn't consider those strange or degenerate, not when you compared them to the shit he'd seen upper-level ponies do to each other in their spare time.

Sometimes, he thought the thought of imitating that shit disgusted him because the thought of ending up like those degenerates disgusted him.

Was that strange? Did that make him less of a stallion, to not want to experiment with weird shit like penises on mares, anal sex, and using a portal to ass-fuck yourself? He didn't know. If it did, then the stallion points he gained by fiercely and righteously ploughing his marefriend's inner fields and coating them white in the traditional manner had to make up for those lost stallion points, surely.

Fswhooosh went the door before him, and 'FUCKING FINALLY!' went the Sunrise Stardust inside Sunrise Stardust's own head. The mare he'd arrived to see finally stepped out to meet him, her
personal Sentry Bot's back panel auto-extended back and out to expose and ventilate its overheating Fusion Core, its blue liquid coolant steaming and evaporating from the sheer temperatures this overclocked fuckbot was reaching.

…Incredible. Absolutely fucking incredible.

Even after the treatment she'd just received, the mare before him was just trotting casually to him, and now, she was standing around as if nothing had happened. She'd used a few drops of Stimpak fluid, alright, maybe even more than a few drops. No pony, mare or stallion, could stand so soon after getting violated so thoroughly, without more than a little aid from a healing potion injector aided by natural and nonmagical healing stimulants. But her personality, the way she acted after he saw her not just nude, but in one position so compromising it threatened to split her into two separate positions before his very eyes… She didn't seem even slightly ashamed. Could that anal ravaging really be so comparatively mundane and routine for her?

Even so, all signs of the earlier depravity had vanished, which meant the wild stallion within Sunrise liked what he saw.

Oh, she was a looker! A real cougar of an older mare, with piercing bone-white eyes. Not a white-to-grey gradient like you'd expect from a white-eyed mare, but a solid bone-white that filled each iris. A nice ass semi-bared by what was an old big-assed dress, before she'd cut a pizza slice-shaped chunk of the fabric off near the front to reveal the steel 'Crinoline' arse-enhancer that gated off a spherical territory around her flanks like some kind of armour. The Crinoline's grid of metal bars had been made to resemble the imposing black gate one might see guarding an old Vampire's castle, though with its spikes pointing down, not up. Her corn-like golden mane had been fluffed up until it rose above her head in what he'd heard locals call a 'Beehive'.

She trotted over to him and placed her extended lips on his cheek, making a loud "Mmmmmmmmm" noise before finally kissing his cheek with a loud "Mmmmmwah! Thank you, dear!"

It almost took Sunrise a moment to remember why he'd visited the place. Oh, right, that bullshit with the radio. "Any time," He answered her.

But that wasn't all he was here for.

He was also here to…

The fuck was he here for, again? Images of that mare getting rectally ravaged were still flashing through his mind, along with confusion that any pony could possibly manage to appear to find any of what he'd just seen so ordinary.

He'd gone here for, uh…

Well, until he remembered…

Well, he was probably never going to get a better chance to ask this question, Sunrise decided. "Why is everypony repeating 'Thunderstruck, Blessed Blade of the Stormseeker' outside?" He asked.

"They're doing it again?" She asked in surprise, and then she smiled as she reassured him, "Oh, it's nothing to worry about. It's just a silly 'Meta Joke' about selling and trading things, something we Tech Sec ponies do all the time. Standing in one place and shouting for a while gets pretty boring, and when you get bored for long enough, you begin laughing at the strangest things…"

I wish I could say I knew the feeling. But my life had been a non-stop barrage of training, studying, building, fighting, suffering, working hard to fake a friendly personality when I was partying to
prove my social worth and desirability to those around me, and more bullshit. When I thought of the mind going to strange places after long, monotonous, mind-numbingly repetitive days, I thought of starving ponies in the library laughing about how hard they'd worked and how they still didn't understand some vital subject and how they'd probably die alone and unloved in some gutter on the Vault's lower levels, if they even lived long enough to get there without their parents killing them for "Shaming them" by being stupid and "Not trying hard enough". I thought of ponies reading shitty escapist literature and writing their own shittier escapist literature, I thought of mentally burned-out husks dreaming of infinite multiverses what was left of their spirit would be able to visit once they'd died, infinite multiverses that took the form of all the worlds they'd read about in books and adventured in through the medium of Pip-Buck Games. I thought of miserable ponies laughing at fantasies of 'Going Stable', developing a bad case of 'Stable Mind', and killing about half of everypony who'd ever wronged them before they were eventually put down. I thought of stupid games and stupid dares and stupid self-imposed challenges getting worse every week until somepony died to change the monotony of their own meaningless lives as powerless and helpless ants for a while. I thought of ponies so miserable, you'd think they'd downed a whole gallon of milk laced with many heaped tablespoons of Silly Sugar one day to get a high they'd chased and never caught, though if you asked anypony, you’d learn that the ponies were that miserable because they’d never experienced that high in the first place, they’d never experienced the joy and purpose having something matter to them gives them, they’d never experienced the feeling of reaching for your dreams and goals and ambitions no matter what, and all they were left with was a hollow emptiness that ate at them from inside because their instincts told them life shouldn't be so horrible. I thought of depressed and suicidal ponies laughing at their own hopelessness, helplessness, and the unfairness of life and the pointlessness of it all, because aside from fantasy, escapist literature, and drugs, laughter was all those ponies had left.

My mind did not go to slightly-bored idiots with stupid fake jobs yelling dumb jokes to each other instead of yelling what they were paid to yell.

To be honest, despite my poor-pony upbringing, or perhaps even because of that, the idea of standing around and yelling stuff counting as a job sounded and felt weird to me. Some part of my subconscious refused to consider regular advertisement to be a real job worthy of respect, even if I did, on the intellectual level, recognize that those with that job would respect me more if I didn't obviously disrespect that job in front of them.

Information. I needed inform- Fuck.

Information. Sunrise Stardust needed information.

And to remind this mare, in a subtle way, what he had done and why he deserved the rewards he wanted.

"You really hate Lone Tree Publishing, and you're willing to fund somepony who knows how to take it down. But why?" Sunrise asked. "Why that company, and not one of the bigger ones?"

"Hold on," She said in surprise. "You don't know why I wanted that company taken down?"

"I knew your son had been hurt, I knew you were hurt, and I knew justice needed to be done. And now that justice has been served, can you tell me everything there is to know about this story?"

"Stories… That's how it all began," She trailed off, dramatically staring into the distance as her eyes unfocused.

She looked down at her wrist, broke character for a moment, fiddled with her Pip-Buck for a few seconds, flicking through each menu in a row as she tried to find the one she wanted… "There we
go," She said, and her Pip-Buck began to play a slow, tragic acoustic guitar melody.

What a weird fecker. Still, Sunrise smiled acceptingly and acceptably. "Something to set the mood?"

"Indeed. My tale is one of betrayal, heartbreak, and above all…” She trailed off.

After seven seconds, Silver guessed that he probably had to say something. "Revenge?" Silver guessed.

"Revenge," The old lady confirmed solemnly. "My youngest son, Black Hawk, decided he wanted to leave the family business behind and become a writer;"

It was hard for him to read this mare… Should he assume that she considered this a bad thing, a terrible job and a terrible waste of talent, and express sympathy for the old mare? Or should he assume that she considered this a good thing, a wonderful and heart-warming success story with a tragic end forced into it, and express approval for the idea of following one's dreams? He decided to go with the safe option in this instance, as he couldn't afford to piss off somepony this vital to his plans. "Writing is a great job, if you can pull it off," Sunrise nodded, deciding not to place bets that didn't offer good winnings.

"He poured months of his life into this book about a Custom Robot who achieved sentience, due to advanced experimental AI programming in his CPU, and his Commander had to leave his old and boring life behind to run away with the Custom Robot and leave the Vault, finding a beautiful multi-coloured wonderland of impossibilities outside. They proceeded to go on an amazing adventure in which both of them broke free of their pre-programmed routines and the moulds fate had forced onto them."

Sunrise's face melted off. Whatever generic and acceptably handsome facial expression had been on his face was forgotten. He wasn't even sure what to call the serious look on his own face right now. "And this was released before 'My Custom Robot's A Little Filly In Rainbowland',' He stated.

"Yes, by two years," She confirmed. "He gave them the manuscript file to publish, and they sent it back a month later with a ton of notes and complaints that DEMANDED heavy rewrites to its most vital parts. And he couldn't send the book to another Publisher now that this one had seen a copy of his manuscript. Bullshit exclusivity contracts, designed to make situations like this common, see, while preventing an imagined and unlikely instance of semi-fraud from happening, where publishing company A tells you how to fix your story and publishing company B pays you more for the publishing rights. In any case, once the manuscript's changes had been made, he sends it in, and the Publisher sends it back with more complaints and more demands for more pointless rewrites. Make the hero a girl, the Publisher says, and make the Custom Robot fuck her."

"Your son was fourteen when he wrote that, right?" Sunrise checked in disgust.

"Yes. He went with the 'Fade to black' thing to skip over the robot-fucking. My son poured his heart and soul into that story, but he does their stupid rewrites anyway. Even when they force him to rewrite the ending so that instead of finding a city where the hero can paint and the robot can sing and they all lived happily ever, the two decide life without structure is meaningless and they head back to their Vault to crawl back to their old lives, and they both lived unhappily ever after, feeling silly for ever thinking leaving the Vault was a good idea. My son is forced to make rewrite after rewrite and suffer rejection after rejection until he's lost all love for this story, because it just isn't his story any more. It's something that will never be good enough for those company bastards. And then, one day, the Publishing company releases a book just like my son's original draft, and that bastard Greyheart, who runs the place, he says his stupid filly wrote it!"
"Her name's Silver Smoke, right?" Silver checked, but she wasn't in the mood for questions right now.

"And just to be even bigger bastards, they have my son blacklisted from the industry, and accuse him of trying to rip off their story! That shattered my poor Hawky's heart, that did. He can't become a published writer until that company goes down and loses the precious 'Prestige' that drives the sheep in this Vault to think its rulers simply have to be completely and utterly perfect if they're so high-up."

"Understood," Sunrise nodded. "I'll make that happen."

"And I'm so glad that you will. Thanks to you and your miracle with the radio, all the books this company sells are going into everypony's Pip-Bucks for free, for the next year! A death sentence, considering their taste for shallow books with eye-catching titles. Thank you so much for this."

Finally, THIS was what he was here for! "You can thank me by sending a regular supply of these Custom Robot Assembly Kits to a pony two floors up from here after you send her my payment, her name is Spark Dash."

Custom Robot Assembly Kits, or CRAKs… Pretty incredible things, in Sunrise's opinion. They were like D-I-Y model assembly kits, in some places. And in other places, they were like those pre-war Toy Brick kits. Not the buckets of toy blocks you could assemble into pretty much whatever you wanted, but the dedicated kits with specially-designed parts that didn't fit anywhere else. You took the arms, legs, or forelegs and rear legs, of your Custom Robot, shoved them into the torso, shoved the head in last, and synched it with your Pip-Buck if your model was newer than the Pip-Buck 5000 model. They even came with Pip-Buck files that, when wirelessly transferred to yours, would tell you how to connect what, where to put it, how to recharge the Custom Robot's Power Core, and so on.

Of course, rather than the typical Beginner Limbs all Custom Robots started with, to encourage you to get some experience with the basic Gun Arm and Bomb Arm before you had to go out and buy some more powerful and expensive parts to have any hope of winning, he would ensure that the stronger items from his personal collection of spare Custom Robot parts would find themselves added into the CRAKs, along with things Custom Robots weren't meant to wield.

Energy Weapons, in disassembled form, along with some overcharged Energy Cells, perfect for punching holes straight through Stable Security armour.

And, more importantly…

Illegal Custom Robot parts, fine-tuned with a power output far beyond the standard limits put into place to ensure safe battles for Commanders and any audience they may have.

Sunrise might have been famous for using the Almighty Lion, but there was an illegal model he'd built in secret for himself by ripping off high-end Custom Robots and design quirks from other, far more talented Custom Robot designers and pumping them up with his own magic. A build that matched the Almighty Lion in size and overall physique, while surpassing it in armour by a long shot, and surpassing it in ground speed by a short one. Its knightly crusader armour had received a black coat of paint. Its head bore seven slots for abilities, and the usual limiter that reduced the effectiveness of abilities you used more than one instance of, the usual 'Diminishing Returns' system, had been disabled. His Custom Robot was a black-armoured bipedal Lion painted crimson, with purple eyes and a golden mane, his body wreathed in moving white flames that almost seemed real, even if they only seemed to exist as moving images on metal. And because each of his parts were custom-made, they copied the colour scheme of this mighty black-armoured beast. A custom-made crown of black Titansteel welded onto its head bore seven diamonds that would begin to glow with a
malevolent purple light when the Robot was activated and in battle. This was the illegal Custom Robot known as the Vengeful King, and it had two Ground Speed increasers to increase its overall ground speed, one Agility Accelerator that would drastically improve its ability to make sharp turns, even at the damn near uncontrollable speeds he could reach with this thing when he really got going, and no less than four Gun and Bomb Amplifiers, each one overclocked to provide a stacking and exponentially increasing +17% increase in damage to his Gun arm bullets and Bomb arm missiles.

Its Charge? Modified to be a simple, instant forwards dash that turned you red and rocketed you forwards from the moment you decided it was time to Charge. It was a short charge, good for negating enemy gunfire, and it had even less 'Ending Lag' than the Charge of the bog-standard Ray MkII.

