
Fallout: Equestria - Project Horizons

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Once upon a time, in the magical land of Equestria, the virtues of friendship were cast aside in favor of greed, suspicion and war. Finally, the world itself was ravaged by the fires of countless megaspells; civilisation, as it once was, ceased to exist. The city of Hoofington, however, did not die easily. Even with the world shattered, the ominous, irradiated towers of the Core remained standing. Formerly the center of Equestria's wartime research and development efforts, the ruined city now slumbers, a place of poisoned secrets and perilous treasures. One unicorn mare, already burdened by guilt and self-doubt, finds herself thrust into the center of Hoofington's web of intrigue. With a diverse and dysfunctional band of companions at her side, she must unravel a mystery over two hundred years in the making - if the trials of the Equestrian Wasteland don't unravel her first.

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Volume I

The Security Mare

Blackjack, an incompetent security mare from the dystopian Stable 99, suddenly has her monotonous life turned upside down when the stable is invaded by vicious raiders. In a daring plan to save her home, Blackjack flees the stable with EC-1101, a valuable data file. With an enormous price on her head and a deadly cyberpony out for her blood, the struggle to survive in the blasted ruins of Hoofington tests her resolve and courage to their limits.

1. Inception

“Once upon a time, in the magical land of Equestria. . .”

War. War never changes. It had consumed our home, a war fought by foreign aggressors until great and terrible magics had been unleashed to burn all the world to ash and dust. Only our constant devotion to the Princesses had carried us through that terrible war, just as our unwavering faith in the Overmare maintained our continued survival within the earth. Trust in the Overmare; obey the Overmare.

The grating buzz of my alarm yanked me away from sleep. I stuck my left foreleg out from under the blankets, away from my head, felt around for the end table next to the bed, found it, and proceeded to whack my PipBuck against the tabletop until the right button was hit and the noise stopped. I groaned and smacked my lips, tasting the sour gunk in my mouth before rolling onto my back and huffing softly, “Good morning, Blackjack. Welcome to another thrilling day in Stable 99.” I half crawled, half rolled, half fell out of bed and gave myself a vigorous shake. Life in Stable 99 was routine, with any deviation punishable by the security mares. I had half an hour to wash, half an hour to eat, and an hour to report to my duty station. The same as it had been every day since I’d gotten my cutie mark.

Slowly, I shuffled through the copious junk I’d accumulated. It was mostly recycled food chips and old drink bulbs, though I liked to pretend that some of the open bottles on the dresser were some sort of fermentation experiment. . . . Maybe a pet? Colonization by our future fungal overlords? Heh. A mare could dream. . . . My horn glowed white as my magic lifted my uniform from one of the heaps. I gave it a test sniff. . . . ew. . . . unacceptable. I tossed it back on its pile and sifted around for another. Sniff. . . . sniff. . . . yeah, this’d work.

Trotting down to the showers, I passed the murals designed to inspire camaraderie and cooperation. . . . at least, according to what I’d been constantly taught in classes. ‘We are all the Overmare’s foals’ declared the caption of one picture of an abstract white unicorn hugging dozens of tiny ponies in her hooves. Another showed one lone weeping mare under the caption ‘Selfishness separates.’

I trotted into the sector’s communal bathroom, and immediately my ears perked to a familiar giggling. Walking past a stall, I glanced in at two mares employing unauthorized and probably ineffective washing techniques. According to the training manual, behavior like that in public spaces was punishable by whipping and restriction to C

class rations, so it was pretty understandable that the pair looked up with some trepidation when they spotted me.

“Oh, it’s just Blackjack,” the dappled mare, Pastels, said in relief before flushing and snapping at her partner, “I swear, you are trying to get us flogged!”

“Fun,” giggled the white mare, Misty Hooves from the bakery, nuzzling her. Misty was a chronic repeat offender. I didn’t know if she liked the kiss of the whip or if there was something else wrong with her. Or both.

I sighed. In theory, I was supposed to discourage this kind of thing. However, it fucking sucked being the mare who was suppose to discourage this kind of thing. “You won’t think so if it’s Daisy doing the flogging,” I commented, and instantly their smiles disappeared. I couldn’t blame them. With the constant duty and honor bullshit, a little flank spank was one of the few reliable means of recreation, and a lot of the security mares got really...enthusiastic about it. I stepped under the spray and immediately jerked. “Cold!”

“Yeah. Heating talismans are really slow today,” Misty said.

“Well,” I said after a moment, “go back to your quarters and finish up your fun. Make sure you’re back in your beds by curfew.” That’s me, big badass security pony. The pair glanced nervously at each other and then quickly finished their showers.

“I wonder if we can do it in the atrium and not get caught,” I heard Misty mutter to Pastels as the two trotted out. I rolled my eyes and shook my head. Some mares have all the luck. Not that they were the only two, or even the worst two. Half the ponies in the stable seemed to have at least one flavor of crazy. I supposed it was only inevitable when half your day was devoted to keeping this place gong.

And we had to keep it going. If we didn’t... don’t think about it.

Stable 99 was all that was left. Every filly learned that as soon as they could read; the megaspells unleashed across Equestria had sterilized the surface. Radioactive death was all that awaited us outside. So we kept the stable working. We kept order. We kept loyalty... because at any moment... any moment...

“Fuck, Blackjack. Don’t think about another Incident,” I muttered softly. “The Overmare protects.” ...but I felt a gloomy specter rising inside me at the thought of the entire stable being in the hooves of a filly a year younger than me.

There were exactly five hundred jobs to be filled in Stable 99. Four hundred and something were covered by mares like myself who inherited our jobs from our mothers. My mom was security. I was security. When I had my daughter, she would be

security. And so on and so on. In the rare event of a mare dying before she could breed, a lottery would be held for some other mare to produce an extra filly for the spot. Because the population had to stay at five hundred. Everypony had to behave and follow the rules. Otherwise... there'd be an Incident.

Stable 99 couldn't take another Incident. This bathroom alone showed the flickering lights from overtaxed generators and the water that couldn't settle on whether it wanted to be freezing or boiling. You couldn't think about it; all it would take was one thing to go wrong and we'd all die. One busted generator... one broken recycler... one accident, and we'd all be choking on our own unrecycled breath.

"Fuck! Don't think about it..." I said, trying again to shove it from my mind. That was made ridiculously easy by Midnight trotting past me towards the atrium. Instantly, my ruby eyes popped wide at her cute flank and graceful tail. Black on black and oh she needed to be mine! "Hey! Midnight! Midnight! Hey! Hey! Wait up!" I shouted as I tripped and raced to catch up with her. Of course, she didn't wait; she never did. Instead, she picked up her pace. "Damnit, Midnight! No running in the halls!" I shouted as I ran after her. What? I'm security! I'm allowed to break the rules when pursuing a fine flank!

Unfortunately, there was a flash and a pair of hoofcuffs materialized around my forehooves. "Oh sh—" I barely got out before rolling head over hoof. I glared around at the source. It could only be... "Daisy. Marmalade. Excellent cunt block... top notch." The pale earth pony mare and honey colored unicorn both smiled at my predicament.

"No running in the halls, Blackjack," Daisy said, stepping out of the side hall she'd been lurking in. When Stable-Tec made the stable, clearly they hadn't had mares of her size in mind. Her ears nearly brushed against the ceiling as she looked down at me with her snide little grin. "Not even after pussy." Marmalade gave an echoing little snicker.

"Right. You got me," I said as I held up the hoofcuffs. "So?"

"Aww... don't know the spell yourself? I thought all the security unicorns did. Marmalade does," Daisy taunted as she stepped over me, making her way towards the atrium stairs. The vapid unicorn gave a slack grin and nodded, and then both of them had a good laugh as they trotted away. I rose, glaring at their backs before hobbling after the pair.

All security unicorns were supposed to know a selection of spells for policing the stable. Me... I had telekinesis... and telekinesis... and oh! Did I mention telekine-

sis? I couldn't cuff or stun or do interrogation spells to save my life; all the practice I'd put in merely gave me a migraine. I'd have been better off being in maintenance, that would mean I'd be responsible for the stable. Strike that. . . better I was in food prep. Nice, low responsibility food prep. That was the life for me. . .

But I was security. Because Mom was security. Because her mom had been security. All the way back to the legendary Card Trick, the one who'd carved 'Security: we save ponies' above the entrance to the security level. Hurray for completely irrational expectations! I knew I'd never save 99. I couldn't even get out of these hoofcuffs.

Woah, pity party; table for one! Or not. I didn't have any time for the poor me routine. Never played well. Nope! I just had to get out of these cuffs. . . and I had an idea how. . .

The huge atrium was the heart and soul of pony life in 99. Almost half the stable could fit in the room for large events, more if everypony was really friendly. Huge support pillars had been sculpted in a parody of tree trunks, and the support beams had been fashioned to resemble branches. That was about the extent of trying to make 99 look like something outside. Besides, the effect was ruined by the huge banners of the Overmare smiling down at us all and her stupid patriotic slogans of 'Help the Overmare, help 99' and 'Stableity over all'. I mean, really. 'Stableity'? The music piped in was half parade march and half hymn.

Any wonder I tried to stay out of this place? There was also the fact that most ponies refused to look at me. They'd drop their conversations, look aside, or leave. It didn't matter that I tried to be nice; the fact was that all I had to do was drop a name and they'd be hauled in for interrogations. I'd witnessed enough to know I didn't want to drop a name. . . besides, I'd already tried it once. Never worked for the ponies who deserved it.

I passed the cafeteria where ponies loaded bowls with green recycled algae slime, scooped recycled fungi cubes onto trays, collected synthetic recycled carrot sticks and apple flakes into bowls, or heaped up stacks of green recycled grass chips, brown recycled hay chips, and white recycled cake chips upon their plates. All the food in 99 was recycled into more food. All the waste in 99 was recycled. We were recycled. And yes, even having lived here my entire life, I still found it easier to pretend that the machines just magically made the food poof into being. Still, despite being made out of recycled poo water, the chips were pretty tasty!

You just had to not think about it.

Midnight was talking with Rivets and Textbook, and the black unicorn's eyes widened at the sight of me hobbling to her table. "Mind if I join you? No? Great!" I said as I set my hooves on the table before she could shoot me down. "Hey, Riv. Hey, teach. . ." the earth pony school mistress sniffed disdainfully at my intrusion.

"We were having a private conversation," Textbook said sullenly as she glared at me. Rivets, an older gray earth pony, showed far more amusement at my predicament.

"Great. Do I have a story to tell! Here I was, just minding my own business, hurrying to catch up with a particularly lovely mare, when these hoofcuffs appeared on me like magic! Can you believe it?" I asked with a grin as I tapped them on the table. "So, there I was, pondering and bemoaning my fate, when I remembered a certain vision of angelic equinity whose magic far outshines my own and who's kindness and generosity would surely compel her to free me from my predicament!" I said, grinning ear to ear as I fluttered my eyes at Midnight.

"Blackjack, I'm a PipBuck technician. . ." she began.

"Which means you're intelligent. Skilled! That you possess far more competence than a lowly security pony like myself!" I said as she hesitated. I almost had her convinced! "I'll pay you in oral sex!" I blurted. Textbook turned the shade of a spoiled apple and Rivets covered half her face as she chuckled.

"I'll talk to you tomorrow," Midnight said to Rivets as she trotted to another table.

"I'll be telling your mother about this," Textbook added to me before going to join Midnight.

I groaned and pressed my face into my bound hooves. Rivets patted my shoulder. "Oral sex, huh? What's the going rate on that?"

"I'm an idiot," I muttered. Rivets chuckled, certainly not arguing.

"I had no idea. I didn't think you were into mares," Rivets said with a smile, munching on her grass chips.

"Eh. . ." I shrugged. "It's more the fact she always tells me no." I glared down at the cuffs on my hooves, growled, and then bit the conjured metal. "She always plays hard to get. . ." I said around the mouthful of metal.

"Well, it's your time to waste. Her spot on the queue's up, though, so I really doubt she'll have time for you," she said matter-of-factly.

"Really?" My red eyes widened and then drooped along with the rest of my body. I slumped till my chin rested on the tabletop. "Bummer."

"We all have our little trials," Rivets said with a sigh. "I've got to get Duct Tape's filly on the duty roster. She's taking over for her mom." She sighed. "Hopefully she knows which end of the wrench goes on the nut."

"Duct Tape died? How?" I gasped. She was one of the nicer ponies in maintenance. I frequently bumped flanks with her on C shift, though never actually talked with her, of course. After all, I was security and she was scared to death of me.

Rivets snorted in irritation. "Don't you ever pay attention? She died a week ago. Tried servicing the Overmare's terminal and it blew up in her face. Power junction wasn't closed."

"But Scotch Tape doesn't even have her cutie mark yet, right? She's still in school," I pointed out, twisting my hooves errantly in the cuffs to try and free them.

"Does that matter? I've got a hundred and fifty maintenance mares to manage and I've got a hole on the C shift and she's got to fill it," Rivets said firmly, narrowing her eyes as she pressed her lips together. "I feel for the kid. Really. But the stable takes first, last, and middle priority. She'll just have to get over it."

"Really? I thought it was Overmare first, last, and middle," I replied, enjoying a little smack talk. Normally it would get a grin. The look on Rivets' face now, though... I'd never seen her look so angry in my life. My black-and-red-striped mane itched terribly and I just wished my hooves were free so I could scratch it.

Rivets groaned. "Don't talk about the Overmare to me. She's been throwing all kinds of special work orders and studies my way. The little foal is demanding peak efficiency and she's countermanding my work assignments to make damn sure it doesn't happen." She reached into one of the many pockets on her utility barding and drew out a notepad. "Last month she ordered the stable recreation broadcaster in Maintenance One overhauled, but then she collected every piece of scrap electronics and conductors for inventory and kept the entire terminal crew occupied with 'searching and cleaning' the stable databases!"

Maintenance One was the little closet of a utility space next to the stable mane-frames and the massive Stable-Tec hatchway right outside the atrium; I sometimes used it for naps when I knew the Overmare was out. "Did she say why?"

"Do overmares ever?" Rivets countered with a snort. "Her mother was bad enough; I sure didn't shed any tears when she died last year. But that little tyrant is going to..." and she drew herself up short, realizing that even though I was the most irresponsible mare in security, I was in security. She coughed and then gave a little

shrug. "I'm just concerned about the stable. That's all."

And that was the story of my life. No matter how friendly I was, I was security. She wasn't. I enforced the Overmare's rules and punished those who didn't. I sighed, my ears drooping a little. "Well, see you at the card game tonight?"

There was some considerable doubt in her eyes as she stared at me. She rose with a cool, "Of course. You're always welcome at the game." Not because I was actually welcome welcome, but more because having me there would assuage fears that the game would be raided. After all, I was the only pony in security who liked associating with the maintenance mares after hours. "It's in Atmospheric Maintenance Three this time. Bring your bits." Because I would be leaving with exactly as much as I came with, because I was tolerated. Not wanted. Goddesses, why was my mane crawling thinking about the look that she'd just given me?

I looked at the cuffs on my hooves, feeling as if there was something I was missing, then growled as I narrowed my eyes and bit them again!

There were five hundred ponies in Stable 99, and one tenth of them were resigned to the duty of protecting and safeguarding the stable and executing the will of the Overmare. Unfortunately, we also had to frequently tackle the question of which one took priority. The briefing room was festooned with graphic reminders that "Service to the Overmare is service to the stable." I hobbled in just as the security head started with the evening briefing.

The security head was Gin Rummy, a middle-aged unicorn who still looked better than several of the younger mares. Her purple and red striped mane contrasted well with her lavender coat and bright pink eyes, and those pink eyes looked right at me with immediate disapproval the second I hobbled in.

Gin Rummy trotted up to the podium and flipped through the notes organized on her PipBuck. The microcomputer on the leg of everypony in the stable had a ridiculous amount of data storage space on it, but I wagered hers was nearly full. She'd been head of security for longer than I'd been alive, and I'd never known her to not be organized, confident, and secure in her knowledge of what was going on in Stable 99. Daisy and Marmalade snickered as I limped in, and I gave the rest of the security mares a sheepish grin and a shrug before taking my seat. Gin Rummy just sighed and looked at me with a slow, disappointed shake of her head. Still, wasn't much she could do.

“So, everypony. I want to thank you for your hard work. Stable incident reports are down to under five percent this month. There hasn’t been anything more severe than a few class C incidents of violating curfew. Springs was caught this morning hoarding Med-X, but she surrendered her stash willingly. Punishment will be twenty lashes in the atrium tomorrow morning.”

“Ohhh! Ohhh! Pick me! Can I do it?” Daisy asked with a grin, waiving her hoof in the air. Gin Rummy did not share her humor.

“Punishment will be administered by a random pony from A shift, Daisy. You know that,” she replied firmly. Daisy snorted, glaring at me. I responded with my best ‘what?!’ expression.

“In other news, medical reports that we’re missing a male. There’s a new P-21 to round up for retirement, but he hasn’t reported back after his last breeding assignment. C shift, your job is to sweep the stable. If a mare’s sheltering him, write up the incident and escort him to detention. If not, find him,” Gin Rummy said firmly. Daisy rubbed her hooves together gleefully. Most mares simply looked bored. I tried my best not to squirm. Damn it, why were hoofcuffs so hard to get out of?

Everypony in Stable 99 had a job assigned to them from birth. Maintenance ponies maintained, security ponies secured, and baker ponies baked. The forty or so males in Stable 99 were no different: they were breeding equipment. From birth, they had their segregated quarters in medical and were signed out by mares for reproductive purposes and, more frequently, recreational. There were twenty unicorns and twenty earth ponies on the breeding rotation. Once a male reached. . . how old was it? Twelve? Fifteen?—they were put into breeding. Of course, to keep the number in rotation the same, that meant that a male had to be taken out of breeding and retired.

“So, if there’s nothing else?” Gin Rummy’s pink eyes scanned the assembled security ponies before landing on me. “Very well. Oh, and tomorrow, I’d like any ponies confused about how to dispel a hoofcuff spell to please report to security at twelve hundred hours for remediation.” Maybe I could do more than telekinesis after all. I was in the front row, and yet, magically, I still knew that every eye was on me. Amazing. “All right. A shift and B shift are off-duty. C shift, stable is yours.” Daisy nodded in response. And with that, the mares dispersed to get their last shot at dinner before curfew went active.

“Thanks. I really appreciate that,” I said as I looked at the head security mare sourly. She returned the look coolly. “You’re not a blank flank anymore, Blackjack. You have

duties and obligations to this stable. If you can't fulfill them, then it's my obligation to train you to meet them."

Yeah, except nopony ever asked me if I wanted them. She started for the exit. "Hey..." I called after her, and when she looked back, I sat down and raised my cuffed hooves. "You mind, Mom?"

She sighed as she looked at me for a long moment and finally went from being head security mare to being my mother. Trotting back, she lowered her horn to the cuffs, and with a flash she dispelled the summoned restraints. Technically, every security unicorn was supposed to be able to do that. Technically, every unicorn, much less every security unicorn, was supposed to be able to do a whole slew of spells that I couldn't. Maybe Mom would get lucky and outlive me. One thing was sure: the second I became head security mare, Stable 99 was doomed.

"Marmalade's work?" she asked in that tone that always seemed to prelude her fighting my battles for me. It was really tempting, I admit. Of course, this was why even most of the security ponies gave me a lot of space; nopony wanted to offend the boss' daughter.

"Don't worry about it, Mom. I can handle it," I said, trying to put on my big girl look. Okay, I was definitely old enough to have it by default, but she always looked at me like I was her little blank flank... when there was nopony else around to see, of course. Thank the Goddesses.

I trotted out after everypony else, pretending not to hear her sigh. Yeah, that just about summed up my feelings on the subject as well.

Outside, I glanced down the hallway. The uppermost levels held security, the armory, the Overmare's office, and all the maneframes that ran the stable. Down at the end of the hall was the Overmare's office and the maintenance room with the maneframes. The Overmare was talking very agitatedly with Midnight and a few of the other mares responsible for the information systems. The dirty white unicorn filly who was our supreme leader looked mad; there was nothing new about that, but tonight she seemed like she was in a grade A pissed mood and was determined to share it. I'd never seen Midnight looking so upset.

"Get out! Get out get out get out! Leave before I have you all shot! You're useless!" the Overmare concluded in high-hysterical shrieks. It was at moments like this that I was glad the laws didn't allow summary execution. Really glad.

"Midnight!" I shouted as the Overmare returned to her office.

She looked back at me, ears drooping as she rubbed her eyes furiously. "I don't have time for your flank spank right now, Blackjack. The Overmare's pissed."

"Yeah, I got that around 'have you shot'," I said as I fell in besides her as we trotted back downstairs towards the atrium. "Why?"

Midnight looked at me, then sighed and shook her head, "She wants a data file. An old one."

"And you couldn't find it?" I said with a frown. Unlike me, Midnight was actually competent.

"No, that's just it. It was already found by Duct Tape weeks ago. The thing was buried deep in the stable's archives, but she found it. Goddesses know how," Midnight said as we stepped into the large chamber. The stable chimed out that curfew was about to begin and all mares not on C shift were to report to their quarters.

"So what's the problem?"

"It's encrypted," she said with a sigh. "We can't get it to open up for transfer. She wants us to break the encryption, but we haven't been able to all week." She chewed on her lip. "I thought that if we got it ready to transfer into a PipBuck she'd be... well... less pissed, but she was hysterical! I've never had the Overmare say I should be shot!" Clearly, Midnight was shaken. I could relate. There was bitchy Overmare, and then there was whatever I'd just witnessed.

"Mom wouldn't let her," I said, and for the first time in about forever received a small smile in return. "Look, don't worry about it. You'll get it eventually."

"Thanks, Blackjack," she said with obvious relief.

Okay, this was my chance! I grinned. "So... I've got ten minutes before I have to start my rounds. Can I swing by your quarters on my way for that flank spank?" I gave her my best 'I promise you'll enjoy it' look.

She snorted, looked at me, and gave a flat 'in your dreams' "No." Then she trotted away from me as I sat down hard, watching her go.

"Oh come on! I was being sympathetic! Nice! Midnight?" But she didn't look back as she disappeared down towards the residential quarters with the rest of the mares. "Ugh, what does a mare have to do to get a little service in this place?!" I sighed, head hanging. "So unfair..."

Stable 99 was arranged with one level atop another. At the apex was the Overmare's office, security, the armory, and the maneframes. Underneath that were the atrium, cafeteria, stable entry, and the two dozen or so recreation, education, and medical facilities. Underneath that were the residential quarters for the stable's population. And underneath it all lay the utility and maintenance levels, a section larger than all the rest of the stable combined. The recycling systems were all found down here, as were the magical generators that kept everything going. Manufacturing equipment, storeroom after locked storeroom, and, of course, all the little hidden fun spots: the makeshift stills, the love nests, and the nooks for gambling.

Most security ponies stayed at the top of the stable. The tunnels below were dark, undecorated, and filled with the stench of all kinds of foul leaking fluids and chemicals used to keep the stable habitable. The Overmare might have had complete authority over the top half of the stable, but this was Rivets' domain. She and her maintenance mares were always the most rebellious and independent element of the stable. One day. . . no, don't think about it. If there was an Incident between the Overmare and maintenance. . . well, I knew which side had all the guns and which side knew how to keep the stable alive...

"Hit me," I shouted over the hum of machinery as I looked at the worn playing cards. They were so old that I'd bet Rivets could tell them by the wear patterns. Good thing this wasn't poker. Rivets dealt me a four of spades; I really had no idea how earth ponies managed cards. They just did. Me, I levitated them around as I looked at the other players.

Tonight I was even less welcome than usual. The other four ponies kept muttering to each other, telling jokes and stories that left me out, and my winnings were virtually frozen. No pony mentioned the Overmare; clearly, they were watching themselves around the security mare.

Because one word of sedition or talk about getting at the armory and we'd have an Incident. Please, don't say something that would cause an Incident. . .

"So, Blackjack, I notice you keep getting shit from Daisy and the others," Rivets said amiably as she smoked on her cigar. She'd offered me the cigar at the start of the game, a blatant class B violation that I'd never ever report her on. I had no idea how she manufactured them, but it was just another indication that things were painfully tense in the stable. After one puff, I'd coughed so badly that she'd taken it back. "They've been doing that for. . . what. . . three years now?"

"Oh, longer than that," I said with a small smile. Ever since my first big fuck up. "But

what can you do?”

“Well, that is the question, isn’t it?” Rivets asked with a spread of her forehooves before dealing out the cards. “We can’t do anything. Daisy is security. You get your job and it’s yours, no matter how you abuse your position.” She chuckled, friendly like, but I knew enough laughs to tell it was an act. “Don’t get me wrong, your momma is a fine mare. She’s always tried to do right by the stable. She just won’t do more.”

Oh, Rivets, please don’t go there. “Well, it’s the way of things, isn’t it?”

“Is it?” Rivets asked in return with a look that made my mane crawl. “You think it’s right that ponies like Daisy and Marmalade get to give you that ration of shit day in and day out?”

“Well. . . no. But what does it matter what I think? It’s the way things are,” I swallowed, noticing that nopony else seemed to be interrupting.

“But does it have to be?” Rivets asked. There was one answer she wanted to hear and a whole slew of wrong answers. I shrank back; why did she have to be asking me stuff like this? Couldn’t we just play the game?

I needed to change the subject, fast. “So. . . what is the Overmare up to?” I asked as I glanced at the others. They looked at one another, then at Rivets. She was still smoking her cigar with slow, steady puffs. I snorted. “Look, I know everypony’s a little more on edge than usual, but this is Blackjack asking. Come on, Rivets. I got my cutie mark here.” In fact, I got my queen and ace of spades playing this very game. “You can talk to me.”

Rivets chewed slowly on the end as her eyes measured me up. Finally, she gave a minimal shrug. “You tell me. Overmare has us running like crazy for a month updating her on the stable, seizes inventory, and Duct Tape dies doing work for her. Now she’s screaming at Midnight that she’s going to shoot her and has her own little guard of security ponies following her around tonight.”

“She what?” I blinked, having left with Midnight so quickly that I hadn’t heard anything about that.

Rivets nodded slowly. “She’s got all of us really concerned. Really concerned. Some of us wonder if we’re all safe with her in charge.”

“She’s the Overmare. It’s her job to keep us all safe,” I replied, almost by rote as my red eyes looked from one to the next. Only Rivets met my gaze.

“Some ponies don’t think she has a clue what her job is. Heck, some ponies don’t think she even knows herself. And some ponies have to wonder why Blackjack’s so insistent on coming to this game. Maybe to keep tabs on all of us?” Rivets asked as she nodded to the equipment around us. “After all, with all the interference, I doubt you can track us by our PipBucks.”

The foreleg-mounted minicomputers were marvels of arcane technology; even if I didn’t understand the first thing about how they worked, I had to admit that they were useful. One of the functions most used by security was the ability to, if you had the correct address tag, track any other PipBuck. All I had to do was put in their name and I could find their location almost anywhere in the stable. Down here, though, it was another story. Probably why the missing male had gone to ground down here.

“Look, I just wanted to have some fun!” I protested. Was it really that hard to believe? I looked from one to the next; these were all mares I’d known my entire life. Heck, Rivets was virtually my godmother from all the time I spent down here! But from the looks I now got. . . yes, yes it was.

I slowly slipped back from the table, leaving my bits behind. “I’m going to go. . . you know. . . do security stuff. Got a stallion to round up and. . . um. . . stuff.” I finished lamely. All of them watched me back slowly out of atmospheric maintenance three. Not one took their eyes off me.

Several minutes later, I took a breather. Rivets was just pissed. She always bumped heads with anypony in authority, always sure nopony knew as well as she did how to run the stable. As soon as the Overmare calmed down, everything would settle down and we’d be able to get back to normal. Don’t think about it. It was how everypony in the stable survived. I’d just forget about it and, in a week, Rivets and I would be laughing as usual!

Please, let everything be alright.

Well, with the game a complete fiasco, Midnight continuing her cold shoulder, and me with six hours left in my shift, I might as well actually do some security work. Mostly the ten or so of us on C shift patrolled and wrote up any mare violating curfew. Down here, I might find more interesting violations, but it was rare that I’d ever run into anything major. I snapped on another function of the PipBuck: the Eyes Forward Sparkle.

Instantly, a number of yellow bars filled my vision as the arcane device detected

the number of ponies within a few hundred feet. It also had a few red bars, likely a few hungry radroaches looking to take a bite out of me. The E.F.S. was a function few ponies used regularly. After all, it only gave direction and hostility, and the indicator didn't even tell you how far above or below you the bar was. For all I knew, that yellow bar was around the corner or a floor up. I entered in the P-21's PipBuck address, but the little icon twitched around spasmodically. Likely he was down here... somewhere.

It wasn't often that we had a buck who tried to hide from retirement. Most just reported to security or medical to get their shot and that was that. Occasionally there'd be a crying or screaming fit in the atrium. Rarely, they'd suicide...ugh, please don't let me find him hanging or poisoned down here. The plain fact was that this was a stable; the only exit had been sealed four generations ago during the last Incident, and eventually he'd starve to death. It wasn't like bucks knew how to get into food stores and the like. They just bred. That was all they knew, all they needed to know.

Right?

I trotted past a row of gurgling pieces of equipment barely lit by wan yellow spark lamps. Knowing my luck, the yellow bar ahead of me was actually one or two floors above me. If I was lucky, I could get through this shift without any more disasters and, if I was really lucky, talk to Mom and not the head security mare about the rising tension. The former might be able to do something. The latter would have to crack down on Rivets, or, worse, tell the Overmare.

Then I heard a faint sniff and soft sobs over the hum of the equipment. Looked like I'd found my pony. "Okay, come on out and let's get you up to security. A quick shot and it'll be all over."

The sniffing stopped, and then a tiny olive filly with teal eyes peeked out at me. My jaw dropped as I saw the pain and fear in her eyes. "Oh! Ah... you're not... ahem..." I sat hard and rubbed my head. Could this night get any worse? "You're not supposed to be down here. It's dangerous and after curfew. Where's your momma?"

She just stared at me, and her eyes dropped to her hooves. "Recycled..." was all she blubbered. She touched her PipBuck and her ID flashed. 'Scotch Tape, Maintenance Shift C.'

Oh... I tried to think up some creative profanity but... eh... I got nothing. "Oh... well... ah..." What was I supposed to do? If this was Duct Tape's kid, then she

was supposed to be here. Should I say something about her mom? Give her a hug? Tell her she's doing a good job? Tell her not to be a cryfilly? "Um... sorry about your mom. Don't worry, I'm sure you'll get the hang of it." I grinned at her as she clenched her eyes closed, pulled a wrench from her barding, and nodded before trotting back between the massive round machines.

I trotted away as quickly as I could. "Wonderful, Blackjack... 'You'll get the hang of it?' What is wrong with me?" I berated myself as I glanced back over my shoulder.

I really wasn't good at this whole life and death thing. Really. You just didn't think about death in 99. It wasn't really like 'death' so much as one day you're there and the next day you're replaced by your kid. And some day they'll be replaced by theirs. I was glad that Mom would probably last forever. I didn't know how I'd handle the stable with her gone.

I couldn't help but reach out and touch the steel walls of the stable. Somepony had daubed 'Fuck the Overmare' on the gray metal in flaking white paint. A shout of rebellion from the Incident almost a century ago, the last time the stable had torn itself apart. Back then, it'd been bucks challenging the Overmare and the rules imposed by Stable-Tec when the stable had been established. Today, it was Rivets against the Overmare.

Why'd I have to get stuck in the middle of this shit?

And, just as I was getting a nice batch of self-pity whipped up, I stepped right in a puddle of leaking sewage. My hooves slipped in the slippery mung and I went over, getting a faceful of the cold sludge. Coughing and retching I kicked away, wiping my face furiously. My red and black striped mane and tail were smeared with grunge as I leaned against the wall, coughing and spitting. How nice that the Goddesses were making my metaphoric life literal.

I tried to think about what I knew of the newest P-21. He was green... no... brown? Ugh... I paid more attention to the unicorn breeding population than the earth ponies. I'd heard that this P-21 was already notorious for 'disappearing', though, so it wasn't much of a surprise that he'd pulled another vanishing act. Nopony was sure how he managed to get out of medical. Males weren't supposed to be smart enough for that.

Wait... what was that?

It was another yellow bar, but one that, when I moved my head, changed direction far faster than any of the others. That meant that it was a lot closer. As in right on the far

side of a door marked 'Emergency Storage #3.' I frowned, tried the handle with my horn, and was astonished to find it unlocked! Not even Rivets left these unsecured. Slowly, I levitated out my baton, opened the door, and flipped on the lights. Row after row of metal boxes lay on dusty shelves for the day another Incident occurred. Of course, there weren't any weapons or ammo, but clearly some of these boxes had been opened.

I toggled the lamp on my PipBuck, flooding the far depths of the chamber with light. There, in the corner, hid a blue earth pony mare in ugly gray utility barding. I immediately relaxed as she watched me with worried blue eyes. "Sweet Celestia, what are you doing in here? I thought Rivets kept this place locked up tight."

She just looked at me with wary eyes. "Just... getting some stuff for Rivets." Her soft voice was surprisingly deep for such a puny pony. "I'll just get it to her," she said, slipping on her saddlebags and starting slowly towards the exit. But as she drew close to me, I frowned. I knew all the mares on the C shift, and the only blue earth pony was a medical mare. "What shift are you on?" I asked with a little frown.

"Um... C shift... of course..." she swallowed as she turned, facing me and backing away.

"Right," I said as I frowned at her, slipping into full security mode. I might not have found the missing male, but hopefully this would redeem me a little in Mom's eyes. Still, why anypony would want to steal century old supplies was beyond me. "Identification please."

She gave it by turning to bolt for the door. Now, I might not be very good at magic, but I definitely knew how to swing a baton and tackle a fleeing thief. She made it a half dozen steps out the door before my glowing stick swept her legs right out from under her. As she went down, I jumped on her back and was amazed when she went completely still. "Okay! Identification!" She didn't move, didn't respond in the slightest. She just lay there, shaking and crying silently. I frowned and reached over to use my security override.

'P-21: Breeder. Retire from service immediately,' flashed on the screen of her... no... his PipBuck. "You're the new P-21," I muttered, staring down at his saddlebags and clothing. Keeping him pinned with my hooves, I stripped him of his stolen goods. Sure enough, those were parts that didn't belong on any mare! "What... what the hay is going on here?"

He didn't move. He simply lay there with his eyes closed, curled up. Saddle bags full of food. A utility mare's outfit. Had he planned on trying to actually live down

here? Like all bucks, his cutie mark was a white male symbol with dots underneath it; his had two rows of ten white dots. Below that would go one more dot. . . though I was never sure why, since after that he'd be heading straight to retirement.

Well, time for the next bit. "Ahem. . . according to Overmare and Stable-Tec bylaws, you are to be escorted to security for final processing and chemical retirement. You are obligated by stable laws to accompany me or you will be compelled. Do you understand?" Goddesses, I hated playing the security mare part. He knew the rules. I knew he knew. He knew I knew he knew. Why did I have to pretend? Meanwhile, he just lay there like a blue doll, his eyes wide and glassy.

"Just kill me. . . it's what you do, isn't it?" P-21 muttered.

I blinked down at him in confusion. "Um. It's not my place to kill you. I'm not an executioner. You're going to be. . . ah. . . retired." I tried to grin and put him at ease, because bucks sometimes did stupid things. It wouldn't be the first time one attacked me without provocation. He looked back, and his eyes slowly drew into focus. I'd never seen a male look at me like that before. The cold anger inside made me wonder if he really was going to do something crazy.

"Like you retired him," he replied softly, his storm blue eyes darkening as he stared at me.

"Uh. . . I think you're confused. Medical takes care of the actual retirement process," I said as I backed away.

"You're all murderers," he muttered as he rose to his hooves and looked back at the stolen clothes and supplies. "I was so close, too. . ." With that, he started to walk slowly towards the stable's central staircase.

"Close to what?" I asked, but he didn't answer. I couldn't blame him. If I were about to be retired, I doubted that I'd be in a chatty mood. Still, it was hard to take him calling me a murderer. I'd never killed anypony! I followed him closely, baton ready in case he came back at me. We trotted past an open doorway to a storeroom, and the olive filly peeked out with a sad eye as we walked by.

I wish that that was all that happened.

Just as we reached the stairs to the higher levels of the stable, a baton wielded by a pale yellow mare whirled out from a side hall and struck his rear knee with the sickening, tearing pop that signalled a damaged joint. He fell to his side, screaming in pain as Daisy and Marmalade stepped out. The huge pale mare spat out her baton, caught the strap on the end of her hoof, and twirled it. "About time we found

the missing penis.” She slammed her hoof into his face as he tried to curl up into a tight ball. “And he’s with you,” Daisy added with a grim grin. “Bonus.”

“Daisy! Marmalade! What the fuck are you doing?” I asked as Marmalade’s floating baton thumped hard against his ribs and Daisy smashed him with her hooves again.

“Saving medical some work. This little fuck’s had us down here for hours,” she said as she grinned at Marmalade. “So I figured we’d take care of him ourselves.”

What the fuck! “You can’t fucking do this! Medical retires ponies, not security!” Was I actually quoting stable bylaws now? The worst security pony in the Stable? What the hell was happening here?

“Oh, he’s fighting us,” Daisy said as she circled him, and brought her hoof down on his swelling knee. “Resisting security. A real dangerous case, right Marmalade?” The honey colored mare nodded with a dumb grin.

And just like that, they set themselves to beating him to death before my eyes. I wondered if this was some kind of nightmare that I’d wake up from... but as he cried out in pain, I clenched my eyes closed. Just wait a few minutes and it’d be over. Just do nothing, Blackjack. Don’t think about it...

Don’t think about it. Don’t think about the thumps and the cries and the sobs and the begging.

No.

Security saves ponies.

I looked at the pair beating him in glee and charged Marmalade first. Last thing I needed was another pair of hoofcuffs on me! Her orange eyes widened in shock as the baton cracked loudly against her skull with such force that she tumbled over. Goddesses, I hoped I hadn’t killed her.