A modified Scorpion Cannon that spat rapidly three sets of two wide purple enemy-seeking projectiles out of its rear vents, followed by a seventh projectile fired right before the weapon recovered and was ready to be fired again, which didn't take long at all. Easily less than half a second. Each magical projectile fired by this gun shaped like a purple blade that started to spin, and accelerated and increased in homing ability as it spun. Its spinning blades would quickly start to act as razor-sharp spinning discs as wide as his Vengeful King's torso, and each backwards-fired projectile would arc up and around to fire where the gun was pointing, each projectile blessed with powerful homing ability and seriously high damage. In the air, the weapon simply launched a stream of four projectiles forwards, and each one behaved like a faster and stronger version of the projectiles the Afterburner Gun would launch when fired on the ground, albeit with better homing, bigger projectile size, and more damage. This weapon was known as The King's Blade.

A modified faster-firing Submarine Bomb that fired a long submarine-like missile that moved at double the standard Submarine Bomb's speed and boasted slightly more than double the original's damage output and a devastating explosion increased in size by exactly 475%, though its speed in reaching that size had only been increased by 50%, which made it a slower and longer-lasting explosion great for knocking foes into. This weapon was known as the Scorched Earth Policy.

A pod that... Oh, wait a second. We're not done talking about the Gun arm, or the Bomb arm. Because while the gun arm had a modified Scorpion Cannon named The King's Blade mounted upon it, and the bomb arm was ready to fuck ponies up with the Scorched Earth Policy, each of the two arms held three other weapons.

Sure, these six Auxillary Weapons did less damage than the weapons in the Main Weapon slots, a necessary drawback to deal with and lessen the incredible power consumption having four weapons per arm saddled your machine with. But dealing 80% of the damage these weapons would deal in a vacuum, rather than 100% damage, was acceptable. And dealing 116% of the damage these weapons would deal in a vacuum, as 80% of the 145% damage modifier his illegal Custom Robo had been fine-tuned to achieve, was far more acceptable. He'd tried to get the damage modifier to 150% for weeks, but he'd given up when he'd failed to find a way to get around the fact that when that much of the Custom Robot's power was wired to the offensive side of things, its mobility and magical shielding suffered far more than what he was willing to call acceptable.

The King’s Blade was mounted atop the Gun arm. On the Gun arm's right side, there was a modified Blade Cannon called the Dragon Lance. Where the Blade Cannon would fire a small, grey, long diamond of a magical projectile almost instantly, needing less than a quarter of a second to reload itself before being able to fire again, this one fired faster bullets with slightly better homing, enough for the guns to move about an inch or two towards their foes when fired. Though that didn't mean real inches, that meant inches when seen by the tiny robots and the tiny perspective they viewed the world with. It was definitely far less than an inch in reality. Undoubtedly so. It was a slight advantage, but one that led to many shots hitting foes who didn't expect to be shot. The bullets of the
Dragon Lance also held a rather powerful stunning effect. A single shot from this gun would deal around fifty to seventy damage, less on more armoured foes and more on wimpier foes, and six shots could be fired per second. Each shot from this gun, upon hitting you, would deal around seventy damage in a vacuum, but a good bit more than that when fired from his robot, what with its mighty multiplicative power modifier and all. A single shot from this gun would also electrically stun you and hold you in place for around two fifths of a second, maybe a fifth of a second if you were piloting something big and armoured, three fifths tops if you were piloting something small and fragile. Yes, he would recover from shooting this gun faster than you would recover from being hit by it. Yes, he could hit you with five, maybe six, maybe even eight or nine bullets tops before you went down and got back up, missing a massive chunk of your health bar. Yes, this made for a fine way to finish off weakened opponents. Yes, getting hit by this gun was a death sentence, and he could fire a barely-staggered stream of bullets from this gun whenever he wanted to put the pressure on a foe and make him either give up whatever positional advantage he might have gained to dodge or die.

On the Gun arm's left side, there was a modified Red Dragon Cannon. It looked like a cool and stylized red dragon's head, normally, and it fired a long, crimson beam of energy tipped with the head of a Dragon. The beam would curve through the air a little, homing in on its foe, but not very well. It was powerful, but it took a long time to recharge once fired, and you were a sitting duck while you waited for the weapon to recharge. He was glad he'd given his Custom Robot the ability to move freely and fire other attacks when its guns were firing and recharging, even the slow-to-recharge ones that normally immobilized you after being fired. That ability was a game-changer, and some might even call it a game-breaker. He was glad he'd ripped it off from a criminal organization that was stealing Robot parts and trying to build the ultimate illegal Robot, something they didn't get far in doing before he conquered their organization and put it to work for him.

Sunrise's modifications addressed the Red Dragon Cannon's issues the best he could, but some compromises had to be made. When the gun was fired, three white versions of the usual red "Dragon Bullets" would be launched, and they would start off aiming away from one another, before curving homing in on their target. The bottom two would be fired at seventy-degree angles from the gun's center, before curving, and the top one would be angled eighty degrees into the air. Each would travel about half a shrunken robo-inch before curving and homing in on their foe. And while they were slightly slower than their inspiration, they would accelerate and gradually improve in homing more and more as the fired bullets continued to exist. Sure, he didn't improve the recharge time on this gun by much, so it could only be fired once every zero point seven seconds, it was still quite a deadly weapon. And it packed one hell of a punch, dealing around one hundred to one hundred and eighty damage per bullet that hit its mark.

He called this gun the White Dragon's Roar.

On the Gun arm's underside, something that used to be a Wave Blaster had been painted fully in black. The Wave Blaster gun was simple enough: When it was fired, it would launch a single, vertical, spinning and serrated black sawblade of a disc. While the gun had once been a slow, reliable damage-dealer with a bullet that could pass through walls without issue, something that shot a horizontal green sawblade of energy most foes would have a hard time dodging, it would now serve as a shield for his robot, rather than a slow, merciless, deadly bullet that would pursue its enemy. It would still try to home in on its enemy, but it would move slowly. Very slowly, and it wouldn't vanish until it had touched its target, though a new Black Disc couldn't be fired once one was already in play. One thing that made it really good? It would swallow up any gun shots, any bombs or bomb blasts, or any pod explosions, or other kind of magical blasts that hit it, growing larger and faster and pursuing its foe with greater haste and homing. And, of course, growing like that would mean that it would deal more damage when it struck its foe. Fifty to seventy damage on average, that's what the weapon would deal, along with a stunning effect that would last about two fifths of a second. The
damage would increase exponentially as it absorbed more damage, but he'd rigged it so it couldn't stop and absorb his own bullets. It existed to put a wall in his opponent's face, and halt the enemy's advance while he formulated a plan and shot bullets from relative safety.

He called this gun The Black Shield.

And then, the bomb arm. I've already told you about the Scorched Earth Policy on the arm's top. But the arm contained three other bombs, as well.

First- Well, not first. The Scorched Earth Policy was first, and on top. Then, on the arm's left side, a modified black Volcanic Volley. Once, it would launch three sticky red bombs at an opponent, and they would land near the opponent: One, a few feet in front of the opponent, and one on either side of him, the same distance apart. When triggered through proximity to the opponent, or on contact with the opponent, or once their seven seconds are up, they would detonate, and magic would extend their explosion by focusing it upwards in a slowed-down vertical cone. It was a bomb designed to hamper the opponent's movement, not damage him directly, and it served in its role fairly well. Sunrise only had to make a few adjustments, by rewiring some magical circuits and cannibalizing a spare Trap Bomb launcher. Now, instead of simple columns, the sticky bombs would explode in the manner that Trap Bombs do: With spiralling once-orange now-black explosions that rotated as they started off two feet in wide before accelerating their rotation and expansion, and finally dying upon instantly upon reaching their maximum size. You could be engulfed in one explosion or take damage from all three, and you'd still take one hundred and twenty points of damage on average. Oh, and the aerial velocity of the launched sticky bombs had been increased. If these three bombs were scattered around you, it was time to turn back and retreat. Once, these sticky black bombs would add additional obstacles for you to run around when fired, slowing you down a little, maybe catching a careless opponent if you were lucky. But now, these mighty blasts effectively blocked off the way towards Sunrise and his robot when fired, and when they hit you, you were going down, giving Sunrise the opportunity to set up a Black Shield and launch a certain bomb that would take a while to hit its mark.

On the arm's right, there was a modified Right Hook Bomb. Normally, these bombs would fire a fast bomb parabolically at the opponent, a big bomb with a decently-sized explosion that would knock the foe into the air upon hitting its mark. And though while its Pitch and Yaw would be fine, its trajectory would be Rolled a bit to the right. Or to put it another way, if you fired it at an immobile training dummy straight ahead of you, the bomb would launch and shoot forwards, upwards, and to the right at the same time, before curving back towards your foe and travelling downwards and to the left while still going forwards, hitting its target. It's quite easy to understand it if you've seen one fire, and I'm told these weapons were inspired by the curving hoofball shots some ponies could make, back when there was a Professional Equestrian Hoofball League. Though, to confuse some battlers, the direction the weapon aims in is automatically reversed when firing in the air. This bomb, the Left Hook Bomb, and the similar Right Hook Gun and Left Hook Gun, were designed to be fired at foes behind cover, at foes from behind cover, and at foes behind cover while being fired from behind cover. Quite useful already, so all Sunrise had to do was take the power output of this bomb and maximize it. Where these bombs once did a respectable ninety to one hundred and twenty damage depending on the foe's armour, they would now deal three hundred and forty damage at minimum, four hundred and forty damage at maximum.

And finally, on the arm's base, there was a modified Conductor Bomb. Normally, the Conductor Bomb fired in a manner unusual for a Bomb. You readied the bomb, automatically targeted the foe, and prepared to fire. But once you fired your first bomb, the targeting reticule would remain visible for your Robot for somewhere around one and a half to two seconds. And as that targeting reticule continued to exist, you could move it about in whatever manner you desired, though at its usual speed. And as that targeting reticule continued to exist, you would automatically fire another bomb at
wherever your reticule was, and then one more before the reticule finally vanished and control over your Robot was regained. It was quite the unusual weapon, and it was designed to be used on a foe behind cover. You could fire, and when your foe moved, you could move your reticule with the foe, or even overtake your foe with it if your foe wasn't the fastest around. And as your reticule moved, your weapon would automatically fire two bombs at whatever ground you could target, making it excellent for flushing a foe out of hiding and making him run in the direction you wanted. Or in any other direction, really. Come to think of it, it was only really good for setting up a trap that would hurt your foe if he went a way you didn't want him to go, but these blasts didn't last very long, and the reticule wasn't very fast. If you weren't good at predicting your foe's movements, you could move the reticule in the wrong way and your bombs wouldn't fly anywhere near your foe. The second or so of absolute vulnerability you spent unable to move anything except your targeting reticule when you fired this thing was a massive liability, too.

So he'd fixed the gun. Now, it fired six bombs into the air, and at a faster pace. The explosions would last for 50% longer, and deal 60% more damage on a successful hit. Its reticule was faster, meaning you'd often have to move in the direction your foe was moving, and then stop at JUST the right time before you overshot his current location and fired too far in front of him. The bombs also moved 20% faster and accelerated as they flew through the air, so it made for a good mid-range "Direct" attack, in addition to a better long-range harassment and area-denial tool. And once fired, the reticule could be moved freely without immobilizing your own robot in the process, allowing you to run around and shoot other weapons while your modified Conductor Bomb fired a volley of bombs through the air. And finally, touching one of these explosions stunned you in place for a sixth of a second, which was a death sentence if you were in range of Sunrise's faster weapons. He'd considered rigging it so that each bomb hit after the first would deal multiplicatively more damage for every bomb in the volley that had already hit the foe, but at that point, the power consumption issues would prevent the Custom Robot from even turning on. So if he made that change and he still wanted the machine to function, but he wasn't willing to compromise on the power, speed, and efficiency of this weapon, or compromise a little less on the most vital statistics of this weapon and a bit more anywhere else on the machine at the same time, he'd have to make each individual blast weaker than an individual blast from the regular Conductor Bomb, and he just wasn't willing to do that. While he spammed his pods and spammed his long-range curving guns and spammed his mighty and fast bombs with big blast radiuses, or radii if you wanted to be fancy, and while he waited for just the right moment to use his fight-endingly powerful weapons, he could spam this weapon freely, without having to compromise on any offensive or mobility options. A near-constant stream of bombs aimed wherever a reticule only he could see could see would start flying at the start of the match, and that near-constant stream would only end if you lost the fight or got so close to him that the radius of these bombs would start to threaten their user. However, at that point, Sunrise would have a deadly melee attack with your name on it.

This Bomb was called the Symphony of Destruction.

There, those are all four gun arm weapons and bomb arm weapons explained and taken care of.

Now, as for the pod, this war machine had one hell of a pod.

A pod that, well… If you've heard of the Air Freeze Pod and Seeker Pod, get ready to hear about their prodigal son. The Pod-launching mechanism extends from the back like an outstretched pair of black falcon wings. And at any moment, this Pod can launch a floating projectile that, like all standard Pods, ignores damage from any weapons, due to being a magical projectile made to look like an opulent black-bladed golden-hilted floating longsword that pointed down. A floating projectile that would relentlessly pursue you and float over walls to do so until they got you and froze you for a full seven seconds, dealing no damage while giving its wielder the perfect chance to set up a devastating Combo Attack with his many guns and bombs. Up to four of these projectiles could be
fired at once. This weapon was known as The Royal Decree.