Daisy’s shock transformed into rage much faster. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing? He’s a fucking worthless male! He’s disposable!” She charged, and while normally I’d back away from her kicks, this time I charged to meet her. Our chests slammed together, and it was all I could do to keep from being crushed under her. Sweet Celestia, how much did she eat to be this strong?

As we struggled, though, I still had one advantage she didn’t. My horn flashed white as I wielded the baton in my magical grip. And one more thing I could do with telekinesis: with another thought, I triggered my PipBuck’s ‘Stable-Tec Assisted Targeting System’. The S.A.T.S. was a magical spell that momentarily slowed time

almost to a stop and let me line up my attacks perfectly. Each attack cost some spell charge that had to build back up over time, but right now I wasn't going to waste any of it. Three baton strikes to the head. The spell even gave me the probability of each strike landing!

Triggering the spell, time sped up but still seemed to move at a crawl as my baton rose and fell soundly upon her head. The first split the skin above her eye. The second busted her nose. The third... missed. Still, when the spell faded and time fully resumed, she staggered back in shock. I stood over the fallen stallion, swinging the baton with all the force I could as she retreated for once.

Then Marmalade rose, looking at me with a hurt, betrayed expression. Suddenly, this looked bad...

Then our PipBucks crackled, the built-in radios squawking, "All C shift security personnel are to report immediately back to security. Repeat. All C shift security personnel are to report immediately back to security."

Daisy stared into my eyes as we both panted, my baton trembling in the air before me as I stared at her, heart racing. This wasn't training, with Mom watching and other mares keeping an eye on me. If they came at me, it would be to kill the male beside me. Even if he was slated for retirement, he didn't have to die like that! Nopony should have to die like that. Period.

"Forget it. You can handle the little cock. I'll report you're bringing him in," Daisy said sourly as she touched her bleeding nose and then glared at me. "One day, I'm going to have your fucking head on a stick, Blackjack. Promise you that."

I swallowed, doing all I could to keep my magical focus on my baton. "Maybe, but not today." The metal rod wavered in the air, my heart thundering in my chest. Despite the fear in my gut, the baton remained upright.

She harrumphed and made her way up the stairs. Marmalade gave me one last confused, injured look before following her up. I felt bad for that. I doubted Marmalade would have ever hit anypony if Daisy hadn't hit him first. Once I felt that they weren't going to double back, I knelt and began to see to the buck. Aside from his swelling bruises, the worst thing was his rear leg. Limbs really weren't supposed to bend that way. I swallowed as I looked around, feeling panic rising in my throat. I wasn't a medical pony. I couldn't do a healing spell to save a leg!

Then I spotted the olive filly watching us from down the hall. "You! I need a first aid kit please! Right away!" She gasped, and for a moment I was sure she was going

to run. "Please! Help me!" She swallowed, gave a nod, and disappeared.

"Why?" He asked softly, eyes clenched in pain. "Why did you stop them when they're just going to kill me anyway?"

"Because. . ." I felt lame and confused. "Because. . . I had to. All right? Now stop thinking about it and just hold on." He didn't say another word, instead simply looking at me with confused anger. I needed to keep him talking. "What's your name?"

He looked at me like I was an idiot, despite the pain in his eyes. "I'm P-21."

"That's your designation, right? What's your name?" I asked as I looked in the direction the filly had gone. It was more to stall for time than out of any real interest; after all, he was going to be retired soon.

"P-21 is my name," he replied softly, with a touch of irritation.

"Oh. . ." Males in 99 lived in medical and were identified on their breeding roster by their designations. P for earth ponies, U for unicorns. Don't ask me why the former wasn't E; I'd never gotten a straight answer. Maybe the Overmare who set up the system was a lot like the current one. 1 would be the newest buck on the breeding roster, 20 the oldest. Being 21 would mean that a male was to be retired. Somehow, though, I always figured they had their own names in their quarters. Names were like cutie marks; everypony had them, even males. Then again, looking at the breeding mark on his flank...

Funny. . . but when I was with a male, conversation was the last thing on my mind. Heck, this was the most conversation I could recall ever having with one.

I thought for a moment that maybe the filly had run off, but she returned a minute later with a small yellow medical case marked with pink butterflies. Setting it next to me, she opened it up and I was at once glad to see that nopony had cleaned it out. The cases were supposed to stay stocked at all times, but sometimes ponies would steal the contents for one reason or another. There were two healing potions, small bottles of rich purple fluid capped in plastic. All a pony had to do was to bite hard on the end, crack the seal, and suck down the magical healing contents. As he gulped down the contents of the bottle, the bruises immediately began to disappear. His leg, however. . . "I'm going to have to set this," I said as I looked at the limb.

"You know how to do that?" The olive filly asked. P-21 just groaned as he clenched his eyes shut.

"Nope," I replied and took out the syringe of Med-X painkiller. I yanked the cap off the needle, jammed it into his leg, and squeezed the soft plastic tube to force the

drugs into his system. 'For all your hurting ouchies'. Well, this was one doozy of an ouchie. He relaxed a bit as the drugs took effect. Then I looked at the leg, bit my lip, and hooked it with my forehooves and magic.

"On three..." I said as I looked at him. "One. Two..." And on two I pulled and pushed to bend his leg back into proper position. There was a pop from his knee like a gunshot as he screamed, the limb jerking back into place. The poor olive filly looked like she was going to be sick. I didn't think it was broken, exactly, but it sure didn't look good.

"Was that the plan?" He asked weakly.

"I never was good with waiting," I replied before shutting him up with the other healing potion. Unlike the beating, his knee didn't seem to heal much. When he tried to move it, he cried out despite the painkiller. I looked at the filly, "Is there a brace or anything in there?"

"Oh... um... maybe!" she said as she set aside a second syringe of Med-X and a container of Buck labeled with a muscular mare flexing. It was technically a class B controlled substance; I'd be scrubbing the bilges for a month if caught with it. Surprising to see it outside medical or security. Then she pulled out a black leg brace for broken limbs.

He jerked away from me as I grabbed his uninjured haunch to pull him around. "Oh, stop it, you baby," I muttered, but he simply closed his eyes and shook as I strapped the brace in place. Bucks were so weird; would he have preferred hobbling up the stairs to medical with a bum leg? Finally, I moved away from him and shook a tablet of Buck out of the jar. "Here. Eat this," I said as I pressed the carrot-flavored medicine to his lips.

Slowly, warily, he chewed it. I looked at the filly. "Thanks for your help."

She gave me the first hint of a smile since I'd seen her. "Sure. I better get back to work before Rivets blows a seal or something." She gave a little wave before running back the way she'd come.

The chems fortified him enough for him to get to his feet. "Why do you keep helping me?" he asked as I supported him enough to get his legs under him. "You're just going to kill me..."

I lowered my gaze. "Well, I can't stop that. But I can at least try and help you. It's what security mares are supposed to do."

Security during C shift was normally a place of quiet tedium. Reports for the next day had to be filed and firearms practice had to be carried out, but neither of those were what anypony would call exciting. As we finally reached the top of the stable, though... something felt very wrong. There were only ten security mares on C shift, including me, and, for the first time since I'd started working security a few years ago, we were all in here together. The seven other mares clustered around Daisy and Marmalade, talking in low voices as I limped in with P-21.

Worse, they all stopped talking as soon as I entered. Great. My mane itched fiercely as we walked slowly past them to the cells. I got the PipBuck key and magic-male-dot-maker-pen-thing from Mom's desk drawer, then carefully removed his PipBuck and added the last white dot. I could wait until morning to notify medical, though. No need to rush with everything being weird. I took his PipBuck and closed the cell door just as the Overmare stalked out of her office.

Some ponies liked to say she looked like my little sister, though never in earshot of Mom, of course. The Overmare's white hide was a little more dingy than mine, and her eyes were a lighter pinkish color. Her mom had once styled her mane in elaborate curls and dressed her up in fancy outfits, but, since her death a year ago, the Overmare had chopped her dove gray mane short and worn nothing save her PipBuck, almost flaunting her Stable-Tec logo cutie mark.

I always assumed that being Overmare was a stressful condition. You had the whole stable on your shoulders. Despite that, the Overmare usually managed to keep a neat appearance. Now, though, she looked like hell; her eyes were bloodshot with huge bags beneath them, her mane resembled tangled wool, and she smelled. But there was one thing above and beyond all that which made my blood run cold: she was smiling.

When she saw P-21 and I, her smile only widened. "Oh... you found my trick pony!" she said, clapping her hooves together in glee. Her trick pony? P-21 stared straight ahead, his eyes unfocused pinpricks as she walked up to the bars. "Oh we're going to have so much fun. Oh yes we are. Yes we are. You're going to be mine forever. Yes you are."

I glanced at the other security mares. Not one looked back at me. The Overmare suddenly seemed to remember I was there and glared at me. "So. Have a nice time in the bottom levels? Have a nice meeting with Rivets?"

"I... wasn't meeting with Rivets," I said, trying to look more clueless than usual.

"Lies," the Overmare hissed. And then went back to smiling. "But that doesn't matter. Not anymore. This is my stable. Mine. And I'm not going to let that gray nag run it any longer. It's mine!" she declared as she she looked out the window to the atrium.

I caught P-21's look. He was glancing at my PipBuck, then his... then mine... then his...

Huh?

He swallowed and mouthed the word, 'copy'.

I glanced at the Overmare as she addressed the others, thanking them for their loyalty and devotion. Once more, I'd seemed to have slipped her mind. I quickly connected the two PipBucks with a cable. I hit the 'Copy All Files' button and dumped the data into an evidence file. I might not be able to manage a security spell to save my life, but I could at least move bulk files from A to B using the clearly labeled button for it. In my E.F.S., I saw the progress bar slowly fill.

"Is that his PipBuck?" the Overmare asked with a snap.

"Um... yes," I said lamely as I cuddled it in my hooves, hoping she didn't see the connection.

"Give it to me," she replied imperiously.

"Um... certainly," I asked, wondering how I could stall as the little bar filled up. "What for?"

"That is stable security business," she replied in a low, dangerous voice.

Almost done. "Aren't I in stable security?"

Her lips turned up in a nasty smile. "I don't know. Aren't you? Why don't you tell me where Rivets and thirty other maintenance mares are hiding? Do they have weapons? Are they planning on sabotaging my stable?"

"I... don't know?" I muttered lamely.

"Lies," she hissed, and her magic reached out and grabbed his PipBuck from my grasp just before the files finished transferring. A big error message flashed across my vision. She tossed it to Marmalade. "Make sure everything on there gets deleted. I don't want anything going wrong," she said as she trotted to the armory door and

opened it with her PipBuck. “Everypony get armed.” And then she looked right at me. “Except for you.”

“What are you doing?” I asked as Daisy came up and shoved me hard into the cell with P-21. The PipBuck key fell out of the pocket I’d stuffed it into and clattered to the floor, making me wince; if it was damaged, I’d get another speech from Mom about taking care of our tools.

“Taking back the stable,” the Overmare said with a satisfied smile as everypony else armed themselves with shotguns and security barding.

“With nine security ponies?” I gaped.

“I can’t be sure of your mother. I’ve ordered Rivets arrested several times, and she always gets in my way.” Because without Rivets, the stable was doomed. “I don’t know who I can trust on the A and B shifts. Who will side with me and who won’t.” She smirked as she looked at Daisy. “Fortunately, some ponies have proven themselves far more loyal. So you just sit tight. This will all be over in a few hours.”

After that, the ten of them marched out of security. Daisy looked back at me with a decidedly nasty grin. Why’d I suddenly feel like P-21 wasn’t the only pony in deep in the recycler?

Whatever they were doing, they were certainly taking their time. I was left in one corner while P-21 sat silent as a blue statue in the center of the cell. I looked at the diminutive pony; there was something vaguely familiar about him, but I felt that way about half the stable.

All I knew was I needed to get out of here and... what? Tell Mom? Would she actually stand against the Overmare? I wanted to say yes, but the more I thought about it, the less certain I was. She’d never countermanded the Overmare unless she had some clear evidence that what the Overmare was doing would endanger the stable. She always put the stable first. Always.

That left me locked up with a buck who wouldn’t say two words to me, flipping through all of P-21’s files trying to find something... anything... that I could use for when Mom got here at the start of A shift. Unfortunately, the broken connection had given me a whole slew of static and corrupted files.

“Do you know what she’s doing?” I asked for the umpteenth time. But he just looked at me and then looked away again. Given he was set to be retired in the morning...

unless the Overmare did what she was planning... whatever that was? “Arrrrgh, why couldn’t they do this to a smart pony!?” I insisted, getting a small smile for my trouble. No answers, though.

His breeding queue for the last few months had been booked almost solid by the Overmare, and then... Duct Tape? No mare ever got exclusive access to a buck like that. I glanced at him and stumbled across an intact audio file. I didn’t have anything better to do, so I played the intact section.

It crackled once and then began to play the noises of two ponies bumping flanks. I felt my mane crawl as I heard the Overmare’s joyous shrieks and a male’s grunts of... something. Then her door chimed, and a moment later a mare asked, “Overmare? You wanted to... oh... my...”

The sounds of coupling trailed off, and the Overmare grunted, “You’re early, Duct Tape.” There was a strange wet noise I didn’t even want to imagine and the sounds of belabored male breathing.

“I... I didn’t want to be late,” she said in a worried voice. “Is he... is everything all right?”

“Tisk, it’s nothing serious. He’s such a good little pony,” the Overmare said in tones that made my mane crawl. “Now, were you successful?”

“I... ah... I... did as you asked. I’ve a list of... of everything you need for it,” Duct Tape said in a little, timid voice. “But really, this is something you should talk to Rivets—”

“No! No, thank you. Rivets has so much going on that I wouldn’t want to trouble her.” The Overmare continued smoothly, “The question is, will you be able to carry out the repairs?”

“Me?”

“Yes, Duct Tape. You. This is a special project for the wellbeing of the entire stable. You’re the only maintenance mare on C shift I can trust to carry this out... with care. After all, I wouldn’t want to ruin the surprise.”

I didn’t have any trouble imagining the mousy gray mare blinking at the word ‘surprise’. We didn’t know each other well; I think I scared her just by being in security, but I remembered that she always liked nice surprises. “I... but... I mean... I suppose I could, but-“

“Excellent. Excellent. I can’t tell you how relieved I am to find a mare willing and able

to help the stable.” Then the Overmare hummed softly. “You deserve something special for all your hard work!”

“I... don’t think so. I mean... um... shouldn’t we get him to medical?” Duct Tape said in clear worry.

The Overmare didn’t answer for a second. “You like this buck?”

“Well... I suppose. He helped me with Scotch, after all,” she replied in far softer and warmer tones than ‘suppose’.

“I see. I see. He is a gem of a pony. Wonderful technique. Truly,” she said matter-of-factly. “If you’re doing such excellent work for me, I see no reason not to put a word in with medical. You might be able to spend a lot more time with him.”

“Really?” There was no missing the eagerness in Duct Tape’s voice.

“Really. Provided you keep it from Rivets and everypony. This is a critical project. Without it, I fear, the stable will not survive.”

“I... well... I mean... that might be very... nice... I’ll give it my best! For... for the stable, of course.” Oh Goddesses, I could practically hear her blushing. The Overmare’s titter offset the warm and cozy feeling.

“Good. Everything you need will be provided for—” and with those last words from the Overmare, everything dissolved into static. I thought about that. If I hadn’t just seen the Overmare... ugh, but that wasn’t enough!

The Overmare’s position could not be challenged at any time. Period. That was the law. A stupid-ass law, but my mom always honored the law. Sometimes she seemed a little neurotic about it, actually, and a sneaky conversation between the Overmare and a dead maintenance mare didn’t seem like anything that would get her to violate the law. It would have to be something big. Damn big.

I wished I could just tell my mom things, but there was always a line. She would be my mom until a point was reached, and from then on she was firmly ‘head of security.’ And that always came first.

I glanced at the silent blue buck. “It sounds like Duct Tape was fond of you.”

“She was fond of anypony who gave her love and attention. It’s why she had her foal,” he replied quietly. “They didn’t even need to force her. I was just bait to shut her up while the Overmare worked.”

“There’s something important on here, isn’t there?” I said as I waved my PipBuck at

him. "She knew you had something, didn't she? That's why she made sure to have it erased." He grit his teeth, closing his eyes; I imagined he wasn't feeling too good right now with the Med-X wearing off. "Help me!" I finally exploded at him. "Why won't you help 99?"

"To hell with you, this stable, and everypony in it!" he shouted back at me, his eyes blazing as he looked for a moment like he wanted to attack me. Then he slowly relaxed, fighting for calm, "My whole life, you mares have fucked me. Now you're getting fucked by your own. It's nothing less than what you deserve."

I blinked at him in shock. "How can you say that? This stable is your home! We're your family. We're all that's left in Equestria!" He gave me a sharp, angry look. I couldn't believe how selfish he was being! "If that's how you feel, then why tell me to copy the files at all? Why not just let her destroy them?" His angry eyes looked away. Slowly, I approached him, and he winced as he backed away into the corner. His eyes kept twitching from mine to the floor and back again; it was annoying! "Look. I'm sorry the rules are what they are. If I could just let you go, I would. But I can't. If you know what she's doing or what's going on... something I can bring to the head of security... then help me."

He clenched his eyes shut. "If I help you... you have to help me." He looked at me again with a ferocious glare. "You have to let me leave this place," he said in slow, even tones of carefully measured control. "Even if I die outside in ten seconds, at least it will be ten seconds free." What, he wanted to die outside rather than be retired? Ooookay...

"I... if there's any way I can... I will." I nodded. He stared back at me, and I gave him the most sincere smile I could. Finally, he nodded as well. "Sweet. It's a plan," I said as I clopped my hooves together in glee. Okay, my only ally at the moment was a reluctant, wounded, pissy male, but I'd take what I could get.

He stood, then lifted his tail, carefully pulled out a bobby pin, and extracted a small screwdriver from his...body cavity. I blinked, realizing that I'd botched search protocols. "Listen to the last recording I made with Duct Tape," he said as he walked to the lock, wiped off the screwdriver, stuck it into the lock with his hooves, fed the pin in with his teeth, and began wiggling them around. So that was how he'd gotten into the supply room. I wondered what else he'd broken into, or out of. Also... ew.

I flipped through the files, looking at the tags and scanning for 'DT'. I might not be able to do magic to save my life, but I only slept through half my PipBuck training (In my defense, it was the boring half). Finally, I found the last file tagged DT; it was

dated a few weeks ago.

It began, as I expected, with the sound of slapping flanks. I blushed... listening to Duct Tape doing it was different than listening to the Overmare. She actually sounded like she really liked it. Funny, I never expected her to be so... loud. Afterwards, they settled down into the little kisses and nuzzles. Then her soft sigh. "This has been so wonderful. It feels like a dream come true. The Overmare's been so wonderful lately."

P-21 said nothing right away, but then muttered in a low, flat voice, "Yeah. She can be nice... sometimes." From the way he said it, I expected that 'sometimes' meant 'the times when she wanted to get something from somepony.'

Duct Tape gave a little giggle. "I was talking about you to her the other day, P-20. She says that, when her plan is over, you can stay with me forever. You can be my... my... what was it again? Oh yes... husband. We can be the first ponies married in 99 since... you know... the bad thing happened." That had to be the Incident she was talking about.

P-21's response was a monosyllabic 'mmmm'.

"And we can have another foal together. Or two. Because once we're out, we won't need the quotas."

"What?" P-21 said softly. "Out of what?"

Duct Tape cussed softly under her breath and then sighed. "Well... I guess you won't tell anypony." She gave a little giggle, but P-21 remained silent as Duct Tape went on. "The Overmare has gotten in contact with Stable-Tec! The outside is safe and clean and we're all going to be able to leave the Stable soon!" She gave another joyous giggle. "In fact, she's getting a broadcast from Stable-Tec right now!"

What the fuck?

Stable-Tec built Stable 99 and set up the rules and the Overmare. Going outside? But every day, the stable broadcasts told us that the outside was a death trap.

"How? The door to the outside was sealed after the Incident..." he muttered softly.

"Well, just because it was sealed once doesn't mean it can't be unsealed. You know all the parts that the Overmare is inventorying? Well... I fixed the door! I even programmed the Overmare a special code to open and close it. See?" I heard the sound of a PipBuck beeping.

"And she said that the outside is safe?"

“Mhmm! I even took a little peek myself. I think it’s... what did Text call it... winter? It was all cloudy... but I saw trees. They didn’t have any leaves, but they were trees!” I couldn’t imagine a tree... not really. Trees were pictures in books, so I could only picture grainy green blotches as far as the eye could see. “You could survive out there. We all can. We don’t have to stay here anymore.”

“But... why keep the secret? If the door is open and it’s safe outside...”

“Well, Stable-Tec is afraid that all the ponies in here will freak out. The Overmare wants to avoid a panic, so she’s only told a few ponies. I don’t even think Gin Rummy knows. Stable-Tec says they need a special data file from the Stable that will tell them how we’ve been doing the last two centuries. EC-1101. So she’s had me extracting it from the system. It’s a doozy of a file, and buried pretty deep.”

There wasn’t a response from P-21. Then she said softly, “I thought you’d be happy.”

“What? Oh... I... it’s just a lot to take in,” he said quietly. Then he said softly, “Duct... do you trust the Overmare?”

“Of course! We all must trust the Overmare. She’s our protector and our guardian. We’d be lost without her,” she said in rote fashion like half the mares in 99. Of course, I’d say the same, but I’d be thinking sarcastic thoughts while I did.

P-21 was quiet for a minute, then said softly, “Don’t trust her. Not for a second.”

“What? How-“

“You remember how you saw me in her office?”

“I...” she trailed off.

“Don’t trust her. You’ve been... nice. One of three. And so I’m telling you... don’t trust her. Protect yourself. Protect your filly.”

There was an uncomfortable silence. “I... I suppose I could throw an encryption on it. Something she can’t crack till she promises to let us out...” she mulled softly. “Maybe make the password that name you liked so much...”

“Huh? Which name?” But she was going on about algorithmying or something, and a few seconds later the recording cut off.

Stable-Tec! Going outside! This was huge! Epic! A real game changer! With Stable-Tec here, all the Overmare and Rivet’s ponyshit didn’t matter. Maybe I wouldn’t have to be security anymore. Maybe...

Don’t trust the Overmare. That was what P-21 had said, and that was the look in

his eye right now as he worked on picking the lock on the door. And suddenly, I remembered an old pony saying: if something sounds too good to be true... it probably is. If the Overmare was serious about this, she would have told Mom.

She's getting a broadcast right now... I glanced at my PipBuck. There were dozens of radio channels on it, but only six were used by the stable. I clicked to security, but it was dead during C shift. Then to maintenance and the dry chatter about a recycling pump malfunctioning in the bilges and that Scotch Tape should get right on it. Service was dead since the cafeteria and food recycling were shut down during curfew. Medical just had the automated message about locating P-21 for retirement. Recreation had the regular looping brass band and glory to the Overmare. Education had a dry recording about how Stable-Tec had placed the Overmare for our protection... which would be suspicious if I hadn't heard it a million times.

Then I clicked over to the next channel. Static. The next... and the next... and next...

"Beep be booop beep be beep boop bip beep..." suddenly streamed out of my PipBuck. I had no idea what it could be; some sort of PipBuck jabberese? It was faint, though, and with many little crackles and breaks in the signal. That meant that it was probably coming from outside the Stable. It was so weak that I doubted the signal would be detectable on the lower levels even if a pony was bored enough to go flipping through the static. I recorded about a minute of it, hoping it would be enough.

That was it. I needed to get out of here. I needed to talk to Mom...

Except... would it be enough? Mom... I wanted to think that she'd believe me. That I'd be more than 'Blackjack the screwup'. That she'd take it seriously because it came from her 'little blank flank'. Or that she'd stay in 'security head' mode but accept the evidence I had... and would do something about the Overmare.

Then there was a soft click and the door to the cell opened. I gaped in astonishment as P-21 put the bobby pin back in his tail and... okay, closing mouth before it becomes an escape route for my stomach contents. "You did it. How... where did you learn that?"

"Have you ever spent a week with a bobby pin, a screwdriver, and nothing to do but wait for a mare to want to breed you?" he asked back. "I'm sure even you could figure it out eventually."

"Don't count on it. If I need a lock opened, I get a key," I countered as I pushed open

the grate and trotted into the deserted security section. Oh, key; reasoning that I might as well not make things worse, I scooped up the PipBuck key and pen-thing and put them back in the drawer. Right, back to the Overmare going crazy. I could try and get Mom on the radio, but I knew Daisy and the others would be listening to that channel. Everypony else would be asleep or under curfew. "Look. I need to get down to tell Gin Rummy about this." Then I looked down the stairs. . . I also needed a gun.

Goddesses, was I really thinking of shooting security ponies? Even Daisy. . . the thought of such a thing made my stomach churn. No crime was worse than murder in the stable. Killing another mare was robbing the stable of somepony needed to keep everypony alive! But if the Overmare was up to something. . . I trotted to the armory door and hoped I wasn't going to set off an alarm or something. Normally Brandybuck would be stationed outside it during C shift, but she'd left with the others. "Can you open this?"

He glanced at it and then moved over to the terminal next to it. "Um. . . maybe? With some time?" Unlock the door with the terminal? He caught my surprised look and rolled his eyes. "Look, don't you have a mare to warn?"

Right. Right. He was a smart pony who knew about locks and terminals and, despite being a male, probably a lot of other things I didn't. Great, even the males were better than me. Enough of that! Now was definitely not the time for self-pity. "Okay. I'll be right back." Oh, how I hoped I'd be right back with Mom and all of A and B shifts behind me.

I picked my way down to the atrium and heard the Overmare and Daisy's voices raised in argument, but with the echoes and distance I couldn't make out specifics. I crept across the wide open space, trying to use the reinforcing columns as cover. Then Marmalade glanced back across the atrium at me. She blinked, then gave a simple little smile and a little wave of her hoof. Smiling slackly, I returned it and nipped into the cafeteria before anypony else noticed. My heart hammered in my chest, and I didn't dare glance back towards the tiny chamber off the atrium. I didn't know what the Overmare was planning, just that it was time for the shots to be called by a smarter pony than me!

I scrambled down the stairs past the medical clinic, school, and other support rooms. I was in such a hurry that I smacked my head on the door to the living quarters before it fully recessed into the ceiling. Eyes watering, I rubbed my noggin and clenched my teeth. "Mom! Moooom!" I shouted as I raced to her room. Then I saw that her bed was still neatly made, and for a moment I felt my heart stop. She wasn't here?

Why wouldn't she be here? She was always here!

Except now. I sat hard on my rump, thumping my head with a hoof and not helping my headache at all. "Think, Blackjack. Think think think!" Unfortunately, saying it didn't really help my brain any. Her tag! I punched it into my PipBuck and brought up my EFS. Then I turned in a circle, looking for the little arrowhead.

Nothing.

I screamed a little in frustration, beating my hooves in front of me! Of all the times for her to disappear! She could be blocking her tag. The head of security could do that, I think. Or she might be somewhere in the stable where she couldn't be traced. Oh... what if something happened to her?

All that didn't mean anything. The Overmare was doing something. I needed to know what. I needed to know what all those signals the Overmare received meant. I needed a smarter pony that actually knew something about PipBucks.

Well... I'd been looking for an excuse to bug Midnight in her quarters for months. Looks like I finally had it! I stopped only long enough to write a note; 'Overmare up to something. Stable in danger. Gone to Midnight's! BJ.' Then I was hurrying down the residential quarters to Midnight's.

Being a security mare, I had certain privileges. Like being able to override most residential door locks with my PipBuck when the stable was in danger and I didn't have time to knock.

I wish I'd knocked. Actually, I wished I knew another mare in data systems I could go to.

The sight of pink U-10 huffing and rutting away froze me in my tracks. Oh, yeah... she was on the breeding queue now, wasn't she? I blinked and tilted my head. U-10 certainly went at it with enthusiasm... ugh! What was I doing! "Midnight..." I muttered as she gave a little whinny. "Midnight." They still slapped flanks. I rolled my eyes; for the love of Celestia... "Midnight!" I shouted.

She shrieked as he finally stopped ploughing her plot and the two gawked at me. The pink buck pointed at me in confusion and Midnight's pupils constricted. "B... Blackjack?"

U-10 pointed his hoof at me. "I didn't know I was scheduled for a double," he said as he checked his PipBuck.

"Midnight, I need your help," I said as I approached her bed. Unlike my room, she

kept hers spotless. Her terminal and workstation were both sparkling clean.

“Get out!” she shrieked and charged me, hammering at me with her hooves. “Of all the times to come to me for flank spank you choose now? Get out right now or I’ll—”

I grabbed her shoulders and stared right in her eyes. “This isn’t about flank spank, okay. It’s not about sex of any kind. And if you help me I promise I will never try to get under your tail again, all right?”

She closed her mouth, looking annoyed, then troubled, then a little pouty. “Alright. What do you need?”

“The Overmare is getting a signal from outside the stable,” I explained as I found the recording on my PipBuck. “I need to know what it’s saying.” Playing the odd string of beeps and boops seemed to finally convince her I was serious.

She gave me one last long glance and then sighed, trotting to her workstation. “You are going to owe me so much for this, Blackjack,” she muttered as she activated her terminal, her horn’s magic pressing keys infinitely faster than I could. She attached a cable to my PipBuck. U-10 hummed to himself as he stood patiently off to the side by the door, looking over Midnight’s knickknacks. Midnight’s roommate was nowhere to be seen; no surprise. I knew I wouldn’t want to be around another mare on the queue. . . . Probably.

“It’s a Stable-Tec transmission code all right. Old one, too. None of our stable security modifications,” Midnight said softly as she worked. Time was crawling by, and I kept swapping my tag back and forth. Mom was off the system. Daisy was... by the main entrance, I thought. So was the Overmare. Now Daisy was moving. . . back to security? My ears twitched as I thought I heard. . . something. One benefit of life in Stable 99 was that the quarters were nearly soundproofed. “Shouldn’t be hard to clean it up,” she said as she manipulated the file in her terminal. “And. . . done!” she said triumphantly. Then she frowned. “Wait. . . it’s a text file.”

I blinked, leaning in to make sure I didn’t mistake it: Stable-Tec security forces incoming tonight, 0100 hours. Have EC-1101 prepared for extraction. You’re doing the right thing, Overmare. You’ll be getting control of your stable back. Deus.

“Stable-Tec wants that program? Why?” Midnight blinked. “We haven’t removed the encryption on it yet!”

“I have no idea,” I said with a sigh. “Where is this EC-1101?” Wait. . . forget the file.

“In the Stable’s communication maneframe; you can access it in Maintenance One outside the Overmare’s office. Since we couldn’t break its encryption, I had it bun-

dled for transfer to a PipBuck. It's a weird file. I had to package it in a permanent rewrite protocol," she said in a rush. My ears twitched again at a distant sound. What was that noise and why was my mane crawling? She must have taken my look for confusion, because she simplified herself for me. "Once you put that file on your PipBuck, there's no way to take it off. It'll be permanently etched into a PipBuck's data matrix."

I looked at her. She was still talking about the file? I looked at my PipBuck. One of the most commonly used features was the chronometer. The time? 0122.

There was a beep of an override on the door, and it hissed open. U-10 smiled genially as he turned to face the door beside him. There were five hundred ponies in Stable 99. I might not know them all by name or even quite all of them by sight, but looking at the mare in the doorway, there was no possible way that she could have been from our stable. Her mottled hide was a stained and blemished yellow decorated with scars and bite marks. The whites of her eyes were stained a solid piss yellow. Her mane had been pulled into bloody spikes. She wore barding made of strips of leather and tires and decorated with countless nails jutting out. Her reeking brown teeth curled in a grin of pure glee.

And if any of us had the slightest doubt remaining, she blew off U-10's head with the sawed-off single-barreled shotgun clenched in her jaws. Bits of blood, bone and brains splattered over both of us as the pink unicorn dropped in a thrashing heap. The mare spat out the gun, casually reloading it as she giggled. "Bang... yer dead..." she slurred around a bloody tongue; it looked... chewed.

Midnight stood there stunned and wetting herself. I was not far from that state myself, but, unlike her, I was security. The fear and horror I felt were unceremoniously shoved into the closet in the back of my brain where I put all the things I didn't want to think about, leaving me with enough wits to telekinetically pull out my baton just as the mare snapped the shotgun closed. With a crack, the glowing metal rod tore the bite grip from her rotten teeth and, from the sound of it, probably broke the firearm.

Unlike Midnight, this mare wasted no time in counterattacking. Rearing up, she slammed me to the ground next to U-10's body with enough force to make me see stars. The baton went bouncing away somewhere out of sight. Then she was on top of me, drawing a rusty carving knife from a sheathe at her shoulder. She jabbed the dull tip into the neck of my security barding, twisting her head back and forth as she tried to work it through the tough fabric and into my throat. I glanced at the slain unicorn beside me and at the paralyzed Midnight who'd be next.

I looked down at that knife and applied all my magic to the blade, fighting to twist it away. The rusty metal shook as the mare bit down even more tightly. Then the rusty knife snapped in two and I reversed the tip. With a telekinetic shove, I rammed the sharp metal as deep into her throat as I could. Her yellow eyes shot wide as her sliced throat spurted blood over my chest and neck, smearing my barding with her gore. Finally, something gave inside the nightmarish mare, and she slumped limply against me.

I gasped, my heart hammering as I kicked my way clear. I'd just killed a pony... a diseased and demented pony, but a pony nonetheless. Before I let that train of thought go any further, I wrestled it into that closet with the rest of the things I didn't need in my head right now. Because right now, Midnight was going into shock as she stared at the corpses in her quarters. I looked at the bloody PipBuck on the murderess' foreleg; it was from Stable 99, and from the gore covering most of it, I doubted it had been removed or donned with a key.

"#340," I said softly. "Snowdrop." A loyal, quiet security mare who'd always been cool to me. One of the nine that'd been with the Overmare.

"You!" rasped a pony from the door, a unicorn floating a rusty razor blade in front of her. I found something better... I hoped... in the rusty twenty gauge shotgun dropped by the earth pony I'd just killed. I didn't even need to use the mouthgrip. I slipped into S.A.T.S. as she charged, the blade slashing wildly in front of her, the world dropping to a crawl. In the spell, I could target her legs, body, or...

Time crawled forward, and the cone of lead blasted out the end of the shotgun. I watched with sickening clarity as the lead abraded her face. She screamed, slashing blindly, kicking and biting in a frenzy. I grabbed her with my hooves to hold her still, reversing the butt of the gun and bringing it crashing down on her skull. Again. Again. Then two things broke: the butt of the gun and her skull. She flopped over limply, twitching spasmodically as I fought furiously to keep my focus. Don't think beyond right now. That closet was getting pretty full, though.

Midnight was making little screams in her throat and I stood, blocking the sight of the bodies. Two... had I really just killed two? No. Don't think about it. I should be good at that. "Midnight..." I said sternly, staring into her pinprick eyes. "Midnight!" I shouted, and because I'm not a medical pony and couldn't think of anything else to do, I smacked her hard across the face. That snapped her out enough to look at me. "The stable is being invaded. You've got to find security ponies and my mom and get everypony else down into the maintenance tunnels. Find Rivets. She can take care of everypony. Okay?"

“Find security... get everypony down below...” she muttered weakly and then nodded. “What are you going to do?”

That was a very good question. Fortunately, there was a simple answer as I found my baton and levitated it up. “Well... guess I’ll thump ‘em with my stick.” Goddesses, it must have sounded sick to crack jokes now, but I had to ignore everything I’d stuck in the back of my head.

Of course, as good as my stick was, a gun was better. Sadly, the shotgun was out of commission; the broken butt had bent and unseated the breech. That was probably for the best, though; I’d been lucky it hadn’t blown up in my face. There was an easy way to tell which way the raiders had come: they’d left a trail of blood from residential door to residential door all the way down the hall. Since there wasn’t any blood past Midnight’s, I hoped it was clear. “Go, Midnight. Go,” I urged as I made my way carefully down the hall, trying to be as quiet as possible.

I didn’t understand these ponies, if they really were ponies and not some sort of mutant pony-shaped predators of some sort. They reeked. They seemed to revel in bloodshed. I had no idea how they could have penetrated the stable... unless they’d come in when the Overmare opened the door.

Inside one room, I saw a red bar moving towards the door, and I slipped into S.A.T.S. the second her head was in view. My glowing baton crushed her windpipe in a single lucky hit. Her yellow eyes bulged and rolled as she dropped a .38 revolver from her mouth; hey, I might have slept through two thirds of my classes and Textbook’s lectures, but I paid attention to my firearms training! My backswing smashed her temple, sending her slumping against the door frame.

She was so dirty I couldn’t tell what color she had been originally. She’d mutilated her own cutie mark. I hesitated as I pointed the baton at her. “Who are you?” I asked as she choked, coughed, and inexplicably started to giggle between gasps as she looked at me... and insanely went for the gun! I kicked it away. “Who are you? Why are you here?”

Then I saw the blood smeared over the grimy lips and took my eyes off her to look into the room she’d been in. Air Duct and her filly Vent were laying still on the floor... but the smears of blood... holes chewed in the blue filly’s side... the blood splashed about. The psychotic mare finally gasped one word, “Yummy!” Then she lunged, grabbing my leg and trying to bite through my security barding!

“You! Sick! Fucker!” I yelled, bringing the baton down with each word. Her skull finally cracked, blood leaking from her orifices, and with a sigh she went still.

Okay... murderous? I got that. Crazy I could deal with, too. But how the fuck did these ponies get into the habit of eating other ponies?! I looked at Vent... had she been dead when...

Oh, puking now. I couldn't help myself, my lunch coming up in the doorway. When I finished, I did all I could to lock that thought in with the others and push a mental dresser against that closet door in the back of my mind. I could freak out and deal with this later. I checked the revolver. Four rounds... and six more on the earth pony mare.

Three down... how many to go? There was an awful lot of red in my E.F.S. as I made my way towards the stairs to the Atrium.

"I can't stand these sick fuckers," a buck said from the stairs above me. That it was a buck made me guess that they weren't quite the same ponies as before. "Murdering, psychopathic rapists the lot of 'em." Maybe there was the possibility of negotiation?