However, its Pod Slot had been upgraded, and it bore two sets of Pod Weapons. One "The Royal Decree", and one ground-based and slower variant of the same weapon. It dealt less damage on a successful hit, its pods moved slower, and its explosions were one and a half times as big. Up to three of its projectiles could be fired at once. It was called The Fine Print, because the name seemed clever when he'd came up with it. And in terms of design, this looked like a set of two pairs of lowered black wings, beneath the main pair. The wing-based design had been inspired by some mythical six-winged deity he remembered reading about in a book about ancient cultures.

Sunrise Stardust's illegally powerful Custom Robot also bore a modified head that, as mentioned previously, to have seven ability slots and a custom-made crown of black-painted Titansteel welded onto its head, boasting seven diamonds that would begin to glow with a malevolent purple light when the Custom Robot was activated and in battle. Forbidden Crown was the name of this robot's head.

And finally, its legs. Modified formula legs that boasted a 250% increase in overall ground speed, with no damage to the wearer's ability to make sharp turns, which was usually the one downside of the Formula Legs. Just for fun, he'd named the legs of his robot Absolute Territory, a reference to some old book on pre-war fashion he'd read long ago. Of course, according to that book, this was a complete and utter misnomer. Or as they say in the vernacular, a name that is entirely fucking wrong, as the Custom Robot's legs were designed to appear fully coated by black-painted metal armour, and not a single inch of exposed robot 'Flesh' could be seen.

In any case…

This thing was fast. This thing was precise. This thing could fill the air with projectiles until it won or send out its Royal Decree pods to hunt you down and freeze you in place while it launched its slow-moving bomb, fired bullet after bullet at your helpless body and bring you to the brink of death, and finally, watch silently and motionlessly as its Scorched Earth Policy bomb went off, obliterating you. If it wanted to outrun you and your bullets, dodging everything you threw at it before punishing you for being bold and foolish enough to fight back, it would. And if it wanted to kick back and relax and watch you squirm as it sent homing projectiles at you to make you dance for its entertainment, it would. And if it wanted to camp out behind a nice tall wall and send out Royal Decrees and Scorched Earth Policy bombs until he got lucky and one hit you, he would.

It was a testament to his incredible determination and almost monstrous mental fortitude that he could pilot the thing at all, let alone wield it effectively in the heat of combat under the guise of a disguise.

And it was absolute fucking murder to use for more than a few minutes a day, with how much mental strain this thing's overclocked internals put on the user, to say nothing of the pain it could deal to enemy Custom Robots.

It was deadly, and not just to his enemies. And even though this Custom Robot was still quite tiny and toy-sized, it still packed one hell of a punch, able to pierce through things most Custom Robot weapons could barely scorch.

And when he could get a few hours alone with the new Almighty Lion that would be made for him, giving him a chance to see how the pros would increase the speed of this particular Custom Robot model, he could copy those improvements over to his Vengeful King and increase its speed even further, just in case any illegal variants of any speed-focused Custom Robot models out there could potentially keep up with him. And best of all, because this thing was illegal, it could fight enemies outside of the usual specially-built magical arenas designed to protect both Robot pilots by blocking all shots that could potentially hit and wound things in the world outside of the arena. Sure, using this
Custom Robot outside of magical arenas resulted in a decrease to the potency of its magical shielding and increased the mental toll piloting the machine took, but with such a deadly ace up his sleeve, he was pretty sure that it was worth it.

He was glad he could use that powerful and tiny illegal Custom Robot of his for an emergency weapon, if it came down to it, instead of Energy Weapons. He was worthless with energy weapons and he couldn't break them down or reassemble them for toffee. Not unless he had some books open on his Pip-Buck to guide him through the process of breaking down, cleaning, repairing, fine-tuning, reassembling, and potentially even refurbishing and enhancing those things. Fortunately, he knew somepony who could handle all of that for him with her eyes closed: Spark Dash, the courier he was going to give all of this junk to, so she could distribute it amongst his higher-ranking Dark Stars, each of whom should have formed their own smaller divisions of the organization by now. So it didn't really matter that he wouldn't have a chance in hell of building those things on his own. Nope. No, there were no large gaps in his knowledge. Certainly not!

In any case, it seemed she knew who Spark Dash was.

"Is she the yellow one who-" She began.

"Yes."

"With the fake magic-"

"Yes, the flier.

"She's into robots?"

"No, but she knows how to smuggle banned things past Stable Security and get them to the ponies in the Dark Stars who are. By the way, if you were to regularly throw an extra disassembled laser rifle, plasma pistol, or assault carbine in with the parts, and you left out the physical copies of the Instruction Manuals that would note how out-of-place those parts are 'To save costs'… Well, who'd notice?"

She frowned. "My bottom line would, and so would those who tax me, not to mention everypony who's counting on me. After the twenty kits and weapons I stockpiled for today, I'll be able to hide the parts for one of those in there every day, but only one. I'd love to give you ten of each in every box, every day, but I can't work miracles like you can."

"Hey, don't sell yourself short. You designed the Almighty Lion, the best Strike Enforcer unit I've ever used!"

"True," She smirked, soaking up the praise like a sponge.

Sunrise leaned in. "Speaking of which, I hear you're going to release a new model of those soon, and you're looking for Beta Testers."

She was confused. "I'm not, and I'm not."

He continued on as if she hadn't shot him down. "The armour and single teleporting air dash of the Almighty Lion was incredible, perfect for air-dashing unpredictably to catch foes off-guard, but its successor, the Righteous Tiger… While I can appreciate his marginally-better armour, he's far too slow. And two Recovery Accelerators with a Pod Speed Boost? The Almighty Lion's current armour level and Air Dash ability is as good as it's likely going to get for a few years without some significant trade-offs in other areas, but if you could do something to squeeze a few more clicks of ground speed out of its next revision, while putting an extra Air Dash, a raw Gun and Bomb damage..."
multiplier, and a ground speed multiplier in its head for its enchant slots, well… Wouldn't it be nice if my radios distributed some guides on how to defeat the strongest Custom Robot models of your rivals, and the most dominant strategies they tended to lean towards?"

She grinned. "It would CERTAINLY be nice! I'll have some experimental models ready for you to test in a few days. Just choose your favourite, and we'll take that into account when designing your sponsored private model."

"Excellent!" Sunrise hoof-pumped victoriously. "How does Sunrise Lion sound as a name? Keep the lion gold, but colour his armour in autumn colours and give his mane my mane's colour scheme."

"I can make that happen," She confirmed. "Still, it's funny… They're called Custom Robots because you can change their weapons and limbs to adjust their capabilities, after buying them from professionals. That's what makes them different from homemade Warbots, with improvised weapons and unique designs. But you… You're having your very own Custom-designed Custom Robot head and torso made specifically for you. A literal Custom Robot! This is a privilege normally reserved for company heads, ponies with more money than the Overmare, and Grand Champions."

"Well, I'm the Grand Champion of a few other things," Sunrise shrugged smugly, because he wasn't just a musical genius to his fans, a messianic figure to his more radical fans fans, the proud owner of a customized extra-badass gun he could still barely use, the prouder owner of a massive penis, a magical prodigy and hard worker, a genius in general, a rockstar, a scholar, a gifted battlemage, a master at several popular video games, the owner of many Vault Record High Scores at Space Spiral songs, including his own, an incredibly skilled and lucky duellist when it came to Duel Monsters, a high-ranking Warbot Pilot and Custom Robot Commander with a deadly Loadout of high-end weaponry that complimented his somewhat tricky "Use the walls, evade attacks, bait and fake out the foe, seize and exploit opportunities that present themselves and pressure the foe hard when the time is right" strategy nicely, and the most desirable and desired stallion in the Vault, he was also charmingly humble as fuck.

"True," She purred in approval. "Why, if I was only twenty years younger…"

"Twenty years? Why, you don't look a day over twenty-five!"

She laughed to herself. "Oh, I'm sure you say that to all the mares my age."

Only by those I've seen getting their marehood spread wider than a pony giving birth, Sunrise felt like saying. He felt like asking this mare if she'd used some sort of Stretchiness Potion to accomplish that, or if she'd just naturally ended up that wide from years of overuse.

He also felt like saying "I would, but I can't find anypony as old as you!"

But he didn't.

"Well, have a nice day," Sunrise said, turning around.

"Wait!" She called out, and he stopped. "Come closer," She whispered.

He curiously crept closer to her.

"Thank you for not making a big deal about seeing my dear Maximus… Compromising me," She thanked genuinely. "I'm sure I can trust you to keep quiet about this. I'll have a surprise ready for you on the day you come to test your new Custom Custom Robot."

He didn't know what that could possibly mean – His influence and network of spies extended far,
but disillusioned poor and middle-class ponies couldn't get everywhere. And there were some places even the spoilt upper-level brats sympathetic to his cause, usually for the wrong reasons, couldn't enter – but he hoped it would be a good surprise. Who knew? Maybe she'd unveil some kind of advanced internal magical engine for Custom Robots that provided more power output, a higher run speed, and a general all-around ability increase, and grant him the prototype of that engine. Maybe she'd work some professional-quality copies of some Illegal Mods into the model, offering high reliability in addition to the usual high power one got from ignoring both safety restraints and arbitrary weapon power limits set by the Elites.

Or maybe she'd invite him to join in one of her robot-fucking sessions. He didn't care if the manbot had a fleshlight somewhere in its back, or even a second piston-dick with a fleshlight attached to the end for those weird gay losers in denial who fantasize about penetrating penises with penises, he wouldn't do it.

He threw his forehooves around her and hugged her, shocking her, because who touched anypony on purpose outside of sexual acts in this Vault? "Thank you!" Sunrise chirped, and cheerfully trotted out of there.

And as the noise of this level assaulted his ears, which he quickly flattened against his head, he felt pretty good about himself. He'd gotten robots for his army, he'd gotten weapons for his army, all that work to secure a smuggler into the Vault's delivery service had been worth it, and all that bullshit with the radio had been worth it. Sure, taking all of the credit away from who'd REALLY invented and worked hard on the PipBuck Audio Payload Distribution System, better name pending, didn't feel all that morally right, but holding onto his ability to feel 100% morally pure while letting Equestria continue to rot would be a far, far worse thing to do.

And now, he simply had to trot back upstairs to his girlfriend's room, and continue getting used to the power and ferocity of his new gun. Maybe he'd shag her, if he felt like it.

Perhaps it was the noise of so many ponies shouting at him, telling him to go here or there and do this or that, that made him consider taking a detour.

What was good, around this time of day? He checked his Pip-Buck. It was around 3PM. 3:42 PM. There was always somepony getting into a Custom Robot or Warbot battle in the Tech Sec.

Did he have time to walk around and listen to the Criers and Announcers until somepony told him about a big match and where to find it?

He just happened to have been walking past another shouter, a pale yellow mare with a short neon-yellow mane and bright golden-orange eyes. And this one was loud enough to snap Sunrise out of his thoughts. "YOU FUCKERS READY FOR AN EXECUTION? Big Custom Robot fight over at Barkseeds! Really fucking big Custom Robot fight over at Barkseeds! And they're getting used on some dumb thief who tried to steal from Big Green's own home, so you know it's going to be bloody!"

Well then, it looked like he didn't have to go hunting for information after all.

But did he really have time to go and see a Custom Robot match?

"And I mean REALLY fucking bloody!" The mare shouted.

…Ah, what the hell? He had time.

And he had a sneaking suspicion that he knew what had caused that execution. After all, one of his
regional sub-commanders was supposed to have recently put into play one of his plans to get a mole in Big Green's Custom Robot company, Greenout. That company was big, one of the biggest. If the pony had been caught, well… He'd need to save whatever unlucky soul got caught up in that mess, and find out what failed and why.

He joined the crowd of ponies the yellow mare's call had roused, what was becoming a crowded constant stream of bodies, and he headed off to see the execution.

One of the ponies on the other side of the sea of Ponies, facing the other way, stopped and pointed at him. "You, red pony!" He shouted, and he was an Earth Pony with a sky-blue mane, a remarkably deep and saturated blue body, and pale green eyes.

Sunrise decided to be cool. "Me?" Sunrise asked casually, and curiously, stopping a bit late. Ponies in their unofficial lanes continued on, moving around them.

"You, me, Custom Robot battle, right now, I'm betting three water rations on this," He said, fiddling with his Pip-Buck for a moment and getting out his inert Custom Robot model, a dice-sized cube with different colours and symbols on each side.

Sunrise didn't really want this distraction, so he dismissively said, "Make that ten rations, or no deal."

"Deal! Now let's fucking go!" The blue pony snapped enthusiastically.

Damn his ability to make ponies accept deals. Damn it! "Fine," Sunrise said, "Where's the nearest Arena around here?"

"This way," He headed off down a seemingly-random side alley, and Sunrise followed him as they went through hallway after hallway, the number of bored ponies standing around and waiting for something starting to increase as they got closer to their destination.

"If this is going to end in another robbery attempt, tell me." Sunrise warned. "So I can give you a better gun and point you at someone richer and slower."

"I'm really not the robbing type. When I want something, me and my Custom Robot, we earn it fair and square, and we take it," The blue pony boasted.

"Oh, you and your Custom Robot are going to take it, alright," Sunrise cockily smirked. "Right up the butt."