"Look at it this way: they'll exhaust themselves killing every last motherfucking pony in here, and then we can get rid of them easily," a mare answered, snuffing any thoughts of working out a deal before continuing callously, "Deus gets that program he wants so desperately. My boss is happy. The Reapers are happy. Everypony wins." Except my damned stable, you mule.

"Makes me wonder what's so damned special about it," the buck muttered as I crept up the stairs. "Deus just grabs a dozen of us at random from the arena, trots us out here, fetches these nutjob raiders, and waits for the stupid cunt to open the door?"

"It's smart. He knows a Filly Flasher like me would never work with a Halfheart Gang loser like you to screw him. This way, everypony gets their caps and everypony's happy," the mare said matter-of-factly. I could make out her head now, and I pointed the rusty .38 revolver at it. I licked my lips and swallowed. All I had to do was pull the trigger. Just pull the trigger...

But she wasn't like the other murderers. She seemed sane, if callous and wicked. Somehow, I had no doubt she would have the same hesitation if I were in her sights. But that was the difference. If I killed her... I tried to push myself. The pale mare was dirty and streaked with blood, her shaggy black mane smeared with gore and some kind of grease. She had a necklace of cheap looking gemstones. She was a pony, a person. How could I just... just shoot her?

Then she glanced at me, and her eyes widened and then narrowed as she smiled. "Awww... stable pony's got a piece. Bet she can't fire it," she said as she ducked

her head to a leg holster and... drew a weird metal box with a mouthgrip? It didn't matter, though; if she was pointing it at me, I doubted it was anything good. And from the look in her eyes, the pale earth pony was dead certain I wouldn't fire back.

I wasn't sure I could either.

The shot was luck. Pure luck. It caught her in the left eye and blew a bloody chunk out behind her left ear and over the buck. Sprayed with brain and skull, the brown stallion staggered back as the pale mare dropped to the floor, muscles writhing a moment before going still. The buck levitated a piece of sharpened rebar like a spear as I tried for another shot, but the revolver gave an unhealthy ping of rust and stopped; hammer drawn back.

I ducked under the deadly spur of metal and scrambled for the mare's strange box... weapon... thing! There wasn't even a trigger! What was this thing supposed to do? "Never seen a beam gun before?" A what gun? Then the metal was whipping towards me again and I barely brought the beam thingy up in time to block the tip. There was a flash, a fizzle, and the metal spur continued on with no hesitation right into my flesh.

I screamed as the sharpened steel caught me above my collar and ripped a hoof long tear along the side of my neck. Again it was only luck that protected me as I fell back, tumbling down the stairs as my own blood smeared my barding and spattered the steps. I landed on my back as the scraggly brown buck descended with the crude but effective weapon ready to spear me like a radroach.

"Stupid soft stable ponies..." he said as he raised the sharpened bar. I watched, unable to move, sure I was about to die.

Then there was the resounding sound of a gunshot in the halls. and a hoof-sized hole appeared in his chest. His eyes popped wide as he jerked back, staring down the hall past me.

"No pony kills ponies in my stable," Mom said firmly, her sidearm floating precisely over her eye. As her second bullet caught him in the face and tore off half his head, I doubted that she even needed S.A.T.S..

I stared at his body as all those thoughts I'd stuffed into that mental closet started to tear down the door. My throat began to work as I stared at the draining holes in his head. I had to do something... something... scream... vomit... wet myself... curl up in a ball sucking my hoof till this was all over. Something!

"Blackjack." Mom's voice cut through all that, and I tore myself away from the blown-

open corpse. "We still have a stable to save." Her calm words were a layer of concrete across the closet door in my mind. As much as I'd love to fall apart, I couldn't. Not now. Not in front of her. Even if I was the worst security pony in Equestria, my stable was in danger.

"Yeah. Sure..." I said as I stood on my hooves, and in her eyes I saw her overwhelming pride. It helped reinforce that concrete. "So... is there a plan?" A plan would be nice, so long as it wasn't my plan.

"I still don't know what's going on or how these... things... got in here," she said as she checked her sidearm. "Somepony taught them the basics of how to use PipBucks. They went right for security ponies' quarters. I'm just glad they didn't get far." Distracted by all the foals to slaughter. Damn it, if I'd just been faster I could have... done... done something!

"Yeah, but how'd they get them on?" They would have had to... oh, don't think about that. "Okay, well, they're here because the Overmare let them in." And in that comment I saw several fuses blown in my mom's mind. "I'm pretty sure she wanted to use them to take on Rivets."

"Take on Rivets? Rivets is the head of maintenance!"

"Well, tell it to the little psycho when we find her," I countered. "She got Duct Tape to open the hatch and find something these invaders wanted. These ponies didn't just come here to kill. They came here for some program the Overmare found in the stable."

"A program?" my mother asked with a frown. "Why don't they just take it and leave?"

"Cause they're evil?" I suggested, looking up the stairs towards the atrium. She didn't laugh, but she did give me a ghost of a smile. "If I can get to the terminal in Maintenance One, I can put it on my PipBuck and then... do... something." Something to get them to leave the stable, but what? Throw it out the main hatch and close it behind them? No... that wouldn't work!

"Ugh, why can't a smart pony figure this stuff out?" I whined as Lock and Barrel, two A shift security mares, came up with batons out. For them to leave, the program would have to leave too. Somepony would have to take it out. "What if I took EC-1101 outside? They'd have to follow me then, wouldn't they?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Blackjack. It's certain death outside," Mom retorted immediately.

"It's pretty reliable death in here, Mom. Erm... I mean... miss head security

mare... ma'am..." I fumbled, blushing a little. She swept me up in a hug. Okay, now I was blushing a lot. She quickly let me go, reddening herself. Mom never was very good with being Mom. Not that she was a bad mom, just... Ugh! Why'd I have to get so many conflicting things going on in my brain right now?

Gin Rummy took point, going up to the atrium. As we advanced up the stairs, I heard a filly squeal. Harsh laughter filled the air as we reached the doorway. Carefully, we peeked around the corner. The invaders were on the far side of the atrium, right outside the door to the stable entry. At least a dozen mares were dead; from the smears of blood, they'd been dragged here from their quarters below. The door to security was clear.

"Come on. We can run for it!" Lock said eagerly and the blue mare jumped out the doorway. Lock was fast; in recreation, she could do a lap around the exercise grounds in under a minute. This was at most a hundred feet.

Thunder filled the atrium, and the blue mare exploded in bloody chunks. The wall behind her buckled. But despite all that, I didn't stare at the heap of her remains.

I stared at where the thunder had come from.

From the midst of the staggered invaders rose... a thing. A thing of pony and metal. Hydraulics braced the metal plates attached to its hide as it stepped forward. For all its mass, it seemed to trot almost effortlessly. Red eyes stared at where Lock had been blown to pieces. Two huge guns pointed over its shoulders, cannons built into its body.

Then it slurred in a metallic sounding voice, "Cunt thought she was fast. Cunt was wrong!" The invaders laughed in agreement. "Now, watch that door. Might need to go get another batch of raiders." Go get more? As long as that thing was here and the door open, why not? It could just keep sending in more of these killers. A half dozen moved forward, one of them wearing a bloody PipBuck.

"Hey! Red bars!" he crowed in glee. "These fuckin' things are great!"

"Cunts still got some fight in them! Cunts are fucked." And from the laughter of the others, I really couldn't disagree. We fell back.

"Now what?" Barrel asked, the green mare visibly shaking in fear.

"I'm open to suggestions," Mom said grimly.

I frowned, then looked back at the landing. "I've got an idea..."

This was a terrible idea. . . but it was mine and the only one we had. I'd shucked my security barding and was now putting on the ratty clothes of the unicorn mare. Our coloring was close, and Mom was blackening the red in my mane with grease from a maintenance closet. "Good thing your horn is so small, little fishy," she said, finally past all her arguments about why this wouldn't work. Mom was lavender, Barrel was green...I was the only filly that looked close to the mare I'd killed.

"Mom, I'm about to pretend to be a psychopathic wild pony," I replied flatly. "Please don't call me that." The last thing I needed was that stupid name. . . . and her talking about my horn. Which wasn't that small, anyway... it was just... compact.

"This is suicide," Barrel muttered as she smeared more dirt in my mane and tail.

"Then they won't expect it," I said.

"How are you going to get past their E.F.S.?" Barrel countered.

I rounded on her. "Barrel, do you want to do this?" The green mare looked like she wanted to crawl under her bed and cry. I know I did. I looked at Mom. "How am I going to get from security to the entry, though? Folks will notice too soon if I just trot out past them."

"There's a passage from the Overmare's office to the entry chamber. The Overmare's grandmother used it to sneak out of her quarters after curfew," Mom said as she transferred a code to my PipBuck. "That should get you through. I doubt the Overmare even knows it exists." She sighed as she looked me in the eye. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"I'm the only one who can," I replied evenly. It wasn't like there were countless pale security mares. The only other two were Daisy and Snowdrop. "So. . . if I make it. . . close up the stable as quick as you can. Heck, I'd reseal it if I were you. If that door opens again, 99 is doomed."

I floated the weird box gun into my holster and checked one more time in the mirror to make sure my horn was covered by matted mane. This wasn't even barding! It was. . . clothes. Rummaged together clothes to try and make a sort of intimidating outfit. I felt like a two bit trick pony. The only good thing was that it covered my cutie mark. There was no way I could mimic the two gold coins on the dead mare's rump.

Making my way back towards the atrium I heard a pony scream and somepony else cackle, "She bit it off!" I didn't have any time to speculate on who was biting what as I approached the door. Another pony yelled, "Here comes another one!"

"Don't fucking shoot!" I bawled as I stepped out. There were a whole lot of guns and

eyes on me and I gave up any and all thought of shooting. Hell, I didn't even have a weapon. "It's me," I said, encouraged by the lack of gunfire. The feeling of pieces of Lock under my hooves was simultaneously trying to make me throw up again and giving me a really, really good reason not to do anything that might break my cover.

"Two Bit?" the buck wearing the bloody PipBuck said. "That you?"

"Of course, who the fuck do you think it is?" I countered, and my belligerent tone seemed to put him at a sullen ease.

"What the hell is going on down there? I thought the scum had taken out all their fighters," he said sourly.

"They got security ponies and are putting up a fight," I countered.

Then a metallic voice grated, "Then what are you doing up here, Cunt?"

I stared up at the metallic monster, and our eyes met. I heard a tiny whirr as its red, glowing eyes tracked my movements. "I... I..." I nearly died right there, because in that instant I almost forgot that I was supposed to be an earth pony. I ducked my head, bit the mouth guard, and pulled the damaged weapon from my holster. Apparently, something about that struck half the ponies as hilarious.

"Flasher lost her flash! Ha!" the buck wearing the PipBuck roared in glee. I wanted to balk. Instead, I glared over the mouth guard. But the metal monsterpony didn't find it funny.

With shocking speed it swatted the gun out of my mouth, and suddenly the only ponies laughing were the yellowed-eyed mangy ponies with their insane giggles. "Cunt doesn't have her gun. Cunt is useless, then. Cunt should be fucked, huh, Cunt?" He placed an armor-plated hoof on the dropped weapon and leaned on it. The casing gave and flattened with a crunch. At the moment, I was pretty sure that I knew how it felt.

I suddenly became very aware of one part of him that wasn't mechanical. A part that I was fairly sure was going to be inside me in a few seconds. I became aware of a whimper and looked over at a prone white shape. The Overmare. One of the filthy, yellow-eyed ponies was pinning her down and raping her, her mouth and flanks bloody. The idea was utterly alien to me, and I did all I could to tear my eyes away and hide my horror. Mares might occasionally force another mare against her will, a class A crime, but for a buck to do that to a mare was... focus Blackjack!

"I'm not useless," I answered as evenly as I could. "I heard one of these stable ponies talk about the program you want and where to get it. It's set for a one time

transfer onto these PipBuck things.”

He looked over at the Overmare. “So the little cunt wasn’t lying.”

“I told you,” she sobbed as she lay like limp meat, blood streaking her muzzle and flanks alike. As much as I didn’t want to get blown into pony pieces, I’d take it over that.

“I’ll go get it for you,” I said evenly.

His red glowing eyes drilled into me. “I’m getting bored, Cunt. Fifteen minutes, then I’ll make my own door,” he said with a nod at the huge cannons.

A brown unicorn buck stepped forward. “You can’t, Deus! If you destroy the terminal, then Sanguine will never get the file!” This unicorn didn’t fit in with the others. Despite the fact he wore the same dirty clothes, he still seemed cleaner. Healthier, though still scrawny. The PipBuck on his leg didn’t look like it’d been stripped from another mare. Then I glanced at his flank: a blue male symbol with twenty-one dots beneath it.

A Stable 99 buck? How?

“I don’t care. I want these cunts dead. Fucked and dead or dead and fucked, I don’t care. This is taking too long!” he said almost in pain before he stared at me. “Fetch, Cunt! Kill the ones left up there and bring me the program! Do it now, Cunt!” Wow, Deus sure had a favorite word, didn’t he?

“I should go with her. I should be the one who gets it,” the brown unicorn whined. Now I recognized him. He’d been in my breeding queue once. The whimperer. U-21 now. I’d never signed up for him again. I’d thought he’d been retired a month ago. . .

“I don’t care who gets it! Get it!” He bellowed, and now seemed like the perfect time to run to security.

U-21 scrambled past me to get through the hatch first. “Okay. . . get the program. . . don’t get killed. . . get the program. . . don’t get killed. . .” he muttered.

I stopped him at the foot of the stairs, hearing banging from above. “What’s going on up there?”

“What’s going on? Those two security mares who escaped barricaded themselves inside! That’s what.” He stared at me in confusion. I felt a little stir of glee. And Deus, massive as he was, couldn’t fit through the door and couldn’t blast it bigger without risk of breaking the program.

“Daisy made it?” Of course she made it! She was too tough and mean to get killed by anypony!

“Daisy?” His eyes popped wide, and he reached up a hoof to brush my matted mane aside to uncover my lit- my compact horn! “Blackjack!”

“That’s me. How did you end up with—” but my attempts at interrogation were for naught as he opened his mouth wide to yell. I shoved my right hoof in his mouth. “Really sorry about this,” I apologized, then swung my PipBuck hard. The reinforced casing smacked his head once, twice. . . thrice. Finally, he went down in a quaking ball; not concussed but too traumatized at the moment to bring shit down on me. “Like I said: really sorry.” Unless he was involved in all this. . .

I ran up to the security level and heard the yelling and banging. There was a door that divided the Overmare’s office, armory, and some utility rooms from detention, briefing, and the gun range. The door itself had been forced open, but Daisy had barricaded it with a desk. Now a huge red mare with a fire axe was chopping her way through it. Three more cheered her on, shouting encouragement as they either brandished their own weapons or giggled in glee. One dingy unicorn mare chewed on her own bloodied hoof as she rocked in place and fiddled with the security shotgun in her faltering magic glow. A second earth pony buck brandished an automatic pistol as he growled and spat cheers around the mouth grip. The last was another yellowed buck grinning in glee and anticipation and knocking a baseball bat between his forelegs as the red mare chopped again and again.

“Hey, can I see that?” I asked as I pointed a hoof at the shotgun and a grin at the mare.

The pupils of her yellowed eyes were pinpricks. Who the fuck gave this mare a gun? She was chewing on the end of her leg so much that I thought she was going to gnaw it right off. She gave a delighted giggle and pointed it at me. “See?” I nearly soiled myself as she pulled the trigger.

At least nopony had been dumb enough to give her ammunition. “Give me that!” I said as I grabbed the floating weapon with my hooves. Her magic was shit and collapsed as I tugged it from her grasp. “Where are the shells?” I asked the automatic-wielding buck. He arched a brow skeptically, looking at my empty holster. “It broke, okay!”

He snorted and tossed me a small bag of twenty gauge buckshot shells. My horn glowed as I loaded the rounds into the gun. He spat his pistol into his holster to speak. “Just make sure you keep it away from that psycho,” he said, not taking his

eyes off the barricade and waving a foreleg at the mare I'd taken the shotgun from. "Why the hell Deus brought them along, I'll never know."

"What's wrong with her?" I asked.

"Who knows? Raider scum like her are all alike," he muttered. "Once they get that way, they're as good as dead." He looked at me as I racked a shell into the chamber. "You know how to use that thing?" Then his eyes widened as he took in the glowing shotgun. "Wait. . . weren't you. . ."

"Yep," was all I replied. I looked him right in the eyes as I slipped into S.A.T.S. and realized what I was about to do. What I was really about to do. The sane raiders I'd killed had been attacking me, and she'd died more by accident than anything. But now, with time practically frozen, I looked into his eyes and deliberately toggled two shotgun blasts to the head. It was still self-defense. I was security and I was protecting my stable.

It didn't make it any easier, but it did make it possible.

Time returned, moving as if in molasses. The Stable-Tec Assisted Targeting Spell slowly discharged, and I watched the cone of lead fan out in a narrow wedge of death. I watched his flesh pulverize and tear away around each pellet, his head deform, and blood and bone fly away behind him. The second shot repeated the devastation, and I watched in horrified fascination at his head detached completely and he dropped like a sack of meat.

I stood there for a second, staring in shock. I'd just decapitated a pony!

It was a second too long. With a scream, the mare with the bloody hoof launched herself at me as the buck with the baseball bat swung it wildly. The clothes I wore were little protection against the heavy impacts of the bat; sweet Celestia, he'd driven nails through the end! I cried out in pain as the rusty lengths pierced deep into my shoulder. This seemed to make the mare enter into a frenzy of biting and chewing, snapping at my neck as I tried to shove her away. The only upside was that, with the two crowding me, the mare with the fire axe couldn't chop me down. Unfortunately, she had the presence of mind to dive for the dropped automatic.

S.A.T.S. took a while to recharge, so in the meantime I backpedaled for the stairs, firing wildly at the maddened pair. One of the perks of a shotgun was that 'close' was good enough in tight quarters like this. The shotgun held five more shells, and I pumped them out as rapidly as I could, the buckshot peppering them with oozing wounds. It was nowhere near as effective as those first two shots, though; S.A.T.S.'s

accuracy was truly terrifying. I was glad that none of these ponies seemed to have access to it or knew what it could do.

The buck went down with the fourth round, giggling even as foamy blood poured out of his mouth. The fifth shot missed the mare entirely, and she slammed her bloody hooves against me in a frenzy, cackling all the while. I saw the red mare pick up the dropped automatic pistol and turn towards me. "I don't have time for this!" I shouted, throwing my hooves around the frenzied mare's throat and twisting as my horn furiously scrambled to reload.

The pistol's nine millimeter rounds thumped into the mare with abandon; clearly, these psychotic mares were disposable. She didn't even seem to realize she was shot, but I certainly did as I felt the bite of one that travelled through my temporary shield. "Hugs," the mare rattled in my ear before she slowly slumped down out of my grasp.

Fortunately, I'd reloaded my weapon, and the red mare seemed to realize that shotgun trumped pistol and axe. I fired as rapidly as I could as she snatched her axe in her mouth and raced across into the briefing room. Reloading, I ran to the door. There were a few offices and detention through there. She could be—

Then there was a bang behind me, and ten red hot needles stabbed into my rump. Screw this plan! I was never ever going without barding again. I saw the honey yellow glow around the shotgun and cried out, "Marmalade! It's Blackjack! Stop shooting me!" I could feel the burn of the pellets in my backside. Sweet Celestia, I'd never get shot again if I could help it!

I slumped as I heard the barricade being drawn back. The red bar wasn't moving towards the door. Maybe she was waiting for help to arrive? It didn't matter. In just a second, Daisy would—

—smash my rear legs out from under me, kick me on my back, and knock the wind out of me with a blow to my gut. Okay, not what I'd been expecting! I screamed as I rolled over onto my back just in time to block her next strike with the reinforced casing on my PipBuck. "Daisy. It's me! Blackjack!" I coughed and sputtered.

She looked at me coolly, spitting out her baton and twirling it on its loop around her hoof. "I know. If we're all about to die, at least I get the pleasure of finishing you off!" I stared up at her, and oddly, the word Deus was so fond of roared through my mind. My anger was enough to get a little more oomph from my horn, and I grabbed her baton, using the loop to twist her foreleg in and up. Overbalanced, she crashed forward on her side and I rose, pressing the shotgun to her face.

"I don't have time for this," I said, my heart thundering in my chest. The shotgun shook as my magical focus was rattled and I hoped that closet would stay sealed closed. "I know we got problems, but I have a plan to save the stable. So please cut the ponyshit, and you can just kill me when I get back."

"Back?" Marmalade blinked slowly. She'd been badly beaten and had blood matted around her mouth. "You're going somewhere?"

"Outside," I said as I turned away from Daisy. I couldn't kill her. I had a better chance of killing her by accident than intentionally.

"But you'll die," Marmalade said softly. "I don't want you to go."

I rose to my hooves, my backside really complaining as I limped to the door. "Really? Why?"

"Cause you're my friend," Marmalade said simply with her wide, vapid smile. "Why else do you think I fooled around with you all the time?" She levitated a trio of healing potions from a medical kit. "Here. I was gonna use 'em, but you're all shot up."

I stared at her with a worried frown. Marmalade? Friend? She'd always been the slow pony in Daisy's shadow. Too stupid to work alone, so simple she was annoying. . . nopony I'd ever called a friend. I drank the potions, glad for the cooling, healing sensation on my hindquarters, and looked at the honey colored mare with unease. "Well. . . thank you, Marmalade." She smiled and gave a little nod.

Daisy shoved past me. "Yeah yeah yeah. Sunshine and hugs and all that horseshit," she said as she slammed the barricade back into place. Her angry scowl turned skeptical as she regarded me. "You're really leaving?" Was I about to faint, or did she really sound the tiniest bit concerned?

"The raiders are here for a program. I'm going to steal it and hope they all come chasing after me. Then Mom and you can retake the stable," I said with a little nod, stripping off the useless clothes. Marmalade gave a soft 'ooh' of comprehension and, without another word, shrugged out of her security barding and handed it over.

"P-21? Are you here?" I asked as I pulled it on. I gave Marmalade a grateful smile.

"That useless cock pony?" Daisy snorted.

"You called?" P-21 said dryly as he stepped out of the door to Maintenance One. There was an unmistakable smug look on his face at the shocked expression on Daisy's face. His eyes met mine and his smug expression disappeared. "You

changed your mind. You're retiring me after all," he stated flatly as he glared at me.

Daisy chuckled in glee. "Now we're talking. Just hold still..." she said, taking a step towards P-21.

P-21 slowly limped backwards. "You never pass up a chance to break a male, do you?"

"Male? Pssh... I never miss a chance to break anypony..." Daisy said with a sharp grin. Okay, this nonsense needed to stop now!

I racked a shell into the shotgun, and Daisy turned to look at me. Had to be careful. I only had a dozen or so shells left and wasn't going to rob Marmalade. The armory door was still closed tight. Probably needed the Overmare's or Mom's personal codes to open it. I thought of the cornucopia of weapons stored for an Incident and thumped my hoof against the floor.

"Look, now really isn't the time," I said firmly. Okay, if I was being the voice of maturity, then Stable 99 was officially doomed. I looked at P-21. "The plan's changed a little. You're still getting out of here, but I'm going with you."

"Not happening. You're big. Noisy. Obnoxious," he stated flatly.

"Ugly. Oh, and fat," Daisy threw in.

"Really lazy... a bit of a letch..." Marmalade added. "And her horn's so tiny..." Hey!

"And female," he concluded in a tone of finality.

Okay. Didn't I have an ego? Oh, yeah, there it was. That mashed up thing on the floor. "Maybe, but I'm also the pony with the plan. Here it is. I get the program. I run out of here with all of them chasing me. Mom and the rest of security push them all out. Door gets sealed forever. If you think you can sneak past and make it outside on your own at any point in that plan, feel free. Otherwise, I'm going with you," I said as I thumped his chest. P-21 glared in return. Sweet Celestia, what was his problem?

"Fine," he finally muttered. "But after we're out, you're on your own."

Right. Probably for the best, anyway. "So, Midnight said that there was a program on the terminals up here. EC-1101. I need you to transfer it on my PipBuck." He nodded with a scowl and led me into the little closet dignified with the name of Maintenance One. There was barely enough room for both of us as he connected

my PipBuck to the machines. I noticed Daisy following, walking a little stiffly. “What’s the matter with you?”

She flushed furiously. “Go buck yourself, Blackjack.”

“Sodomized,” P-21 said simply. I was really glad that Daisy didn’t have a shotgun at that moment. She did, however, launch herself at P-21 with the clear intention of smashing him into blue jelly. I was barely able to stop her. What, was he trying to get killed?

“How’d you know?” Marmalade asked curiously, but he just gave her a flat look and went back to work. “Rude.”

I watched him work. “I wonder what it does.”

“Opens a camera,” Marmalade said, looking hopeful that she was being helpful. “Well, that’s what they said it did.”

What? I shook my head; this was Marmalade, after all. “Nevermind. Is it transferred?”

“Almost. And there’s a whole bunch of Overmare files here I’m adding. Just in case. . .” I always thought it was cute how it looked like earth ponies were prancing on the keys with the tips of their hooves. Then he pushed one more button.

The stable around me vanished as my E.F.S. went crazy! “Whoa whoa whoa! Hey, what’s going on!” Columns of numbers and diagrams and maps and – what the hell was that supposed to be?! – all flashed by one after the other. Then, as quickly as it began, it ended. A tiny cursor appeared.

>Permanent transfer completed.
>EC-1101 transferred.
>Warning: unknown encryption detected.
>Warning: biomedical peripheral insufficient.
>Warning: navigational data unavailable.
>Warning: Equestrianet data connection not available.
>Please commence manual transmission.

Please what? I opened my mouth to see if a smart pony might have an explanation for what just happened, but at that moment there was a roar from the atrium followed by an explosion that shook my teeth. I suspected that Deus had gotten tired of waiting. “Okay! The running part of the plan!”

“Problem,” he muttered, pointing at his injured leg. Oh, yeah. That.

I pulled out another syringe of Med-X, jabbed it into his leg, and injected the painkiller.

“Problem solved.” I could have used some myself; I had a hell of a headache from that light show!

We moved into the Overmare’s office. The room looked ransacked; it had probably been searched before Daisy and Marmalade got away. They hadn’t guessed that the program was in a little room right next door. Though it looked like somepony had pissed all over the Overmare’s huge ring-shaped desk, it was still intact, as was an old piece of paper taped behind it. The title caught my eye: ‘Enemys’ was crookedly scrawled at the top of the page in large, block print. There were a lot of names on that list. Topping it, and circled: ‘Overmare.’ She counted herself as an enemy? Rivets’ name was right underneath it. Mom’s name had question marks around it. Daisy was on it?! Not me, of course. Oh, wait! There I was... at the bottom...

Uuugh! Focus! No time for this! I accessed her terminal and used the code mom had given me. The desk hissed as it slowly rose into the air on hydraulic legs, revealing stairs disappearing into the gloom below. I activated the lamp on my PipBuck and threaded my way down with P-21 right behind me. A minute later, the desk closed behind us as another impact reverberated through the stable. We moved down hall to a second door, and I used the code again. Slowly, it opened. Very thankfully, the noise it made was relatively quiet compared to the racket in the atrium.

The entry hatch to the stable, a massive cog-tooth-edged slab of metal, was rolled away to one side, and a long rough-rock-walled tunnel led up beyond. Bones lay crushed on the other side of the door, mashed by the entry of Deus and his raiders. “Better get a head start,” I warned P-21, nodding to the tunnel. He nodded back and began making his way out. I wondered if he’d stay with me longer than ten seconds. Probably not.

Going to the door from the entry room to the atrium, I saw the Overmare lying limp against the larger room’s wall. I supposed the raiders had gotten tired of her. Even she didn’t deserve that. . . but I had bigger problems. Or, rather, I was about to.

“Hey, doofus!” I bellowed across the atrium, and to my shock, he froze completely. Then his head slowly turned to look at me. I saw certain annihilation in those eyes. “I got your program here, jackass!” The raiders around him looked even more shocked than Deus!

Then he was turning and I suddenly had a vision of a cloud of Blackjack settling around a PipBuck and hoof. ‘Ohshitohshitohshit!’ I thought as I turned and raced for the stable door. “Cuuuuuunnnntttt!” he roared, and the shells detonated behind

me. Luck saved me from a messy splat as bones churned beneath my hooves.

I caught up to P-21 and shouted, "Running now!" From the roaring behind me, the plan had worked. I was leaving the safety and security of my stable with a pissy, hostile male, an unknown destination ahead, a mechanical nightmare pony of death behind, and a mysterious program that apparently sparked it all. Odds were that, if I survived the next five minutes, I'd be wishing I were dead inside a month.

So why was I smiling so much?

Footnote: Level up.

New Perk: Rapid Reload - All your weapon reloads are 25% faster than normal.

2. Trust

“In the end, we all have to trust in something. . .”

Outside. Everypony in the stable imagined it at some point. According to the Overmare, it was supposed to be an irradiated desert, a death quick enough to doom anypony caught beyond the main door but slow enough that you'd wish you could put yourself out of your misery. To be honest, I'd imagined the outside to be a really big atrium. Just a huge flat space with better air and better lighting. Of course, we knew that the outside hadn't always been deadly, but there wasn't much in the school about how it used to be except grainy pictures in books. Apparently, recycled wafers grew on things called 'trees' while there was an edible carpet called grass everywhere.

Me? My first impression of the outside was made simple by the presence of two invaders standing on the other side of the boarded-over hatch. The two ponies were just starting to turn towards the exit when we burst out, taking both by surprise. If it hadn't been for S.A.T.S., I never would have been able to take the shots. It was just pure luck that the first shell from the pump action delivered a hit to the first raider's throat and the second wounded his companion enough that she turned to run for her life.

Running! Excellent idea. We set off in the general direction of 'away'; that was all I could think of as Deus thundered up after us. There was some... stuff? Shrubs? Trees?—that I hoped would make us harder targets when he did eventually step out. For now, our direction was 'downhill' and our speed was 'for our lives'.

At least, it was for five minutes. Then P-21 started limping. Soon, he started slowing down. I passed him and glanced back. Our eyes met. There was no animosity, just a question: 'Is this the plan?'

I could leave him, I realized. Deus wanted me. They might just ignore P-21 all together. Then I mentally hit myself as I remembered little Vent lying next to her momma. If these ponies killed foals so casually, P-21 would be no better off in their hands. It would be more merciful if I just shot him myself and made it clean.

No. I couldn't do that. I slowed and enveloped his leg in the faint white glow of my telekinesis, trying to add support; he looked panicked for a moment, then realized that I was trying to help. His pace didn't pick up, but at least he wasn't slowing down

as much.

“Turn left,” a voice buzzed to our left. Left was nothing but rock and more of these gray bushes and a . . . bug? A metal bug that was bobbing in the air before us with little fluttering wings.

Wha... huh... talking metal bugs? I had about a hundred – okay, a dozen – questions pop into my head, and the dumbest spilled out first. “Why?” I gasped, panting. I didn’t think that I was in that bad shape, but then there wasn’t much need for running for my life in 99.

“You want to live?” And it zipped away through the bushes. I could hear Deus now. It was like the rapid thumping, grinding noise the old food wafer stamping machine was making before it blew. From the snapping and crunching, I wondered if he was even bothering to go around the trees or just running straight through them. Come to think of it, I did want to live. I glanced at P-21, who shrugged at my look, and we turned to the left and raced in the direction the weird metal bug had taken.

We came to a house. Well, if you could still count two standing walls, a toilet, and a bathtub as a house. I tried to ignore the pony skeleton curled up in the tub as we ducked behind the wall. “Hide,” the strange metal bug said, and then it zipped away into the underbrush.

“But–” I started to say when I heard a panicked cry to the south. Not my voice, but definitely a terrified mare. I almost started after it when I realized that it had the same tinny buzz as the bug. A second later, Deus and four raiders galloped past.

We didn’t move for a minute or two, but then, finally, I laughed. “Well, that was exciting.” Then I choked.

I was gonna die.

I can’t explain it, but when I looked into the sky, I thought it’d be like the atrium ceiling. Instead, there was just this great big emptiness above me with distant gray that blurred into obscurity. Despite my head being tilted back, I felt like I was looking down. My brain screamed at me that if I took so much as a step I was going to fall into that immense nothing. I hate to admit that, after everything I’d been through, it was just the simple sky that made me wet my barding.

“Blackjack? Blackjack?” P-21 said, first with annoyance and then with growing alarm. I barely heard him. I couldn’t move. I could only breathe as fast as possible.

Slowly, he reached up with his hooves and covered my eyes. Immediately, the sensation of up being down ended and I fell over. I wanted to retch, but there

was nothing to bring up. I made sure my eyes were on the dirt when I opened them. I could finally lower my breathing rate to normal levels. “Thanks,” I said softly, sincerely. He could have just trotted off and left me like that. If I’d left him behind, that’s exactly how Deus would have found me eventually.

There was another faint buzzing, and I raised my gaze enough to look at the little flying bug. Had I been out of it for that long? Now that I could look at the bug while not running for my life, I could see that it was actually just a flying robot made to look like a bug. Well, that was at least less weird than a non-robot metal flying talking bug. There was a faint crackling noise, and the tinny voice spoke again. “Well, he was sure in a hurry. Don’t worry, I’ve sent him off on a wild sprite chase to the south.” For some reason, though, I couldn’t shake the feeling that it had somehow also been watching us.

“Thanks,” I said, and I meant it. “Now, I hope you don’t mind, but just who and what are you?” I was more curious than suspicious; I was fairly confident that, if the metal bug thing wanted us dead, it could have just let Deus catch us.

“You can call me Watcher. As for what, this is just a spritebot. You’ll find them wandering all over the Wasteland. I just took some in this area over when I noticed you two helping each other.” So, ‘Watcher’ wasn’t this machine thing? She... he— The voice didn’t sound very mare-ish; I sort of imagined a robotic P-21 behind that speaker— he was just controlling it from afar? I really wanted to know how anypony could do that... and I put that question somewhere in the forties or fifties on my rapidly growing ‘What the fuck?’ list.

“Thank you,” P-21 said calmly, as if he wasn’t fussed at all with meeting a robotic talking bug, the dry yellow stalks of grass, or that entire great... big... empty...

I gave myself a shake to try and ignore it, but it was like the sky was Deus hovering above me. I couldn’t freeze up like that every time I looked up, though! “Yeah. Thanks for all your help. I don’t suppose you can magically make shotgun shells pop out of that thing, can you?”

There was a soft chuckle. “No, but you’ve got the right idea. Believe it or not, you’re better off than some ponies I’ve met.” Then, in a softer tone, as if to himself, “Though she didn’t have raiders hunting her right out of the stable...” Who?

“So what should we do?” P-21 asked respectfully. The little machine seemed to be regarding us, and I suspected that this Watcher pony was deciding something about us.

“You’ve got one gun. Get more and all the ammunition you can put your hooves on. One of you has decent enough armor, but keep your eyes out for more and better. Now all you need is some direction. Might I suggest west? You might find something useful that way. Lastly, make friends. The more ponies you have looking out for you, the better your chances.” Another metallic chuckle. “Though I suppose the two of you have a head start on that one.”

“What?” I looked at P-21 and gave an awkward laugh. “Oh... no no no. We’re not friends. In fact, we really just met today...” when I rounded him up to be retired. My laugh withered as P-21 just looked away. “Okay, awkward.”

“Oh.” For some reason, the spritebot sounded disappointed. “Well... for two ponies who aren’t friends, you might want to think about it.” The spritebot gave a sharp crackle and buzz and began to bob and bounce in the air to the hefty ‘oompha-oompha’ of a tuba. Then it wandered off into the Wasteland. O...kay.

I looked over at P-21 and then looked down at my PipBuck. Watcher had said we should go west? I knew that my PipBuck had a navigation function, but until now I’d never actually needed it. Loading the map, I noticed two interesting things. First, there was a little icon of a gear marked ‘Stable 99’, and secondly, there was a location tag off to the west. I looked around for the spritebot to ask Watcher if he’d done something to my Pipbuck, but it was already out of sight in the underbrush, the music lost to the soft hiss of wind in the dead grass.

“Well, I guess west is better than south,” I said as I rose, keeping my eyes firmly towards the dirt. I took a half dozen steps before I realized I was alone. Looking back, I saw P-21 on his knees in the dirt, eyes clenched shut. “What’s the matter?”

He didn’t answer. It was then I noticed his tears. Oh, damn... good thing I hadn’t said I was his friend; what a shitty friend I would have made. “Your leg?” I asked him as I knelt. Stupid question, Blackjack! He was injured and just took his injury out for a ten minute sprint! He swallowed hard and looked away from me. Aside from the most basic first aid, I didn’t have a clue what to do. I had healing potions, but they were for immediate injuries. The kind of damage that had been done to his knee needed major magic.

“Well, lean on me,” I said as I pressed my white shoulder against his blue one, and together we started hobbling in the direction marked on my PipBuck. For a few steps. He jerked away from me, then cried out as he fell on his side. I knelt beside him, “What’s wrong? You’re not shot or something, are you?”

“I don’t...” he muttered.

“Don’t...? Don’t what?” I said with my ears twitching. Voices... P-21 started to answer, but I grabbed him and clapped my hoof over his mouth.

“There! That way! Please listen to me,” came the plaintive whine of U-21.

“Shut up! Do all stable ponies whine this much? ‘Please don’t kill me, I don’t wanna die. Please don’t rape my ass! It hurts, don’t do that.’ Bitch bitch bitch...” a buck said sharply. “Now hurry up. When we find the big guy, he’ll decide what we do.” U-21 shouted off a few more protests as they continued off to the south.

I finally relaxed again...and then I noticed the blue pony shaking hard in my hooves. It looked almost as if he was having an attack or something. Oh, crap! “Your leg! I’m sorry.” I said as I got off him. Yet for the longest time, he didn’t move. He just lay there, shaking. I swallowed, looking to the south. “Come on. We can’t stay here. We need to get going.” Do NOT tell me I have to leave you here.

He started to rise, his braced leg sticking out to the side as he started to hobble... east? “Hey, where are you going? Watcher said to go west.”

He didn’t look back as he slumped against a dead gray stump. Pain in his eyes, he glared at me. “I’m not going anywhere with you.”

I stared at him. “Really?” I pointed my shotgun in the direction that the invaders had gone. “You want to wait here for them? You heard how they were treating U-21. Is that what you really want?” He hung his head, hissing softly through his teeth as he clenched his eyes. “Look... you’re a smart pony. Smarter than me. How long are you going to last on your own, injured like that?”

He took a long, slow breath. “What should I do?” he said so softly that I wasn’t really sure if he was talking to me or not. “What would he want me to do?” He? He who? But before I could ask, he said to me, “Fine. Till I can go on my own, I’ll go with you.” He tried to take a few steps, but at this rate we’d manage fifty feet in an hour. I moved up beside him and leaned my shoulder against his again.

“Don’t touch me!” he blurted. Funny. I would have thought a male would be used to being touched. Of course, when I pulled away, he nearly fell over. Again. He flushed, closing his eyes. “Please don’t touch me... a lot.” Wow, he sounded like he was begging; maybe he was hurt worse than I thought?

“I’ll try not to,” I promised in a softer tone. I did my best to support him, and we hobbled to the west. Maybe we’d get lucky and run across a miraculously skilled unicorn surgeon who worked for free? I could keep my mind off the sky above trying to work out the odds for that one!

We'd been traveling for almost three hours, and it felt like a lot longer; there was no sense of time in the gray twilight beneath the rolling clouds. Walking shoulder to shoulder with P-21, I knew we weren't making good time, but it was increasing the odds that Deus wouldn't find us. I spent a little bit of time thinking about Mom and the stable. Had they cleared out the raiders? Who had died?

It didn't matter, as I'd never see them again, but I felt homesick. I wanted to be able to look forward to Rivets' next game. I longed for my boring and uneventful night shift. I remembered how thrilled I had been at the idea of being on the surface and wanted to kick myself.

We hadn't come across anything too serious yet. Some fat bloated fly things had spat nasty thorns at us. I didn't waste rounds after the first one; the butt of the pump action was more than sufficient. When I put their carcasses in my bag (Well, we'd have to eat at some point. Not that I was at all confident that they were edible, but they'd be better than air or dirt and quite possibly better than two-centuries-dead grass), my PipBuck's inventory system labeled them 'Bloatsprite Meat'. There was even a 'value' next to it. How the heck would my PipBuck know the value (in a totally unknown economic situation) of a bug it'd never seen before? I should ask Midnight how—

Damn it.

I had to remind myself that this was my life now, but my mind kept going to the past. As lousy as things were in the stable, they were better than this. I once complained... okay, whined... to Mom about not wanting to be in security. It wasn't any fun. 'Sometimes survival comes before fun,' she'd told me. I wondered if fun would be anywhere on my priority list for the foreseeable future.

Ahead, the dead trees parted to reveal an immense, soggy field. Flooded squares housed patches of thick weeds around scummy pools of muddy water. Still, that water did look incredibly inviting after over three hours struggling through the filthy Wasteland. Then I heard the ticking. That was new and strangely ominous. I'd only heard it the one time I'd gone near 99's magic generators. I looked at my PipBuck and stared at the sight of the little radiation needle bouncing back and forth in the green.

"Oh, that's not good," I muttered as I took some more steps forward and the clicking increased. This wasn't the 'flesh stripping radiation' I'd been warned of in school

safety courses, but suddenly the pools seemed as inviting as a raider's welcome mat. Moving up the hillside, we could see a small still-intact farmhouse next to a barn. I could also make out the rainbow swirl on the pools and several rusted barrels sticking out of the water. More barrels were spilling from a large smashed vehicle that looked as if it'd just fallen from the sky into the center of the fields.

Clearly, this sturdy farmhouse had been built by somepony who took pride in their work, and the building was just far enough from the water that the clicking from my PipBuck stopped. The door and windows were all intact, and, unless I was mistaken, this would be a good place for P-21 to rest. Who was I kidding? I needed the break as much as he did! I needed a roof over my head desperately. I kept imagining suction tugging at me towards the clouds.

Inside, the place had been ransacked. Most of the furniture had been tossed about, the shelves were mostly bare, and the floors were covered with broken dishes and garbage. Some old bones and rags had been tossed in one corner, and a few newspapers lay in grubby heaps in another. 'Hoofington's Angel of Death strikes again!' declared one headline. 'Four foals filleted,' said the one beneath.

I spotted some pictures that had been knocked off of the wall and turned over the cracked frames with my hoof. The photographs were badly faded, but there were some I could make out. One of a mare and a huge buck wearing some sort of harness around his neck and a bandage around his waist. Kinky sex? Somehow, I doubted it. There was something off in the images for that. A picture of that same teenaged mare with the apples for a cutie mark carrying a filly with a bow. Foalsitter? Again... something about the image didn't sit right. An old mare smiling sleepily as she stood behind three foals dressed... what were they wearing? They looked like little monsters. Another of a filly wearing an old, battered hat so enormous it covered her head completely. But the two pictures that really threw me had the old mare next to a buck. That it was a buck didn't shock me.

An old buck. He was every bit as wrinkly and crooked as the mare. Clearly, the massive old hat eating the filly's head was his. In another picture, he was kissing the shocked-looking old mare on the cheek! Two mares, looking like older versions of the pair from before, stood side by side in smart looking business attire. The large buck in the harness now wore a smart military uniform. The old buck pushed the old mare in a wheelchair...

Family. They were family. Not the mother/daughter dynamic of Stable 99, but a family. I could vaguely remember hearing about the old ways in history class, but seeing an actual, happy family like that...

P-21 was looking at the pictures of the old buck and the uniformed stallion with a shocked expression, one he quickly covered up the second he caught me smiling at him.

“What?” He said defensively as he looked away. Goddesses, was he blushing? The mares were cute enough, I supposed. Something about the one with the three apples made me imagine a little fun flank spank. The male... no... what was the word? Brother? He was pretty delicious. I could really eat his apple.

“Awfully cute,” I said, giving him a playful wink. I needed to get his mood up. Hopefully, it would take his mind off his leg, which was so swollen at the knee I was afraid he wouldn’t be able to wear the brace.

Of course, my intentions went down like a radroach sundae. “Are all mares sex fiends? Is that it?”

“Huh?” Where did that come from? “I was just trying...”

“Don’t you get it?” He lifted the black and white photo of the calm buck in the uniform. “Males as soldiers. Husbands. Brothers. Not as breeding equipment.” I tilted my head to the side as I was now completely lost. “You see them, though, and... and... cute? That’s all you can say about them?”

Pissiest... male... ever... “I was just trying to lighten the mood,” I said in a softer voice. He blinked, then resumed his grumpy frown. Midnight. Why couldn’t I have run out of the stable with a beautiful dark unicorn mare? Really? If you were going to have a travelling companion, it’d be hard to beat that. Or a pony with a sense of humor. Was that too much to ask?

There were a few other things in the room. A terminal set atop a desk. P-21 had to smack it with a hoof a few times before the green screen lit up. Next to it was a small safe set in the floor. From the scorch marks in that corner of the room, it looked as if somepony had tried to blast it open! I guessed it was a miracle the terminal still worked. I also found a locked ammo container that was way too heavy to be empty.

“Can you get that to work?” I asked him as he started to tap on the keys. The work seemed to calm him down.

“Maybe,” he said quietly, “Duct Tape showed me a few tricks, and it looks like it’s still pretty much intact...”

“You two close?” I said, now feeling genuinely curious. Maybe it was the pictures. Both Watcher’s comment and what we’d been through had made wonder about this odd blue pony.

For a moment, I thought he was going to launch into a new tirade of anger, but it seemed like I'd exhausted his supply for now. Instead, he looked almost... guilty. He didn't answer for a minute as he tapped the keys, and then said softly, "She was close to me." He suddenly shut down the terminal and then started it back up again. Meeting my surprised look, he said in his calm voice, "I have to close it out. . . too many wrong answers and the terminal could lock me out permanently."

And this was why I didn't touch terminals. "So, she taught you how to do this?"

He sighed and closed his eyes. "I'd rather not talk about it. She's dead. I've escaped. I don't want to remember that place." He looked at the screen, his voice level and cool. "Now, if you don't mind, I need to focus on this."

Well, so much for friendship. I sighed and stood. "Well, I'm going to check to see if the sink in the bathroom still works." I needed a bath. I desperately, terribly needed a bath. The blood I'd rolled in had hardened like black paint. I smelled of blood, urine, and feces. I'd take one of Rivets's icewater baths right now if I could.

Still, I hesitated a bit when my PipBuck notified me that the water in the sink was also radioactive. ...I wasn't going to drink it, though. That'd cut down on some of my exposure, right? I found a rag, soaked it, and tried to scrub myself off as well as I could. By the time I finished, my PipBuck radiation meter bounced back and forth in the middle of the green gauge. I guessed that that meant that I wasn't near flesh-stripping radiation levels yet.

Returning to the living room with the terminal, I smiled. "So, am I glowing?"

For the first time ever, a look of absolute, incredulous shock settled on his face. "You're pregnant?!"

I laughed as I flopped on the couch. "Oh, Goddesses, I hope not. I just washed in some water that was a little more radioactive than I'd like." Of course, if I were pregnant and irradiated. . . okay. Not thinking about that now. It definitely killed the joke though.

"Oh. You look. . . cleaner," he replied with a flush as he returned to the screen. He hit a few more keys and suddenly smiled. "Finally. 'Granny'. Interesting password."

"Nice," I said as I looked at the safe. "Can you pick the lock on that, too?" I suspected it wouldn't be easy for him. It was a safe, after all.

"Why?" He hit a key on the terminal and a click came from the safe. Okay, now he looked smug. It was a nice change from the stoic or pissy looks he normally wore. Then he looked at the ammo crate. "Now that I'll have to try and pick."

We swapped seats, him dragging the ammo box to the couch while I investigated the safe and terminal. Inside the safe were two stacks of bits, a small bag of bottle caps, another healing potion, another syringe of Med-X, some food that simply had to be past its expiration date, a revolver, and a half-empty box of ammo. I just dumped it all in my bags for now, my PipBuck tallying my inventory automatically. Then I turned to the terminal. There was a series of log entries. The dates after each were so much gibberish, though. Oh well, I had nothing better to do while P-21 opened the ammo crate.

Entry 1> Well hello there. Not exactly sure what I'm supposed ta be writing about. Doctors said it'd keep my noggin from falling apart if I write stuff down. 'It's important to keep a journal, Hoss.' Personally, I think it's a bunch of hooey, but since Apple Bloom went through the trouble of sending Granny this contraption, I may as well learn to use it!

Entry 2> Well, in a time of one boneheaded decision after another, one more shouldn't be much of a surprise. Celestia's out and Luna's in. A thousand year rule's a goodly stretch, I suppose. Unfortunately, I doubt that this whole shake up is gonna do anypony a lick of good. Ministries? What are they doing that wasn't done before? Heard they're gonna remove the gardens cause each one has to have their own headquarters or some such. Glad I retired when I did. Don't think I could stand the hurt of seeing it all torn up.

Entry 3> Big Macintosh is dead. I know they said he died a hero saving Princess Celestia. I'm glad that Celestia's alive and all, but I also wish Granny's grandson were still about. Instead, they're going on and on about how heroic he was. Makes me want to spit. Big Macintosh wasn't a hero for saving Celestia. He was a hero because he'd have tried to save anypony who didn't deserve to die. Granny's not doing too well since the funeral. I don't think any statue in Ponyville's gonna make up for this.

Entry 4> Buried Granny Smith behind the farm. Apple Bloom sent her condolences. I dunno if Applejack's heard. Getting a message through to the Ministry of Technology's a hassle and a half. It's been a long time coming, watchin' her slip away. Somehow thought she'd last forever, though. Things are getting so bad that I'm feeling like I want to join her some days. This world's so angry. It's so full of hatred that all I can do is shut it out and try and keep this little corner green and healthy. It's all I can do anymore. Made a new friend, though. Marigold at the garden club. Kind filly. Said she'd stop by and show her foal the farm.

Entry 5> World ended today. Thought that was worth writing down. I guess the war is over. Hurray. Load of ponies streaming through my fields to get up into that stable on the hill. I sent Marigold and her foal up that way since they can't reach 90 in time. Hope it does some good. Hope there's some good left anywhere.

Entry 6> Sky carriage crashed in the fields last night. I figger that's it, then. Dunno what that sludge is, but it melted those two pegasuses. Liquefied 'em. There's some kind of green snow starting to fall. Pretty sure it's going to kill me. Done killed everything else. Ain't seen anypony since that black mare snuck in the barn. Invited her inside, but she just skedaddled. Feeling tired now, but maybe that's just my age. Never wanted ta live long enough to see all this. Just wish I had the strength to rest with Granny. Fels wrong dyin lie tis.

Entry 7> one genration passes away and anothr genertion comes, but Euestra abides fore

Log-in time out. Disconnecting.

I didn't know how long I sat there reading the entries over and over again. It wasn't until I heard the pop of the lid coming off the ammo box that I looked over at P-21. I felt completely torn, on one hoof feeling bad for the old pony who'd lived just long enough to see his world blasted apart. On the other, he hadn't lived to see just how bad things would get. Seeing me blubbering, P-21 suddenly looked uncomfortable as he opened up the case. "Um. Want some more bullets?" he asked as he tilted the ammo container.

"Yeah. Thanks." I didn't want bullets. I wanted seven entries of Hoss telling me how wonderful life was. I rose to take the loose, shifting rounds out of the case and dumped them unceremoniously into my bag. I had no idea what kind of gun they went to. Perhaps a rifle?

As I scrolled through my inventory to distract me from the bones in the corner, P-21 read through the journal entries himself. I don't know what I expected. Tears like mine, I supposed. I wanted to know my reaction wasn't weak or wrong. When he finished, though, he didn't cry. He simply looked at me with that even blue gaze. "Do you want to do something about it?"

"Do? What do you mean?" I asked in confusion.

"Well, you can sit there and cry," he said as he rose with a groan, leg brace squealing softly before he limped towards the door, "Or we can do what he asked."

Confused, I stood and walked out after him. He looked around at the grass around the farmhouse and then slowly limped out. Was it just me, or was it getting darker? About fifty feet up the slope was an odd squared-off stone. Some wit had used it for target practice, and the marble was so chipped as to be illegible. "Start digging. Carefully," he said before he returned to the farm house.

...Oh. Slowly, I started to scrape away the soil with my magic. It was hard work, and I was glad. Focusing on this, I felt my horror of that open darkness above me fading away. The nightmares of the attack dwindled away. I didn't see Air Duct's foal lying with her head nearly sawed off. I didn't think about Hoss's last moments. I simply thought of dirt as my horn's magic scraped away layer after layer.

He returned just as my magic brushed against something more substantial. With great care, I levitated the dirt around the buried bones of the pony. Finally, I stopped. My horn hurt. My head hurt. My eyes burned. But I did feel a little better as P-21 laid old Hoss next to Granny. Then I noticed something in Granny's hooves: a little

figurine of a cheerful orange pony I recognized from the pictures. Her hooves kicked at the air above her as she grinned confidently at me.

Carefully, I levitated the little statue from the grave and gently brushed the dirt away from a tiny plaque at the base. 'Be Strong'. Looking at the orange pony, her little cowboy hat and three-apple cutie mark, I couldn't help but smile. I wanted to be strong. I needed to be strong. I glanced at P-21, but he was simply placing the bones.

"Would it be okay?" I asked softly. He glanced at me, then at the figurine, before going back to placing Hoss's remains in the earth.

"I'm curious why you're asking me," he said as he finished laying out the bones. He finished by placing a brown moth-chewed hat atop the old skull.

"Because you seem to know what's right," I replied. I felt so confused right now, I'd welcome any advice.

"I guess that depends on why you want it." he said as he sat on the edge of the grave, looking at me.

I hesitated before I answered. For some reason, I wanted to be completely honest with him right now. If I'd come across this beauty just hours ago I'd have swapped it for some treats, drinks, or sex. But now, everything was changed and different. "Because. I want to remember him... because no one else does but us." I looked at him and gave a snotty sniff. "And I've got to be strong..." And I wasn't strong. Not really. I had a shotgun and an overactive proclivity to using it.

He looked at the figurine in my hooves for a long moment, then said softly, "Then I guess it'd be all right."

As I looked at the figurine, a sensation settled around my shoulders. A focus driving away some of the terror and worries that were nibbling at the back of my mind. I carefully placed the figurine into my bag, and I was oddly happy that it didn't instantly have a value assigned by my PipBuck. Then we both stepped clear as I gently pushed the soil back into place around their bones. I even tried to put the yellowed grass back down. When I finally finished and my glow faded, only the faintest red smudges of light remained on the western horizon. Together, we returned to the farmhouse.

The familiar alarm on my PipBuck woke me. I swung my limb at the end table

once... twice... and then opened my eyes and blinked. There was no end table because this wasn't my bed, nor was it my bedroom. I looked up at the ceiling... how strange to see one that wasn't dull gray metal. Lying on my back, I traced my eyes along the cracks, and that was when it really sank in. I was outside.

At once, I regretted leaving so soon. I'd been in such a hurry to get out with EC-1101 that I hadn't realized it might be the last time I saw Mom. Without Deus there and with the stable sealed, I knew that eventually Mom would retake it. They'd do something about the Overmare if she was still alive... big 'if'... and get on with life.

But could I go back? With Deus still out looking for me, what was to stop him from following me back in? He'd probably have somepony watching the stable and would come back the second I returned. I barely escaped once. Could I just 'lose' my PipBuck? I didn't have any way to get my PipBuck off... and if I could, I probably wouldn't be able to find my way back. And it was possible that I'd annoyed Deus enough to have him be after me personally. And, even if I dealt with Deus somehow... another big 'if'... there was still the pony who sent him. If she could send one small army to invade my stable just to get the file, she could probably send another.

No... I couldn't go back.

Crap... why was I missing home now? My body wanted a hot shower. It wanted a meal in the atrium. It wanted to report to the shift change briefing. It wanted to find Midnight and see if saving her life got me under her tail. But all that was over. Done. I'd never see Midnight again, or Rivets... Daisy... the Overmare... Mom...

And just like that, being outside sucked.

And speaking of sucking... why were there red bars on my E.F.S.?

Shit.

Slowly, I rolled to my hooves. P-21 had to be the yellow bar next door. He refused to share my bed, looked pissed that I'd even joked about it. Did he really prefer to sleep alone? I retrieved my shotgun and carefully opened the door a crack.

"I'm telling you, she's here," a vaguely familiar voice said. "I have her PipBuck tag." Shit! I knew that whine: U-21.

If he had my PipBuck tag, he could find me... was there a range on these things? Everypony in security was locatable anywhere in the stable, if there wasn't local interference. I activated Mom's tag... nothing. Maybe it was blocked by the stable

walls. "She better be. I've never seen Deus this pissed before," a mare muttered softly.

"If he'd listened earlier, we'd have had her hours ago," U-21 started to grouse.

"Will you two shut up?" a different mare hissed. "Let's finish this and get the damned thing. This is raider territory, and unlike Deus, we're tasty snacks to the freaks out here."

They were coming down the hall. In a few seconds, they'd be at the door. Correction, two were coming down the hall. Two were back in the living room. They reached P-21's room. I heard the door open, my heart suddenly pounding. "Empty," one mare announced.

I stepped to the side, and slowly the door creaked open. I saw the barrel of an automatic pistol. The mouth biting the grip. The eye searching me out. And then our eyes met. I suddenly saw a buck decapitated by my shotgun. I saw his head blown into chunks. I saw the terror in the mare's blue eye as she saw with certainty her own demise. I wanted to scream at her to run. My throat sealed shut. I wanted to shoot right above her head and make her flee; I couldn't move my aim. She turned that barrel towards me, and in her eyes I saw the doomed look of a pony knowing they acted in futility.

I pulled the trigger. Eight pellets of lead travelled less than two feet, turning the firearm into scrap and her lower face and throat into pulp. She made a noise; not exactly a scream, with all the bubbly froth coming from her. Her whole body whipped wildly, flinging gore before she collapsed in a thrashing heap.

"Fucking hell!" shouted a mare as I moved into the doorway. She had a security saddle with two single-shot rifles connected to it and a welding helmet protecting her head. Her gang colors didn't do shit to protect her, though; I knew the difference between barding and Wasteland 'armor.' We fired almost simultaneously as she backpedaled, yanking on her bridle. One bullet slugged my hide but didn't penetrate. I slipped into S.A.T.S. and aimed for her... chest.

So I didn't want to blow another mare's face off... call me a wuss.

Three rounds of buckshot turned the hall and most of her front into blasted ruin. As that accelerated time wore off, she slumped to the ground, her last shots chewing up the floor before she fell over in a bloody mess. I looked down at the mare still thrashing on the ground as she tried to breathe through the ground meat of her throat. I wanted to put her out of her misery. From the tears in her eyes, she wanted

it too. I pointed the shotgun at her head; she stilled a little. Just pull the trigger. End her pain. . .

. . . I couldn't do it. "Sorry. . ." I muttered to her. She shuddered and closed her eyes. I hoped that that was that.

And a second later, I'd have bigger worries as a unicorn mare floated another automatic pistol around the corner and fired blindly. A lucky shot nicked my ear, which probably saved me by getting me to duck down. The mare then stepped into the hallway with two automatic pistols floating before her, aiming them right at my head.

The shotgun blasted a cone of leaden destruction that had her scrambling for cover again. Her shots were wild, but I only had three more shells in the shotgun and no time to reload. I tripped over the bloody mare's corpse at the end of the hall, rolling over it as the remaining mare fired at me. U-21 was behind her, apparently learning about a little firearm feature called a 'safety' the hard way.

"You're dead! Fucking dead!" screamed the mare as she pointed her automatics at me. S.A.T.S. was still recharging. We were going to make a mess of each other. . . and then my magic reached out. There was more than just a safety on an automatic. I fought to split my attention to hit those nubs directly beneath the safeties. A push, and the magazines slid out of the guns. Two bullets, and only two, punched my barding hard. Two shells, and only two, turned her chest into a bloody hole. She died with a confused look on her face, her fading horn still pulling the triggers.

Then the brown unicorn got his weapon working, putting a round in the wall. He took one look at me and screamed as I brought shotgun around, firing his weapon wildly in my general direction. He was the pony that had told the raiders how to use the bloody PipBucks to find the security mares; no other raider could know. And he'd been working with Deus. And he was shooting at me...okay, trying to shoot at me.

This was a shot I could take. Red bar. Red and it's dead. The last shell in the pump action shotgun blasted out.

In his final second, he'd raised his hoof to shield himself with his foreleg; he'd have been toast but for one thing: he was wearing a PipBuck. This one might not have a reinforced case, but PipBucks were tough suckers. The blast was virtually point blank and the lead shot didn't have time to spread, almost entirely ramming into the device. The unicorn found himself peppered with wildly flung shrapnel but not turned into a smear on the floor. Screaming, he raised his hooves to his ears and rolled back and forth. The arcane device still attached to his leg was now so much

sparking metal.

Breathing hard, I reloaded as quickly as I could. He'd flung his gun when his focus snapped. I couldn't risk him getting it again. I lifted the reloaded shotgun. P-21 was shouting something, but there'd be time for that later!

Then I got shot in the ass. The sudden bloom of pain in the back of my leg scattered my thoughts as well. Damn it, hadn't I decided back in Stable 99 not to get shot any more? I looked back, and my eyes met the shocked face on P-21. He was shaking as he bit down on the brown unicorn's gun. I calmly put the safety back on, and just in the nick of time, as he pulled the trigger a few more times. The friendly fire had turned my E.F.S. red. I supposed it was the first time he'd shot a gun.

"Aim. Then fire," I said through the haze of pain. I turned back to U-21.

"Blackjack!" P-21 yelled in a strangled voice behind me, and I looked back at him. There was a look on his face; strained and anguished. "He's done! Please! Don't murder another 99 male."

What? Still, U-21 did look pathetic. The blast had probably temporarily deafened him. I sighed. "Waste of ammo anyway."

P-21 let out a held breath, then frowned at me. "Yeah, thank goodness you didn't waste the ammo on that mare." I glanced down the hallway with a frown at the mare in the door to the bedroom. That was completely different.

Wasn't it?

I checked U-21 but only found something that looked like a weak healing potion. It barely took care of the shot to my rump and my other nicks and injuries, but it was something. I knelt down and said loudly, "Where's your boss?"

U-21 whimpered, curling up into a fecal-smelling ball. He was going to be useless. "Let's go."

P-21 stared at me. His features slowly hardened once again. "No."

"Huh?" I blinked back at him. "What do you mean 'no'?" Were we back to this again?

"It's a pretty simple word. Two letters. Pretty sure even you can figure it out." He pointed a hoof at the other male. "Help him right now. Give him one of your potions," P-21 said firmly. "Otherwise, get going."

Suddenly, the thought of being on my own loomed inside me. It was a feeling I didn't

like one bit. One of the most effective forms of punishment in 99 was isolation. I'd gotten it twice: twenty four hours in a virtual closet for mouthing off about the Overmare. It was worse than detention; at least in there you could hear ponies through the bars.

"P-21..." I said softly.

"You said I know this stuff better than you, right? Then help him. Otherwise, you're on your own," he said firmly, his lips pressing together. He meant it too.

I floated out one of the potions Marmalade had tucked into her barding pockets and set it next to him. He could use it when he pulled himself together. I felt a little ashamed, a little annoyed, and a lot confused. Did he think I spared the mare because I wanted her to live? Did he think I favored mares over bucks?

That was just crazy.

With a sigh, he gave one last look at U-21, and together we left the farmhouse.

We continued following the PipBuck's directions west. I took it for a good sign that neither that metal abomination nor any raiders had found us since. Walking under the open sky, I still felt the pit of my stomach drop when I glanced up, but I didn't lapse into bladder weakening horror like I had before. I didn't stop keeping my eyes down at my own level as I looked for something more hazardous than bloatsprites, though.

P-21 was walking on his own, but slowly. I'd given him the Med-X, but after a long hesitation he simply put it in his pockets with a mutter about how he might have to run again. The pain was obvious, but he bore it as stoically as possible.

The issue of him taking the revolver or one of the pistols, on the other hand...

"No," he said simply.

"But you remember what Watcher said. If you can't protect yourself, then you're going to die."

"Then I'll die, but I'm not taking it." He stared me right in the eyes. "And if you were smart, you wouldn't want me to have it." Ugh, more cryptic, angry statements...

That had started the disagreement. No matter what, he refused to take one of the guns. I didn't want to fight right now, not after everything he'd done for me the night before. Still, it bothered me. I also didn't like the idea of him being unable to protect

himself or to save my butt if things went bad. I couldn't get him to open up about anything.

We weren't friends.

That was the truth of it. He was smart, clever, and resourceful, but we were not friends. Was that really so surprising? Clearly, there was far more bothering him than just his injured leg. Yet he wouldn't talk. It's like he hated me or something, but hadn't I saved him from Daisy? Didn't I help him escape from 99?

I had to admit, I was glad when we finally reached the destination on my PipBuck. The sight of the small town warmed my heart greatly; of course, that was before I realized it was abandoned. The dozen or so buildings along the road were mostly intact, but scattered further away were the ruins of thrice that number that had been all but demolished by time. In the middle of town was a large two-story building made of brick. As we got closer, my PipBuck chirped; I looked at it and I saw two new icons. "Flooded Fields" lay behind us, and this town was apparently called "Withers".

Suddenly, red icons began to appear on my Eyes-Forward Sparkle, and we moved to take cover behind a standing wall. I peeked around the corner, searching for the source. Then I spotted the two raiders on the roof of the large square building. From their mottled appearance and black leathers, it was pretty clear that these were similar to the breed that had attacked our Stable. It helped that they'd decorated the roof of the building with a variety of severed pony heads. Both raiders were armed with rifles. I really didn't want to pit the accuracy of shotgun, revolver, or auto pistol against them until I was close enough to make it not matter.

Their patrol along the roof would take them out of sight for a minute or so. I could run for the front doors then. There was just one catch. I looked back at P-21. "Well?"

He didn't seem to know, himself. Finally, though, he looked at me and nodded once. I watched the two, and when they were out of sight I hurried towards the front door. P-21 managed to keep up for the short sprint. Then I glimpsed the word above the front door: 'School.' Somehow, I didn't like this one bit.

Stepping inside was like entering a mouth full of rotten meat. Flies buzzed everywhere around coagulating pools of blood. Bodies... no, these were body parts... lay strewn and scattered like gory decoration. I nearly slipped on the layer of sludge covering the floor. Glancing behind me, I saw P-21 looking with his stoic expression at the butchered corpses draped across the front desk.

Then the raider stepped around the corner. Her eyes widened and the brown mare ducked her head to pull another automatic pistol from a holster on her front left leg. She didn't even aim before starting to fire wildly.

I only had thirteen or fourteen shells and... and I hadn't bothered to check how much ammo I had for the revolver or auto pistols. As she started to fire, I triggered S.A.T.S. and placed two shots in her pockmarked face. Executing the spell, I watched in slow motion as her face disintegrated in chunks of bone, blood, and brain. Unfortunately, as her corpse fell to join the others, I heard yells from within the school. The shouts, cackles, and errant gunshots left no confusion as to their intent.

One raider holding a magically levitated knife and another with a sawed-off shotgun raced to the front door of the school. S.A.T.S. was still recharging, so I narrowed my eyes and filled the doorway with spray after spray of buckshot. The bucks finally dropped, but I definitely didn't like the five rounds it had taken. I began moving to check Sawed Off for more, but the sound of another raider approaching sent me ducking behind the counter. I levitated a stream of shotgun shells from my bag, each one clicking into place inside the magazine. I racked the pump action shotgun as I rose and spotted the fourth raider advancing with steady shots that chewed through my cover.

P-21 reached over and lifted a dismembered pony's head. He looked at me grimly and then pushed the head above the counter edge. Instantly the head jerked as the raider swapped targets. I rose, hit S.A.T.S., and ended his barrage with two solid shots to the torso. P-21 immediately dropped the head and wiped his hooves on my barding. I just looked at him a moment, wondering if he really just did that. Then he flushed. "Sorry."

There weren't any more approaching at the moment, though my E.F.S. detected at least a half dozen further in. It also identified some non-hostiles. I went from slain raider to slain raider and simply unloaded whatever they had into my bags. At least half of it seemed to be trash, but my PipBuck handled the inventory well enough. It even displayed the approximate weapon quality; no surprise that most of these weapons were junk. Unfortunately, Sawed Off had apparently never heard of proper ammunition care, and the few shells he had would probably be more dangerous to anypony trying to fire them than whatever they were being aimed at.

Glancing back to make sure P-21 was behind me, I advanced down the central hallway, looking to the left and right and trying to keep track of the red marks ahead of me, alert for rapid movement that suggested they were charging. The raiders had wasted no time defiling the school. Most of the posters meant to motivate learning

were defaced or torn down. Ruined books covered the floors in heaps of moldy paper. I peeked into one classroom that had been turned into slaughterhouse, the foals' desks transformed into butcher counters.

I was so fixated on the room, I almost missed the butcher. He, however, didn't miss me. I turned just in time to see a gore-coated raider emerging from a bathroom swinging a cleaver at my neck. Once again, my security barding saved me from being crippled or decapitated, but by the Goddesses, it hurt. I entered S.A.T.S. and hit him point blank with a shotgun blast to his head; much more effective.

Much more noisy, too. Two more raiders came running, and they had rifles. I was at the wrong end of a shooting gallery. I leaped into the butcher shop, finding cover behind the stout teacher's desk. My neck throbbed terribly, but I couldn't look away. I waited for a head to come around the corner. Instead, there was a laugh and two round metal apples clanked through the doorway, rolling around the floor.

The explosion was more stunning than the blow from the cleaver. The desk deflected a little of the blast, but my entire left side was coated in blood. Personally, I was amazed at how little pain there actually was. Strike that. I was amazed that I was actually alive. The fact that they hesitated before rushing in gave me the time to drink down a healing potion. That, unfortunately, resulted in me making noise.

Another metal apple came in through the doorway. Not this time. As it hit the ground, I wrapped my magic around it and tossed it back out the door. A yell and a muffled crump sent rattling chunks of metal back through the doorway. I was limping as badly as P-21 when I stepped out. They were still moving. Two shells fixed that.

I glanced down the hall. No reinforcements. Were they deaf, waiting, or running? No, the three marks were steady. I guessed that they were setting up some kind of trap. Good. I looked over at P-21, who'd survived the explosions unscathed. My horn glowed as the revolver floated to him. "Take it. I need your help."

"I told you. . ."

"Unless you give me a reason right now, I don't care," I shouted at him. My barding was half shredded, and my hide wasn't much better.

"If you give me that gun, I might shoot you again," he replied softly, not looking at me.

"If you don't know how to fire a gun, it's not that hard. You point the end with the hole at the bad guys and pull the trigger. The bad guys, not my butt," I added for emphasis. Okay, there was a lot more to it than that, but I finally got him talking.

"I know the basics." And now he looked at me with that calm look. "I mean that, if I have a weapon, I might kill you."

...Okay, what?

I looked at the remaining three hostiles. They were still holding steady. I wondered if they could have imagined why we were holding back. Probably not. "Okay. Elaborate for me?"

"I don't want to talk about it," he replied firmly. "I don't want to think about it. I don't want to remember it." He clenched his eyes shut and started to shake. "Just... I can't. I don't know what I'd do with a gun right now, Blackjack. Please... don't make me use one..." he begged softly, keeping his eyes squeezed shut.

I opened my mouth with a hard comment in mind, then closed it with a grimace. No. Watcher had suggested we become friends. I really never had any in 99. Not till Marmalade... and that lasted all of five minutes. Being in security, I always made folks nervous that I'd bring trouble on their heads. I thought about Rivets and Midnight. I'd have to talk to him like I talked to them... minus the whole sex thing. Pity, but for a breeder, he didn't take that well. "You don't want to talk... all right. I'm not going to make you talk. It's just that there's two of us here and only one of us shooting."

There was a guilty look in his eyes. "I don't trust myself with a gun right now..." He looked away. "I'm glad you know who you're supposed to shoot. I feel like I want to shoot everypony. You know who to shoot." Somehow, I suspected he wasn't talking about my PipBuck's Eyes-Forward Sparkle.

Him shooting me in the farmhouse... and trying to fire again after I hit the safety... those had been accidents... right?

I remembered back at the flooded fields farmhouse looking at the figurine in dirt. Because you seem to know what's right. That... don't think about it now, Blackjack. You're in the middle of a nightmare. Try to focus.

I took a deep breath and did my best to summon my most 'Nightmare Moon may care' smile. Now was no time to show doubt; hell, I needed to convince myself as much as him. "Oh, well, that's simple. We just need to get you another PipBuck. Yellow, be mellow. Red, it's dead." I was glad to see him return my smile... okay, it was a half-assed smile, but right now I felt like half my posterior was blasted off. I noticed a red line creeping slowly towards us.

"I don't think that would help much. In 99, all the PipBuck showed me was red," he

said as he looked at the revolver and pushed it back towards me. "I'll try and back you up however I can. Just please don't ask me to do this."

I could try and force him to carry the revolver. It seemed so ridiculous here in the Wasteland. We were sitting in a school that had been transformed into a grisly morgue, but he still refused. Somehow, even in all this, he wouldn't cross that line. I doubted that when Watcher talked about us being friends, it involved me shoving a gun into P-21's mouth and sending him to kill ponies.

"All right. Just promise me you'll tell me why some day. Okay, P-21?"

Relief flooded his features. "You'll be the first to know. Probably because you're the only pony in the Wasteland who has a clue what 99 was like, but still. . . first to know." He was trying for a joke! It was so precious.

Great. . . I almost couldn't help but laugh. Almost. I watched as the sneaking raider poked her face around the corner. I have to admit, the expression on her face was pretty funny. I smiled right at her, despite the apple-shaped bomb in her hooves. I looked right into her jaundiced face and yellowed eyes with their tiny, pinprick pupils and gave a little shake of my head. The shotgun floating three feet from her head probably helped. Instantly, my PipBuck tag swapped from red to yellow as she dropped the bomb and raced for the an exit as fast as her legs could carry her.

Somehow, the sight of a raider running from the two of us struck me as unbelievably funny, given that I was half blown up and P-21 was unarmed. I couldn't imagine what the sound of my laughter would mean to the raiders. "All right. Let's finish this," I said as I walked past the apple bomb, carefully moving it inside the classroom. Sure, it looked simple enough, but I sure didn't want to touch it. I had no idea how big a boom it would make. I preferred weapons with a more predictable area of destruction.

I made my way towards the second classroom. As I neared the door, one knife-wielding raider sprang at me. Knife vs shotgun. Really lousy odds for her, but it cost me two of my four remaining shells. Only one raider remained with the friendlies. I trotted past more scattered filth, heedless of the risk. At this moment, I just wanted it over with and cleared. The other classroom had a pen of sorts constructed of chain-link fence in the far corner. Within were a half-dozen filthy, terrified-looking fillies. The raider crouched behind them.

"Cunt," he said, then gripped the stem of an apple bomb with his foul brown teeth. What was it with raiders and that word? Still, something felt off. He wasn't acting suicidal. He was acting cocky. Then again, if I shot him and that apple thing ex-

ploded, then this would definitely have an unhappy ending. Carefully, I shifted the shotgun into my front hooves and turned it to place the trigger in my mouth like I'd seen other ponies do. Then I slowly advanced. It had to be the most awkward approach attempted in pony history, but it was working. His grin wavered as he looked confused and then worried. Finally I took a step too far and he yanked the stem from the apple.

Or, rather, tried to. My horn glowed as I focused all my magical strength on that little stem and keeping it connected. Step by step I moved up till the barrel of the pump action pointed through the chain link. I tried to make eye contact with the foals, looking to the floor. One or two caught the look. "Met downd, girs," I said around a mouthful of trigger. They hit the deck, and his eyes widened in panic. S.A.T.S. ensured the shots would go where they were needed.

My last two shots rang out, and his ribcage vanished. The assorted viscera within came slithering out in a messy heap over his hostages, but at least they were still alive. Suddenly, the girls started screaming. Then there were two bangs from behind me and an explosion and everything turned white and then dark.

I was still alive. This hurt way too much to be death. I was stripped and face down on a mattress. He'd warned me that he'd try to kill me. I just didn't actually expect him to do it...