The blue pony laughed. "That's good! That's fucking good. I'm gonna use that one, myself."

The two ponies eventually made it to what had been another single-family bedroom in a row of identical rooms, a long time ago.

Now… Now, it was not that.

Somehow, the blast door of the room before him had been taken off its pneumatic mechanism, permanently jamming it open. When he looked to his left and right, he noticed that the same had been done to every door on this side of the block, and when he looked behind him, he saw that it had been done to every door on the side opposite to the one he'd just looked at. Furthermore-

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**Level Up!**

**New Perk: Leg Day - You never skipped Leg Day! You move 5% faster for every point of Strength**
Time to Duel

…Furthermore…

Sunrise blinked in confusion as he discreetly checked around him. Did something strange just happen? Something felt different, he was sure, but he wasn’t sure what it was. Everything, as it was now, felt just like it did a second ago. He knew he wasn’t going to say anything, either way, but he knew an anti-rape alarm program on his Pip-Buck would have alerted him if he’d been brainwashed, put to sleep, stunned, or if his memories had been tampered with in any way. Remember when I said I was going to tell you all of the Pip-Buck's functions? I meant I was going to tell you the Pip-Buck's major functions. If I listed every program ever made for this thing, this story would end up many millions of words long.

In any case, Sunrise Stardust and his new opponent admired the room they were about to enter for a moment. Earthy browns with lighter highlights and black lines painted the edges of the door-hole, and he noticed the linework had a certain almost-uniform quality to it, yet each rectangular segment had a unique pattern of brownish swirls…

Wood, he realized. He remembered what wood looked like from some old pre-war pictures, but he knew there were ponies in his Vault who worked with wood taken from greenhouse-grown trees to make cute little wooden dolls called Wood Carvings every day. The sides of this room's entrance had been painted up to look like the walls, were made of wood. The ceiling was painted to look like it was made of wooden planks, too. An odd choice, to be sure. When he looked above the doorframe, he saw that a sign had been painted there, only…

Instead of a sign, there was a sign. But at the same time, it wasn't a sign. It was a painting of a sign, a painting of a rectangular plank of wood on its side, hanging by a thin black cable from a steel-grey nail. It had all been painted on, nail and all, even the shinier metal parts of the nail. Astounding!

The sign said "Faucet Inn" in big red-painted letters, but the red paint had been used artistically to look shitty and homemade. Flecks of paint, tiny paintless lines in the painted letters, 'raised' lines where the paint 'visibly' stuck together a little when painted… Somepony had put a lot of effort into making this sign look low-effort.

The name, on the other hand? That name really was low-effort. He couldn’t imagine anypony seriously struggling to think of that name. Sunrise instantly knew that it was a pun, which meant that the "Hmm… No… Aha!" moment of thinking about a pun and figuring it out and laughing never came.

'Force-It In'. Sure, it was funny, he supposed, but it felt a bit out of place when the sign above the room turned place of business to the right of this one proudly proclaimed the name of the establishment to the world in big, rainbow-painted letters. "WHITERUN’S WHOREHOUSE – THESE LUSTY WHORES WILL SUCK YOUR COCK WHILE THEIR SEXBOT PARTNER PLEASURES YOU! ASK US ABOUT OUR ‘CANTERLOT SPECIAL’!"

In any case, Sunrise and his new rival stepped into the Faucet Inn.

It was almost, once again, like stepping into another world, but not quite.

This time, while everything looked like it belonged in another place and another time, Sunrise could tell that things were just a very convincing copy of things from that time. Metal bar stools had been painted brown, with the seats on top painted in a variety of wine-red shades and glossy leather
blacks, with shines and lighter sections painted on. Those chairs had been seated around metal and
glass tables painted up to look wooden. Some tables even had thin and mostly-straight light-brown
marks on the front, as if knives had been used to carve initials, hearts, rude words, and assorted other
scratches into them.

Each scratch mark on each table was unique, he noticed, aside from the matching marks in the center
of half the tables in the room. He recognized those marks, they were the series of rectangles needed
for a Duel Monsters duelling field.

And then he noticed what was on the other half of the tables in the room. With that same uneven
brown knife-mark aesthetic, there was a simple square, a big one. He knew what THOSE ones were
for.

On the walls, Sunrise noticed that metal-framed pictures had been hung up here and there, glass
walls protecting the pictures. The metal had been painted to look brown and wooden, but it didn't
fool Sunrise's eyes. And the pictures? Sunrise's eyes first identified the pictures as really lame images
of photographic pornography. Classy mares posing seductively, sure, and some were naked, sure,
but nothing was happening to them.

And then, Sunrise felt sad. These pictures were beautiful. These mares were beautiful, and even
more beautiful for trying to look sexy and desirable, instead of letting themselves get seen mid-
pounding. Had his eyes truly been so desensitized to the wondrous sexuality of the female equine
form? Many of these pictures looked old, but they all had a timeless air of quality to them, like those
pre-war "Pin-Up" porn posters he remembered hearing about.

He still found it hard to believe that before the war, some ponies had to buy a magazine, or order a
monthly or yearly subscription to a magazine to have it delivered to their doorstep every week, if
they wanted to see some pony pussy, pony ass, and pony titties. Were some stallions not perpetually
surrounded by mares? He supposed they must have been popular in far-away areas with low
population, like forest huts and mountaintop monasteries. And they were probably popular with
ponies who had inactive, uninteresting, or underwhelming sex lives, too.

In any case, the- Fuck, I need to stop saying that.

Anyway, around twenty ponies were inside this makeshift bar, some sitting on the floor and some
sitting on chairs. Sunrise noticed that some chairs went empty, even as ponies on the ground sat next
to them, so he assumed that this bar had a "You have to pay extra if you want to sit on chairs" deal
going on. Which made sense, he supposed. After all, chairs cost materials to make, and materials are
incredibly precious here.

A bartender with three crates of canned booze sat atop the bed in the far right corner of the room,
watching Sunrise, just like every other pony in the bar started to do as he walked in beside his new
opponent.

As the two ponies approached the nearest table with a big square carved into it, the square began to
glow with a vertical white glow, as if the lines were cracks for a bright light shining below to pour
through. Vertical and horizontal lines shot from one end of the square to the other, and the two
ponies sat down at the table, one on either end of the table, each with their own chair.

The blue pony set his robot's cube down, and it flashed white. Light spilled out of it like churning
white water, writhing and grasping at nothingness before settling into its true form: A small metallic
toy of a blue-painted Earth Pony with a green body that stood upright, its legs digitigrade, rather than
plantigrade, and clad in deep-blue armour with white highlights. What did digi-something and plant-
whatever mean, in that context? Well, you know how pony legs end in hooves? They're Plantigrade,
because they have big hooves you plant down onto the ground and walk upon. Imagine dog legs, stick-like legs with bendy joints here and there, thin legs that end in tiny clawed digits, those weird wriggly things with tiny spikes. That's what Digitigrade legs are. Except, in this case, instead of dog paws, highly-dexterous 'Hands' modelled on old pre-war Gorillas and 'Feet' modelled on theoretical ancient aliens (Don't get me started on this, but before the war, a lot of archaeologists believe there was a species that lived on this planet before Ponykind, a species of highly-evolved super-intelligent mutant monkeys who killed their prey through merciless and determined Pursuit Predation, the copious use of old melee and rudimentary firearms technology, and unspeakably powerful explosives. The experts back then were sure these creatures invented magic and invented Ponies to use it, and then proceeded to die out due to societal decay or environmental problems or their home planet needing them or something. But other experts were convinced that this was a load of hooey – you know, bullshit – and they didn't come to a consensus before the war. Nopony really bothered to give the topic much thought after it) were used. Two feet on the rear legs, designed for fast bipedal movement, and two hands on the gun arms, designed to fire the triggers of the weapons mounted on its arms.

Speaking of its head, its head was fully blue. Blue head, blue hair, blue irises, blue pupils, blue everything. It was as if its owner had lazily dunked its whole head into blue paint, and never bothered to paint over that blue layer with anything better. It was a good thing Custom Robots saw through magic, or his paint-coated robot would be blind.

Sunrise's eyes recognized the blue-headed green-bodied upright pony's legs as Formula Legs, a simple and fairly old speed-boosting set of legs he also favoured, he recognized the basic blue-painted head as standard beginner-level Shining Chariot-model Ray part, while the torso was a bright-green Sky High model Peace Dove, and he looked away from the green body and its angelic wings, and the blue-painted ordinary-earth-pony head, to look over the rest of its figure.

For the record, Sky High Custom Robots are tremendously slow on the ground, but incredibly agile in the air, and able to leap quite high with just a single jump. Though they are vulnerable in the moment they land, a period of immobility slightly longer than the standard Custom Robots, a good Sky High user knows how to get in, shoot weapons, and get out to safely land away from the foe. Unusual for a Custom Robot, the Sky High models boast six mid-air Air Dashes that are unusual, in the sense that they are slow and travel a short distance horizontally, and a higher distance vertically. Where most Air Dashes move you in a straight horizontal line, the Air Dashes of Sky Highs add diagonal upwards ascension to their Air Dashes, aiding them in staying off the ground for longer.

The Peace Dove's right arm had a long and flat yellow almost-cube on it, about the shape of a book, though with a triangular chunk cut out of the business end. A long, flat-tipped red triangle, properly known as an isosceles trapezoid, stuck out of the yellow square's open end, ready for action. The Three-Way Gun, Sunrise noted. A powerful weapon that would, when fired, automatically launch three columns of three large yellow magical bullets at the foe, with a tenth bullet leading the charge in the center column.

Its left arm was coated in a rectangular chunk of cherry-red metal, a square of armour and its front coversliding forwards and pivoting upwards to split into three chunks and intimidatingly spike from the gun and provide an oversized frontal Iron Sight, the armour revealing blackish-grey metal and an unexpectedly deadly square hole for its business end. The Submarine Bomb, Model D. This weapon could, when fired, launch a slow and long cruise missile that travelled at barely one mile an hour. Those missiles were powerful, but took a somewhat long time to recover, and with how slow they moved, you needed quite a bit of strategic know-how if you wanted to ever actually hit somepony with them. In addition, unlike Guns, the explosions of Bombs and Pods could harm the Custom Robot that fired them. That added another dimension that made these things tricky to use.
Upon the blue-headed green pony's back, two pillars of a slightly desaturated purple expanded outwards and slightly stuck out above its head, armoured purple chunks coming apart to reveal and expose vibrant green magical metal. Sunrise couldn't see a bullet hole on this model, but when you were working with tiny magical weapons, those were really just formalities. These twin purple pillars made up the Feint Pod, Model F.

Sunrise couldn't tell what Abilities were loaded up in the toy pony's head, but he was pretty sure he'd be able to figure them out from how his opponent chose to fight.

"Bring out your Custom Robot already, rich colt!" The blue pony jeered.

Sunrise opened his Weapons menu, scrolled down to his 'Custom Robots' option, selected it, scrolled down the menu it opened up, and he selected his chosen robot frame, head, right forehoof-mounted Gun, left forehoof-mounted Bomb launcher, the explosive Pod launcher on his back, and the rear Legs he wanted.

And before him, his robot was magically assembled as the parts flew from his Pip-Buck and into place.

The Almighty Lion, an upright and heavily-muscled gorilla-like gold-furred torso coated in thick silver armour highlighted with metallic gold, with the animalistic perpetually-roaring head of a mighty golden lion, its glowing eyes repainted with small RGB .Ini file edits to be a bright purple. The Afterburner gun formed on its right arm, a blue rectangle mounted on the back of its right arm that extended four blackish-grey metal spikes to form a long cuboid frame, a golden star-shaped chunk forming near the end of each spike's bullet-hole to reinforce the frame. The familiar red rectangles of its Submarine Bomb, Model D, flew to its left arm and opened itself up like a blooming flower. Dark blue-armoured legs, with white racing stripe-like highlights, mounted themselves on his robot's lower body. And on its back, long twin blue octagons formed triangular tips that pointed upwards, a single flat white plane wing forming on each octagon's outer side for decoration.

As though they were alive, and had just recognized each other, the two tiny Custom Robots grew in size until they were around a foot in height. Their proportions remained the same, so Sunrise's lion-headed model still towered over his opponent by a whole head, and his torso was quite a bit wider than his foe's.

Having finished assembling his war machine, Sunrise hit some menu options on his Pip-Buck, and activated a feature of O.A.T.S. I didn't feel like telling you about until now, as it technically wasn't a true O.A.T.S. feature, but instead, something it could do when interacting with dedicated programming from another device. The modern Pip-Buck, when connected to a Custom Robot, has the ability to mentally command Custom Robots with advanced software designed to turn the basic "Queue up actions and targets to attack with your weapon of choice" commands into true mental controls for the robot, operating in real-time.

"Not bad," The blue pony said, setting up his own Pip-Buck's Deep Dive option and activating it. His pupils, irises, and sclera were fully engulfed in a saturated and deep blue, and while he continued breathing, he stopped moving.

Sunrise's eyes and body mirrored this, all of each eye turning fully purple.

Their Custom Robots, now housing most of their consciousnesses, began their pre-fight stretches as around the two figures, the magical white square they were under began to glow. Tall square walls of magical shielding formed up to shield and protect the many ponies who gathered around the two fighters and their robots. The Arena seemed to be about fifteen feet in width and length to the small foot-tall robots, even though both knew the actual arena was small enough to fit on a common bar's
One pony must have ran out and called to nearby ponies, because more stallions and mares were starting to enter the room, and if they couldn't get a good view of the Arena, they stood atop tables or got up onto ponies they liked to get a better view, and many ponies were starting to make their own bets on the fight.

"Five!" A disembodied and distorted female mare's voice chipperly called from the magical Arena, as a few opaque white walls that were about head-height for the larger Custom Robot rose around the arena, thicker than the transparent walls that protected the onlookers. Two L-shaped white walls formed on the right side of the arena, their long sides facing each other and their short sides facing two flat walls that formed on the far side of the arena, perfectly aligned. A short flat wall formed between the two, and box-like magical constructs formed in the center of the Arena: Two brown cubes end to end, followed by an indestructible white cube. A third brown easily-destroyed box was divided from the fourth cube by the short flat wall and pathways on either side of the wall.

"Four!" The Arena's magic targeted both Custom Robots and turned them into dice-like cubes with small puffs of white magical smoke, and then it formed a set of two cannons to suck up the cubes. Sunrise and his foe gained the ability to pivot and aim those cannons as the dice within them turned wildly, something that seriously disoriented beginner fighters, but not seasoned experts like them.

"Three!", the voice called, and ponies around the room started to join in with her countdown, many raising beers in makeshift metal mugs of scrap to the air in celebration.

"Two!", White glows formed around both robotic cubes for a second, as their natural magical shielding was enhanced and precisely manipulated to have, as colour-coded health bars announced above them in both numbers and bars, 1000 health each. Each health bar also had three Mercy Points that ran horizontally along the top, like three "-" symbols, one after another. When you got hit, you lost one or two of them depending on the severity of the damage dealt. When you ran out, your robot collapsed and entered a helpless Downed state, where your robot couldn't move or fight back. If your Custom Robot was programmed to be a Defense Type, rather than a Power Type, Speed Type, Tech Type(Technique Type) or Other Type, your robot would take slightly less damage than usual while Downed. After about a second of being Downed, your robot would get back up and enjoy the benefit of its newfound temporary Mercy Invincibility for a second or two, before it faded away and your robot could be hurt once more.

"One!"

The cannons fired, launching the two dice out, where they bounced off the walls before landing on the Arena floor. Sunrise's natural and considerable luck influenced the roll of his own robot's dice and allowed it to land with its Head symbol facing up, meaning that when the two dice turned back into Custom Robots in small puffs of magic white smoke, Sunrise's robot stood upright, ready for action. His foe also must have been pretty lucky, however, because his foe's die also landed with his head die up, giving neither fighter a real advantage.

The weapons of both Custom Robots finally started to work and an absolute fucking banger of a rock song blared from the Arena to set the mood, and the fight began, something so fast and chaotic, it would need to be described in slow motion if it could ever be conveyed through the medium of text.

Immediately, the blue and green machine known as Dove jumped up and descended slightly slower than he should have as he fired his Three-Way Gun, sending three rows of three bullets at Sunrise's Almighty Lion. Sunrise evaded those bullets by running right, behind the indestructible box, where he waited as his opponent's Peace Dove landed, launched his two Feint Pods and one Submarine Bomb, and leapt once more into the air. His launched Pods were two purple snakelike made of
triangular 3d-diamond-shaped metal chunks, the large triangular chunk one down from the top was wider and larger than usual to resemble the outwards-flaring parts of some snakes, while its head was simply a flat-topped pyramid of metal. They slowly slid forwards, and waited for somepony to run into them. When that happened, they would explode. The Submarine Bomb, on the other hand, slowly crept forwards, not aimed at Sunrise's robot but simply fired for the sake of being fired.

In the less-than-half-a-second Sunrise had been standing behind that cube, he had formulated a plan. Custom Robot combat required a quick mind, after all, and if you couldn't think of anything, you just fired wildly and hoped to hit something. He ran back, away from his airborne foe, and behind one of the L-shaped walls near the edge of their Arena. The one Feint Pod that had locked onto him and began pursuing him detonated harmlessly away from him, having failed to reach it before its timed explosion was due.

His foe matched the move in spirit, gliding through the air slower than normal with the aid of his thrusters and controlling his descent to land on the other side of the arena, facing Sunrise's robot directly.

Away from both of them, the Peace Dove's Bomb and Pods detonated harmlessly. This dance may have seemed pointless, but it was part of the 'Neutral Game' fighters played with one another during the start of most matches, where they felt each other's strategies and capabilities out, playing mindgames with one another as neither one really had an advantage over the other just yet.

Sunrise made to sprint left, back behind the wall, and the Peace Dove leapt into the air once more, only for Sunrise to run right out of the cover he'd headed towards, and straight at the descending enemy machine, who fearfully released one Pod in midair to keep his foe at bay. When fired in the air, the Feint Pod functioned differently, sliding horizontally in the air for around three feet, before it would eventually fall and continue its standard "Slowly slither towards the foe, stop when sufficiently close to the foe, detonate when touched or when time was up" behaviour.

This was a quirk of a Pod Sunrise hadn't personally fought against in years, but he remembered it well from the one time he did fight against it, and he took it into account as he fearlessly ran under the airborne Pod, ignoring it and continuing to run right at his foe as he landed, was vulnerable for a moment, and while his foe leapt once more into the air, it didn't matter. Finally, Sunrise was around six or seven feet away from his foe, and running at full speed into the flat wall that stood between those three squares and the fourth. Already, Sunrise was activating his Afterburner gun, the weapon's magical programming taken over as his robot's body locked up, sliding along the ground at the speed he'd just been running at, and two out of four stars were fired before the Ray-headed Peace Dove launched his Three-Way Gun. A fearful and foolish move, as while it may have succeeded in making some flee the bullets, Sunrise was made of tougher stuff, something that slightly reduced the damage your robot took from combat, and it didn't matter how agile your Custom Robot was in the air, when you fired your gun, you could only move down. Until you were done firing it, then you regained your typical air control, air speed, and air acceleration.

The sliding Sunrise's Almighty Lion slid into the wall, as expected, which stopped him from sliding too far away from his helpless foe, and while most of the bullets hit the ground beside him, he didn't care when some bullets from the Three-Way Gun started to hit his robot, because all four stars from his own Afterburner Gun had been launched, and two were starting to rapidly accelerate, leaving behind trails that glowed gold as they rocketed towards their foe. This was the power of the Afterburner Gun. Their homing was crap, their range was alright for a long-ranged weapon, and their power was considerable, especially when backed up by the Gun Boost enchantment in the head of Sunrise's robot.

From one thousand to nine hundred and sixty four, Sunrise's health went down as the bullets hit him.
But his own sequence of four stars was making their way to the foe, and while three soared over the descending foe's head, when the foe landed, he was helpless. The fourth Afterburner Gun bullet hit the Peace Dove, clearing out two of his three Mercy Points and sending his health from a clean one thousand to a lower eight hundred and ten with but a single shot, the force of the blow knocking the Peace Dove back a little, into a raised wall.

Sunrise wasn't done, however, as his Almighty Lion Custom Robot turned red and slid forwards, stopping less than an inch away from his foe. The Peace Dove had a moment of hope as he landed, and suffered the moment of vulnerability one typically got after jumping, as getting punched back a bit technically counted as a jump to those mechanical legs.

This was a moment of weakness Sunrise's Almighty Lion brutally exploited as the redness faded from his Custom Robot for a moment and returned in full force as he charged again, brutally slamming bodily into the green-winged machine and sliding into the wall the foe was pinned up against. The hit wiped out the last of the robot's Mercy Points, forcing him to collapse as he entered a Downed state, his health dropping from eight hundred and ten to four hundred and forty two. Incredibly, Sunrise's foe had already lost over half its health, and he was still Downed!

In the final moment of the foe's Downed state, Sunrise's Almighty Lion moved slightly to his right and charged one last time, hitting his foe as he slid away from him, getting in one last hit that sent the Peace Dove's health from four hundred and forty two to three hundred and thirty two.

Did I say final moment? Because Sunrise turned and slid right back at his opponent, Charging at him once more to send the immobile foe away from the wall, cutting away forty health points before the foe finally gained Mercy Invincibility and landed on his feet, invincible and pissed. His health had been sent from three hundred and thirty two to two hundred and ninety-two. A blue glow flared up around him, revealing that he had the Last Chance ability enchantment mounted in his robotic head, something that drastically reduced the damage your robot took for ten seconds upon dropping to 300 health or less.

The crowd of ponies outside started to move, as if they were going to cheer. It was weird how comparatively slow big ponies seemed when your mind was accelerated by the power of magical processors and the thrill of Custom Robot fighting.

Sunrise's Almighty Lion backed off a little, jumped, Air Dashed over a row of three squares, fired his slow-moving Submarine Bomb, and landed quite a bit away from the foe, who fired one of his Feint Pods, which angrily pursued Sunrise's robot before stopping, blocking any hope of Sun moving towards the Peace Dove as the winged figure ran only somewhat slowly (Putting Formula Legs on a Sky High model to increase its slow speed on the ground was definitely a clever move!) around the flat wall, taking an arcing path towards Sunrise as his Pod took the direct and speedy right-angle-turn approach.

The Peace Dove jumped just before it left the cover of the flat wall it was near, and Sunrise jumped and air-dashed away, landing behind one of the L-shaped walls as the Peace Dove fired one Feint Pod and its Three-Way Gun, sending a wave of ten projectiles at Sunrise's Almighty Lion, which the wall he used for cover absorbed for him-

FUCK! Sunrise's foe got abnormally lucky, to the point where Sunrise wondered if his opponent had a ton of lucky objects in his pockets to help his opponent overcome his own luck, and the last bullet on the center soared over the wall and curved around like a turning boomerang to strike his robot right in the head, dealing more than double damage it would normally deal. A critical hit. Sunrise's health dropped from nine hundred and sixty four to nine hundred and twelve. It was a good thing that gun fired so many bullets, as Critical Hits like that could be game-changingly deadly from
a gun that dealt its full damage in just a few magical bullets, or worse, one.

The Peace Dove landed, and landed dangerously close to the explosion of Sunrise's Submarine Bomb, but he infuriatingly avoided damage. Was this some kind of taunt, to jump over and arc around the slow magical explosion of a bomb before landing so close to it? Sunrise didn't like it, and while he remained behind cover, he stuck his left arm up above the wall to launch another Submarine Bomb from behind cover.

The Peace Dove started to walk away from the Submarine Bomb that slowly cruised towards him, stopping when he noticed the lingering magical explosion of the previously-fired Submarine Bomb. Sunrise fired another Submarine Bomb. His foe waited for a moment as the explosion shrank into nothingness, and then he evaded the slow bomb headed for him by casually walking to the right. Damn that slow weapon's lack of homing ability, damn it to hell!

Sunrise fired another Submarine Bomb right as the two Submarine Bombs he'd already launched hit walls, one detonating when it touched a wall near the Peace Dove and one detonating when it touched the Arena's far wall, the one meant to protect the crowd of ponies watching the fight.

The Peace Dove kept going right, and Sunrise's third Submarine Bomb hit one of the arena's central boxes, detonating harmlessly. Sunrise stayed behind cover and fired a fourth, but the Peace Dove had finally maneuvered around the wall Sunrise was using for cover, and he fired a Submarine Bomb of his own and leapt into the air.

As expected.

Sunrise backed up and ran around the L-shaped wall, remaining behind cover as he launched a Submarine Bomb at the ground beneath the airborne Peace Dove, causing him to manoeuvre himself in the air so that he moved further than he'd planned to, and landed facing Sunrise and around two feet from him. The Peace Dove fearfully lowly leapt or 'Short Hopped' away for a wide leap designed to cover ground and minimize the 'Landing Lag' time you were vulnerable for when you landed, but Sunrise wanted this to happen. He slid to his right as he fired his Afterburner gun, launching three stars before his angle of approach got him stuck on the wall he'd intentionally slid into, uselessly firing the fourth star into the shield wall, which soaked up the magic bullet without a single fuck given.

The Peace Dove Air-Dashed through the sky to try and spend longer in the sky, but it was hopeless. Three of Sunrise's stars hit the blue-glowing figure, dealing a tiny fraction of the damage they should have dealt, his health going from two to two hundred and ninety two to one hundred and ninety five. But hey, even though those hits only dealt minimal damage, and only took away one Mercy Point per bullet, three hits were enough to send the Peace Dove Down.

Behind cover, Sunrise recovered from his sliding state, fired a Submarine Bomb at the foe, and ran left to run out from cover. By the time the Peace Dove had gotten back up and turned invincible, Sunrise had moved far enough to use the central boxes as cover.

The Peace Dove jumped up and fired his Three-Way Gun, and Sunrise was done underestimating that thing. He fired another Submarine Bomb toward his foe and ran diagonally towards his foe and to the right. Sunrise's initial Submarine Bomb detonated near the Peace Dove, but Sunrise had cleared the corner and was ready to start shooting at it, which meant it needed to move. It jumped away from the Submarine Bomb's explosion, and Sunrise slid sideways past the Peace Dove as he fired his Afterburner Gun, firing out four white stars that left golden trails as they shot straight on, three missing the opponent entirely as Sunrise turned without adjusting his trajectory and the fourth hitting its mark, striking his foe in the face. Barely twenty points of damage had been dealt, sure, but Sunrise's shot had knocked his foe into the explosion of his Submarine Bomb, and the foe was
Downed. He ended up with one hundred and twenty health remaining, and Sunrise was facing his foe, about three feet from his helpless enemy.