I heard voices and glanced over to see P-21 surrounded by the nervous fillies eating some of the two century-old food from the farm, as well as what I assumed were the raiders' supplies. Apparently, it was still edible. A small fire crackled in a trashcan next to them. The foals all wore ragged cloaks draped over their flanks. My back was wrapped in layers of medical bandages and movement made everything hurt. My low groan tipped P-21 off, and he rose to trot to my side. "How are you feeling?"

"You shot me in the back," I groaned.

"I didn't. . . ." He stammered.

"Somepony shot me. In the back." I growled, glancing up at him. Was I going to have to get used to this?

"He really didn't, ma'am," a little filly said, trembling slightly. "See?" She pointed with a hoof towards the door.

There were some extra raiders in the hallway. "The one you spared must have gone

for help. They snuck up behind you, and I thought they'd killed you." P-21 said quietly.

"And who killed them?" I asked as I looked at him with a cocked brow. He suddenly looked sheepish. I looked at the scorch marks around the body parts of the raiders.

"Well, they walked right past me after you, and they were just standing together, and that apple bomb was just sitting there," he said, looking troubled. "I didn't realize just what it would do."

"It's called a grenade. It blows ponies up! Everypony knows that!" a pink filly called out as she lifted her face from her box of cereal, her muzzle coated in sugary dust. It was a little disturbing how she cleaned it all away in one lick.

"He's funny," a teal filly said as she grinned at P-21. "He was actually apologizing to 'em after they was blowed up!" One of the girls laughed. The rest had expressions ranging from pained to tired to even happy. They didn't look scared. Though with how I must have looked right then, it'd be a miracle if anypony was scared of me.

"I don't think I'll be able to do that again anytime soon," he said softly, flushing as he looked at the girls who were tucking into the raiders' supplies. There were boxes of it tossed in the corner. Food that old couldn't possibly be healthy, but it was apparently quite tasty. Why were the raiders butchering ponies if they had other food, though? It was just crazy.

I looked at the teal one, who, aside from looking very sore under her tail, seemed the oldest and most composed. "So, what's your name, how did you get here... and how loudly do I have to whine before you share some of that with me?" I said as I pointed at a box of dried apple shavings in her hooves.

She blinked, then grudgingly parted with half the box. I was a little skeptical till the first bite, and then my eyes went wide. I'd never tasted anything so sweet and tasty in my life. My PipBuck's little radiation clicks went unnoticed as I chowed down. Sugar Apple Bombs leaped right to the top of my favorites list!

"As for my name, I'm Scoodle. Them raiders grabbed us while we was out lookin' fer stuff fer the Finders."

Scoodle? Well... who was I to judge? "My name's Blackjack."

"P-21," he chimed in.

"Y'all got funny names." That seemed to count in our favor. The teal pony lifted the box of Sugar Apple Bombs and poured them into her mouth, chewing frantically

before letting out a loud belch, much to the giggles of the other fillies. She pointed at P-21. "He's got a great nose for findin' stuff. Got into that safe in the office and everything. Just click and open! Y'all should join up with 'em."

He nudged over a duffel bag closer to me. "There weren't any shotgun shells, but there's another automatic pistol and some ammo." He seemed a bit put out about finding a gun in a school. "The nurse's office also had some bandages and stuff, but we used most of it on you."

"Thanks." I looked at Scoodle. "So what's a Finder?" I asked as I felt the most wonderful buzz running through me. The look she gave me suggested I was an idiot for not knowing this bit of information. "We're not from around here."

"Stable ponies, huh? Don't know nothing." She shook her head in disappointment, then adopted a lecturing posture and a tone so like the Overmare that I fought not to giggle. "Finders are a buncha ponies what find stuff. They trade and swap fer the darnedest stuff. Even junk, but they pay good for ammo, weapons, or anything we find that we don't use. They'll trade with almost anypony."

"So you're Finders?" Apparently they were not, from the sour look I received.

"No...", she said as she stood with pride to show the tiny patch crudely sewn onto the ragged plaid cloak. It was a little soiled white cloth showing a rearing filly. "We're Crusaders."

"But... where are your parents?" Immediately, they all looked sad or angry. I got the distinct sensation that I'd just fucked up, but I couldn't see how. If they were kids, they had to have... somepony? Right?

P-21 answered me in a whisper, "Blackjack, they're orphans."

I really didn't want to move, but the sugary goodness compelled me. That, and I wanted to peek around Withers real quick and see if there were any more red marks on the E.F.S. I still wouldn't look up at the sky. It made me feel silly. These children had been captured, tortured, raped, and had watched some of their colt friends get killed, and here I was scared of the sky! Still, I had to admit, the cool air was quite nice. I'd never realized till now how thick and humid 99's air had been.

There was a billboard at the edge of Withers where the road straightened to the southeast. 'Welcome to Hoofington, city of tomorrow!' read the caption over an image of soaring gray towers connected by bridges. In the sky above, seven pegasi

flew like an arrowhead trailing crackling thunder. 'See Shadowbolt Tower!' declared bold words in one starburst. 'Home to the Hoofington Reapers!' announced another burst next to a grinning gap-toothed cartoon buck in a black helmet. 'Tour Robronco's Headquarters. Free for fillies and colts!' a little robot pony said with a wide smile.

There was one thing off, though. Written across the billboard, in faded red spray-paint, was, 'Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.' Not exactly the best advertisement for the city. I could barely make out an eerie green light far in the distance down the road.

The plinking of a piano and the twang of a banjo filled the night, preluding the spritebot's arrival. I narrowed my eyes as it bobbed through the air past me. For just a moment, I thought it was going to continue into the dark when it paused and turned towards me. "Watcher?" I asked, sitting up a little.

The obnoxious music cut off at once, and the little flying machine flew in front of me. "Well, you're alive," said the tinny little voice. "Glad to see it."

"Glad to be it," I replied with a wince. I smiled as I looked at the bandages that half covered my body. "Half blown up, but yeah. Alive." I looked back at the bot. Something niggled in my mind and I frowned. "You put this location tag in my PipBuck, didn't you?"

There was a long, awkward silence. "Well, raider bases are a good source of ammunition and other goods. . ." the voice said awkwardly.

"No doubt, and I bet there are lots of those all over the place." I lay down, folding my hooves in front of me. "You knew, didn't you? About the Crusaders?"

The spritebot hesitated, and I felt he was picking his words carefully. "I might have had some intelligence about them being held till slavers could pick them up."

I was angry, but I wasn't sure exactly why. "Why didn't you just tell us?"

"Please, don't. Do you have any idea what it's like to tell people six fillies are being held by raiders only to have them turn and run the opposite direction? Or, worse, kill the raiders and sell the foals to slavers themselves?" There was anguish in his voice that said he knew all too well. "I just wanted to point you in the right direction and hope it would work out."

I sighed as I lowered my chin to my hooves. "Do me a favor. Next time, tell me. Alright?"

The spritebot hovered a moment longer, then resumed playing the banjo as it bobbed into the night.

Footnote: Level up

Perk: Telekinetic precision – You’ve got a steady horn on your head for when you need to count sand, thread a needle, or keep a pin in a grenade.

3. Learning Curve

"I'm so sorry. . . ."

We waited in the Withers public school till morning. Really, once the flies and the reek of rotting meat reached a certain point, all of us were glad to get out of there. I still resembled a mummy with all the bandages coiled around me, but their healing magic was doing the trick. Though it'd taken two healing potions to bring me back from the gunshots to my back and the back of my head, my luck was still holding out. The first had just grazed my skull rather than turning it into all kinds of bloody brains, and the second had been slowed by what was left of my barding and lodged in the muscle at the base of my neck. Fortunately, even P-21's minimal medical skills were up to removing it.

I'd taken some time looking at a map on the wall of the classroom. It was badly stained and aged, but I could make out the name of Withers and a road leading to what seemed like a big city. Hoofington. One of the cities Hoss had mentioned when he described the balefire bombs going off. There were other strange posters rotting in their frames. In the office a pink pony with her mane striped almost identical to mine, but pink and gray rather than black and red, stared out with a grin above a caption that read 'Trouble can start in the smallest places'. A purple unicorn sat on the library wall, looking clever and surrounded by floating books, saying 'We need every idea'. Well, that's what I thought it said. Some wit had scratched out 'idea' and written 'penis'. I got the joke. In the nurse's office, a soulful yellow pegasus hugged a bunny while telling me 'Little ouchies are still ouchies'.

I knew there had been a war. Even security ponies had to learn history in 99. Zebras had attacked and attempted to exterminate all of ponykind. There'd been six ministries that had done all they could to end the war and find peace for ponykind. They'd failed. It might have been unfair of me, but I hoped that they'd done more to try and end the war than just make pithy quotes for posters.

It had been a little amusing, and a little disturbing, to see Scoodle handling the revolver from the farmhouse as casually as if it were a toy. No. Not a toy. She wasn't playing with it. She understood it was a weapon. She understood how to use it. She didn't even have her cutie mark yet and she was better with guns than P-21. There was something profoundly depressing about that. When we'd gathered the weapons and ammo from all the raiders, it'd proved a somewhat daunting amount

of firearms.

“How are we going to carry all that?” I asked as I looked at the heap. There were at least four rifles, a shotgun, a revolver, the automatic pistols, two knives, a cleaver, two grenades, and the assorted junk we’d taken from the raiders. Between P-21 and I we’d be able to do it, but it would still be quite a weight.

“Ya don’t need ta carry all of it,” Scoodle said as she looked at the heap. “Well, ya wouldn’t if ya had some tools. What ya can do is take ‘em apart and just put the best pieces together.”

“Take them apart?” I levitated a rifle and concentrated. It was tough to telekinetically hold an object while messing with one small part of it, but I was able to unscrew and disassemble the various portions of the weapon. Immediately, I saw what the teal pony had been talking about. Some of the screws on one rifle were almost rust-free. Another had an intact slide. One had a superior barrel. Of course, I had to listen closely to her directions as I assembled one weapon from four. When finished, my PipBuck suddenly showed a much higher value for my new rifle than any of the original four. How it knew that was slowly driving me crazy. When I finished I loaded five rounds into the clip and heard a comforting click as it loaded smoothly.

“What about the rest of this?” P-21 asked as he opened up the duffel bag. To be honest it looked more like a garbage bag with all the junk inside.

Scoodle looked it with a smirk. “Well, if it’s light, take it. There’ll be somepony that’ll buy it for caps. If it’s heavy and worthless, just toss it unless yer close to a buyer. Most ponies haul around as much as they can carry and when they find something good they’ll drop some more junk. Otherwise let the Finders worry about the coffee cups and stuff.” She looked in the bag and the teal pony frowned, seeming to be thinking of something unpleasant, and then smiled. “Oh. And keep the caps. They’re money.”

Bottle caps? Did they really use bottle caps for money? From all the glares Scoodle received from the others, it was pretty clear they weren’t happy with her for mentioning it. “Scoo!” shouted the pink pony, Boing, “We’re supposed to tell Stable folk they’re trash, remember?”

I saw that the teal pony that had been so helpful was getting upset so I adopted my easiest smile as I looked down at the fillies. “Well, I’m pretty sure she just wanted to be helpful after all the things that happened last night. Remember?” Scoodle definitely perked up at that, but the others still didn’t look too happy. I couldn’t blame them. I’d be ticked too if I saw some rube talked out of unloading a stack of bits back

in 99.

Once we were outside and under the clouds I felt a little vertigo. I still didn't look up. I'd like to think that I'd get over this eventually, but somehow I didn't think I would. Not completely. Still, as long as I kept my gaze at or below the horizon I felt with it enough to move on. The road we walked along was faded and crumbly, but I felt a little more confidence with a clear path in front of me. While the open spaces to my sides weren't as overwhelming as above, I still liked to pretend I was surrounded by nice straight halls.

At first I'd been nervous about accompanying the Crusaders in my current condition, particularly with P-21 being so stubborn about not carrying a firearm. Scoodle assured me that the Crusaders could handle themselves and that the raiders' capture was simply a case of bad luck. I passed out what weapons and ammo we had, saving the rifle for myself. I might not have known the specifics, but I knew which end went bang. I admit, I was skeptical as many of the Crusaders chattered quite openly about what would happen when they got to 'town'. Then I noticed that Scoodle and Boing weren't joining in the conversations. When we encountered some strange spiny animals rooting through the rotten ditch beside the road, all they had to do was stop and the conversations ended. The five unarmed fillies disappeared into cover on the far side of the road. In fact, given how quickly P-21 disappeared as well, I was feeling just a little bit exposed standing alone in the middle of the road!

Only once Scoodle and I had finished off the last of the strange mutated animals did my worries about them fade. If it hadn't been for my E.F.S. I wouldn't have known where any of the others were hiding. Once the danger was past the Crusaders came out and at once carefully carved off some pieces of meat, wrapping them in some scrap paper from my duffel bag.

I tried to hide my disgust as I asked, "What are you doing with that, Scoodle?"

"Huh?" She looked up with a bloody knife clenched in her jaws; I did my best not to shudder. She stuck the tip in the corpse and answered brightly, "Oh, this? Radhog is good eatin'!"

I just turned my back and busied myself with not being nauseous or watching them finish their work. I'd stick with the Sugar Apple Bombs.

The trip along the road was made far easier by my E.F.S. picking out threats before they actually engaged us. The most prevalent were the bloatsprites and radhogs. The wildlife seemed incredibly aggressive and even lone radhogs didn't hesitate to charge our group. I took the opportunity to talk with Scoodle about the Wasteland.

She seemed to delight in knowing more about the wastes than P-21 or myself.

“See, there’s three kinds o’ folks. You got folks that’ll help ya out, folks that’ll put a bullet through yer noggin, and folks that won’t lift a hoof fer ya, but probably won’t kill ya less they got reason. Make sense, Blackjack?”

“Plenty. So which are the Crusaders?” I asked with a little smile, half teasing and half curious.

“We’re the third, ‘less yer on yer own. Most folk are,” she said without hesitation. “Crusaders look out for our own and any filly or colt what needs protectin’. Past that we take care of ourselves.”

“Not to insult you, but how do you take care of yourselves at all?” P-21 asked in his calm voice.

“What, ya think because we’re young we’re helpless?” And with a flick of her head she scooped the pistol out of her holster and pointed it right at his head as if she had a S.A.T.S. spell herself. Then she grinned around the handle before spitting the pistol back into her holster. “We don’t fight lest we gotta. We stick together and hide when we can. We got lots of forts all around we can hole up in if we need ta,” she said as she trotted along. “See, we can get in places big ponies like yerselves can’t. We find all kinds o’ good stuff in cellars and tunnels and stuff.”

She sure seemed confident, and I reminded myself that these children lived in a brutal environment. Weak things didn’t seem to last long in the Wasteland, that was for sure. “What about these Finders?”

“Shoot, Finders care only about the caps. You got caps, they’re yer best buds in the world. Ya got nothing and they’ll piss on ya soon as look at ya. Finders ain’t nopony’s friends and don’t you believe ‘em when they say otherwise.” Scoodle and the other Crusaders definitely didn’t seem very happy, even though we were apparently heading towards their town.

“So who might help us?” I asked her.

“Help ya with what?” she asked in return.

That was a very good question.

P-21 and I hadn’t really talked about what our next step was. I had one goal, but I didn’t want to involve P-21 just yet. I wasn’t really sure how he’d handle it. Beyond that... “Information. Somepony attacked my stable. I want to know why and what for.”

I described Deus and the filly immediately looked concerned. “Well from what you said, I’m guessing he’s a Reaper.”

“Why does that just scream ‘bad’ to me?” I asked sarcastically, getting a smirk in return.

“Reapers is what happens when raiders grow up. They’re the baddest of the baddest. Don’t take shit off nopony. There’s only a hundred of ‘em, cause the only way to join is ta kill another Reaper hoof to hoof. Monsters one and all,” Scoodle said darkly.

“Arloste’s a Reaper now,” Boing said to Scoodle.

“Arloste’s too nice ta be a Reaper, so it’d never happen,” Scoodle countered.

“Arloste?” I asked, curious about this little digression.

“Crusader. One o’ the first. Got us started with the reverend,” Boing said as she bounced on her hooves in glee. “I heard they had a thing but then they had a fight and she went to join the Reapers.”

“So what, I should go and ask a Reaper for info?” That sounded just a little suicidal to me.

“Well not unless you want a busted leg.” Scoodle looked down at P-21’s limp and flushed a little. “Sorry.” Looking back at me she went on, “Reapers is folk though. Gotta cozy up to ‘em, or pay ‘em off in caps. The only time Reapers join up is if somepony’s crazy enough to attack ‘em at the Stadium.”

“Anypony else that might help? The first kind?” I added with a small smile.

Scoodle seemed to mentally scan her list. “Well there’s DJ Pon3 on the radio. He’s off in Manehattan, but he knows stuff what’s going on everywhere. You can hear him all over the place.” P-21 and I shared a look and added it to the mind bogglingly long list of ‘what the fuck are they talking about?’ “There’s also them Society ponies. I guess they technically count since they do help. Bunch of stuck up thoroughbreds that give ya a meal and then tell ya how thankful ya should be for getting it.”

“They sound like a joy,” I muttered. “Anypony else?”

“Well, ya can talk ta the college ponies. Call themselves the coll... co... um... well most folks just call ‘em Eggheads. They’re way over past the Core, but you might run across ‘em. They wanna fix Equestria. Dunno how. They’re nice to us most often. If we ever come down with worms we always ask them fer help. They got this medicine that’ll clean ya out lickity split!”

I winced at that. "Thanks for the tip."

"Oooh, you forgot the Steel Rangers!" Boing said as she made machine gun noises.

"I didn't forget 'em. Wasn't gonna mention 'em," she said sourly at the pink filly. "Rangers might help ya. They might not. Might shoot ya. They got their own things going on; mostly trying ta figger out how them roboponies work in the Core. I can tell ya they won't give us a glass o' piss."

"Roboponies?" P-21 asked, curiously.

"That's what they are, so don't you laugh. Pony gadgets wandering all over the Core. Dangerous critters too. You see a pony made of wires and lights, you best run. Can't kill 'em." Scoodle frowned in thought. "There's the 'Clavers, if you want, but I don't trust 'em one bit."

"The Enclave are pegasus ponies! They're gonna swoop down and save us all!" Boing cried with a little cheer. A few of the other fillies also looked hopeful.

"I'll believe 'em when I see the sun," Scoodle replied sullenly. "They give me the willies."

"They're no worse than ghouls!" Boing countered, "And ghouls will eat ya!"

Scoodle caught my look. She sighed and rolled her eyes, explaining to the clueless stable ponies, "Ghouls is ponies that are... well... they look dead. But they ain't! I been to Meat Locker, and they wasn't nothing but friendly to me." Her certainty faded a little and she amended, "Well, some of 'em might try and eat ya, but they ain't no different from raiders."

Ghouls. Enclave. Steel Rangers. Eggheads. Society. Reapers. Finders. Crusaders. I was suddenly getting a picture of Hoofington as a city with different stables all around it, each group fighting against the others for control and dominance.

P-21 looked at Scoodle as he asked, "You mentioned the Core? What is that?"

"The Core? It's what got blowed up in the big war. I heard there was all kinds of tech and stuff being studied there. Least it was before the zebras blowed it ta smithereens."

"Wasn't the zebras!" Boing jumped in. "Them ponies made something what blowed up in their faces!"

"I heard that Princess Celestia sent the whole city to the moon right before the bombs went kablewy," offered a gray unicorn filly.

Another quickly shook her head. “Nuh-uh. It was a dragon. Biggest, scariest dragon of all. He breathed green fire.”

“That’s what the bombs did, ya ninny!” Scoodle roared. I winced at their noise, wondering if this was how they had gotten caught in the first place.

I drifted a little to the side to let them argue over what, precisely, destroyed Hoofington while I leaned towards P-21. “So what do you think?”

He looked at me with his level, cool gaze. “I think they should be quieter. Unless they’re trying for more radhog meat.”

“I mean about what we should do? While I don’t mind helping ponies who need it, I doubt that Reaper has given up. We need information.” I lifted my PipBuck. “We need to learn about that Reaper. We need to find out what EC-1101 is. Why it was worth attacking Stable 99.”

“Did the Overmare say anything about it, Blackjack?” P-21 asked as he looked at the bones of ponies laying along the road.

Oh. I’d completely forgotten about the files he’d transferred to my PipBuck. “Um. . . not yet?”

“There might be a clue about EC-1101,” he pointed out in his calm, reasonable voice that was just a little aggravating.

“I know. I know! I’ll check it when we stop,” I said in a soft huff. Then I noticed Boing listening in. “Something up, Boing?” I asked, not sure if I should be angry or not.

“Hmm? Oh, nothing!” she said with a giggle as she bounced along back over to the other Crusaders.

That’s a lot of bones. As we proceeded south west along the road, the skeletal remains grew thicker and thicker, and the Crusaders grew quieter and quieter. Rags and rusty bits intermixed with the bleached bones as scattered white lumps turned into nearly a solid sheet. Then mounds and piles of gleaming white remains rose to either side of the road.

My PipBuck chirped. ‘Boneyard’ appeared on the map. I noticed the girls weren’t talking anymore. Now they looked wary, and walked right in the middle of the road cleared of the remains.

“What happened here?” P-21 asked, keeping his voice low.

Scoodle looked at us and then pointed ahead. “When Hoof went boom, lots of

ponies tried ta run for it along the road.” She pointed the way we came. “That way’s Manehattan. . . and when Manehattan went boom, lots of ponies from there came running fer the Hoof. Thousands and thousands. They all got bunched up here, and died.” She glanced warily at the heaps of bones around us. “Don’t touch anything.”

“Why not?” As far as I could see there was lots of stuff for the taking, and not a single threat to be seen.

“There’s bad stuff here. Ghouls. And Tiara.” That was all she said before she bit down on the pistol again and continued walking.

The whispering was beginning to creep me out, but I wasn’t about to raise my voice not knowing what might be around. There were hundreds of busted wagons and carts scattered amid the skeletal remains. Lot of boxes, even some ammo crates. I looked at the Crusaders keeping an eye all around them and ignoring the ammunition right beside us.

“We should take some of this,” I whispered as we passed a tipped-over wagon half buried by bones. I couldn’t see a single target on the E.F.S. aside from the eight of us.

Scoodle looked at me with an expression of horror and outrage, shaking her head.

“There’s nothing here.” I couldn’t explain the PipBuck’s targeting system to somepony that had never worn one before.

“I think you should listen to her,” P-21 murmured.

That did it for some reason. Fillies scared of bones I could accept, but being told what to do by a pony that wouldn’t carry a weapon himself just annoyed the shit out of me. My mane was itching in irritation and I wasn’t about to pass up something that could keep all of us safe. “It’s fine!” I said as I reached out with my horn, grabbed a nice heavy ammo box, and pulled it from the bones. The bones clattered in to fill the void left behind, filling the still air with a dry rattle.

Then I saw the creature within the heap of bones. It looked like a pony that had been cooked past well done, and now it was exposed it began to move! It reared up and opened its maw wide, letting out a scream that no living pony could make. And then, it was answered.

Instantly, my PipBuck came alight with red bars as horrific screams raised in the air. The mounds around me shifted and from the depths emerged chunks of rotting meat clinging to pony frames. Shredded lips allowed jagged mouths to open far

wider than any living pony could. There was nowhere to run; they stepped out onto the road in both directions.

“Heads!” Was all Scoodle shouted before drawing her gun and taking aim at the running forms. I wasn’t familiar with a rifle at all, but I knew I should use it before they closed the distance. I popped S.A.T.S., but the rifle required a great deal more energy per shot than my pistol or shotgun. I carefully lined up my shot in that moment of frozen time, then released the spell. I could almost see the bullet as it spun through the air, striking the ghoulish pony in the head and blasting it apart into meaty chunks. Without S.A.T.S. I had a harder time lining up the shots. What took one round to the head would require four to the chest.

The Crusaders were holding up better than I’d anticipated. Maybe the fact we were ridiculously outnumbered and probably going to die helped them focus on putting every round in the screaming ghoulish ponies’ heads. P-21, unarmed, simply kicked and shoved to try and keep the ghouls off the Crusaders.

Scoodle’s revolver blasted ghoulish after ghoulish, not firing till she had a head shot. She would be an amazing marksman when she grew up; a pony to be feared and respected. But as she turned to gun down one, two others pounced upon her. S.A.T.S. recharging, I tried desperately to line up the rifle, but the shots failed to drop them. One ghoulish pony gripped Scoodle by her haunches, the other by her shoulders. With monstrous strength they each pulled their half.

The teal filly was ripped in two before my eyes.

I fell into a moment of horror that felt like a S.A.T.S. that would never end as I saw with terrible clarity the organs and viscera pouring out over the asphalt. I smelled the wash of blood even over the unnatural reek of the undead monsters around me. I saw the stunned look on her face as she slowly fell, and a pony that had weathered raiders and who knew what else died because of my stupidity.

I knew that I would never stop seeing that image for as long as I lived.

“No!” I roared, rage seeming to guide my shots. Despite my tears blurring my vision, I lay down a rain of fire such that even the ghouls were momentarily beaten back. Every other bullet seemed to find skulls and vulnerable joints, though my horn ached from the effort. When the shots clicked on an empty chamber, a telekinetic stream of bullets flowed from my bag into the slide and my attack continued. But there were more ghouls than I had bullets, and every second it seemed like more of the mindless monsters emerged from the bone piles.

Soon the rifle went from firearm to club; there were just too many and too close for it to be effective. I'd have given my teeth for some shotgun shells. The monsters were starting to surround and overwhelm us, snapping with their broken teeth and kicking with shattered hooves. I would happily have stayed there till I was torn to pieces, but there were five more Crusaders and P-21 on the line. They were all going to die, and it was my fault.

It couldn't get any worse than this, I thought.

I'd soon think to myself, 'Oh, silly Blackjack, it can always get worse.'

The scream from a nearby bonepile froze us all in place. A luminous green light spilled forth from a ghoulish pony that at once started my PipBuck clicking. "Tiara!" the ghoulish pony screamed, looking down at us with its baleful gaze. The presence of this glowing abomination was tempered by one saving grace: its presence made the hordes of ghouls back away momentarily. "Tiara? Is that you?"

Step by step, it approached, and my PipBuck began to click faster and faster. I glanced behind me at the scratched and clawed Crusaders. If there was any way I could get them out of this nightmare, I'd take it. I put on my best smile and approached the glowing ghoulish pony. "Um... yes. It's me. Tiara." I looked at the glowing cutie mark etched in her blackened flank. Was it a mirror? No... a rattle? No...

"Really? I think I lost my glasses." Up close, I could see that the glasses weren't lost: they were melted. Glistening glass clung in cracked, fluid shards, the blackened metal frame now seared to the flesh. Behind them, eyes glowed. She raised both her hooves with a creepy smile, then frowned as I hesitated. What was she doing, holding them up like she was going to do a... a hoofshake! I immediately tapped my hooves against hers. Instantly she smiled. "Bump, bump, sugarlump, rump!" she intoned, not seeming to notice me scrambling to match her moves. "Oh, it is you, Diamond Tiara! I've missed you so much!" She pulled me into an embrace, my PipBuck clicking like mad.

"Um... yes... it's been a long time..." I held the hug for as long as I dared before backing away. A glance at my PipBuck saw the needle entering the yellow. "Yes, it has been much too long. Work and all." Once more luck saved us as my eyes glanced at some of the rusty debris around us. A brown metal spoon caught my eye. "How have you been... ah... Spoon?" I prayed to the Goddesses that it was a part of her name and not something like ladle.

But my guess had been lucky enough to get a sigh of frustration. "Oh, it's been

terrible since I lost my glasses. I think something very bad happened, and I was looking for somepony who might be able to direct me to the Ministry of Peace for a new pair! I simply can't process all these stable orders for Golden without my glasses." She leaned towards me and missed me leaning away. "Do you know what that pink hag told me? She said 'Silver Spoon, if you can't bake cupcakes, then you'll have to clean the pans!' Like, what does that even mean?"

"Well there's just so much... ah... work to do." I glanced over and saw a trio of ghouls devouring Scoodle while I chatted with the monster that was slowly irradiating us. "And speaking of work, I really should get back to it. Busy busy busy!" I said as I grimaced, fighting the urge to charge down the ghouls defiling the slain filly.

"You work far too hard at that silly prison. They should give you more time off." Her glowing eyes turned to the Crusaders and P-21. "Is that what you're doing now? I didn't think that you had to escort them yourselves." I opened and closed my mouth, at a loss, and simply gave a smile and an exaggerated shrug. She sighed. "We really should get together next week. You know, sometimes I think something terrible is going to happen. I really do."

Something terrible did happen. And a small part of it was my fault. "Well, take care of yourself, Silver Spoon." Then I looked at all the ghoul ponies waiting around us. "I don't suppose you could ask them to step aside?"

"Oh sure!" She said brightly as she faced the ghouls. "Like, get out of her way, losers, and find my glasses!" Slowly the yellow dots began to disappear as the ghouls dug their way into the bone mounds. "Well I'd better keep looking. Otherwise, that hag is going to have me scrubbing pans again... or whatever."

I dared to look back at Scoodle; nothing remained but bloody bone and scattered flesh. I tried to find an excuse to go and collect the remains. In truth, with my PipBuck's needle in the red, I almost wanted to stay a little longer, chatting with Silver Spoon till I was just as dead. I couldn't. I had six others who might need my protection, flimsy as it was.

We walked silently for several minutes before from behind us came the plaintive wail of "Tiara! Tiara! Where are you?"

It was half an hour before we exited the boneyard. It didn't take long for the radiation I'd been soaking in to catch up with me and have me puking up my lunch. I felt like crap. I deserved to feel like crap. My guts gurgled and every square inch of my body

felt like it'd been beaten. The Crusaders didn't say a single word. They didn't look at me or each other, but I could almost hear their thoughts in the back of my mind saying over and over again 'She killed Scoodle for a box of bullets.'

Finally clear, I looked behind me, trying for some kind of smile... something... to make this not the utter disaster it was. "Safe and..." Only P-21 was behind me. "Sound..." I looked at the long dead grass and bare bushes along the road. There was no sign of the Crusaders to be had. "They left..." How profoundly insightful I'd become since I'd fucked up.

"Yeah. A little bit ago," he replied evenly as he looked along the road. "I think there's a house up there. We can rest and take care of you."

"I don't want to be taken care of," I muttered softly.

"I'm sorry, did you say something?" P-21 walked in front of me, his sure blue eyes bearing down into mine. "Sometimes we don't get what we want," he said as he nudged me towards a single story house beside the road. "Sometimes we don't get to sit around and have pity parties for our mistakes. Sometimes we just have to keep going because, otherwise, we might as well just die."

"That's what..." I started to say.

He hit me hard enough to knock me on my side. I stared up into the sky and felt my guts churn and my pupils contract. "I'm sorry. Were you about to say you wanted to die? Is that it?" he said as he glared down at me. "If you were this weak, you should have just given yourself to Deus and been done with it."

"I killed Scoodle!" I yelled up at him. It felt like a confession.

"Yeah! You did, you fucking idiot!" he screamed back down at me. "Didn't I tell you to listen to her? Didn't you say to me that I know what's right when it comes to this sort of thing? But she's dead, Blackjack, and unless you wallowing in pity or dying will somehow magically bring her back to life then this is accomplishing nothing except indulging in your own selfish wishes!"

I slowly opened my eyes, looking into his. He hated me. I hated me. Yet no matter how much I wanted to be done, I had to admit that he was right. Me dying right now wouldn't bring back Scoodle. It wouldn't right some great cosmic wrong and fix anything. It would just be another corpse in the wastelands. "I'm so sorry," I whispered softly.

"Then prove it, Blackjack. Live and don't ever fuck up like that again. Learn from this, because if you ever kill another pony through stupidity then I will fucking end

you.” He shoved his head under my shoulders and turned me over so I no longer stared into that terrible void above. . . only now I had an equally vast void within and I couldn’t look away from it.

When I had been a little filly, I’d been drilled on the various stages of radiation poisoning. Nausea arrived first, followed rapidly by diarrhea, headache, muscle weakness and fatigue, bruising, mane loss, neurological disorders, and at the most extreme end, being cooked by the prolonged exposure. That was the ‘flesh melting radiation’ I was so concerned about. P-21 managed to get me into the derelict house after I’d shat myself but before I collapsed. Laying on my side on a filthy mattress, I felt like I was rotting from the inside out. That wasn’t completely inaccurate, as the next time my bowels moved it was to dump blood over my hind legs. I drifted between guilt-ridden consciousness and blissful unconsciousness.

The worst was when I was stuck between the two. I saw Deus laughing at me as he sawed off my PipBuck with a chainsaw penis. The Overmare reminded me that I was ultimately disposable. The little orange pony figurine told me that she could only help so much; I’d have to get up and be strong on my own. I felt eyeglasses melting on my face and covering my cheeks in cracked glass. Scoodle’s severed head lay on the bed next to me and whispered softly over and over again, “Stable ponies don’t know nothin’. Don’t touch anything!”

All the while, P-21 nursed me back to health. He’d disappear for hours on end and I’d lie there wondering if he’d died or simply moved on. I didn’t understand why he wasted his time with me, and yet he did. He didn’t say a word of complaint, nor did he mention anything more about the events in the boneyard.

When I awoke to lucidity, feeling like a clogged up toilet, I saw the spritebot hovering before my face. Watcher cleared his throat. “So. Is this it?”

I carefully raised my head. The sprite-bot wasn’t transforming into some face eating nightmare. “Watcher?”

“Yeah. That’s me. What about you, Blackjack? Is this it? Is this the point where the Wasteland breaks you?” The sprite-bot looked particularly solemn as it hovered before me.

Carefully I pushed myself up and covered my face with my hooves. “I fucked up, Watcher.”

“You’re not the first. And if I can be blunt, your fuck up only killed one filly. I’ve known ponies whose fuck ups killed millions. So on the grand scale of fuck ups, I think you’re overrating yourself.” Slowly I dropped my hooves from my face to look at the little machine as it went on. “So I’m asking you: Is this it? Are you just a pony that wallows in self pity and kicks herself for a mistake, or not? Because if this is it, then I’ll leave you be. I can’t help you. You can’t help anypony.”

It would have been easy to just fold right then. But as I sat on the edge of the bed, damn me, I couldn’t help smiling as I looked at the machine. I reeked of vomit, crap, blood, and despair but I still felt my lips curl mirthlessly as I looked at the device. “Are you on that grand scale of fuck ups too, Watcher?”

There was a long pause, and I wondered if I’d offended him to the point that he would just wash his hooves of me. “Yeah. I am.”

“Did your fuck up kill someone who didn’t deserve it?” There was silence and I knew he wouldn’t answer. He didn’t have to. I sat there for a minute longer, looking at my hooves. “I was so proud when I saved those girls from those raiders. Now...” I closed my eyes and grit my teeth. It would be so easy just to give up. Fold the hand. Cash in the chips. Quitters might not go bust, but they’d also never make it big. I opened my eyes as I looked right at the machine, wondering what Watcher’s face looked like right now. Finally, I asked softly, “So how do I move on, Watcher?”

“You do everything you can to make up for it, knowing that you’ll never succeed in getting rid of the guilt. You devote yourself to spending every second trying to do better despite the fact that it will never be enough. And you pray with every single good act you do that somehow when your life is over that your lifetime will come close to make up for the wrong you committed.” Watcher spoke so clear and true that I couldn’t stop smiling and crying at the same time.

“Well. That sounds like a plan,” I whispered. “So where do I start?”

Turns out, starting involved me getting off that filthy bed and finding some Rad-Away before I either died outright or grew a second head. While that might have doubled my smarts, it wasn’t something I was exactly looking forward to. On the plus side, Watcher knew a possible source of the radiation-purging drug. A sky carriage had crashed with a load of Ministry of Peace supplies that hadn’t been scavenged. The reason was simple.

“Those are some nasty looking reptiles,” I muttered as I looked down at the lake sur-

rounded by dead trees and gangly weeds. A small island on a cove was connected to the mainland by a rotten bridge. I could barely make out the sight of the upside down sky carriage mixed in with the remains of a gazebo. P-21 and I were crouched in the flattened remains of a small cottage a small ways above the gray waters of the small lake. 'Lake Macintosh' appeared on my PipBuck map.

I had no idea what the reptiles might be. No doubt if I put a hunk of their remains in my bag something would pop up. In his scavenging, P-21 had rounded up six rounds for the rifle and six shotgun shells. It would have to do.

"You're being stupid again," P-21 warned me.

"Ending me stupid?"

"No, just standard stupid."

"That means I'm improving," I said, and even he smiled at it, shaking his head. I looked out at the gazebo and crashed carriage. The E.F.S. informed me that there were three, but, after the boneyard, I wasn't going to take it for granted. "I'm dying without that Rad-away," I said as I slumped against the mossy foundation stones. "A few more days and I'll go like Hoss did. Say I'm wrong." He pressed his lips together as he scowled at me.

"So let me sneak over there and get it," he pressed.

"No," I replied firmly. "I appreciate all the help you've given me, P-21. I'm not going to let you risk your life for mine over this." He might be sneaky, but I had no idea if those mutated animals could sniff him out; I wasn't about to let him take that chance.

"Let me? You're dying of radiation poisoning, Blackjack. How are you planning to stop me?" he asked as he turned towards the ruined gazebo.

I just looked at him, then down at the lounging mutant alligators. The rifle came up and without any hesitation I fired a shot right into a mutant gator. It gave a bellow and rose out of the water, charging towards the two of us. P-21 stared at me with a scathing look that would do any raider proud, eyelid twitching, before he turned and ran for cover. "Sorry, P-21. I've got to save my own life this time," I said as I faced the enemy.

One way or another, it was about to be resolved. I triggered my S.A.T.S. and placed two rounds exactly in the forehead of my target. The fourth round caught his eye, and the beast staggered. The fifth missed. The final round, three past what I'd hoped to use, dropped the beast in its tracks. I discarded the rifle and backed away

up the hill as rapidly as I could. The radiation poisoning and fever were slowing me down, but it still kept the gators in front of me.