Sunrise turned red for the duration of his next move and Charged, dealing fifty two damage to the magically-reinforced foe. Seventy three health remaining, and the foe was knocked back a bit to collapse once more, in range for Sunrise's Almighty Lion's next charge, which knocked the foe back further and dealt more damage. Thirty seven health remaining, and surely, his temporary buff to his toughness would fade away any second now. Sunrise was pretty sure this guy was using the version of that ability that started off less defensively powerful than the standard version, but increased in toughness as your health decreased.

Sunrise backed off as his foe got up and became invincible, and Sunrise fled to the far corner of the map, the side with three flat walls and one box instead of the side with two L-shaped walls. The Peace Dove leapt into the air and launched a Submarine Bomb Sunrise easily evaded as he continued to run, faking towards a box as his foe reached the peak of his jump and running towards his foe once his foe had started descending. He seemed to be trying to land near the far side of the arena, on the side with the L-shaped walls.

Sunrise juked left and began to slide right towards cover as he fired his Afterburner Gun, two white star bullets hitting his foe and two white star bullets hitting the L-shaped wall he'd slid into. On purpose, as this made a great way to attack while heading for cover. The Peace Dove landed and suffered a moment of vulnerability as Sunrise finished firing at the wall (Sometimes, he hated that Custom Robot guns were programmed to fire automatically and in very specific ways) and ran back away from it once his foe had recovered, seemingly fleeing until he arced around the L-shaped wall's shorter right side, but the Peace Dove ran away and got shot in the back with the final two bullets Sunrise fired as he stylishly slid out from cover. His foe was Downed, with just twenty-five health points remaining.

Sunrise didn't need to run, and his foe didn't have any ability to run. Sunrise fired his Afterburner gun once more, firing four shots that hit the downed foe right in the back.

But the bastard was using the Last Chance ability, so when the health points of his shield reached zero, they jumped back up to 1, and he became invincible for the rest of his Down period until he'd obtained Mercy Invincibility, and was invincible anyway.

A red glow flared up around the Peace Dove, telling Sunrise that the robot was using the Now Or Never ability that could be mentally activated once per match and would multiply the damage your weapons dealt for four seconds equal to how much health you'd lost. At 0.1% health, that robot would have a deadly 4.5x damage multiplier on the damage of every bomb, and pod he fired, and the overall damage his Three-Way Gun would deal if he used it from an incredibly close range so that all ten bullets would hit you.

It really was now or never for Sunrise, as when his foe's weapons were this strong, even getting hit once or twice could seriously hurt him.

And the Peace Dove went fucking wild with its bombs and pods, firing wildly and rapidly, as if it had the Final Frenzy ability, which doubled the Recovery Rate of your weapons when you activated Now Or Never for the duration of the ability's effect.

So that's why his foe seemed to be playing so badly, by Sunrise's standards, the Unicorn in the body of a lion-man recognized. His build relied upon losing health and getting revenge for it!

Well, this Sky High user was about to learn he wasn't the only one who liked holding back for the last moment of the match.
Sunrise readied his Submarine Bomb and unexpectedly spent longer than usual when aiming, swinging his left arm to his right and his foe's left before firing. The Peace Dove fired his Three-Way Gun, which Sunrise avoided by backing up and hiding behind his nearby L-shaped wall. But when he'd gotten behind the wall, he didn't stop, he kept running and ran around it, until he could see his enemy once again. He evaded some Feint Pods and ran towards the Peace Dove and faked right – as if he was going to run around the central boxes - as the Peace Dove walked forwards, jumping to avoid the Submarine Bomb that almost hit him, and as he made his choice to move left away from Sunrise and fire more Submarine Bombs, Sunrise dashed madly straight at his landing robotic foe, skilfully evading each projectile and explosion with almost supernatural agility, getting close until he was less than a foot away before he fired his Afterburner Gun and slid right past his foe, each bullet hitting its mark and ending the match.

The Peace Dove's shielding ran out of health points and became a wildly-sparking glow for a moment before shorting out and fading away, the robot reflexively and automatically turning back into its Cube Form to automatically repair itself as it prepared to eject its pilot's consciousness from its system.

Sunrise would have smiled, if he could do so in this body. He made up for it with a combination of the victory dance he performed in his own mechanical body, a dance he performed while facing his opponent, knowing the cube'd guy would be forced to watch it and rage silently, something that made victory even sweeter…

First, Sunrise's robot clapped his hands together and started a mental beat. One, two, three, the robot walked in place for three stylish, strutting paces while putting his arms out before him and bringing them back down to his hips as if swimming poorly, followed by a clap as he spread his knees (the middle points in his legs) outwards, then inwards.

A stylized strut of the left leg, followed by a shake of the knee. A stylized strut of the right leg, followed by a shake of the knee. At the same time, he stuck his arms down, then raised them, and raised his right arm as if dramatically raising a gun, preparing for the next dance move. While strutting for two more steps, he stuck his right arm forwards, every finger curled towards the palm besides the index finger (the top one, the one closest to the thumb), which was stuck outwards, like his thumb, which was raised high towards the sky. At the same time, his left hand was resting on his left hip.

In time with the mental beat ending, Sunrise had his robot fold his arms and tilt his head left, just a little.

Only then could the consciousnesses of both fighters leave their machines.

…Yes, he made up for his robot's inability to smile with that victory dance, and the massive grin his pony body had when his consciousness left the robot's metal frame and shwooped fully back into his own equine form, his robot folding back into a shrinking cube and teleporting back into his Pip-Buck. Back in his own four-hooved pony body once more, something that always felt like a natural and welcomed return to form even after how long he'd spent in the wildly-varied bodies of his Custom Robots, he stored his Custom Robot proudly for future use as the not-living weapon shrunk back down again.

Ration tokens, beer cans and glass bottles, drugs, makeshift metal coins, nine millimetre revolver bullets, a small pistol or two, and many full and half-charged batteries changed hooves as bets made were paid out, and the Ponies who watched the battle cheered wildly around the two masters of Custom Robot combat. Sure, some ponies might have just lost some food, or something they could use to get food, but an awesome Custom Robot match was an awesome Custom Robot match.
The fighters, however… Even though both ponies hadn't moved much at all for the past few tens of seconds, unless breathing automatically and blinking occasionally counted, they immediately began lightly panting once they'd returned to their bodies, as if they'd just physically engaged in that recent combat, rather than having their Custom Robots fight for them. Sure, it was a habit that lessened as your experience in Custom Robot battles grew, Sunrise knew, which meant his opponent was hardly any more experienced than he was. Good to know.

Sunrise wasn't sure how his blue opponent would react to losing a match, so he decided to set the tone with a cheerful congratulation. "Great game!" He beamed proudly with a huge grin on his face. "You almost had me near the end!"

Something weighed on the blue pony's mind, but Sunrise was pretty sure it was physically impossible to not enjoy a Custom Robot battle. Especially not one that got so tense near the end! "Thanks," The blue pony smiled back, more exhausted than Sunrise. "But I only have half the water rations I promised you. Do you take battery packs?"

"I could always use more MicroFusions and Energy Cells," Sunrise shrugged. "Twenty bolts and sixty shots of each will do."

"How about twenty of each?"

"How about sixty of each?" Sunrise offered amicably and peaceably, insisting in a manner that just slightly suggested it was a good idea to take his offer. "Ten fully-charged packs for each battery type."

The blue pony whistled. "What the hell kind of guns are you using to chew through batteries that fast?"

"At the shooting ranges? The big kind that punches through armour and magic shields like a hot knife through butter. The kind that could turn anything, even a Stable Security thug, into Swish Cheese or a pile of ash depending on how lucky he got," He said with a dreamy smile, as he was a pre-war pony talking about a wonderfully fast speedboat he was proud of, a boat that he spent most of his time tuning up. "Even though they're small enough to be hidden on you quite easily. I may or may not have one with me."

"Fine," The blue pony sighed, getting the water bottles out of his Pip-Buck's Aid menu with the drop command, though dropping the batteries took a bit longer, as it took him a while to switch over to the Ammo menu, select the right ammo type, bring up the extra menu for choosing numbers of things to drop, twist a knob when the prompt came up to specify exactly how many batteries he wanted to drop, and drop them. He kept over-twisting up and down, his glowing cursor flying past the ten mark again and again, but he eventually hit eight and stopped before slowly and very carefully rotating his Pip-Buck's clicky spinner up to ten. He dropped that number of MicroFusion cells, and then he dropped that many of the other battery type, smaller energy cells. It took a little longer to re-select the chosen number of objects to drop after he switched tabs over from Ammo to Junk, but he eventually dropped a whole twenty bolts. Sunrise's gaze worked with his Pip-Buck, which teleported the batteries, bolts, and water bottles into his own device's inventory, and the solar Unicorn smiled.

"I'm curious, what would you have done if I had refused to accept an alternate payout?" Sunrise wondered.

"I'd just have to hope that you'd go all 'Loan Shark' on my ass and give me a few weeks to get more water."

"And if I killed you for gambling with something you don't have, a felony punishable by death like
"every other real felony down here?" Sunrise asked amicably. It wasn't a threat or a 'Promise', it was genuine casual curiosity.

"Then I die," He shrugged. "I've got a mare I've known for years, and she's got a family some rich bastard left her with after a one-night stand, two foals. But she'll let me add to her family if I make her family into our family and support it. Know what I'm saying?"

"I can respect that," Sunrise nodded, seeming like he truly did, even though on the inside, he wasn't quite so sure if he did. Devotion to one's family was important, but devotion to a mare who'd already chosen another stallion, only for it to not work out with that stallion, leading her to settle for him? Then again, he realized, he was assuming the worst of the mare: That she'd bribed or snuck her way up through the Vault to find a rich pony to seduce and foal-trap, or that she'd attempted this on one who came down to her level, looking for easy pony pussy attached to mares who dreamed of getting ploughed, married, and brought up to the level of the rich. "How about a rematch?" Sunrise offered.

"I don't have much left to bet," The blue pony sadly admitted. "I wouldn't be worth the effort. I have to say, I thought this was going to go differently. I mean, I could tell you were rich, with your neat jacket and all-

A few ponies in the crowd gasped. "'Neat jacket?' A grey mare with red eyes and a wildly-spiked cherry-blossom-pink mane repeated in horrified doubt. "That's a Black Stars Jacket! You know? Those 'Black Stars Rule!' guys?"

Sunrise grinned. "It's true, I'm quite high up in the organization."

"You are?" The blue pony asked fearfully. "You aren't going to do anything with all these witnesses around, right?"

"I could do anything with three times this many witnesses around, but I won't, because I'm not that kind of pony and that's not what the Black Stars are about. We're about defending the weak, helping the poor, spreading knowledge those 'Elites' up in the higher levels would consider too dangerous or exclusive for the common pony, and preparing for the future. And being really, really good at robot battles and Duel Monsters. Do you play Duel Monsters?"

"No."

"I do!" Somepony in the crowd shouted, raising their deck, and Sunrise turned his head around to look. It was somepony he recognized as a Black Star out of uniform: An unusually tall and thin adult mare who'd spoken, a white pony with a purple mane, orange eyes, and a flowing orange dress that swooshed about constantly as if blown by non-existent wind and complimented the twinned purple gun holsters on her hips quite nicely, a scoped Marksman Carbine sticking out of each holster as if they were unusually long revolvers.

"Rock on!" Sunrise cheered that pony on, and turned to the blue pony who'd challenged him. "Are you in any gangs?"

"No, sir."

"What floor are you from?"

"Floor three-oh-six, we're a plant-growing floor."

"That's quite far down from Tech Sec's main floor," Sunrise noted, and once again, that's what floor they were right now. "How'd you get up here?"
"I snuck up and had somepony here forge some papers so I could stay. I owed him a lot of money, and I owed the guy I got my Custom Robot from a lot more. So I took up Custom Robot fighting to pay the bills."

Floor three zero six… Sunrise didn't think he had much of a presence in that area, something he'd have to rectify. "Have you ever been arrested before?"

"No, sir."

"Besides using forged papers, have you ever committed a crime before?"

"Yes, sir."

One of Sunrise's eyebrows rose. "Was it to help somepony besides yourself?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good," Sunrise smiled, and his eyebrows returned to normal. "Living well and making sure those close to you do the same is practically a crime its own right, in this Vault. And when villainy and tyranny is the law, it's every good and just pony's duty to disobey wherever they can."

The blue pony paused for a moment, not sure how to respond to that as it sunk into his mind. One thing about what Sunrise had said, however, really stuck out in his mind. "…You mean Stable?"

"No," Sunrise insisted, "I mean Vault. Stables are what ponies called Hotels before they were called Hotels, but after they were called Inns. Hotels, Inns, Stables, these are things you can enter and exit whenever you want. You go in, you rent a room, you sleep, and you leave when you're ready. Vaults… You don't leave Vaults. Others decide when Vaults open up and who leaves them, and until then, you're the property of whoever owns the key to the Vault's combination lock. Vaults are reinforced boxes you put your valuables in, to protect them. Some are in walls, some are in banks, and some are underground. Sure, you could say the pre-war idiots thought giving these bunkers such a cutesy name would make the idea sound more palatable and appealing to investors and the common citizen, but what is more valuable to a nation than its ponies, and its future? Nothing. And that's what we're about: The Future. So, violence or theft?"

"Huh?"

"What crime did you commit?" Sunrise explained, and there was no judgement in his voice, only curiosity. "Violence or theft?"

"How do you know it wasn't something else?" The blue pony asked suspiciously.

"You're talking to me," Sunrise shrugged in a non-answer. He was, after all, perceptive as fuck. "So, Violence or theft?"

"Violence," The blue pony said, closing his eyes. He took in a slow, deep breath, and sighed. "I beat up two old Stable Security bastards who were trying to rape some tiny yellow filly around here. I took my shirt off and tied it around my head, tore a hole in the front so I could see, picked up a metal chair, and I smashed one of them in the head hard enough to dent his helmet. Then the filly I'd saved said 'Well, time for plan B!' and pulled a tiny gun out and shot them both. And she ran away, leaving me with the bodies. So I ran away, and nopony was left with the bodies."

"And you were never caught for this?"

"There are plenty of blue ponies down here, the witnesses said they weren't paying any attention to
what happened, because they weren't going to do anything anyway so this was literally the least they
could do, and the cameras didn't see my mane or whether I had a horn or not, so no."

"Good. Tell me, what's your Cutie Mark?"

The blue pony frowned and turned his side to Sunrise, lowered his chest to the floor, and used his
forehooves to push the waist of his white leather pants down. The blue pony showed Sunrise the
mark on his bare asscheek. And, of course, his heavy white balls and wide sheathe, which had a
mediocre length, a bright blue cock snugly resting within it, its head slightly peeking out of its
protective folds, just a little. Sunrise's eyes focused on the Cutie Mark: A large and curved ocean
wave far lighter in colour than his own blue body. A dark blue surfboard rode atop the wave.
"Surfing," The blue pony said sadly.

Both of Sunrise's eyebrows shot up, and somepony in the crowd of fans announced everypony's
thoughts for them. "The fuck is surfing?" A loud and gravelly, yet unusually high and enthusiastic
voice demanded, because pronouncing the word 'What' when you asked what the fuck something
was… something like that was just too mainstream.

"It's a pre-war sport where you get on a flat floating board called a surfboard, kind of like a
skateboard, and you try to stay on top of it while you hang around on really wavy and unstable
water. The goal is to try and ride along the side of the biggest waves you can find. And on top of
them, if you're really good" The blue pony explained.

"I'd say that's bullshit, but I believe you," Sunrise admitted, "Pre-War ponies invented some weird
sports. I can't imagine that's very useful down here."

"No, sir."

"And you're an Earth Pony, so it's not as if you can play with semantics and master some sort of
'Body-Surfing' possession spell. Still, you're good at Custom Robot battles. Really good. And I
suppose the ascending diagonal air dashes of your Peace Dove are like surfing on the air itself. Be
honest, what do you think of the Elites?"

"I hate them. They get to eat whatever they want and do whatever they want, and we have to eat
their garbage! We try and act all weird with fucking outfits and shit but we're not different from this
Sta- Vault! Those rich bastards are still in charge, and have you fucking seen them? Prancing around
like they're foals in a fucking candy storeroom."

"Do you have a job?"

"I work nights at a Custom Robot assembly line."

"For what company?"

"Barkseeds."

"What's your name, son?"

"I'm Blue Moon."

Sunrise smiled, and got out a black leather jacket for new Black Stars recruits. "Well, Blue Moon,
welcome to the Black Stars,"

He gasped. "Wow, uh… Now I feel really bad about taking you here and stalling you while my
friends ran off and got my other friends to come here to fight you."
"Your friends are going to fight me in a row, using Custom Robots and Duel Monsters decks, and I won't be able to leave until I beat each one in a row, right?" Sunrise asked peaceably and curiously, tilting his head. "No pony would be dumb enough to ever try an armed assault on any Black Star, let alone its leader, a pony famous for never losing a single fight in his life, right?"

"Hell no! I mean yes. I mean- We're just going to use cards and robots to tire you out. Eventually, one of us is going to beat you, right?"

"Alright, but I'll only fight each pony once in his or her game of choice, and then, I'm leaving. I've got a show to see, after all," Sunrise shrugged, as if it wasn't so exhausting to fight multiple Custom Robot battles in a row that the toll the mental strain took on you would start to threaten your health. He was a tough guy, and he'd fought back-to-back battles in tournaments before, so he knew he could take it.

…Hopefully.

Well, if the ponies he was about to fight were using Legal Weapons, he'd be fine. If they were using Illegal Weapons, the strain would get a lot worse, and he'd never fought a series of Illegal Part users before. Actually, come to think of it, he wasn't sure if he liked his chances. Then again, with any luck, most of his opponents would prefer their chances in a Duel Monsters duel over their chances in a Custom Robot fight. Besides, Custom Robots were more expensive, and Illegal Parts even more so. Usually. He knew some Custom Robot part manufacturers made a little extra cash on the side by selling sub-standard and fragile low-power parts, cheap and nasty little things prone to breakage and malfunction. Things that would never pass any sort of inspection or survive any rigorous field-testing. Things only a starving, desperate pony would buy if he expected to fight fellow ponies so poor, things would be a relatively even match. And, of course, things a desperate pony bought when he wanted to fill every part slot with something cheap and crappy, except for the main robot body and Main Gun.

Speaking of guns, he just remembered, he needed to test out that experimental Custom Robot he'd modified, the one he'd slapped two extra arms onto, each with their own attached guns. Perhaps he'd test the Custom Robot here, if things got a little dicey, and he needed to swap out the regular die with one of his lucky dice, so to speak.

"The only show you're going to see," A growlingly-voiced teenaged mare trying to sound tough yelled from the makeshift bar room's front door. "Is a show where the so-called Immortal Sun goes up in flames!"

Sunrise turned around and saw six ponies at the door, waiting for him. In addition, he noticed that some of the twenty-ish ponies in the bar around him had gotten up, and gotten out their Duel Monsters Decks or Custom Robot Cubes, ready for a fight.

He doubted he could talk his way out of this, so he figured he might as well get excited and throw his all into this. After all, fighting was fucking fun. Custom Robot battles were fucking fun. Duel Monsters duels were fucking fun. And what made it even more fun? Getting hyped as hell and acting like some kind of overly-animated Neighponese comic protagonist, pretending every battle, every duel, every move made in each and every moment, was the most important thing in the universe. It was an act, sure, but it was an act ponies couldn't help but get drawn into.

"Let's see who burns first!" Sunrise dramatically declared with a big grin, pointing right at the mare who'd spoken first, a bone-white mare with a delightfully curly short purple mane, except the pink left side of her hair had been hacked off and left shorter by an unskilled barber, leaving that side of her mane a mess of spiked clumps. Unless that was what her mane just naturally looked like. In any case, her eyes were mismatched in more ways than one. Her right eye, beneath the purple mane
segment, was pink, and her left eye, beneath her pink mane segment, was purple. "Form an orderly line for your chance at the Champ, baby!"

Sunrise didn't know how many duels he'd have to fight, or how many Custom Robot battles he'd have, either. He didn't know how long he'd be stuck here, and he didn't know if these were all the ponies his new member's friends had been able to get, or if even more would show up after he finished dealing with these guys.

He did know three things, however.

One, there was no way in hell he was losing to any of these ponies.

Two, he was going to come away from this gauntlet of foes a lot richer.

And three…

Things were about to get crazy.

_________________________________________________________

*Level Up!*

*New Perk: Mini Gunner - The Guns of your Custom Robots deal 10% more damage.*
This was fucking crazy.

This, right here, on some generic-ass and undecorated mid-tier Vault floor known as Floor 394, was fucking crazy.

Reflette didn't know who this sky-blue mare with a harsh yellow-tipped curly pastel-pink mane was, or what the fuck she thought she was doing, but she was standing atop a big box in some intersection and she was in her fucking way.

And so was the massive crowd that had already gathered around this bitch, blocking this and other route intersections!

Reflette and her two friends had wanted to make the trek from their home to her place of work, Golden God Robotics. But now, she was stuck here, watching some dumb bitch stand on a big fucking box in the middle of a big fucking crowd as said mare struggled with the desire to kill herself.

Their home was nothing to write home about, and not just because writing home about their home would be entirely pointless and, depending on whom you asked, arguably impossible. Their home was a "Shared Living Room", a room in want of a bed, the walls stripped bare, the ground filled with sleeping bags. Your earthly possessions either remained in your sleeping bag and got stolen when you weren't there to defend your property, or your earthly possessions were stored in your Pip-Buck. Their home was twelve floors down, and it was a home they and thirty other mares called home. Thank fuck for the Silencing Enchantment on the roofs in most of those Shared Living Homes, silencing any and all noise made by the ponies inside and allowing any to sleep there at any time.

A Unicorn mare at Reflette's left - a pure white Unicorn with a pink mane, soft blue eyes, and two long-tailed and large-bowed pink ribbons tied on either side of her mane to tie her straight hair into two ponytails, with a third ponytail from the back of her neck hanging down the right side of her chest - sighed. She rolled her eyes, and looked up at the dumb bitch of a mare up on the box, who sobbed and wailed around the shotgun she'd shoved into her own mouth. "Do you think she'll do it?" The white Unicorn by the name of Ribbonacci, "Ribbons" to her friends, casually wondered.

"Not a chance," said the mare at Reflette's right, a chubby pale-brown Unicorn with a short yellowish-brown straight mane parted in the center. It fell to the sides and curled up a little, but it wasn't much, and the lower half of her mane hung down one side of her chest. While the crying mare up on the box would have been shocking to some, Booky simply observed the mare with a level of detachment you'd expect to see only in a curious scientist. This was mare was known as Open Book, or "Booky" to her friends.

Reflette shook her head in disgust, the long twin lilac ponytails attached to her head, each bound by connected sets of three round glass bands, shaking with it, though the longer ponytail that came from the back of her neck, bound in the same way and hanging down the left side of her chest, remained still. Her body was a very pale blue-white, and her eyes were an eye-catchingly pale purplish-blue.

"If this turns out to be another stupid fucking advert, I'm going to lose my shit. There's a list of shit that's okay to do, and this isn't on it."

"My money's on a Live Performance," Ribbonaci, or "Ribbons", guessed.
Reflette groaned. Not another Live Performance. Not that bullshit again! Not another one of those stupid scenes from some random story or play nopony had heard of, or a stupid scene from a book that wasn't even finished and published yet, or a stupid extra-made-up scene from a book that didn't even exist, acted out by one or more of those stupid fucking "I don't care if making a scene on this scale and getting in the way of workers is illegal, I live to make life unpredictable by acting out pre-scripted scenes with my friends in random places and hoping ponies throw money or food at us when we're done acting!" ponies. Forget adverts. For a pony to just pretend to blubber and scream and deep-throat Pinkie Pie's Microphone like this, only for the pony to suddenly have the gun pulled out of her mouth by some shit actor who jumps up and "Saves her from herself" and then they hug, and then they go "End scene!" and then they expect fucking applause for this shit…

Or worse, for the mare up on that box to fire, and find that the gun was missing its ammo, or it had dud ammo, or whatever, and then the crying pony suddenly goes "Has this ever happened to you? Buy high-quality twenty-gauge ammo from Insensitive Bastard, today!", and it turns out this shit was an advert all along…

…There was a list of shit that was okay to do, and absolutely nothing about that shit was on it.

Ribbons smirked. "Well, if it is a Live Performance, the whore up on the box isn't likely to have a response planned for anything I say. 'Specially if it's something unexpected."

Nervous concern spread across Reflette's face. That friend of hers and her terrible ideas had gotten them into a lot of trouble over the years, and while things had a tendency to work out in the end almost half the time, and even turn out quite well now and then, she still hated risking it. "…What are you going to do?"

"HEY, YOU! On the box!" Ribbons barked, drawing a bit of attention to herself, which Reflette visibly hated, trying to shrink in on herself. "Get the fuck down!"

The crying mare made a throat sound that tried to sound angry, but just sounded sad.

Really, really sad.

Wait, was she… Was this mare on the box serious?

The walls Reflette had built around her hardened heart started to falter and tentatively turn transparent as she peered closer at the mare's face. She didn't seem to be bullshitting them. She seemed to be…

Serious.

Oh, fuck!

What could she do?

She didn't see any reflective surfaces she could use her magic on. She didn't have time to move any of her mirrors over there. And when it came to her friends, they couldn't do jack shit with magic! Fuck, she wished she knew more than six spells. Damn, she wished she was as strong as the incredible mirror mages of old, who could do all kinds of mirror-y bullshit with pretty much anything, even the reflections in one's eyes and individual drops of rain, and fancy conceptual bullshit that'd kick the ass of a country and leave the survivors scratching their heads, unable to understand what had happened without diagrams and several paragraphs of explanation.

Reflette turned to her other friend, Booky, hoping the mare would have some words of wisdom for the occasion, or better yet, whatever words were needed to calm her friend down and change her
mind about doing whatever she was trying to do. But instead, Booky simply watched things happen, impartial and detached, a casual observer with a casual, mild curiosity.

Some stranger with an ear-catchingly gruff voice piped up. "Hey, fuck you! She needs a minute!"

"Please shut up," Reflette quietly begged her friend.

Ribbons ignored her friend, and that friend's better judgement. "Well, she can have all the minutes she wants once she's out of everypony's way!" Ribbons yelled back.

The mare on the box pulled her shotgun out of her mouth, but just a little, keeping it aimed at her mouth. "I want to be out of everypony's way! I want to fucking die!"

"Shut up!" Reflette urgently whispered.