Out came the shotgun as the two closed in. The recharge on my S.A.T.S. slowed to a crawl as I unloaded shot after shot into the leading crocodile. Three shots left. Two. One. The buckshot of the final round scattered its brains across its back.

Unfortunately, I was now out of ammo. This would normally be the point where I would die and P-21 would take over and probably do the Wasteland a lot more good. There was just one catch: I wasn't done paying for a little teal pony. As the gator lunged, my magic flipped the shotgun vertical and rammed it into the gator's mouth. It hissed and tried to claw at the pump action, the weapon bending under the ferocious strength of its jaws.

From my saddlebags I floated an apple-shaped grenade and plunged it straight into the radigator's maw. My telekinesis plucked the stem from the tip as it disappeared down the gator's throat. Five... four... three... two... one... huh. The shotgun snapped in two and immediately I backed away, trying to draw out my last grenade.

The mutant gator exploded in a nice spray of faintly radioactive blood. Given how much I'd already taken, I quickly moved away before I simply keeled over dead. I really didn't want to win and then fall over. Slowly I staggered my way down towards the rotten bridge and the gazebo.

P-21 emerged at my side. "Feeling better?" His tone might be snide, but there was some sincerity in his question.

"A little bit," I replied. The wastelands were giving me a brutal education, but I would rise to the challenge. I'd be stronger, and I'd try to never let my stupidity endanger another pony if I could. "I know you wanted to help me, P-21. I'm sorry that I couldn't let you this time."

He rolled his eyes and gave a long sigh. "I'm back in the stable again." I detected more than a little bitterness in that comment.

I looked over at him in confusion as we walked over the bridge. "Huh?"

He rounded on me, teeth bared as he glared with undisguised anger. "My whole life, I've had mares telling me what I can and can't do. I wasn't even allowed the option of turning a mare down if she was on my breeding rotation." He gave a little snort. "Did you know some males in 99 would cut or beat themselves just to get a break? Just to do something we wanted instead of what we were instructed to do?"

I honestly didn't have a clue. I could barely imagine. "We all had to do things that

we didn't want to do in 99. I didn't want to be in security." That was how 99 went. You did what you were told, filled your role, and never thought outside it.

"You didn't want to be anything, Blackjack. If there was a 'sit on my tail and play cards all day' job you'd have been fine, but otherwise you wouldn't have been happy doing anything," he said as we approached the wrecked gazebo. The rusty sky wagon still had bright yellow paint and a pink butterfly visible. Inside were a number of rotten and rusty boxes, but there were at least three that appeared intact. "Tell me you had some pining need to be an atmospheric maintenance mare like Rivets. Did you curse your rotten luck that you missed out on protein recycling duty or an exciting future in waste management?"

"Well. . ." I stammered.

He stood there, staring at me with his lips pressed together.

"Can we hold this conversation until after I'm not irradiated?" I asked with a feeble smile.

"No. No, I don't think so. I think I want to have this conversation now," he said in his firm and irritated voice. I could see that now the dam had been cracked and nothing was going to stop this deluge. "So what is it, Blackjack? If you had a choice to not be in security, what would you do? Huh?" He stomped to the first box, clenched his teeth on the bobby pin, and started on the lock.

And to be honest, I didn't know what to answer. I'd always thought that I was stuck with security, which meant I resented it. To be honest though, it hadn't been a bad job. Taking males out of the population was about the worst it got. There was dealing with the Overmare more closely, but there were plenty of ponies that worked a lot harder than I had whose jobs were far more critical to the survival of the stable.

"I guess you're right. I guess security wasn't that bad for me," I admitted. I was also too tired and feverish to do more than sit on my butt as he worked. "What about you, P-21? Tell me what you wanted to do." He kept his glare on the lock. I sighed. "If you want, that is."

He glanced at me and then opened the lock. Inside were two healing potions and some Rad-X. 'Don't let radiation get you down,' the label read. "I wanted to be a teacher," he finally said softly.

"A teacher?" I winced at the own skepticism in my voice. I just couldn't imagine a male doing. . . that.

"Yes, a teacher." He examined one rusty lock on the second, jammed in the screw-

driver, and gave it a hard twist. With a pop, it opened right up. "Before I was P-1 I tried to learn all I could about arcane sciences. That was how I knew Duct Tape so well; I studied off her as she went through training. I thought that if I knew enough that maybe the Overmare would let me teach. I would have been fine doing both jobs." He opened up the crate and took out two empty syringes and two boxes of some kind of canned meat. "Know what the Overmare said? She said she'd let me teach sex education in my breeding rotation."

I winced. That sounded just like her. I laid down, feeling light headed. My eyes stared at the third container as he attacked the lock with bobby pin and screwdriver. "Still. . . a teacher," I said as I closed my eyes, feeling exhausted. "I bet you would have been good at it. I saw how you were with the Crusaders."

He glanced at me and then carefully adjusted the lockpick. There was a quiet scraping noise as he worked whatever magic he did, then a soft click as the top opened.

Inside were three clear plastic pouches filled with amber fluid. 'Rad-Away, your source of radiation relief,' it proclaimed. "Well, if it's any consolation, I think you were one of the best mares in security. No pony else would have tried to stop Daisy and Marmalade from beating the snot out of a male. And you were the one who came up with the idea to lead Deus out of the stable."

"You have no idea how depressing that statement is," I said as I offered my hoof to him. He connected the end of the pouch to the PipBuck intake and within seconds the bag drained and I felt a tingle running up my leg. The rad meter dropped a bit closer towards yellow. By the time all three doses were inside me, the needle hovered around the middle of the yellow band. I still felt crummy, but a little better than I had before. With luck, I wouldn't lose my mane or turn into one of those ghoulish things.

"I was just being stupid," I muttered, keeping my eyes down. "I have a habit of doing that."

"You have a habit of being reckless, Blackjack. What you did was brave, even with that glowing ghoul. I never would have thought to talk to it or do hoof bumps," he said calmly as he proceeded to dig through the remains of the cart as the drug did its work. Sadly, there were no bullets to be found on a Ministry of Peace sky carriage. He did, however, find a glowing marble in the wreckage of the gazebo. "What's this?"

I held out my hoof and looked at it. Well, it wasn't radioactive, didn't go bang, and didn't seem edible. I dropped it in my bag and frowned as 'Lake Macintosh Memory

Orb' appeared in my inventory. How the heck did my PipBuck know what was it was when I didn't? "No clue. I'll worry about it later." Standing, I had to admit I felt stronger. . . not 100% yet, but better. "So. Does this mean next time I see Watcher I can tell him we're friends?" I was only half serious, but the other half was curious about his thoughts.

"No," he replied firmly, and then gave me a grudging smile, "But we're closer to it than we were."

"Well. That means I'm improving."

Footnote: Level up.

Skill note: Guns (50)

Perk Added: Run and gun – Better accuracy with ranged weapons while moving.

Quest perk added: Minor Mutation: Rad Sight – When under the effects of minor radiation poisoning, gain +1 perception in low light conditions. -15 to sneak, speech when not wearing sunglasses, authority glasses, or mirrored sunglasses

4. Innocence

“Another Donut! Extra sprinkles!”

Stable Overmare’s log 11-#231: There is a threat to my stable and my ponies. A threat within that must be dealt with. Numerous problems plague the stable, and I am certain of the cause: her name is Rivets. When I assumed the Overmare position, as per my right, she resisted me from the very beginning. Patronizing. Insulting. Countermanding and fighting me at every turn. I am the Overmare! Stable-Tec created my position, gave ME authority, but she believes the stable is hers. Worse, she has a significant following among the security ponies. The head of security herself dared countermand my arrest order! Oh, she claimed there was no law, but I am the law! Something will have to be done about the nag. I won’t let her do it to me again.

“Ugh,” I muttered as we walked through the constant drizzle. I’d hoped it would have stopped by now, but it seemed like this rain stuff was going to be going on for a while. “You know, I knew that the Overmare was a neurotic little trotter, but I never realized she thought of herself as the princesses reborn.”

“No pony knew the Overmare,” P-21 muttered. He’d been in a snit all morning, grumbling to himself and giving me sullen looks. Really, was shooting a bunch of radigators so bad? He scowled at every lump of dead grass beside the road. What was he worried about? My E.F.S. would pick up any threats.

Except buried ghouls. . . I started looking a little more closely at those lumps, too. When they continued to not be zombie ponies in hiding, boredom crept back and I hit play for the next audio log. Maybe it’d give me a hint. At least they’d help pass the time.

Stable Overmare’s log 11-#233: If help cannot be found within the stable, then it must be found without. To do that, I’ll need to make contact with the outside, and I think I’ve found a pony to help me with that. Duct Tape from the night shift. She’s quiet, well trained, and obedient. Above all, she’s lonely and naïve. I just need to find the correct leverage to use against her. Perhaps her foal? Or maybe I won’t even need that; I had her move some stable broadcast equipment to Maintenance One, and she did so without question or speculation. Best of all, it infuriated Rivets.

Through her foal? What the hell, would she actually hold a filly hostage to get Duct

Tape to cooperate?

I snorted softly. “I don’t get it. I mean, she always seemed to have it good. The best food and fanciest clothes... why the hell did she turn so crazy psycho like that?” All my memories of the Overmare were of her trotting around next to her mom like a little white shadow dressed all in frou-frou girly dresses and fancy makeup. She was the only filly who got to do that.

P-21 looked at me and then gave a disinterested shrug. “Don’t ask me. There’s nothing in 99 I want to remember.”

The next few recordings were little more than rants against... well... just about everypony. Rivets featured extensively, but my mom was referred to in unflattering terms more than once. Surprisingly, I heard myself mentioned, too. ‘Put on C shift to keep an eye on me for her mother.’ I could have told her that Mom put me on C shift because that was when I’d be least likely to embarrass her.

Stable Overmare’s log 11-#238: Duct Tape has successfully unsealed the stable. I’ve placated her by giving her unrestricted access to P-20. I will miss my trick pony. He always knew exactly how to relax me.

My companion froze in his tracks. I glanced over, but his blue eyes stared straight ahead like he was in shock or something.

I need somepony to go out and find assistance, but who? Her absence would be noticed immediately when she failed to report to her duty station. Oh, of course. A male. He wouldn’t have to do anything hard, merely find somepony and help them make contact. I’ve set up the radio for communications. Oh, I can’t wait to see the look on Rivets’ stupid face when I retake my stable!

He didn’t move a muscle, and I cleared my throat. “Um... so... since you were in the stable, I’m guessing she didn’t send you?” He blinked, then scowled at my PipBuck. “Hey, you’re the one that copied the files!” I said defensively. He huffed, glowering at the city barely visible far down the road. I reached out a hoof to nudge his flank. “P-21? Are you okay?”

He actually jumped away from me, shaking. His leg almost collapsed under him, making him yelp in pain, but he waved me off. “Just! Just listen to your stupid recordings and leave me out of it, Blackjack. I don’t want to remember her or that place. Leave me out of it.” And he dug out a syringe of Med-X and injected it in his leg with a sigh. That always improved his mood.

I almost stopped... but fuck it. He was going to be in a bad mood either way. Why’d

I have to leave Stable 99 with the pony carrying a whole stable's worth of issues? Why not U-14? Least then I'd be in the Wasteland with some fine flank. Sighing at the injustices in my life, I listened to the next few entries.

Stable Overmare's log 11-#240: Success! U-21 made contact with Stable-Tec almost immediately. He has put me in touch with Stable-Tec's director Sanguine... a male, apparently. He verified his position by accurately identifying several Stable-Tec passwords from when the stable was first sealed. He was quite sympathetic to my needs and assured me that, once the stable was back in my hooves, Stable-Tec had no interest in interfering. His only price for assistance was a file in my databases. I suspect deception, but I have no alternatives. I will put Duct Tape on extracting this file.

I wondered why the Overmare made these recordings in the first place. Each of them was damning... but maybe she'd been so power-mad that she didn't care. The next ten were all boring rants about just how the Overmare planned to punish us for our disobedience. Even I got mentioned once for failing to lower my eyes respectfully.

Stable Overmare's log 11-#250: Duct Tape's progress has been infuriatingly slow. I've filled her head with all kinds of ideas about her life outside the stable, as if she'd ever have such a thing. What would be the point of such a life? Who would do her duties here? Still, the foal is besotted with ideas that may be distracting her from progress. Perhaps I should allow her a step outside to refocus her efforts.

Stable Overmare's log 11-#251: What a difference five minutes can make to a pony's focus. I truly believe Duct Tape will extract this EC-1101 for Sanguine now. She's determined to get her reward: a life on the surface with my trick pony. Good. Sanguine is becoming impatient about the delays. I don't want Stable-Tec to do something premature... The less shock to my stable, the better. I've already approached Daisy and the other C shift security ponies and made sure that they'll aid me... except Blackjack, of course. Fortunately, Gin Rummy's daughter remains as oblivious as ever to the stable around her.

I snorted. "I am not oblivious!" Then I tripped on a chunk of asphalt and went sprawling on my face. Okay, maybe a little oblivious. I glanced at P-21 again, but he was doing his best to ignore me now. I remembered Duct Tape being so perky and focused. I'd never have guessed the reason why she was so glad to spend hours in Maintenance One.

Stable Overmare's log 11-#259: Finally... success. Everything is ready. Duct Tape

has completely extracted the files from the Stable-Tec system into one terminal. She nattered on for hours about the size, complexity, and difficulty of extracting the files. I've notified Sanguine that everything is ready. He's sending a representative, Deus, along with his own security ponies. So nice to see another Over... stallion... extending me proper courtesy.

As I recalled, Deus' courtesy involved a few pints of semen. Likely not what she had expected. After listening to this, though, my sympathies were pretty played out.

Stable Overmare's log 11-#260: The traitor! The little traitor! I select her, let her go outside, and she dares insist that I give her her reward? How dare she? How DARE she! She's placed some sort of encryption on EC-1101 and refuses to lift it. Even when I threatened to throw her and her little filly into the recycler! Silence may stay her for now, but Deus is on his way! He'll be arriving any day now! What to do?

"Sounds like Duct Tape took your little 'don't trust her' speech to heart," I said with a chuckle.

"Yep..." P-21 said mirthlessly as the next recording played.

Stable Overmare's log 11-#261: Duct Tape has been disposed of. The sabotaged terminal worked far better than I anticipated. I had to finish her off with my own hooves, but I doubt anypony will check the body. She'll be in the recycler by morning. I've now tasked the entire data management team of the stable with breaking the encryption. I have no time to waste. Deus is outside the stable!

P-21 sighed softly. "And my advice cost her her life."

I watched him, his odd mask-like expression. What was he thinking? "Did you... like her?"

He glanced at me with a cool look. "She liked me. That was all that mattered."

"That's not what I meant. I mean..." Goddesses, could I slog through an awkward conversation or what?

He looked at me and sighed. "She helped me. That's something only one other mare's done. So I'm thankful for that and sorry she died, but no. I didn't like her. Not like you're asking."

The next few recordings became more and more hysterical. Screaming, crying, and desperate rants. Half of them involved the Overmare begging somepony not to hurt her. The other half about how killing 'her' was the only thing she could do. Finally, the last log.

My log... it's time. Sanguine can worry about the encryption himself. Blackjack is meeting with Rivets as I record this; I have no doubt that the coup is imminent. Deus has several dozen ponies ready, and now I must take back what is mine. If I don't act now, then I'm certain that tomorrow I'll not have a stable. I will not be the final Overmare of Stable 99. This is my stable. And nopony shall ever hurt me here again. Not her. Not anypony."

"Hurt her? Who hurt the Overmare? She's the Overmare! No pony could ever touch her!" I sighed and shook my head. P-21 walked pensively besides me, hanging his head a little. "You're blaming yourself for Duct Tape?"

He looked at me sharply, then sighed. "If I hadn't prompted her to act, I wonder if she might have survived the attack."

"From Deus and the others' actions, I don't think any of us were supposed to survive." I sighed as I closed the Overmare's logs. I'd hoped that they'd... I dunno. Give me some kind of hint about what I was supposed to do next. "Well, that sure was worthless."

"Worthless?" P-21 sounded surprised. "That told us a good deal."

Huh? "Well, it just confirmed to me that the Overmare was crazy. What did all that tell you?"

P-21 sighed. "First, that this 'Sanguine' was probably watching the stable before U-21 left it. You know how dangerous this place is. A lone stable unicorn wouldn't have lasted long. Two, Sanguine has some links to Stable-Tec; the Overmare confirmed that with his codes. Third, he clearly had a grasp of the Overmare's psychology. I suspect we're looking for somepony who's spent time in a stable themselves. Fourth, he's got established contacts with Reapers and raiders. Deus might have been brutal, but he also showed restraint rather than charging through and killing everything."

"So we find and kill Sanguine and we win? Sweet. I love a simple plan," I said with a smile, hoping to get one in return. Even a little one?

He gave me a flat look. Was he born with that face?

"Okay. So, probably not simple. What about Deus? What if we find him?"

"Did you forget those guns he's carrying? Not to mention that he might have another small army of raiders and Reapers with him. I'm happy never seeing him again," P-21 said firmly. "I think our best bet is to try and find out what the heck EC-1101 is. If we learn that, it might tell us who Sanguine is."

“Well, you’re better at the thinking thing,” I admitted. There was one other goal on my list, but I really didn’t want to talk about it just yet. If I could, I’d make it a surprise. “For the moment, we need guns, bullets, and caps.”

“Yeah, but it’s not like we’re just going to happen across some place we can just. . .” He trailed off as he saw my grin. His blue ears drooped. “Red bars?”

“That way,” I said, pointing off the side of the road with my security baton. I gave the baton a swing with my magic. The metal was definitely dinged up, but still serviceable. I definitely would have preferred a firearm of some sort, but this would do.

He sighed and shook his head. “Seeking out death and danger for fun and profit,” he said with a sigh as he followed me. “What a life.”

“It’s a life,” I replied, “and that’s what you wanted, as I recall.” That drew a small smile. Keeping a tight grip on the end of the baton I prowled through the woods and underbrush. “But just in case this is something nasty, be ready to run!”

“Again with the running plan. Always a running plan. Never a sneaking and avoid a fight plan,” P-21 whispered as he limped along behind me.

Then I heard the sound of something moving through the brush. Not a bloatsprite buzz or a radhog snuffling or a ghou’s scream. It was. . . clicking with strange beeps. Step by step I advanced through the dead trees.

Suddenly a metallic equine head stepped into a gap between the trees. Then it swivelled and looked at both of us. Its eyes flared bright red and from a port atop its head flashed a bright red beam that left a smoking black line on the leafless trees around us. I remembered Scoodle mentioning roboponies. Well now I had a real killer robot in front of me.

“Keep back,” I said quietly, having no clue how well it could hear us or understand us. Then I hustled to the side, trying to move close enough to bring my baton to bear while avoiding the flashing lines of fire. The rad sickness wasn’t helping, but the machine was slow and its laser had a few seconds’ recharge time between shots.

The baton made a resounding clang of metal on metal as I ran around it as quickly as I could. Despite being made out of metal I could definitely hear the sounds of more brittle interior parts crackling with each strike. Finally my telekinetic backswing crushed the firing port over its head. Something inside whined, and then there was a small internal explosion. It popped and crackled, and then slowly fell over as acrid smoke rose.

“Huh. . . I think I prefer raiders. They at least carry loot,” I said sourly as I looked at the plate on its chest that read ‘Robronco.’

“Well, there might be something worthwhile,” P-21 said as he drew his screwdriver and carefully removed a smoking plate. He carefully withdrew several components; small containers of crushed crystals that were apparently ammo of some sort, something called a ‘spark battery’, and quite a bit of ‘scrap electronics’. Still, it was better than a poke in the eye.

Argh, why’d I have to think that? My eyes were itching like mad!

While he finished, I continued forward towards more red dots. The dead wood ended abruptly at a crumbling concrete wall. At least four more red bars crawled around in my E.F.S. I could hear their dull metallic footsteps on cracked concrete. Slowly I made my way around the wall till I spotted a rusty gate hanging open. Keeping the E.F.S. on the robot I heard on the far side of the wall, I waited till it was passing before stepping into sight. Its eyes flashed red as its head rotated to face me.

I hit S.A.T.S. at once and, as before, unleashed three blows on the machine’s head. Fast as I was as I made the attack, the laser proved faster and scorched a line across my neck. The third blow snapped something vital, and the entire head peeled off. One down, three to go. I carefully peeked around the gate. The three remaining robot ponies were walking much closer together. I swallowed, rubbing the burn along the side of my neck. I’d just gotten my head together. I didn’t want to lose it entirely.

I pulled out the last grenade and swallowed. I could see their bars on the E.F.S., and soon I heard the slow plodding steps. I pulled the stem and telekinetically dropped it on the far side of the wall. There was a muffled ‘crump’ and two of the hostile marks disappeared. Stepping around the gate in the wall, I wasted no time finishing the last one off.

As P-21 emerged from the yellow underbrush, he looked at the wreckage. “These have been outside for a while,” he commented as he nudged the rusted plate with his hoof. All the ponies had dented plates from bullet impacts. “I guess they weren’t made to resist being attacked by some pony with a heavy metal stick.”

“Design oversight,” I agreed as I looked at the large concrete building on the far side of the wall. Two stories and apparently reinforced. Then I noticed the bodies at the door. Not decades or centuries old, these were fresh, pungent, and swollen. I approached the two corpses while fighting the urge to retch, but even that was suppressed at the sight of the wings sprouting from their sides. “Pegasi. . .” I murmured,

having seen them only in books.

They wore simple utility harnesses that seemed pretty pathetic armor. Carefully I searched their bodies, and was rewarded with some tools and a strange boxy object shaped like a pistol. They even had some bottle caps on them and some strange flimsy paper money I'd never seen before. There were also more of those powdered magic gem cartridges.

"Any idea what this is?" I asked, pointing the boxy pistol at the wall. My telekinesis pressed a small button on the handle. With a sharp pop of expanding air, a red bolt of energy shot out and left a singe on the concrete wall. A glance at my PipBuck confirmed: magic beam pistol. I also noted our location: Weather Monitoring Station 4.

"A beam pistol or an overpowered flashlight," he said as he checked it with a soft sigh. "It's been through the wringer too. Starting to rust." He handed it back to me. "Well, you wanted a gun."

"A gun comes with some recoil, sights, magazines, and rounds. This is just weird." I said as I levitated it in front of me. "How am I supposed to aim it?" I sniffed the tip, wrinkling my nose at the tang of ozone instead of the stink of cordite. "It doesn't even smell like a gun."

"Isn't there a firearms rule about not putting the barrel up your nose?" P-21 said as he examined the tools, his muzzle breaking out in a smile.

"It doesn't have a barrel!" I countered, but I took his point to heart. "Well, better than nothing. Ready to go in?" I asked, nodding to the doors.

He looked at the dead pegasi in their black utility barding. "I'm pretty sure these two died trying to get out."

"Well since they didn't have anything expensive on them, we can assume that anything valuable is still inside."

"As well as whatever they were running from," he added. When he saw my grin he gave a soft groan. "Try to be careful, Blackjack."

"Sure. Be back in five minutes," I replied, grabbed the door handle with my magic, and pulled. It barely squeaked open enough for me to squeeze through, and when the door slammed shut I found myself enveloped in pitch black—no, not pitch black. There was some light, despite there being no windows. Everything was outlined in a strange dim amber glow. Emergency lighting? Maybe the pegasi had done

something? Thin, delicate bones crunched underhoof, making me wince at their loud snaps.

I didn't take much time to explore the reasons as red bars began to move ahead of me. The robotic ponies clanked in my direction with more haste than I expected. Nothing for it, I'd have to use the strange energy weapon before they turned the hall into a shooting gallery. I ran towards the first as it stepped into the hallway to close the distance as much as possible before jumping into S.A.T.S. Unlike the robots outside, these hadn't been softened up by time and previous attacks.

I was amazed to get four shots programmed with the S.A.T.S., and, while the blasts were definitely not as tightly placed as with a normal gun, my luck didn't seem to care what weapon I shot. A round went through the beam gun atop the robot and made the machine's head explode in a flash of sparks. As I came out of the accelerated state, another robot walked up behind the remains of the first one. I kept moving, not letting its head lock on as its weapon flashed back and forth across the hall. Blast after blast of my gun's crimson beam melted small glowing holes in the robot's chest. Finally, it too popped and went still, smoking with an acrid reek.

A third was clanking closer from a nearby room. The little dial on the back of the pistol was hovering on E. I backed away, using my telekinesis to try and figure out how to reload the damned thing! Finally I must have pressed something right as the rear of the boxy weapon opened and ejected a smoking cartridge. I levitated out a fresh cartridge of glittering crystals, slammed it into the space, and fumbled to get it closed up and zapping again.

I'd been still for too long. The robot's red searing beam struck me in the chest, scorching my barding and reminding me to move my ass! I zigzagged, my hooves slipping and sliding on bones scattered across the hall, but I succeeded in getting closer and jumped into S.A.T.S. a second time. Four shots transformed the robot into a smoldering ugly statue. Wincing, I took a healing potion to alleviate the burn on my chest. Damn thing hurt. I carefully watched the remaining red tags, but their wanderings were slow and predictable. Not coming to attack, I supposed.

There were more pegasi corpses in the hallway; I found a second energy pistol and more of the magic powder cartridges. I carefully made my way through the ruins of the bottom floor, the magical beam box carefully pointed ahead of me at all times. I found a safe, two ammo boxes, and a locked medical box that I made sure to remember for P-21. I also lucked into a cafeteria and found some delicious Big Mac 'n' Cheese and a working vending machine. Sitting at a desk, I had myself a snack and pocketed the rest. Soon as we ran out of recycled wafers, my cohort would be

getting hungry.

Why are there so many bones in here? We'd come across so many remains that it was hard for me to think of them as ponies. With the exception of Hoss, Granny Smith, and Scoodle, the remains of the dead were so numerous and so prevalent that I just couldn't feel for them as I should. Yet even I felt something off with this concrete building. There were enough bones for a hundred ponies, and lots of them were quite small.

As I reached the stairs at the end of the hall I heard the scrape of P-21 entering. No doubt he'd start on the robots in the hall. Trying to be stealthy, I climbed up the stairs and round the corner at the top. A robot pony immediately turned and started blasting away with its beam of light. I leaped to the side, held down the trigger, and washed my beam over its head and chest till it popped and collapsed.

Another dead pegasus lay nearby. I pocketed his weapon cartridges, a gun that looked better as a blunt weight, and another strange apple grenade with a bright blue band around the middle. The last two red bars were close together, and as I watched them separate I saw a tiny yellow line almost directly between them. What the heck did that mean?

Slowly I advanced down the hall with the laser weapon floating before me. I couldn't hear anything but an odd humming noise, like a vent fan. Reaching the door at the end of the hall, I bit the handle of the pistol, gently gripped the doorhandle with my magic, and slowly turned it, wincing at the grinding noise. I heard the whirr of a robot's magic weapon charging on the far side. I didn't know where the yellow non-hostile was in the room, and I'd be damned if I tossed a grenade around a non-hostile.

"Fuck it," I muttered and ducked down, kicking the door open. Instantly a fusillade of crimson beams swung back and forth across the hallway as I backpeddled and ducked as fast as I could to the next doorway. Two robots stood shoulder to shoulder as they filled the hall with sweeping flickers of death. I fired wildly back at them, hitting but not doing anything critical. By the time I reached the open doorway behind me, I had angry red burns all across my chest and forelegs. I hissed in pain as I took a healing potion and waited in the small closet.

Clicking and clanking, the robot ponies approached towards the doorway. My sole saving grace was this door was too narrow for them to pass through in unison. When the first came into view, my magic beam weapon was at point blank range. S.A.T.S. assisted in four energy shots decapitating the machine. As it fell, the last came into

view. I screamed as I moved back and forth as much as the closet allowed and held the trigger down with my magic. It didn't help much as more lines burned my limbs and shoulders.

The red bolts of energy chewed through the metal plating of the Robronco sentry, and a white glow spread along its frame. It collapsed into a pile of warm ashes and smoldering metal. Letting out a sigh, I collapsed onto my haunches, looking at the energy pistol with a new appreciation. "Well, that's new."

I holstered the energy pistol and trotted into the room the robot ponies were guarding. There were a few more ash piles lying about the interior of the room; I guessed they had to have been either more pegasi or bots. In the room were a half dozen little bays large enough to hold the sentries, so I doubted they were the latter. One wall was dominated by a massive terminal that had clearly seen better days, while a corner held shelves with an automatic pistol and two ammo boxes. I couldn't help but smile as I lifted the far more familiar weapon and checked the slide. Fair condition.

Then I looked at my PipBuck and at the non-hostile reading. It pointed right at the terminal. "What the heck?" I muttered, looking it over with the strange amber over glow that filled my vision. That's when I noticed the grate the terminal sat on. Slowly I looked down through the grate at a crawlspace just barely large enough for a pony to fit. "Hey? Hello?"

"Are you okay, Blackjack?" P-21 shouted from the hall behind me.

I walked along the grate to the corner of the room where a little hatch lay open. "I think somepony's in here," I said as I carefully lowered my head and peeked into the space.

My amber gaze saw the many cables of the terminal, but hiding behind them was a small pony shape. She peeked out around the corner at me, and I gave her my most comforting smile. "Hey. There you are."

Her eyes widened in terror and she moved her head completely out from behind the cable. My smile vanished as I looked at the boxy business end of a magic beam pistol. The yellow mark turned red as she screamed around the clenched handle and my world became filled with red light.

"She shot me," I groaned, my face sporting an ugly black burn that ran from jaw to

ear. It looked like my luck was enough to preserve my eye; was not getting shot in the first place was too much to ask? I looked at the pegasus, scowling. "You shot me! In my face!" I pointed at the burn, making her wince. My already messed up vision was even more out of whack as I waited for the healing potion to take away some of the pain and injury. "What is it with people shooting me when my guard is down, huh? That's twice in two days."

"Blackjack," P-21 said softly. "She was alone, starving, dehydrated... and to be honest I probably would have done the same."

"Is this more of that 'I can't trust myself with guns around you?'" I asked as I sipped the Sparkle-Cola. Given how much radiation I'd sucked up recently, the trace amounts didn't worry me.

"There's a bathroom down the hall. Go look in the mirror," he said as he took out my last bottle of purified water and rolled it to the pegasus curled up in the corner of the room next to the hatch. I don't know how P-21 got her to surrender her weapon, but she did. It was all she'd done since P-21 had patched me up.

I walked down the dimly lit hallway and into the bathroom. Most of the mirror had been broken out, but there was enough left for me to see... what the fuck?

Since when did my eyes fucking glow? Now that I was paying attention to the amber light, it wasn't the result of light slipping through boarded over windows or emergency lighting. The light came from my eye sockets as if I had a little PipBuck lamp glowing in the back of each. "Well... fuck..." I said lamely as I finished the bottle of lukewarm soda. After everything that had happened in the last three days I think I'd finally reached the point of numb acceptance. My eyes were glowing. What could I do about it?

I returned to the terminal room, looking at the pegasus in the corner, "Given that my eyes are glowing, I'd say shooting me was no harm, no foul. This time," I said as I looked at her while she sipped the water slowly. She looked pretty ragged. Her black coveralls were torn and stained with waste. She didn't look like a wastelander. In fact, she looked more rattled than the Crusaders. "I'm Blackjack. He's P-21." She didn't say anything as she stared at me with wary, bloodshot eyes. I glanced at P-21 as he struggled with the locks on the cases he'd found downstairs before looking back at her.

She didn't say a word. Even with my PipBuck lamp lit my eyes must still be glowing. "Look. I'm not going to hurt you. If you want to go, then go." I stood and carefully stepped aside. The silver-gray pegasus slowly started to crawl for the exit as I

walked to P-21 on the far side of the room. I waved my hoof as if coaxing her to go if she really wanted to. I didn't envy her odds alone but. . .

She disappeared down the hall. I let out my held breath. Well, good luck, I silently wished. P-21 glanced up at me and shook his head. "What? Do you think I should have shot her or something?"

"You spared that raider and got shot in the back," he said softly.

"Yeah, and I tried to help her and got shot in the face." In my fucking face! "Still not going to tie her up and keep her as a prisoner. She wants to go, then she should go." I rubbed the burn, feeling the magic healing the damage quickly. I tallied up how much I owed him just on healing potions he'd found stashed away or locked up. I looked at the massive terminal. "So. . . any clue what that thing is for?"

"No idea," he said as I started on my last Sparkle-Cola. Darn things were addictive! Enjoying the warm carrot taste, I glanced back down the hall. Our pegasus hadn't run far. I guessed she had probably encountered those pegasi in the hallway. "It's on a security lockout." He glanced at the piles of ash and the robot recharge bay. "I guess they failed to enter the right password. That activated the sentries."

And that meant there was no chance to hack the terminal without ending the lock-out. "Great. . ." I muttered as I spotted another pegasus skeleton in the corner. . . It wasn't the species, though, that made me curious: it was the sight of the weathered recording cartridge under the bones. Carefully, I levitated it and connected it to my PipBuck. "Maybe somepony happened to mention a security override," I said as I started the playback.

The recording was clearly old, but I heard a dull chuckle. "Yeah dude. Rainbow may be hot but, like, you got no chance man. Dude, isn't she like the spokes horse for mare riders? Heh. . . yeah I hear that. So you check out my score on the last basketball match with monitor one? Shyeah, we kicked tail thanks to yours truly. Hey, what happened. . . ?" Suddenly I could hear a noise with a deep reverberation and a sucking sound that transformed into a roar.

The recording crackled and snapped with static and buzzing voices. Suddenly a male spoke out in a tense, thick voice, "... this is crazy. The Hoof is fucking gone, man! It's fucking gone! There's green... fire shit... like... everywhere! No pony knows what's going on. Fuck man! Game over!" The recording broke off in a harsh crackle that made me wince. After some more static, the buck's voice returned.

"I got a whole bunch of kids from the Fluttershy clinic south of here! We need ponies

to fly them out! Get them to the Shadowbolt Tower? Thunderhead? Somewhere! Come on you fuckers, I know you can hear us. I got a transmitter and power! Fuck! Answer me you fuckers!” He screamed into the recorder, his voice breaking into a peal of static. When it returned he was coughing. “Fuck. It’s so quiet outside. I think the fucking radiation’s getting in somehow. If anypony can hear this, this is Brolly in Hoofington Weather Monitoring 4. I contacted Thunderhead, but they haven’t sent shit to help. They told me to come home. There are kids here who need to be evacuated. Can anypony hear me? This is Brolly in Weather Four!” There was a long pause and then he screamed once again, “Answer you fuckers!”

I stared at the PipBuck, feeling dread prickles up and down my spine. The static crackled for the longest time and when it returned, his voice was a raspy whisper. “Kids aren’t doing so good. I’m not doing so good. Fuck. Couldn’t get to Thunderhead now if I wanted. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I contacted Jack Knife at Weather One and Bluebells at Weather Three hours ago. They were told to abandon too. Think Jack left, I dunno. No pony’s answering anymore. Somepony help us. Anypony.” The recording gave one last crackle and I heard him whisper, “Fuck... they’re fucking kids... fuck...”

For the longest time I thought that was it. Then I heard a grating rasp that rose and fell. It wasn’t static. “Fuckers... fuckers abandoned us... told me... told me to stop transmitting... switched channels on me... fuckers... didn’t give a shit for the kids.” There was a spat of coughing. “Is that blood? Shit... it is, isn’t it? Fuck... Dash was right... I thought... shit... Fucking right... fuck...” With that, the recording continued playing silently for several minutes before I finally stopped it.

Damn it! I’d been fine when the bones were just bones. I didn’t want to think of dozens of foals dying slowly of radiation poisoning while someone, somewhere, casually let them die. “How could they?”

P-21 stared at his hooves with his inscrutable expression. “Maybe... maybe things were so chaotic...”

“They told him to stop transmitting,” I said as I stood. “They told him to shut up and die along with dozens of young ponies! They were organized enough for that!” I sighed, rubbing my stinging, itching, mutated eyes and feeling the tears start. “Fuck. I’m going to have to dig another grave.”

I spotted her hiding in the doorway, sitting down on the floor looking at her hooves. “There was nothing we could do,” she said a soft, buzzing drawl. “After the bombs went off... every pegasus that could get home was recalled. We had to save as

much as we could.”

I felt my temper spike, but P-21 limped in front of me and shook his head slightly. Swallowing what I’d been about to say was like vomiting in reverse, and just as unpleasant. He took a seat, stretching out his injured leg with a sigh. “Come on in here. We’re not going to hurt you.” I forced myself to relax as well.

“Yeah,” I said as I kept the pistols away. When she stepped back in I marveled at how compact and delicate she appeared. Her coat was a soft gray and her purple mane cut back into a buzz. I suppose it was some sort of military look or something. I looked at her uniform and remembered what Scoodle had said. “You’re Enclave?”

“Morning Glory, serial number 221-12-9921, first Volunteer Corps,” she said as if reciting the information. She licked dried lips and I floated what remained of my Sparkle-Cola to her. She took it hesitantly and then drank it slowly. Still, it made her smile. That helped me to relax. “Thank you,” she murmured.

“Volunteer Corps?” I asked.

“The Volunteer Corps enlisted with the Enclave to help with restoring contact with the surface,” she said in a shaky voice. “It wasn’t. . . wasn’t supposed to be like this. They warned us. . .” She looked at the ash piles. “But I didn’t believe them.”

“Warned you?” P-21 gave me a concerned look.

“That the surface was deadly and savage,” she said softly as she rubbed her face with her hoof. “That all surface ponies do is rape and murder and then rape what they murdered.” She looked at the ash piles with a little shiver. “I. . . all my friends. . . we were sent to make contact. . . we had gifts. . . no heavy weapons. No power armor.” She began to shake and clenched her eyes tight. “Oh Celestia! The things. . . they did such horrible things!”

“Sounds like you ran into raiders,” I replied.

“Half of us they slaughtered and ate. Some were still alive. We fell back here when I detected the transmissions. We couldn’t access the system though, and the sentries activated. I. . .” She clenched her eyes shut. “I’d crawled underneath to connect the power. I heard them all die.” She started shaking again.

“Hey. Hey. Breathe, Glory... just take some deep breaths.” I gave P-21 a long look before I tried to put her at ease. “Sounds a lot like what the two of us just went through. Wasteland seems to love tossing one nightmare after another against a pony. So why don’t you just, you know?” I gestured skywards with a nod of my horn.

She flushed and looked away. "I . . . I just can't."

Okay. Psychological trauma AND distrust. I knew exactly what this called for. "Want to do something about it?"

P-21 looked at me and just groaned. Morning Glory glanced at me, then at P-21 in confusion. "Do? What do you mean?"

"If you ran here, those raiders' camp can't be far. I say we go and make sure they don't eat any more ponies," I said with a sure little grin. "Trust me. Hunting raiders is pretty. . . ." I rolled my eyes, tapping my hoof thoughtfully. "Help me out here, P-21."

"Asinine? Juvenile? Hazardous?" he suggested as he passed me the weapons and ammunition he'd scavenged. A nice replacement automatic pistol and some clips of ammo; finally, something I could aim that went bang!

"Nah. . . fun!" I said as I clapped my hooves together.

P-21 sighed, looking mournfully at Morning Glory. "You get used to the madness."

Clearly Morning Glory hadn't quite figured out our style of banter just yet. "You want to kill the ponies that killed my platoon. . . for fun?"

I let out a long sigh. "Actually, no. First, I don't want anypony caught by raiders if I can do something about it. Secondly, I don't like the idea of raiders having beam weapons taken off your comrades. Thirdly, there might be five young fillies in this area and I don't like the idea of them getting captured again. Fourthly, I need caps and ammunition and taking it from murdering scum sounds fine to me." I said as I listed them all off, rolling my eyes in thought. "Oh yeah, and its fun. You'll find that out if you come with us."

"Come with you?" she asked in complete shock.

"Sure. Your friends were attacked and killed. You've been trapped in a coffin under a terminal for a week. I'm pretty sure some part of you wants some payback." She just stared and shook her head. I grimaced. "Not even a little?" Another shake of her head. "A smidge?" I offered, holding my hooves a millimeter apart. She finally gave me the ghost of a smile but still shook her head.

Great. I wagered I was the only pony in the Wasteland who could attract pacifists. "Okay. Well you can stay here and we can come back for you, come with us, or else good luck."

"I'll. . . I'll come with you. I don't want to be alone," Morning Glory said warily, clearly not trusting me. I levitated her beam pistol back over to her. Still looking uncertain,

she took the weapon and slipped it into her holster. That put her a little more at ease.

“Not to be nit-picky, but are all of you armed with. . . well.” I nodded to the dinged up beam pistol. “Seems sorta poor quality.”

“Oh no. The Volunteer Corps are issued surplus arms and armor separate from security and scouting forces.” Armor? She counted that uniform as armor? My security barding was better armor than that! “May I see some of the others’ beam pistols? I might be able to improve things,” she asked warily. I remembered what Scoodle had done with the rifles, so I put the four other beam pistols down and let her get to work. P-21 looked on in interest as she skillfully broke the weapons down and repaired the best of the lot. When she finished, it looked much more impressive. She didn’t even have to slam the cartridge container closed.

“Nice work. Do you normally fix stuff?”

“I. . . I was a student at the Thunderhead academy,” she flushed. “There were some protests. . . nothing serious. Just a lot of us wanting to come down. That’s why the Volunteer Corps were established.” And ripped to pieces by raiders. Convenient.

Something about all of this stunk. “So. . . the Enclave came here to help the Wasteland. They let volunteers like you come and help out. Then they give you old weapons and uniforms. . . did they even train you how to use them?”

“I. . . I had a two week training and survival course,” she said defensively.

Right. And then they sent these volunteers on a peace mission to raiders? If that was incompetence, they deserved a reward. I had a real bad feeling it wasn’t incompetence. Did their scouts miss the severed heads and mutilated corpses? I glanced over at P-21, but he looked grim as well as he gave a little shake of his head. Morning Glory was young, traumatized, but still innocent. Maybe it was just paranoia, but suddenly I understood why Scoodle had been wary of the Enclave.

“Well, your call,” I said, gathering up Brolly’s remains in a bag. Outside, I found a tree and cleared out a hole at its base with my horn. There wasn’t room or time to do anything fancy, so I set the bag into the depression and covered it once again. I levitated a pointed rock and scratched out ‘Brolly’ and ‘He tried.’ on the trunk. I spotted both of them looking at me oddly; P-21 looking approving and Morning Glory simply seemed confused.

“So. Coming with us?” I asked as I checked the automatic pistol and my ammunition. Morning Glory nodded and I looked to her beam pistol, floating several cartridges

to her. "I know you might not like the idea of shooting raiders, but trust me. . . try. Especially if you see me shooting." Red, it's dead. Yellow, be mellow.

There was some irony in that the raiders were based out of a diner along the road from Withers. If I hadn't made that detour we'd be facing much stiffer resistance. As we journeyed back towards the west, I let Glory take some pot shots at the Bloatsprites. She could shoot when she worked up the nerve. I couldn't begin to guess how she aimed a weapon like that with no sights, but between a half dozen bloatsprites and one radhog I was pleasantly impressed.

"So just how is the Enclave trying to help? I mean, I haven't seen signs of swooping pegasi flying over and laying waste to every raider that pokes their heads out," I said, glancing to the sky. Mistake. I staggered so hard I ran into Morning Glory and nearly knocked her over. "Sorry," I muttered, getting my gaze below horizon.

"Well. We're trying to assist by providing food and clothing to the locals around the skyport. There's been diplomatic missions as well." Like her mission to get friendly with a bunch of raiders? What genius thought that up? "We also offer free medical assistance."

That got my attention as I glanced back at P-21's limp. "Really? That's generous," I said. He was in such pain that he just grunted his agreement.

"Unfortunately there's many factions that appear to be quite hostile to Enclave activities. The Steel Rangers in particular have attacked us at the skyport. There's a lot of distrust I simply can't understand. Why won't ponies let us help?" Morning Glory's frustration was clear. Personally I wasn't opposed to the idea of helping folks who needed it, but there was something off with the Enclave's offer. I kept thinking back to the Overmare's recording about this Sanguine giving her everything she wanted.

Generosity didn't come cheap here.

The raiders were based out of a donut shop. A faded brown unicorn held a ring and the chipped lettering read 'Pony Joe's'. How cute, they'd nailed body parts to the hoof as sprinkles. Artistic and grotesque. The PipBuck detected only a sole hostile wandering out the back door. I glanced back at P-21. This would be a lot easier without him giving the alarm. I slowly slid the baton out of the my holster.

"What if he's. . ." Morning Glory whispered hoarsely.

"Innocent? Unarmed?" I looked at the raider as he squatted beside a ditch. PipBuck

read as red. I closed my eyes. What was the difference between me and the raiders, besides that I seemed to have a little more discretion as per my PipBuck? If I didn't have that convenient red bar, would I be as much a murderer as the raiders? "If he gives up. . . fine."

I approached as quietly as I was able, baton floating beside me as the raider let out a rather epic bowel movement. He'd probably have to kill it with a shovel afterwards. Fortunately, he'd brought one with a jagged bloodstained edge. The reek made me gag, but I closed the distance and was quite glad he finished. He muttered something sounding like a language of strung together obscenities as I gripped the baton even tighter and poked him with my hoof. "Hey."

He froze and slowly turned to stare at me. One eye was a swollen, pus dripping mass that couldn't close. The other pupil was so contracted I wondered if he was blind. He slowly grinned, revealing teeth sharpened to points as he started to giggle. "Don't. . ." I warned as his giggles grew louder and louder. "Don't." I repeated through grit teeth, but it was too late. He jerked his head, grabbing the handle of the shovel. I had no choice as I brought the baton down on the back of his head with all the strength my horn could muster. A pulpy noise that oddly matched his bowels filled the air and his whole body jerked and fell flat next to his reeking pile of filth.

I looked at Glory watching in horror and frowned at her. "Happy?" I asked as I pointed at his frozen maniacal grin with the baton. She looked away, and P-21 gave me a look that read simply as 'not fair, Blackjack.' I didn't care; I didn't want to discuss the equinity of any pony so crazy they adopted radical new styles of dentistry to suit their dietary habits. "Now, I'm going in there. If I have to get out fast I'd really appreciate if you could be ready to cover me." I didn't look to see if she'd nod or not. Hopefully P-21 would get through to her.

She'd shoot me in the face but didn't want to kill a raider. Fuck fuckity fuck fuck fuck. . .

I carefully opened the back door to the diner. Old donut making equipment stood coated in black and crimson sludge. The stench coming out the door was so intense that I almost retched. Flies buzzed over every surface, and there was an industrial mixer with limbs sticking out. There seemed to be more than a few wings. Maggots thrived in great squirming lumps that popped underhoof as I moved in as carefully as I could. There knot of raiders seemed to be concentrated in the dining area.

"Squarr! Finish shittin and get in here! Squaaaaaar!" A mare shrieked from the front. "I'm gonna make him eat it. Anyone wanna see him eat it?" Raucous laughter filled

the air as one bar detached from the mass, coming towards the doorway. I looked left and right, and then tried my best to squeeze into the fetid corner between the wall and mixer. I couldn't help but glance in and wish I hadn't. There was some kind of jelly in there. It was moving...

When the mare walked past my hiding spot I saw the floating beam pistol in front of her. Knowing how fast they shot, and really sick of burns, I hit S.A.T.S. at once and brought the metal curve of my baton across her throat. Any warning she was going to make died as the second swing smashed across her face, and I saw with disturbing clarity the orb of her eye burst and spray viscous yellowed jelly across her cheek. I couldn't stop if I wanted to, and I really didn't want to as the final swing finished caving in her eye socket. I grabbed her with my hooves to keep her from falling and lowered her to the floor of the kitchen. The laughter from the far side had drowned out her collapse.

I glanced at the beam gun: just like the ones at the monitoring station. I counted four more bars moving. I doubted I'd be lucky enough to catch another alone. P-21's method had dropped two; time to finish it Blackjack style.

Coming around the corner, pistol raised, I wasted no time going into S.A.T.S. and putting all four rounds into the nearest raider's skull. The third round effectively turned his skull into chunks and I immediately backed away. Red blasts of light peppered the doorway as I waited. Sure enough one came around wearing a welding helmet. The automatic roared along with me as each round scooped out great bloody hooffuls from his chest. After the fifth burst he finally went down.

A metal clang and clatter beside me was all the warning I needed; I dove back into the dining area and crouched low. The grenade's explosion made my eardrums throb and blew pieces out of the remaining mare's neck and head. She tried to draw a beam pistol, but my bullets bit into something arterial and a bloody spray spewed out from her neck as she collapsed, twitching. That left. . . oh fuck!

This raider had something new; over his raider armor he was wearing a harness that slung his weapons at his sides. Said weapons were two large, long, boxy things, bigger versions of beam pistols. I tried to kick into S.A.T.S., but the spell still needed time to recharge. I fired wildly as I dodged back into the kitchen as the beam rifles mounted to his sides ignited a smoking line where my head had been a second before.

I couldn't counter that firepower! I gave ground as he pursued, his shots melting the festering equipment in the kitchen as I emptied my clip. Still backing up I ejected it

and levitated a new one into the breach before diving out the back door.

“Flash! Flash flash flash!” he screamed in glee over and over again as he stepped outside. My automatic suddenly seemed woefully inadequate as he pointed both barrels at me. I kept trying to drill his head with the automatic, but the metal helmet he wore deflected most of my shots.

Suddenly Morning Glory appeared on the roof of the donut shop, pistol clenched in her teeth as she stared down at him. She was shaking so badly I was sure she was going to drop the weapon! She fired a shot that had to be by accident, smoking the gravel besides him. Slowly he turned, looking up, bringing the beam rifles to bear. We’d already established that my automatic wasn’t of sufficient caliber to threaten him.

“Shoot!” P-21 and I shouted in unison.

“Flash!” screamed the raider. The air filled with red beams.

Suddenly the raider’s backpack let out an immense spark and crackle as Glory’s shots tore into it. He screamed as burning components cascaded down his sides. The two beam rifles smoked as he tried to fire at the shaking gray pegasus. “Nooooo! Flash! FLASH!” the raider screamed as he looked at me rising.

“Stop it! Just run away!” Glory screamed down at him. The raider wasn’t listening and bolted for the sharpened shovel. Damn it! I raised the gun again, trying to find some vulnerable place to drop him with as he picked the shovel up in his jaws and began to swing it at me.

I went through a second clip before the sharpened edge sliced almost exactly opposite the burn that Glory had given me. Fuck! Was it too much to ask them to watch the face? I drank my last healing potion and went to reload... two bullets? Two fucking bullets!

Not good.

I used S.A.T.S. to place the shots in his head. Effective, but not fatal. He seemed to not feel the slightest bit of pain as he stabbed the shovel edge into my upper foreleg. I drew my baton, hoping it could finish him off.

Suddenly Glory appeared above him and fired every single shot left in the beam cartridge. One shot seemed to consume him in a bright red glow that fully engulfed him and sent him collapsing into a heap of ash at my hooves. I scrambled back as Glory continued to fire, tears on her cheeks as she landed. When the gun was empty she spat it out, screaming at the smoking pile of ash, “I only wanted to help!

I wanted to help!” She then shook and voided her stomach as she staggered to the side, weeping. I did the only thing I could; I put my hooves around her and held her close as she shook and whimpered over and over again that simple plea.

Me too. The Wasteland made murderers of everypony.

“She’s an emotionally unstable and naive liability, Blackjack,” P-21 said when we’d found a trailer to hole up in for the night. It didn’t do more than keep the rain off us. P-21 had only been able to strip the weapons off the raiders and found a mixed number of rounds and other lousy weapons before he’d gotten sick. I’d try using a beam pistol for now; we had twice as much ammo for that than I did for the automatic. How I missed my shotgun.

“Perfect. She’ll fit in fine then,” I replied. My leg burned terribly from the untreated slash. Without healing potions all I could do was hope we came across some help.

“I’m not saying leave her here. I’m saying don’t let her carry a gun. She nearly shot you as much as that raider,” P-21 argued softly. Glory lay curled on her side on the far end of the trailer in her smelly uniform. I’d give sexual favors for a laundromat right now.

“I’m not disarming her either, P-21. There are three of us and I can’t be the only one shooting. So, unless you’re going to start packing. . . .”

“You know I can’t do that.”

“Right. Well, she can. She just needs to get her hooves under her and some training discipline. As for her ideals. . . what can I say? I might think there’s something off with this whole Enclave business, but she wants to help. I do too. I think it’s the only difference between us and raiders.” I had to admit that in three days I’d fallen into a somewhat frightening eagerness to shoot ponies.

P-21 sighed and looked out the window at the drizzle that clanged against the roof in a soft staccato. “How long is it supposed to keep doing this?”

“Glory said it could go on for hours or even days. Pegasi don’t try and control the weather anymore, remember?” That had been a shock to me. I’d thought that perpetual gray black layer was the sky. Learning that it wasn’t, that it was a mass of clouds perpetuated by the pegasi, really undermined the whole ‘Help Wastelanders’ argument. Glory hadn’t been too happy to admit it either.

I didn't particularly mind the rain. It was cold and wet, sure, but the steady noise reminded me of the hum of ventilation recyclers constantly turning over the thick, stinky air. Even though it was depressing, I liked to think the rain was doing all it could to wash away the bloodstains.

Listening to rain, though, was hardly stimulating, and I quickly found myself bored. I didn't want to listen to the Overmare's craziness, though. I switched over to the radio channels, doubting that there was chance I'd pick up 99's internal radio signals. Still, I slowly clicked one channel after the next, and then blinked as music filled the dingy trailer. Music in 99 was all stately pomp reminding us how we should all be loyal to the stable and Overmare. It was never this sweet, pining music that seemed to drive out the gloom before it.

"... let it go. Let it go. Let it go. Let it go... When pain is all you have, let it go."

The voice demanded every iota of my attention and I gave it happily. I had no idea who she was or what she was singing about, but I knew pain. All of us did. And as she sang on I felt my chest relax just a little bit. For a few brief minutes I was able to leave the Wasteland behind and be someplace else.

It finally trailed away, and a buck gave a long sigh. "That was Sweetie Belle with 'Let it go.' Just giving us all a reminder that sometimes, when things are at their worst, it's best to just forgive and forget. This is DJ Pon3 with a shout-out to all my listeners back east around the Hoof. I know some of you feel like you don't get as many headlines out there, but it's a great big old wasteland. So this news is just for you, Hoofington.

"Turns out the road between Manehattan and the Hoof is just a little safer now thanks to a pair of ponies fresh from a stable. You're gonna love this... looks like the Hoof has just a little more Security than a few days ago. That's right, she's got it displayed loud and proud. She's already carved up the raiders from Withers all the way to Megamart, and she doesn't look like she's going to be stopping any time soon. So here's a big thank you from DJ Pon3 to the Security Mare. Looking forward to see what law and order you bring down next."

What the fuck? "What the fuck? Who the hell was that? How does he know what I'm doing? What..." Suddenly I knew. "Watcher..."

"Watcher?" P-21 said with a little frown.

"It's gotta be. Who knew we left a stable and took down raiders in Withers?" I crossed my hooves and nodded. "It makes perfect sense."

P-21 looked skeptical but didn't argue. Then he cracked a smile. "Security Mare, huh? Catchy."

I didn't feel catchy. I felt pissed! "He just told Deus where we are! The road..."

"Is really long and even Deus probably can't search the whole thing," P-21 interrupted reasonably.

"Well... what about that bringing down law and order? I'm not doing that. And he didn't even mention you!" I had to admit I was more than a little paranoid now. Why had Watcher just told Hoofington what I was up to? "It's like he's making me out to be some kind of law pony!"

"Well, aren't you? You attacked those raiders without hesitation in large part because what they're doing is wrong. You might not be upholding a written law, but you yourself said what they're doing is wrong and you were going to stop them." P-21 seemed to enjoy needling me. "So what's wrong?"

"Cause he's skipping the parts where I fucked up. No mention of what I did in the Boneyard or how I got Scoodle killed." It was like he was making me into some damned folk hero. I didn't want that.

Of course, the question was: how could I stop it?

Footnote: Level up.

New Perk: Friend of the Night - Your eyes adapt quickly to low-light situations.

(Huge thanks to Mr. H for helping me make this ten times better than I could on my own.)

5. Work

“Step one... stay alive. Step two... I dunno. Step three... profit!”

So. That’s Hoofington. The Hoof. Or ‘the Core’ if you were talking about the inner city where all the technological marvels were supposed to be. Glory had been filling us in all morning as we continued along the decayed road. But now, as it rose into an overpass, I had my first look at the city. And I didn’t like it one bit.

The Core of Hoofington lay on an island surrounded by sluggishly flowing green fluids swirling with noxious pink contaminants. With such limited space, the buildings within the Core rose higher and higher until the tops disappeared into the cloud layer. Some buildings ended in broken-off spars, while others leaned precariously against their neighbors. Clouds of green clung to the black, crumbling spires, and if there were pegasi in those clouds... well, good luck to them. The entire Core was backlit by a perpetual green glow that pulsed and flickered like a heartbeat. I could barely make out the skeletal remains of a bridge several miles ahead of us beside a large oval structure.

On the sides of the river were the boroughs, the suburban sprawls that had once held the populace. Far less resilient than the skyscrapers of Hoofington proper, they formed a thick belt of crumbling buildings and blocked roads. With the exception of the highway cutting towards the Core, I couldn’t see a way through it. The river flowed to the north on our left, the sprawl changing into more industrial-style buildings. To the right were more dead trees and raider territory. I could barely make out the top of a large building to our southwest.

But what mattered to the three of us was the massive square building beyond the overpass. The building was surrounded by a berm of scrapped carts, sky carriages, and other debris. Four large turrets clung to the corners, sweeping their long barrels back and forth. Bright neon lights flickered in the rainy gray weather: ‘Megamart’, they said, and beneath that in bright red paint was ‘Finders Keepers’. Unless I was mistaken, this was the headquarters of the Finders.

We approached under the ominous gaze of the turrets. Each barrel seemed a match for Deus as we walked along the crumbling highway towards the gate. The half dozen ponies looking boredly at the small trickle of traffic perked up at the sight of the three of us. “Entrance fee,” a unicorn mare said as she looked over my barding. Her green hide was mottled with the oddest brown and gray splotches.

"We have to pay to get in?"P-21 said skeptically.

"Five caps a head. Ten per Bessy. Or you can just become a Finder for the discount price of a thousand caps. You don't like it, pick a direction and start walking,"she said matter-of-factly.

One of the guards looked closer at me and then broke into a grin. "Hey, Keystone! It's her. Security Mare!" The others took note as well and immediately started to chuckle and talk to each other. I could have found DJ Pon3 and punted him clear over the Core. They were saying it like I was Superpony. "Bottlecap wouldn't mind if we gave her a pass."

The camouflage mare looked at me coolly. "So she killed those psychos at Pony Joe's. That's not so much,"she said as she looked me over. I half wanted to agree with her. I also didn't want to give up any caps just to get inside.

"Hey, I couldn't just let them hang out along the roads. Pretty sure you folks need them,"I said as if it wasn't anything at all, but from the looks I'd scored a win. I grimaced, not happy with the role, but if it'd save me some money. . .

It looked like I'd managed to say the right thing. "Go in. Make sure you talk to the manager. She was talking about you earlier,"Keystone said as she stepped aside and let us in. "Fire a weapon and bring the wrath of Gun down on you."

"Nice job, Security Mare,"P-21 said once we were past, as we approached the front doors beneath the buzzing neon sign.

I snorted. "Shut it."

"You can be sore about the reputation or you can use it. Not both,"P-21 replied casually. I stuck my tongue out at him, much to Glory's surprise.

I was surprised that the interior more resembled a junkyard than anything else. Piles and pallets of scrap lay in carefully stacked rows. There were perhaps a dozen booths with vendors hawking their wares. I saw a drum-fed shotgun and promptly started salivating. There was a crude medical clinic set up over by the pharmacy, and their advertisement of 'radiation purging' appealed more than the shotgun. A row of cots served as a hotel of sorts, and there was a kitchen. Overhead rested 'Gun', a huge cannon mounted in a ceiling turret. I didn't even want to imagine. . . okay. . . in my imagination the sight of it firing was pretty cool, but I'd be happy putting off witnessing the reality. Thing looked like it fired I-beams.

There were also probably as many ponies here as there were in Stable 99. They moved in small clumps, keeping wary eye as they looked around. Some were obvi-

ously raiders, and I had to glance up at Gun to remind myself to behave. Most appeared to be fairly benign, talking and laughing with each other while they swapped stories and goods. Two well dressed fillies were escorted by a dozen body guards as they chattered on about 'slumming'. Six ponies stomping in full power armor were given a wide berth as they seemed dead set on buying every grenade and missile they could get their hooves on. I felt a stab of guilt at the sight of four Crusaders walking out with a bag full of canned goods, though at least they weren't the ones I knew.

"It's a regular slice of the Wasteland. I wonder where the Enclavers are?"P-21 said, frowning as he looked at a bin full of grenades. "Where do they find this stuff?"

"All over,"a lemon-furred blue-maned mare answered brightly as she approached us. She had three bottle caps for her cutie mark. She wore a slightly off-color navy blue vest with a name tag that read 'Hello, my name is Bottlecap, your Megamart Manager.' "Hoofington had more military bases around it than any city in Equestria on account of the enemy constantly attempting to disrupt research and development. After the bombs fell, the ordinance just sat around in hidden caches and arsenals. We pay top caps for any and all war materiel." Her eyes looked at my security barding and she smiled. "Ah, you're the mare who cleared the Manehattan highway!"

Okay. Maybe there was a security discount or something. It was the only silver lining I could see. "Yeah. It's not a big deal. It just sort of happened,"I said with an awkward smile. She gave me a very calculating look that made me shift awkwardly. "I mean, they were just raiders. Anypony would have killed them."

"I'm afraid you're mistaken,"she said as she looked at me with a cool little smile. "Anypony would have given them a wide berth while they tried to extort my caravans. You were the one that shut them down. Perhaps not a big deal to you, but we've lost six caravans in as many months. Trade to Tenpony and Gutternville was down to a trickle." She reached into her vest and took out a small plastic bag filled with caps. "Consider this a 'thank you' from the Finders,"she said as she tossed it to me with a smile.

"Wow. Very generous,"P-21 observed curiously. There was a clear look of suspicion on his face. Was I the only pony in our merry band that tried to look open?

"Well, it was a standing contract. I am fairly sure you'll spend it here, so I'll recover some of it from the vendors. And if it outfits you, well, the more likely you'll bring in profitable goods in the future,"Bottlecap said, looking back at him with an even look

as her explanation mollified him.

I glanced at my PipBuck and saw the amount. Five hundred caps, not counting the miscellaneous junk we'd acquired. I glanced at P-21 and Glory, both of whom were looking around in surprise. I counted out two groups of twenty five caps each and handed them to Glory and P-21. "Why don't you two get something to eat and look around? Maybe you'll find some Enclave ponies," I suggested to Glory.

"No. We're not allowed here. This place is restricted," she said sullenly as she took the caps and turned to walk along the rows. P-21 gave me a curious look before he followed her.

"She's Enclave?" Bottlecap asked with a frown. I nodded hesitantly and she immediately scowled. "Be careful then. You may not realize it –she may not realize it- but she's trouble."

"I doubt she's very dangerous," I replied and got a dry look in return. Okay, Enclave a sore topic. I looked back at Bottlecap and gave her my surest smile. "Sorry about P-21's suspicion. He's dealing with a lot of pain. It's been a rough few days for us."

"Just a few days, imagine that," she replied dryly, arching her brow in a way that suggested I hadn't seen anything yet.

"Yeah. . ." Okay, try not to sound like a complete idiot. "I was wondering if we could get some information."

"Information is a commodity like bullets and armor," she answered back. "Simple questions are easy enough, but if you're looking for something specific then it'll be pricey."

I winced at that. "I have a data file. EC-1101. I need to find out what it is."

"Data analysis? Sweet Goddesses, you know how to jump to the top of the price list," she said, looking slightly pleased at this fact. I showed her the file and she frowned at my PipBuck. "Encrypted?" I nodded and she closed her blue eyes, nodding her head back and forth a little before she concluded, "Ten thousand caps." She looked at me with an even, sober expression. "That includes our processing fee."

Had her expression been anything but professional and serious I would have laughed. "Ten thousand?"

"If you want a safe and reliable job, yes. I can think of cheaper sources, but they'd more likely shoot you and take the data themselves. If you want to buy an answer,

ten thousand caps,”she said with a conciliatory smile. “Sorry, but that’s the honest answer.”

Great. The ‘get the info quick’ plan just went swirling down the toilet. Now I needed to work on a ‘get rich quick’ plan. “Thanks. At least I have a number to aim for,”I said with a sigh. A five digit number. I gave my best ‘Nightmare Moon may care’ grin. “So any suggestions on a way to get ten thousand caps?”

“I assume you want this money relatively quickly, rather than over the course of a lifetime?” Bottlecap asked with an arch of her brow and an approving smile. When I nodded she looked me over. “Well, competent help always demands a price,”she said as she walked to a large bulletin board that was covered with pieces of paper. Some were printed documents, but most were hoof-written. “We don’t just find things. We also handle ponies looking for special help. Sometimes it’ll be retrieving goods, other times it’s contract work like clearing out nests of dangerous wildlife or bounty hunting.”

“Bounties?” I said as I looked over the papers. “You mean killing ponies for bottle caps?”

“Oh yes. That can be quite lucrative... provided you don’t mind letting another decide if somepony should die,”she said as she pointed at a section with a hoof. “Don’t let the language fool you. They’ll all be described as raiders, murderers, thieves, and killers... whether they are or not. Some are. Some aren’t. You decide.”

I needed ten thousand bottle caps, and in front of me I had a wall of opportunity. “Thanks. I’ll have to read these closely.” Actually, P-21 reading them would be a safer bet. . . . P-21... I looked back at the yellow mare. “One last question. My friend was injured a few days ago. It’s really hurting him and he’s going to need some substantial healing. More than just a standing healing potion.”

“Magical surgery’s almost as expensive as data decryption and analysis.” She regarded me for a long moment. “However, west of here is the Fluttershy Medical Center. If there were something salvageable, it would be there. The upper floors haven’t been thoroughly looted or explored. It’s a... difficult place. But shy of going to the Ministry of Peace’s hub in the Core I can’t think of any place it would be available.”

“Thanks, Bottlecap.”

“Don’t thank me, Security. I just gave you a direction. You’re the one that actually has

to do the work. Good luck,”she said as she walked off, hailing two ponies encased head to hoof in metal armor with some impressive multi-barreled hardware strapped to the sides. “Welcome, Steel Rangers! Missiles, grenades, or 5mm ammunition today?” So they were the Steel Rangers? Well it was good to know Deus wasn’t the only one packing cannons.

I stopped by the clinic, where prices were scratched out on a busted slab of black-board in chalk. ‘Patchwork: 50c. Rad purge: 100c. Teeth pulled, 10c each. Worm and parasite removal: 25c. Ask about our stock of drugs, certain to pick you right up. Specials: Dash 75c. Amputations in under a minute or half off.’ The doctor, and I use the term lightly, was a scrawny old brown unicorn with a bonesaw for a cutie mark and wearing a white coat covered in old yellow stains.

I opted for the ‘patchwork and purge special’ for 125c. I unbelted my barding and let the blue and yellow padded armor be lifted from me. Beneath it my white hide was a roadmap of bruises, yellow discolorations, angry red lines, and half healed strips of medical bandages. My neck still ached from the shots in the school and my cheek throbbed from Glory’s welcome present. Bonesaw levitated a pair of spectacles onto his muzzle as he blinked at my injuries. “Well now. Somepony’s been busy? Rad burns. Beam burns. Bullet holes. Lots of healing potion fixes.” He shaded my eyes with his hoof and gave a grim nod. “Interesting. I’ve seen eyes like that before.”

“Really?” Maybe he could fix them?

“Yup. See ‘em all the time on ghouls,”he said with a grim chuckle. “Looks like Security doesn’t come easy.”

“That’s not my name,”I said as my ears folded. “I don’t know why DJ Pon3 called me that, but it’s nonsense.”

He looked at me coolly. “Girl, I’ve been in the Wasteland a while now and outlived my children and grandchildren. If there’s one thing more precious than clean water and bullets, it’s the feeling that tomorrow you’re less likely to die than today. Those raiders might be replaced by some other band, but yesterday we nearly had a party when we’d heard we could send caravans safely to Manehattan again. That might be nonsense to you, but it means the world to us.”

I didn’t know if I should feel encouraged, annoyed, or embarrassed, so I settled with shutting up and letting him get to work. P-21 and Glory stopped by, the former sipping water through a straw as the latter enjoyed a Sparkle-Cola. Both of them seemed a bit taken aback at the sight of me in my hide. Not that I was too embarrassed about that; clothing in 99 was a matter of duty and I’d been fine trotting

around off duty with my mark just hanging out. Bonesaw gave me a cup of some chalky gloop as he went to work with his magic. I had to admit that as scraggly as he was, Bonesaw knew his trade. By the time he finished I felt like I'd just received treatment at 99's medical center.

"Ten thousand caps?" Glory gaped at the pair of us once my treatment was finished. The doc had given me something called Buck, and I had to admit I felt more energized than ever. Glory frowned. "Is that a lot?"

"That Sparkle-Cola was ten caps. So it's the equivalent of a thousand colas," P-21 said calmly.

Glory winced. "Yeah. I guess that is a lot." Then she thought for a moment. "Well. There might be a cheaper option. I'm pretty sure that if we got to the skyport, the Enclave might be able to crack the encryption for free. I'm sure they'd be happy to in exchange for returning me." She frowned, rubbing her mane as she rolled her eyes a little. "I'm... just a little unsure of how you get to the skyport from here though. I think it's east... ish?"

"That's... a possibility." Maybe once I knew more about the Enclave than just two opinions. Morning Glory, I knew, would have happily helped. When I thought about Brolly's last broadcast, the clouds, and what had happened to the Volunteer Corps, I had doubts about the rest of the Enclave. Then I remembered something. "Glory, who is Rainbow Dash?"

Her eyes went round with shock, lips pressed close together as if trying to keep from blurting something out. Finally she stammered, "Rainbow Dash? She... ah... oh my..." Clearly this wasn't a topic she expected to discuss. "Well, she was the greatest heroine of the pegasi during the war... but... well..." she looked at me sadly, "When the bombs fell, she wanted us to go down to the surface and help."

P-21 looked at her in confusion. "So what's wrong with that? Isn't that why you're here?"

She shook her head firmly. "I want to help now, but she demanded the pegasi fly down and help despite the magical radiation of hundreds of balefire bombs poisoning the atmosphere. Tens of thousands of pegasi would have died, or more... We'd already lost Cloudsdale, so the pegasi council refused. She left... and probably died of radiation poisoning," she said quietly, looking at her hooves. "Some ponies really respect her for that, but..."

"I'm guessing you don't?" I asked with a little smile.

She sighed with a little frown, shaking her head. "If she'd stayed and listened to the council, she could have shaped things for the better. The Enclave was established to protect the pegasus people, and they do. But..." She glanced around the Megamart. "Well, maybe if Rainbow Dash hadn't left then the Enclave would have started helping the surface sooner. Instead she left and it took two hundred years of petitions and peaceful demonstrations for the Volunteer Corps to do what she'd wanted us to do right after the bombs blew." She finished drinking her Sparkle-Cola.

I had to admit my mane was itching in curiosity. "So, what's life in the clouds like?"

Again, clearly not a question she expected. "Um... it's different. That's all I can really say," she said softly. "We're not supposed to discuss Thunderhead. It's all classified." Huh, go figure. Secrets for her, suspicion from him. I could tell I had a long way to go on this whole making friends thing. P-21 still wasn't even willing to carry a gun; he still saw me as embodying all the fucked up shit he'd endured in Stable 99.

Time for a topic change! "So P-21. Have you seen their little bulletin board? I'm pretty sure if we can knock out some jobs, sell any salvage we don't need, and get lucky then we might be able to get that ten thousand caps pretty quick." Quick hopefully meaning that we wouldn't need months of searching. I really doubted we could evade Deus that long, particularly if that stupid DJ was giving my position away every other broadcast. I pulled out a couple the slips of paper and slid them to him. "I was hoping you could help me pick?"

"Right. Get rich quick. That's a plan that always works out," he replied sardonically, but took the papers. "Okay... kill so and so... no. No. No." he looked at one oddly, arching a brow, "Okay... kill and defile... No. Defile and kill? Ugh. What is wrong with these ponies?" He then frowned as he smoothed out a crumpled note written on the back of a lottery ticket. "This might be okay. Some mare wants us to collect radscorpion venom glands."

"Oh? To make anti-toxin?" Glory asked curiously.

"Casserole," P-21 answered with a small roll of his eyes. Glory mouthed the word in bafflement as P-21 went on. "Apparently they're delicious and nutritious. She's paying twenty-five caps each. Six hundred caps if we can bring her twenty. Apparently there's a pit west of here that's full of them."

"What's a radscorpion?" I asked, glancing at Glory.

"Well, I heard they're like scorpions... only bigger."

“Great. So what’s a scorpion?”I asked with a crooked little smile.

Clearly she wasn’t used to facing my level of professional ignorance. “Um. . . a bug. Well, technically an arachnid, but. . .”

I stomped my hoof, cutting her off. “Ahah! Bugs. I can kill bugs. Bring on the caps!” No moral ambiguity there. “What else you got?”

He sifted through more. “Murder. . . murder. . . not enough caps. . . murder. . . murder. . . wait. Salvage.” He lifted the yellowed printout. “Ironshod Firearms R&D center. The poster wants us to get some components from their maneframe. Bonus if we can extract any blueprints still within the system.”

“Great. So we get to the maneframe, rip out the blueprints and yank any spare parts, and get rich!” I declared, getting wincing from both of them. “What?”

P-21 looked at Glory. “Can you remove the parts?”

“Well. . . I mean. . . I know the basics. Maybe?”Glory said with a sheepish smile as she tapped her hooves together. “Probably better than just yanking them out.”

“That would be a thousand caps, plus two hundred per blueprint.”P-21 said calmly as he fished through some more. “Huh. This is a recent one. ‘Time sensitive.’ Two thousand caps to remove squatters at the Fluttershy Medical Center.”

My ears immediately perked. “Remove? As in kill and mutilate?” Glory looked at me with some concern. “What? You’ve heard these contracts. The mutilation’s always implied.”

“It just says remove. Doesn’t say they’re raiders like all the rest so it might be legit.”

“Well, we should give it a shot, then. After that, we can poke around. We might find something valuable.” I tried to keep my voice as calm as possible, but P-21 still looked suspicious. . . okay, he usually looked suspicious. Honestly, what was the deal? You round up a guy for summary execution and they never trust you again? Well, if we found something to help his bum leg, maybe then he’d start thinking of me as a friend rather than ‘stable reminder’.

“Okay. So we stomp some bugs, yank out some wires, and roust some squatters. How hard can that be?”I said with a grin at the other two. P-21 covered his face with his hoof while Glory clearly seemed to have some doubts. “What?”

“She just had to say it,”P-21 muttered.

"I just had to say it!" I shouted over the chittering, snapping horde that was advancing at me. The drum-fed combat shotgun I'd picked up for a hundred caps roared over and over again as I retreated around the gravel pit, a half dozen of the radscorpions clawing at me with their pincers and stabbing with their venom-tipped stingers. I couldn't miss at this range... but I also wasn't having the best of luck piercing their hides.

S.A.T.S. had finally failed me too. The targeting and time manipulation spell might have slowed things down, but it didn't stop time. By the time it finished two of the radscorpions were dead, but the remainder had put new holes in my forelegs with their razor-sharp pincers. I was going to have to visit Bonesaw again when this was all done. Fortunately, their barbed tails hadn't penetrated my barding yet.

The gravel pit was filled with rusted machinery that made Morning Glory's job infinitely harder. She had to swoop under and around the girders, busted conveyors, and decaying equipment to try and follow me as I blasted ammo like crazy. She proved much more adept with the beam pistol fighting insects than ponies. I had no clue how she could aim the boxy contraption clenched in her teeth, but the soft 'crak' of each shot mixed well with the throaty 'boom' of my shotgun.