Ribonacci did not shut up. Her horn aglow with a pale pink light, Ribbons pulled out her only weapon, an average and nondescript nine-millimetre pistol that, on closer inspection, had a few dents and scratches here and there, and she raised her weapon into the air before levelling it at the side of her own head, and glared at the crying mare. "Now you listen here, you little shit! You die, I die!"

"What the fuck, Pinkie?!" Reflette shouted, desperately hoping the ponies on this vault would think her name was Pinkie, and not something unique like Ribonacci.

Of course, now that she thought about it, the name Pinkie would be pretty unique down here anyway. After how the Ministry Mares failed Equestria and practically caused its darkest hours, the names of those ponies were treated like they were cursed. There were poor ponies out there, who were unlucky enough to have been given rich-pony names by ambitious parents who hoped their foals would rise above their stations. Those ponies tended to suffer through a lifetime of mockery and bullying and shame instead, if they didn't give themselves more suitable nicknames quickly enough and hope hard enough that they stuck. These ponies, who hated the names they were given, thanked their lucky stars that they weren't named after the Ministry Mares.

Why the fuck… Why the fuck did she say Pinkie? Out of all the names she could have chosen, why the fuck did she pick Pinkie? She already knew this name was hated, so why did… Why was it, that when she started to say "What the fuck," and decided to pick a random name without thinking about it, the first name that came to mind was something so remembered, so loathed, so universally despised…

And why did saying it at the end of that sentence feel so right, so natural, as if she'd already said it ten thousand times in her life, and would go on to say it ten thousand thousand times more?

"Please, put that gun down!" The mare up on the box sorrowfully shouted.

Ribbons's eyes darted around, checking who was beside her. She noticed a colt, around twelve years of age, and she smiled. The colt didn't notice.

"Don't do it," Reflette ordered quietly. "Don't do it, please. Please don't."

"If either of us dies, that foal will be scarred for life!" Ribbons shouted, nodding her head towards that colt.

Reflette sighed with relief. Good, Ribbons didn't plan on grabbing the colt and pulling his head close to her own, using the young one as an extra hostage.

"Pssh, no way!" The colt boasted, looking away and looking stupid. "I see death all the time,
Granny!"

Ribbons gritted her teeth and glared at him. "Have you ever seen a mare kill herself?" She asked.

"Nope," He admitted happily. "But I've seen tons of ponies die. What's the difference?"

"The difference is: This is sadder!" She insisted.

"Not really," He shrugged. "I dunno for sure, but isn't it sadder when a mare wants to live, and she's all, No! Don't kill me! I want to live! But then she dies anyway? Because that's how my mom died."

" Fucking shit… " Ribbons breathed to herself, awed. "This floor's a shithole."

Reflette agreed.

Ribbons paused, and the world waited a bit. All was silent, aside from the soft sobbing of the mare on the box with a gun in her mouth.

"Now comes the part where you laugh, call me an idiot for listening to you, and say you were only fucking with me."

"Who said I was fucking with you?" He asked.

She rolled her eyes, telling herself that this little shit simply HAD to be bullshitting her, he simply HAD to be.

"Hello? Remember me?" The sobbing mare on the box asked.

Ribbons sighed, and decided to try a different tactic. "You know, if you die here, nobody will really remember you."

Reflette's jaw dropped. With a soft and urgent scream that broke in her throat and strained it, she screamed. "Fucking shut up!"

Ribbons ignored her. "No, really," She said to the crying mare, "You'll be remembered for a few days as some mare who killed herself, then everypony who pretends to care about you for longer than that will forget all about you when the next mare kills herself like a little bitch instead of trying to solve her problems or die trying to solve somepony else's."

"That's not true!" Some mare in the audience yelled. "If she dies here, we'll remember her forever!"

"What's her name?" Ribbons asked pointedly.

"It's… uh…” There was a pause. "Tear… drop… Mouth… gun?"

"Teardrop Mouthgun," Ribbons said sarcastically, and she raised one eyebrow at the crying mare. "Is that who you want to be remembered as, or do you want to tell me why you're up here, and why you thought getting up here would make your troubles go away?"

"I was raped, and my rapist said if I don't die like this today, my daughter's next. And she's only 15! And if I say who raped me, her sister's next. And she's 11!"

"And you don't feel like camping out in a Room somewhere with a shotgun, ammo, your daughter, and food, becaaaaaaause?"

"Because they can wait around longer than we can stay in one room! They're paid to walk around
these floors, remember? Anypony can take this floor's patrol one day, a week or two from now or even a few months from now, and fuck us! No matter what we do!"

"Why not join the Black Stars? They protect their own."

"Sure, why not join a fucking gang, and take my daughters in with me? THAT'LL help them live a better life!" The mare yelled sarcastically.

"Hey, the guards already hate you and want to fuck with your family, so that's half the qualifications needed right there."

"I don't want my foals joining a gang!"

"But you're fine with them potentially getting raped after you're dead?!" Ribbons yelled. "Call me crazy, but personally, I think life's better when it doesn't have rape in the future!"

"Fuck you!"

"No, fuck you! Harder!"

Reflette knelt down on the ground, slowly lowered her stomach to the floor, rested her head on the floor, and covered her face with her hooves. "I hate this."

"Where are your parents?" Ribbons demanded. "Where the fuck are your parents?!!"

"Dead!"

"Where's your husband?" Ribbons asked pointedly.

"I divorced him."

"Bitch," Ribbons commented in a somewhat low tone, though loud enough for the mare on the box to hear.

"Because he started doing drugs again!" The mare on the box insisted. "Then the fucker had a mid-life crisis, went to the Tech-Sec, and threw his life away in some arena. He picked up a bat, and some teenager with a switchblade took him out."

Ribbons decided to drop this line of questioning. "Tell me who raped you, and I'll have the Black Stars take your kids into protective custody. They won't even have to join."

"You can get them to do that?" The mare on the box asked.

"Like you can get them to do that!" Some bitch of a stallion in the crowd yelled.

"Of course I can! And since shit got this real, they'll do it for free. They're good guys, remember?" Ribbons questioned.

The most recent voice from the crowd was silent.

"Now you!" Ribbons yelled, swinging her gun around to the back of her head so that if it was fired, it would kill herself and fly into the body of the mare with a gun in her mouth. "Tell me who raped you!"

"Fine!" The mare on the box snapped, and Reflette got off the floor, shocked that her friend's bullshit ability to have things go her way struck again. "I was raped by-"
A gunshot was heard.

Buckshot splattered against the face of the mare on the box like semen, caving her face in and killing her instantly. Blood sprayed from her ruined face as she flew off the box, and landed in a crumpled heap like a foal's dropped stuffed animal.

Ears folded down from the noise, Reflette turned around and saw the shooter, and five friends right behind him. Six Stable Security ponies clad in black riot gear were here, and had probably been sent to deal with the crowd and the mare on the box, Reflette assumed. Which meant that they'd decided to solve the situation by shooting the mare first and trying to intimidate the crowd into dispersing.

Reflette looked back to the mare.

The mare was dead, and the puddle of blood around her body was spreading.

And suddenly, almost everypony in the crowd was crying.

"She was so young!" One pony wailed.

"Why do the good die young?" Some stallion in the crowd roared with anguish,

"She was too good for this world!" Another stallion yelled.

Reflette heard the other mare at her side, Booky, start to cry.

"This world is so cruel!" Some mare in the crowd screamed.

"Fuck!" Ribbons shouted. "Fuck! Fuck fuck fuck fuck FUCK!"

Reflette was stunned. A mare had just died. So many ponies were content to stop and stare and wonder if she'd really die, and her friend had been the only one to stand up and try to stop the death. And now, a mare was dead, and almost everypony was-

"She was so beautiful! And so stunning and brave!" Somepony screeched.

"I'm so fucking sad!" Another cried.

…Interrupting her thoughts by screaming.

When the pony was alive, they watched her misery. And when the pony was dead, and nothing they said mattered, they yelled as loudly as they could to try and convince themselves these meaningless words spoken too late to matter mattered.

The sheer fucking fakeness of it all… The fradulity, the… Whatever the fuck the proper word for fake-ness was, that word she couldn't quite remember right now, that's what this was!

She wanted to start ranting. She wanted to lose her fucking shit. She wanted to lose it completely. But she knew that with these trigger-happy thugs around, saying the wrong thing could get herself shot.

"Let's go," Reflette growled to her friends.

"I'm going to fucking go, alright. Quietly shove your way to the elevator and when I'm done, run," Ribbons whispered.
"Oh no," Reflette whimpered.

"Go." Ribbons quietly ordered, and her tone left no room for argument. Reflette glanced to her friend, Booky, the silent watcher, and saw a silent look of shock on her face as she nodded. The two friends started to sneakily and stealthily slip away and prepared to start running at any moment as Ribbons got ready to make her move.

Ribbons reared up and dramatically pointed at the shooter. "You killed her!" She yelled. "It was you! You were the one who raped her!"

It was as if a spell had been cast, a spell that turned tearful blue eyes to raging red. The mob around her screamed and swore and threw accusations around and raged, and Ribbons smirked as she ducked into the crowd and slipped away. As she slipped behind some crying grandmother and slipped behind a massive and furious Earth Pony, her hoofiwork was left behind to angrily yell at the guard, showing off to each other how angry they were.

And then one of the guards decided to solve the situation by shooting into the crowd. Blood sprayed, ponies screamed, and the fake rage turned to real anger as the mob attacked and the six armoured guards were swarmed. Superior physical strength and agility wasn't worth much when you were outnumbered and surrounded by limbs grabbing and pulling at you, lightweight and sturdy black riot armour wasn't worth much when ponies were taking out pool cues with sharp metal spikes attached with rope and screws to run you through, and shotguns with buckshot and drum barrels weren't worth much when they were shoved up and away from ponies by some as others pulled the guns away and threw them away.

Every victory here would be hollow, every dead Stable Pony would be a hollow and meaningless gesture of defiance that invited and ensured death, Reflette knew. For every Stable Security pony that died down here would be replaced by two more, and as alarms undoubtedly raged somewhere in the building, soldiers would be sent down by the Overmare herself with orders to kill until the only life signs on the floor were concealed by custom Stable Security Pip-Buck software. But it seemed the ponies down here were fed up pretending to feel this and that and anything other than hatred for who ruled them.

Normally, when a floor like this one reached its breaking point, many ponies would fight and many more would flee. Some ponies would be spared, if they quietly assimilated into other floors, and others would be killed if they ever said anything bad about Stable Security or talked about what really led the floor to revolt, rather than what the Overmare and her dogs in the radio stations would say led the floor to wipe itself out or deserve to be wiped out.

But here and now, the ponies running with her were a few fearful and oddly-dressed ponies who probably weren't from here, and a lot of foals. Including the one who'd bragged about seeing dead bodies earlier. He didn't look scared, he looked serious, focused, determined to survive.

A lot of ponies also seemed to be from here, and they were running, too. But they were owners of the voices who'd screamed about how sad they'd found the death, not the owners of voices that remained silent for fear of revealing their true feelings to the world.

Reflette changed her mind. This floor wasn't a shithole at all. It was full of heroes, and the heroes of Floor 394 would be remembered.

She would make sure of that.

Level Up!
CHARACTER NAME: Reflette LeMinus

Tagged Skills: Sneak, Small Guns, Magic:Light

New Perk: Clever Pony - With each level of Swift Learner your character will gain an additional +10% to experience whenever Experience Points are earned.

STATISTICS

Strength: 5
Perception: 5
Endurance: 4
Charisma: 4
Intelligence: 8
Agility: 8
Luck: 6

TRAITS

Good Natured

You studied less-combative skills as you were growing up. Your combat skills start at a lower level, but other skills are substantially improved. (+5 to Barter, Medicine, Repair, Science, Magic:All, and Speech, -5 to Energy Weapons, Explosives, Guns, Melee Weapons, and Unarmed)

Skilled

You gain +5 to all skills, but you suffer a -10% penalty to gained experience points.

Level Up!

CHARACTER NAME: Ribonacci/"Ribbons"

Tagged Skills: Sneak, Speech, Magic:Tailoring

New Perk: Cherchez La Filly - In combat, you do +10% damage against female opponents. Outside of combat, you'll sometimes have access to unique dialogue options when dealing with the same sex.

STATISTICS

Strength: 6
Perception: 6
Endurance: 6
Charisma: 1
Intelligence: 6
Agility: 6

Luck: 9

**TRAITS**

**One In A Million**

Are you lucky or unlucky? You're not sure, and it seems fate can't make its mind up, either. Your Critical Hit chance is divided by 3, but your Critical Hits deal 3x damage.

**Skilled**

You gain +5 to all skills, but you suffer a -10% penalty to gained experience points.

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**Level Up!**

**CHARACTER NAME: Open "Booky" Book**

**Tagged Skills:** First Aid, Speech, Magic:Writing

New Perk: Clever Pony - With each level of Swift Learner your character will gain an additional +10% to experience whenever Experience Points are earned.

**STATISTICS**

Strength: 5

Perception: 5

Endurance: 4

Charisma: 4

Intelligence: 8

Agility: 8

Luck: 6

**TRAITS**

**Shot Counter**

You might fire slower than your friends, but when your shots hit, you make them count! (-25% fire rate with guns and energy weapons, +25% AP required per shot, +20% accuracy and +30% damage with guns and energy weapons)

**Skilled**

You gain +5 to all skills, but you suffer a -10% penalty to gained experience points.

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