"This is getting out of hoof!" P-21 called from the lip of the pit, watching through a pair of binoculars. While I really wanted him to get a gun and join in the fight, I was glad for any help right now. "More are coming out of that cave, Blackjack!" he yelled as he gestured to the far wall of the gravel pit.

"Glory!" I yelled, leaping aside as one got close enough to jab me with its stinger. It was with some satisfaction that my return shot took its tail off. Now if it just didn't have claws, pincers, or razor sharp mandibles... "Flash 'em!"

The small pegasus blushed furiously, but the term was appropriate enough. The radscorpions didn't seem to know how to attack a flying enemy. Meanwhile, her beam pistol rained down more shots to keep them off the grounded and more munchable pony. The flashing shots kept them disorganized, and I took some satisfaction when her shots killed one of the smaller varieties.

I tripped over some rusty equipment and flailed as I struggled to stay on my hooves. One of the radscorpions pounced, and I rolled onto my back while kicking with all four hooves to try and keep all its nasty pointy bits out of myself. Fortunately, I didn't need my hooves to fire my gun. I floated the barrel right against the scorpion's head; a single shot transformed the head into a spray of green globules and shattered chitin. If I could just keep them off me this could be easy; they didn't seem to realize

the shotgun was the real threat, not me. I kicked the corpse off, and the remaining radscorpions shied aside long enough for me to get my hooves under me.

I turned and ran, feeling nicks to my flanks as I took a healing potion, telekinetically unloaded the spent drum, and levitated a fresh one from my pack. Smacking it in place, feeling the magic take away some of the pain from my injuries, I turned once more and laid down a rain of buckshot that eroded the tenacious arachnids. Finally the last one dropped and I was able to go help Glory. I was quite glad she'd managed to keep them off me as I ran in towards the confused, milling mass. They were already worn down by the time I got there, too; half a dozen shots finished the rest of the chittering vermin.

"Okay. That wasn't so bad," I said with a laugh as Glory landed beside me.

"That was terrible!" she countered. I decided not to tell her what I'd seen inside Pony Joe's. I'd take fighting bugs over smelling that any day.

Why'd the ground just move? "Look out!" I screamed, seeing flashbacks of ghouls exploding from heaps of bone as I knocked Glory aside. From the middle of the pit heaved the largest radscorpion I'd ever seen! It was as large as three ponies combined, with pincers large enough to snip my limbs and head like a daisy... well... pictures of daisies. I always thought they were flimsy looking flowers... but why was I thinking about flowers now? Its tail struck with such force that I could imagine it going right through me.

"Run away!" We didn't have anything that could harm something like this. The problem was, for me at least, that the only way out was behind the giant radscorpion. Worse, the thing was fast! I'd expected something so big to move ponderously, but it skittered after us with tenacity and swiftness. The only thing we had going for us was its size and the wreckage in the base of the gravel pit. A few shots revealed that I was right that the shotgun and beam pistol did nothing to it.

Still, I had one ace in my pocket. I fished out the grenade with the blue band. "Eat this!" I shouted as I telekinetically shot it right at the beast's maw. Eating was this thing's forte, and I pulled the stem right before it disappeared into radscorpion's mouth. Five seconds. Ten... why was Glory looking at me like that? "What?"

"That was a shock grenade!" she yelled as the giant radscorpion scurried around towards us.

"A what?"

"It only works on robots!" she screamed at me.

“Who makes a bomb that only works on robots?” I screamed back at her. “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever. . . look out!” I yelled as its tail shot out through the wreckage and nearly took Glory’s head off. I kept looking for some opportunity to get past it and run out of the gravel pit, but it kept moving left and right. I could only fall back as it moved me towards. . . the cave. . . oh hell no! “It’s herding us!”

“What?”

“It’s pushing us back towards that hole.” And once in there I seriously doubted I’d last long.

“Let me fly you out!” Morning Glory yelled as the giant radscorpion was tangled in some rusty cabling from a steam crane. There weren’t enough words to express my skepticism, but then there also weren’t enough words to stress how much I really didn’t want to be in that pit.

“If you think you can,” I said as it scurried towards us. I felt her bite the back of my barding behind my neck and felt her hooves hook into my straps. Her wings beat furiously and I was stunned as we slowly rose up into the air.

Rising: good. Slowly: not so good. The giant radscorpion jumped up on the side of the steam crane and snapped its tail out. Morning Glory cried out as the barbed tip bit deeply into her flank, and gravity returned with a vengeance. Had I fallen to the ground I probably would have broken something vital. Instead, I landed on the roof of the huge steel crane. I looked back to see Morning Glory fluttering down to the floor of the gravel pit. The radscorpion turned and started to scuttle towards her.

I saw a teal filly torn in two before my eyes.

“No!” I bellowed as I ejected the drum, and slammed in a fresh one. I only had a dozen or so slugs. They’d do the job or it wouldn’t matter. I jumped from the roof of the crane and landed right in the middle of the giant monster’s back. Crouching low on the middle of its heaving back, I triggered S.A.T.S. as I pressed the barrel against its tail. The slugs tore into the meaty appendage with a spray of sour yellow flesh and greenish black ichor. A third shot severed the tail entirely, and more importantly made me its first priority.

I jammed my front hooves into a groove in its armored carapace, feeling my limbs squeezed almost to breaking as it bucked and squirmed wildly. Its claws weren’t quite agile enough to simply pluck me off so instead it swept the claws back and forth over its back to knock me loose. I ducked my head down, gritting my teeth as I waited for S.A.T.S. to recharge enough to chance a shot. I locked in a blast that

caught the radscorpion at the base of the pincer and took it completely off. When it finally flipped over on its back to scrape me off, I kicked free and rolled in the loose gravel, screaming as I rose to my hooves and charged the monster. I wanted every remaining slug to matter as I closed to point blank range and opened fire.

It attempted to shield itself with a claw, and I had just enough charge in S.A.T.S. to target that limb as well. The shotgun's roar stretched out as the black pincer spun off in a slow arc. "Die! Die! Die!" I screamed again and again as I pulverized its head with my three remaining slugs. Finally I reversed the spent weapon and smashed the butt against whatever goop might have constituted a brain stem. I didn't stop until it did. In fact, I might not have stopped even then if P-21 hadn't yelled to snap me out of it.

"Ow... ow... ow..." Morning Glory cried as she limped over to us. "No offence, but I really am starting to dislike the surface."

"Join the club," I remarked, then saw their looks. I was splashed almost head to hoof in radscorpion bits. P-21 gave Glory one of our healing potions, but even though the hole in her flank right above her sunrise cutie mark closed, she still didn't look so good. "Are you okay?" I asked her.

"Yeah, sure. I'm just a little light headed; hope it's just blood loss. I'll be fine," she said as she took a seat.

"When we get back, I'm going to find you some decent armor," I promised. "That uniform you've got is worse than useless."

I had no idea what constituted a 'radscorpion poison gland', but apparently P-21 did. He and Glory went from scorpion to scorpion collecting them. It looked like we'd be making that bonus. Meanwhile, I headed over to the cave... more of a pit in the wall, really. Dozens of bones and other debris filled the cavity. Mostly earth and unicorn ponies, but there were two picked-over pegasi too. I took the time to sift through with my telekinesis and was rewarded with an assortment of ammunition; two energy cartridges, a hoof sized energy drum called a 'micromagic cell', and a workable bolt action rifle. I also found a Crusader's cape. There wasn't much of it left, but I still saw the rearing white filly on the stained blue patch. Carefully I tore it from the scrap.

Part of me wanted to wear it. Even though my mother was still alive, I doubted I would see her again, but then I thought about Scoodle and Boing. I thought about asking P-21, but... I couldn't keep using him as my ethical barometer. I owed the Crusaders. Carefully I took the patch and slipped it into a pocket.

“Blackjack!” I was really starting to hate people shouting my name. I ran back out and saw P-21 kneeling over the prone gray pegasus.

Damnit! She wasn’t fine. “She’s poisoned, isn’t she?” I demanded as I ran to them. I wanted to hug her and kick her.

“Sorry,” she said weakly. “I said I hoped it was just blood loss.”

I hissed softly through my teeth. I couldn’t shoot, kick, or beat poison out of her. “What can we do?” Because we had to be able to do something. If I just had to sit here and watch her die then I would completely lose it.

“I could synthesize an antidote. One poison gland. . . one healing potion. . . but I’d need lab equipment. . .” Morning Glory said softly, her breathing labored.

I looked up to the west at the large brown building that my PipBuck identified as the destination for the next job. “P-21, R&D means research and something, right?”

“Development, yeah.” he said as he followed my look.

“Let’s go.” I said as I loaded a fresh drum into my shotgun. Morning Glory needed a lab, and I would find one. We weren’t going to lose another pony on my watch.

Ironshod Firearms; I could have worked for these ponies. I really could have. Just looking at the faded pictures of firearms sitting over desks was enough to make my insides moist. Especially at the sight of the clip-fed IF-88 ‘Ironpony’ combat shotgun. Now that was a glorious-looking weapon! Still, I had no time to admire their works when it seemed like every automated turret and Robronco sentry was out to render us into glue.

“I want that gun,” I shouted, my buckshot peppering the head of a sentry pony as I advanced on a grand unofficial tour of the premises. “I want a lab first, but after that I want an IF-88 ‘Ironpony’. Can I have one?”

“I’m sure you do,” P-21 said as he carried Morning Glory on his back, watching as my second shot destroyed the sentry. “Ask your mother.”

“She’d never let me have one.” It was crazy. I was crazy. Every second I had to keep moving or I’d look at Morning Glory. I had to joke because if I thought about Glory. . . without waiting for S.A.T.S. to recharge, I hopped right over the blasted sentry and into the next room. A sweep with my gun and a check with my E.F.S.

and I was moving on to the next hallway. Jumping through the next door I heard an ominous beep underhoof.

I glanced down just in time to hit the override button on the mine with my magic. That sent prickles up and down my spine. I'd help nopony if I got us blown up. Levitating the mine into my gear, I moved through this hallway with more care, finding two more mines hidden under debris. The two were so close together I detonated them with a shot just to move faster. Passing bathrooms, I moved into a large production area.

"Greetings, zebra scum! Time to get wiped!" A metallic voice cheered with gusto as a multi-limbed hovering robot lowered down and sprayed fire across the doorway.

"Wipe this!" I shouted, the moment's levity leaving me feeling raw as I moved under the bot, firing into the levitation talisman built into the base. With a sizzle of sparks it collapsed behind me, and I finished it off with some more bullets to the central processing matrix.

"The labs might be on the second floor," P-21 suggested as he looked up the stairs with their narrow catwalks. What kind of pony designed places like this? Still, we'd only seen offices and this manufacturing space on the first floor.

"I'll take her." I said as I carefully transferred her from his back to my own. She felt like she was burning up. That was good. . . I'd take feverish and alive over cold and stiff. Using my telekinesis to hold her in place I ran up the steps as fast as I dared.

For once something went our way. Passing through a door we found ourselves surrounded by lab equipment. . . and spent shells. Lots of spent shells. I almost dropped Glory as my hooves skidded beneath me. There were reloading benches, work tables, and lab equipment. Some of it was smashed but... "That's the stuff you need, right Glory. Glory?" I gave her a telekinetic slap. "Glory!"

She stirred and looked around in a daze, muttering softly, "No. I don't want to do this anymore." Her pupils were unfocused as she stared around, "No more weapons. Please. . ."

"Glory! Antidote. You said you can make one?" I gave her a little shake.

"Antidote. . . why. . . wouldn't make any sense. . . it'd need to be an antibiotic. . ." she muttered weakly. I gave her another slap and relaxed a little as her eyes focused on me. "Stop. . . stop slapping my face. . ."

"You shot my face. Tell us how to make an antidote," I said as P-21 checked the lab equipment and burners.

"Poison gland... mix with a type A or B healing potion... simmer... filter the extract... inject..."she murmured in a daze.

"Please, please tell me you understood that?"I asked P-21.

"I think so,"he said as he got to work. He dug through his bags and extracted a used needle, sterilizing the tip on a burner flame. "Did you get the impression she's more than just a good-intentioned idealist?"

"I don't care. She helped us. We're going to help her,"I said sharply as he worked. This was NOT the time to bring this up with me.

"But..."

"Enough with your suspicion!"I yelled as I rounded on him. "Right now she needs our help. I know you don't trust anypony, but we are going to do this." Clearly my outburst shocked him. I took a deep breath and sighed. "Look. I know she's Enclave. I know she says she wants to help. I also know I'd love to see what the sun is really like. But letting her die isn't an option for me."

"I..." He looked over at her and then sighed, "I wasn't going to let her die. I just... why do you trust her? You trust everypony. Watcher. Bottlecap. Even the Crusaders. Morning Glory. You even trust me when I've told you that I want to shoot you."

I looked at him as he worked to mix the gland and the healing potion. "I don't know. I can't help it. I just accept people until they try to kill me or hurt somepony else." Maybe it was an effect of 99. There was no real chance for guile there; everypony knew everypony and even deep secrets were common enough knowledge. The closest you came to deception was bluffing at poker. With the exception of the Overmare, I probably knew the dirt and flaws on a hundred different mares in 99. "I just believe that ponies are more likely to help than screw each other over."

He chuckled softly. "Just what the wasteland needs: an optimist."

I sighed and rolled my eyes. "P-21..."

"I mean it,"he said seriously, surprising me. He instructed me to fill the syringe since my magic was a touch more precise than his mouth and hooves. Once filled, we injected it into her leg. A minute later she shuddered as her breathing deepened. "You frustrate me, annoy me, and sometimes scare me half to death, but you also impress me terribly from time to time."

"So does that mean next time I talk to Watcher I can tell him we're friends?"I asked with a smile.

“Closer to friends,”he said as he held his hooves a millimeter apart. “About this much.”

I laughed and shook my head. “Okay. Good to know I’m making progress.” I sighed as I finally returned to actually paying attention to my surroundings. There were a number of red marks on my E.F.S. “I’m going to clear the lab and see if I can find the maneframe.”

“Right. Don’t try and take parts out of it,”he said with a half joking, half serious smile.

I proceeded further into the lab, kicking brass and shotgun hulls with each step. I had to admit I was glad nopony had made it up here before us. There was a veritable cornucopia of ammunition up here. I passed by ammo crates with handgun, shotgun, and rifle ammunition. Several of them had markings I’d never seen before: red, orange, green, blue, and black bands. And here I had a number of sentry robots to try them out on!

Red proved to be some sort of incendiary that seemed rather futile. An orange shotgun shell, on the other hoof, exploded on contact like it were a grenade! Perhaps not so large, but still impressive! Green just splattered some sort of goo all over the metal. Then I fired a blue shell at a turret. There was an electric flash and then the turret just stopped. I looked skeptically at the disabled device and then at my gun. At first I’d been impressed. Then a minute later the damn thing powered back up again and I had to disable it the old fashioned way: with buckshot. Black simply fired a bunch of tiny sharpened nails that bounced right off the armor of the few remaining sentries.

I got to one door and immediately froze. I could feel the tingle in my skin even before I could hear the clicking of the PipBuck on my foreleg. Whatever was behind the locked door, I could live with the mystery. Finally I cleared the last turret and discovered an office. ‘Dr. Trottenheimer. Research Lead.’ was written on a tarnished plaque on the front. Inside were a safe and terminal; I’d leave them to the more reliable hooves of P-21. A unicorn skeleton sat in the chair, an unusual pistol on the floor next to it.

As I looked, however, I noticed the bones appeared... wrong. Like his skull was made of wax and left too long near a heating duct. The hole in the skull didn’t look blown out, but instead appeared melted. I reached out with my magic and carefully lifted the gun. I’d never seen its like before, but something about it made me squirm. I put it in my duffelbag. Most ominously, perhaps, my PipBuck identified it as simply ‘Trottenheimer’s Folly.’ Then I looked at the wall the exit wound pointed at...

Like most buildings in the Wasteland, Ironshod Firearms R&D was ridiculously overengineered. I might not know the first thing about construction, but there were some walls with three inches of armored plate squeezed inside a foot of reinforced concrete. It was made to withstand missiles. So when I walked to the hole in the wall, I could only stare through the glassy hole that passed through the armored office and the exterior wall of the room beyond that. I glanced back at Dr. Trottenheimer's corpse, then looked back at the hole. What the fuck kind of bullet had done that?

It was an hour later when I swapped shifts with P-21 so he could work his lock-picking magic. He passed me a ratty old magazine with half the pages falling out. Apparently, it was some sort of 'cook book', though it had some pretty odd articles like 'Plastic explosives and you' and 'How did Pinkie Pie foil the Prance bombing? Three theories.'

Glory's breathing had slowed and deepened, and it was a few minutes after P-21 left that she finally opened her eyes. "I'm alive?" she asked quietly.

"Does this look like the afterlife?" I said with a snort. "Yeah. We flipped a bottle cap and it landed carrot up, so we had to save you," I said with a flippant grin.

"You flipped. . ."

"A joke," I explained. "Don't Enclavers joke?" I asked, arching a brow.

"It's just Enclave ponies, Blackjack. Not Enclavers..." Morning Glory looked away. "And no. I don't suppose that we do," she said as she slowly sat up, holding her head with her hooves. "Ow... ow..."

"Headache?" Stupid question. I fished in my bags for a bottle of Sparkle-Cola and levitated it to her, deftly flipping off the top and pocketing it. She smirked as she held it in her hooves and took a drink. "So. You said some things while you were out of it that made P-21 curious."

Instant evasive look. Not good. Worse, she looked upset. "I did?"

"Something about 'no more weapons'? I mean I just found it ironic given the nearest lab we found was a munitions laboratory, but P-21 was a little more curious," I said softly, hoping to coax her into opening up a little.

She closed her eyes, looking away. "I... I don't want to talk about it."

"That's fine. Just fine." P-21 wants to shoot me for reminding him of home but he doesn't want to talk about it. She did something with weapons in the Enclave and doesn't want to talk about it. I'd give my left leg for somepony without a dark and troubled past. "Just, if you ever do, I know that I'd be glad to hear it." I said as I rose, leaving her to her Sparkle-Cola.

"I didn't have a choice," she said to my back, softly.

"Excuse me?" I looked back at her with a politely curious expression.

She stared down at the fizzy carrot flavored water. "I didn't have a choice. In the Enclave... if you have aptitude then you're... encouraged... to accept training and an assigned job in your field." She sighed and closed her eyes. "My aptitudes were in technical engineering and medical procedures. I never worked on anything critical, but there was always... talk. Talk about how something could be weaponized. Talk about how something could be used for the Enclave's security." She looked back at the bottle. "I didn't like it."

"So you couldn't just quit?" Gee... looks like stable 99 wasn't so unique after all.

"I could, but... It would have been complicated." I could tell she wasn't going to elaborate past that. "So I transferred into the Volunteer Corps. Got my two weeks training and came down here."

I gave a crooked smile. "You know, some day I'd really love to hear about life in the Enclave. Compare notes and all that?"

"It's... I can't. Please... it's not that I don't want to," she said softly as she stared at her hooves. "It's that I can't. If they ever found out I broke that protocol... I have family." Her lavender eyes begged me to understand. "They'd be investigated. There'd be inquiries. My sister might lose her job. My father would certainly be disgraced. I can't talk about it. Not about Thunderhead or what I did there. Nothing." She covered her face in her hooves. "It's not that I don't want to tell you. I can't," she said as she gave a snotty sniff.

I felt that if I pushed right now I could make her crack. My mane itched just right to get some solid answers. Instead I sighed and brushed my magic along her purple mane. "Don't worry about it. I get it. And I'll tell P-21 to drop it as well." So it looked like I'd be putting up with secrets for a bit longer. I rose and stretched. "Finish that off, and then do me a favor; take three or four of those glands and mix up a few more doses of antidote. I'd like to avoid doing this again." She smiled and nodded. Sure, we wouldn't get the full bounty, but I'd live with that. We might not live without

it.

“I’m going to go find P-21. Find out if he needs any help.” I had no idea how I was going to help him crack terminals or locks, but hey. It sounded better than saying ‘I’m useless unless there’s something to shoot.’ Leaving her to recompose herself, I headed back to the doctor’s office. While I walked I levitated out the pistol. I’d never seen its like, and the design was absolutely bizarre. I couldn’t find a place for a clip, so it couldn’t be an automatic as I had assumed. The caliber was huge; almost as big as my horn! It seemed as if the pistol had been armored. It loaded from a breech like a break action shotgun, but clearly it’d been engineered for precision.

Well, worse came to worse I could hit someone with it. It had a value of more than two thousand caps, but I couldn’t imagine it would fetch that price if I didn’t find bullets for it.

“So... any luck?” I asked as I sat on the desk, crossing my rear hooves as I perched upright, getting a distinctly odd look from P-21. I noticed a little plaque on the desk. I have become death, destroyer of worlds. Creepy.

“I’m on attempt sixty-one,” he replied with a soft sigh, returning his gaze to the terminal. After a moment, he suddenly he brightened a bit. “And... apparently 62 is the charm.” There was a click, and the safe in the corner opened up. “There are some journal entries here. Want to read them while I see what we have?”

“Ugh... I probably shouldn’t. It’ll just depress me,” I said, but did I mention I hate being bored? I really couldn’t help myself as I rocked forward onto my hooves and trotted around the desk to read the journal entries off the terminal.

Entry 1> I am writing these entries in the event that I am detained or have my memory modified by the MoM. My move from Horizon Labs to Ironshod Firearms is jarring, to say the least, but vital to my safety. G.B. is doing everything he can to protect myself and S.S. from the director. I fear it may not be enough. B was quite thankful to get an intellect such as mine on his R&D staff, but I’ve noticed considerable resentment of my addition from the old team. That doesn’t matter; though the new work may be far below my abilities, it is at least enough to provide for myself and my family. And, considering the current circumstances, it is probably better for me to keep my genius to myself for a while anyway.

Entry 2> T.B. came by trying to convince me to work with the new director. Odious mule. He has no loyalties to anypony but himself. I can’t imagine why she married him. It’s clear that he feels quite superior for his betrayal; he kept going on about ‘the winning side’. P.P. sent more MoM goons to search my files, but they did not find these records. I hope I will be safe, if only for the moment. G.B. is fighting for us all.

Entry 3> G.B. came to me last night. I’ve no idea how he bypasses security. I’ve never seen him so... disturbed. For once, G.B. appeared quite at a loss, and he was truly desperate for my expertise. After P.H. and P.S., haven’t I done enough? No. For him, for his faith in believing in me when none would... I owe him this. He swore it would never be used on P.L. or P.C. He said the most peculiar thing: ‘There are greater threats.’ I am uneasy, but I will do this for him. Fortunately, I’ve grown quite adept at keeping

secrets from my loved ones; this would only worry them, and the less they know, the safer they'll be from the MoM.

Entry 4> I fear that my security may be compromised. Another conspicuous visit by the director again. He may be quite amiable, but I cannot allow him to sway me. He promised me a transfer to the M.A.S. if I agreed to work with him. It was tempting. I was destined to work with the greatest forces known to ponykind, not to make... bullets. As glorious as it would be to work under T.S. again, I had to decline. The director was quite put out.

Entry 5> G.B. has provided the metal, flux, and cores necessary. As I am working for a firearms manufacturer, I craft the devices in the shape of bullets and guns. It is true enough to their function. I warned G.B. of the risks, but he was quite dismissive. I am not certain of him anymore. Is his agitation paranoia or legitimate alarm? Am I crafting another 'Dragon Killer'bullet like the ones that slew B.M.? I do not know any longer. Four Leaf wants me to spend more time at home. She says the girls miss me terribly. I hope that, after this, things will finally settle down.

Entry 6> We are undone. G.B. has been arrested. My lab was raided by MoM officials. I don't think I've ever seen P.P. so happy. She questioned me personally. I told her precisely what I had done; it was not my fault that she lacked the intellect to understand me. I foiled her interrogation spells and sent her mind-digging lackies on a tour of the Trottingham countryside. They've seized all my work, but they missed bullet #9 still in the fabricator. It was quite pleasing to watch them gape at my art like stupid mules. Still, I am feeling quite ill from the flux. I should go home but... there's still so much to do. Even with G.B. gone... there are others he trusted, and I know how important he thought this was, even if I don't know why.

Entry 7> There's something going on in the city. I thought it was just another attack when the sirens went off, but this was something different. Something far more substantial. For a moment I heard the most horrible scream. After that, the entire building went into security lockdown. I can't leave my own office for fear of being vaporized by our own security ponies! There is no line out of my office. I suspect something quite terrible has happened. I fear the illness from flux contamination is progressing.

Entry 8> There is no more point in waiting. Nopony is coming. I'm not going to wait days for flux contamination or dehydration to claim me. The BGP, and one BBP. Irony. So much work and sacrifice for it these past weeks, so much concern for the vitally important need G.B. never bothered to tell me the details of, and this will be its first and only use. I've decided to rename it 'Trottenheimer's Folly'. I am sorry, Four Leaf. You always said I was an unlucky pony; I don't know about unlucky, but I feel that I have been incredibly stupid. If anyone should ever discover this hidden log, please know that I always endeavored to serve Equestria with diligence, dignity, and honor. If by some chance my family should read this, know that Daddy is sorry. Farewell.

Okay. Well, at least I was right about one thing: it had depressed me. Also confused me out of my horn. I looked at the hole blasted through the wall and floated Folly in front of me. No shell casing remained in the breech. "What do you think did this?" I couldn't think of anything that could have caused that kind of damage. With bullets that ignited, exploded, shocked, perforated, or poisoned, what did you need that could do more than that?

"No idea,"P-21 said as he put the gold coins in my duffel bag. There were tons of finance reports and other papers in the safe, as well as a strange black case. It was a little longer than my hoof, but skinny. As I touched it, there was a soft pop and

it opened. He immediately looked a little agitated. "Wait? How'd you open that? I didn't see a lock or a seam or anything!"

I furrowed my brows as I smiled at him. "Um... P-21? I shoot things. You're asking the wrong pony." I said as I flipped open the lid and looked down at the empty interior. "Well, that's anticlimatic," I muttered as I looked at the orange velvet-lined space, showing it to him. He looked equally baffled.

After carefully going through the lab and the downstairs offices, I found myself sitting on more ammunition than I'd encountered yet. I even had a sizable collection of the specialty rounds, but nothing marked 'BBP.' Despite my reservations, P-21 opened the locked door and discovered a room filled with dozens of containers. One labeled 'Biomagical Flux #13' had broken open and oozed strange rainbow-colored fluid that glowed softly. My PipBuck clicked ominously, and I closed the door once again. If there was anything valuable in there, some other, more radiation-proof pony could benefit.

We found the Ironshod Firearms maneframe in the basement. Of course, all I really did was sit there while P-21 entered the doctor's password and downloaded the contents into my PipBuck. EC-1101 could have some company. I looked at the musty poster that read, 'Ironshod Firearms: How do you like them apples?' and chuckled at the joke.

Then, with nothing in particular to do, my mind wandered back to the journal entries from Trottenheimer's terminal. Just what had been going on in this place before the bombs fell? "Hey, Glory, who was running this place during the war?"

"Well, probably the Ministry of Wartime Technology, ultimately." I looked at her blankly, and she back with unease. "The Ministry of Wartime technology. One of the six Ministires that ran all of Equestria?" I smiled and cocked my head to the side. "Didn't they have a school in your stable?" she blurted.

"Does Blackjack strike you as very studious?" P-21 asked with a thin smile.

Glory sighed. "Well... in a nutshell... the Ministries ran the war effort. There were six of them, and the the Ministry of Wartime Technology was in charge of Equestria's private companies, particularly the defense contractors. The Ministry Mare of the M.W.T., the pony who ran it, was Applejack," Glory supplied as she peered into the guts of the machine. "I don't really know much about her personally, I'm afraid. There was apparently plenty of friction between her and the ponies under her, though. Half of Hoofington was probably connected to the M.W.T. in some way. Ironshod. Robronco. Flash Industries. Aegis Security. Boom Incorporated. They

were all developing weapons for the war effort.”

“All in Hoofington?” I asked as I found a desk and sat my haunches on it, facing her and earning an amusingly baffled look.

“Hoofington was the war research effort. I understand it used to be a college town, but when the war picked up, the old town was leveled in a surprise zebra raid early on. The survivors swore to rebuild, and they did with a vengeance. Hoofington existed to invent things to kill zebras. And they were very good at it.” Carefully, she deactivated the power and started to remove some internal components with care. “Hoofington was a strange city, though. All the ministries were involved here. Even the Ministry of Awesome, since Hoofington housed the Shadowbolts. Still, according to the official records, Hoofington was almost like a country in and on to itself. Lots of secrets. Manehattan might have been bigger, Canterlot the capital, Fillydelphia the industrial nexus, but Hoofington was the city of the future. Small wonder the zebras never wasted a chance to attack it. No other city in Equestria was targeted more.”

“And then everything blew up,” I commented softly. “Along with the future.”

Footnote: Level up.

New perk: Shotgun Surgeon – When using shotguns, regardless of the type of ammunition used, you ignore an additional 10 points of a target’s damage threshold.

6. Play

"I know lots of other ways to take care of you. Don't worry. You're gonna get better."

The rain had returned while we were in Ironshod Firearms R&D; this time it was a seemingly endless drizzle that cut the world down to a thirty foot bubble around us and rendered the ground a layer of slippery muck. It made what should have been a simple trek southwest to the Fluttershy Medical Center a real toil. I wasn't going to discard a single bullet or bit of loot that might contribute to our ten-thousand cap goal, though, and with P-21's injured leg and Glory's lack of pockets that left me slogging through knee-deep mud while they trotted ahead.

I didn't worry quite so much with my EFS and compass. In fact, with the navigation tag up I couldn't get lost. The rain gave me time to think, which is always a bad thing. Ten thousand caps just to find out what EC-1101 was, and once we found out, what then? Deus was still out there, somewhere. So was Sanguine, who directed him. Then there was Hoofington, a city of technology and a city built on its hatred of the zebras. A country within a country, as Glory had described it. A place of secrets.

"Ugh. I am not a smart pony. Why do I have to deal with all this complicated shit?"

"Stop whining, Blackjack," P-21 said from ahead.

"I am not whining. I am complaining."

"No. I'm fairly sure that's whining," Glory commented overhead.

No respect. I tell ya, I get no respect.

Never have I been so happy to reach a parking lot. The rusting carts and sky carriages slowly decayed in little heaps across the cracked, weathered, and uneven asphalt. Still, it wasn't mud, and that was all I cared about at the moment. Okay, that was a lie, but if I actually thought about all the things in the back of my head I'd get a migraine. So I was in denial. Who could blame me?

And that's a really big building.

Even through the veil of rain, the Fluttershy Medical Center rose before us like an immense tree stump. Multiple wings branched from the central structure. I'd never seen a structure like it before; which admittedly wasn't saying much. I simply couldn't help but think of twenty Megamarts stacked one atop another. If Bottlecap had been right, this was my best shot at finding something to fix P-21's leg.

The yellow bars on my PipBuck gave me pause. One day I'd find somepony who could explain how the magical cuff could tell if something was going to shoot me off hand or not. Maybe P-21 could figure it out. Still, might as well be friendly, so I holstered the shotgun across my back and shouted into the hazy rain, "Friendlies coming! Don't shoot!"

The yellow bars immediately started to mill about as we approached. P-21 gave me a look, but personally I would be less inclined to shoot a pony who asked me not to. True, I was an idiot, but still. As we got closer, we came across a low barricade of rusted sky wagons and, behind the barricade, four ponies pointing rifles at us. Pointing, but not shooting. I could live with that. "Somepony needed some squatters moved?"

"Yes," a buck called out into the rain. His tone sounded dignified and just a bit like the Overmare. "I'm so grateful somepony decided to come. Please, come and get out of the rain." I immediately looked at P-21 in surprise. Manners? In the Wasteland? I walked past the barricade and towards the center of the encampment, where, I now saw, a long sky trailer had been draped with canvas to create an island of dryness in the middle of the drizzle. The first thing I took in about the ponies sheltering there was they were clean, and not clean in a 'I was just rained on' way. Their clothes were trimmed and patch free. They wore some sort of light armor similar to my security barding and their weapons were of distinctly higher quality.

Then I saw a unicorn inside the trailer who had to be the pony in charge. Charisma and charm seemed to drip from his ivory hide and cobalt mane, and he gave the impression of illuminating the dim interior of the rusty trailer. His smile made my knees feel like I'd just glanced up at the sky. "Greetings. I am Prince Splendid." You bet you are! "I'm glad somepony responded to my requests in a prompt manner. Would you care for some refreshment?"

"Sure. Refreshment sounds great." Hot body, manners, and feeding us? This day just got a whole lot better! In fact, I was pretty sure that this was the high point of my entire experience in the Wasteland. Heck, of my life!

Refreshment involved chilled Sparkle-Cola RAD, which had a delicious sharp radish flavor –and more clicks on the radiation sensor- and some fresh carrots and apples. I could only imagine where he'd gotten fresh produce from. "So, excuse me for wanting to talk business while we eat, but who exactly are we evicting from that building?" P-21 asked as he batted a half eaten carrot around his plate. I gave him a sharp glare that hopefully said 'do not piss off the nice unicorn with the hot flank.'

“Members of the Collegiate that have some academic interest in the site,” Splendid said calmly, without showing the slightest bit of umbrage. “We’ve tried to negotiate with them, but they’ve adamantly refused. You know the Collegiate.” Actually, I didn’t. “There’s nothing in Hoofington that they don’t want to study. So we need somepony to convince them to leave until my business is concluded.”

“And just what is your business here?” I asked, giving him my winningest, flirtiest smile. True, I’d only employed it on Midnight with little success. “It must be important for somepony like you to be here.”

He looked at me with momentary consideration, his smile softening before he sighed. “My father is old and very ill with a wasting disease. Fluttershy’s Ministry of Peace pioneered revolutionary medical technologies and procedures, from simple healing potions to megaspells that could resuscitate entire battlefields. I believe there must be something here that will restore my father to health. Without my father, I fear the Society will tear itself apart.”

Society ponies will give ya a meal and then tell ya how grateful ya should be ta get it. “The Society?”

“Ah, yes. You’re from a stable. I should have remembered that you’d be unfamiliar with the various political factions of the Hoof. My apologies.” He stood and said with great pride, “The Society members are the descendants of the aristocracy of Equestria. Our king and leaders are related to Princess Celestia, and thus we are the rightful inheritors of Equestria.” He gave a great sigh. “Sadly, few in the Wasteland will acknowledge our bloodline claims.”

I tried to keep a pleasant smile as Stable 99 returned with a vengeance and the Overmare popped into my mind. “So... you think you should get to rule because your ancestors did?” He smiled and nodded, pleased that I’d gotten it. Great. That splashed ice water on my hot, steamy fantasy.

He seemed to detect my skepticism and smiled graciously. “I understand that the burden is on the Society to prove its worthiness to lead. We don’t expect everypony in the Wasteland to bend knee to us simply because we say so. But for a thousand years and more Equestria knew peace and harmony under an autocrat. Why should it not be so again?”

Somehow, the fact we were in a rusty sky trailer drinking two hundred year old soda and finding fresh food a luxury made such a simple nostalgic desire both tantalizing and disappointing. Worse, Prince Splendid seemed to believe every word.

“So you want access to the clinic. If I can convince these Collegiate ponies to let you in, would that be okay?” I asked, tapping hooves before me. Things were so much easier when I could just shoot ponies. If I lived, I won.

“If you can, it would be a miracle, but an acceptable one. We have no argument with the Collegiate and their naive ideals. I merely want access to find something to cure my father.” Still, a solution with nopony getting killed was preferable.

Prince Splendid was a gracious host, but there was way too much awkwardness. I had to admit, I was impressed by what I saw; his ponies were better armed and equipped than most. He had fresh food; that was a miracle in and of itself. It was simply the fact that the Society seemed to believe it had some inherent right to rule. Even if he got this super cure for his father, who would it help besides ponies who already had so much?

We stepped back out into the rain with our stomachs fed, but my head, already struggling with earlier doubts and questions, now throbbed. Plus, it didn’t help that my loins were very interested in Splendid, and I had no clue how to address that; in 99 I’d put myself on his breeding queue. No doubt Splendid would have had a backlog of years. Now, I doubted it was just as simple as getting him alone and lifting my tail.

“So, what do you think?” I asked P-21, and then frowned as I saw him staring out into space as he limped along beside me. “Yoo-hoo... Equestria to P-21...” I swished my tail through his field of vision.

He blinked out of his reverie, looking... embarrassed? “Yeah? What? Oh, think? I think... ah...” I stared in fascination as he actually stammered! “I... I’ll leave it up to you.” Rarely have such ominous words been uttered by so level-headed a pony. I didn’t think he could stammer!

“What’s gotten into you?” I asked, and grinned at he went even redder.

“Nothing. I mean... I’m just thinking about what he said to you...” He scowled and then clenched his eyes closed. “Never mind!” he said as he limped ahead of us.

“What was that all about?” I asked Morning Glory. Prince Splendid had been rather gracious to me. “Is he jealous?” I looked back at Splendid’s encampment and then at P-21’s backside. He was! It explained everything. I couldn’t help but nicker.

The gray pegasus looked up at me in confusion and a touch of worry. “You’re asking me?”

Good point. We crossed the parking lot, heading towards an entrance surrounded

by sandbags. And two turrets. . . hello! Still, the bars remained yellow rather than red. "Hey! Don't shoot!"

"One day you're going to give somepony ideas," P-21 muttered.

Ponies scrambled at my call, and soon three pointed weapons from behind the sandbags. "Go away!" a buck yelled, his thick glasses looking almost like goggles as he gaped at us standing in the rain.

"Calm down!" I said as I sat. "We don't want trouble. We just want to talk." Preferably out of the rain.

"Are you with the Society?" he asked at once and then blurted nervously, "Tell them we're not leaving!" Their beam rifles looked like they'd fall apart with a sharp kick. Those turrets on the other hand. . .

"I'm here to talk. If I can work out a deal where no pony gets killed, even better," I said truthfully. "My name's Blackjack." Incomprehension. I sighed and added, "Security?" Comprehension dawned and they started to relax a little. Urgh. . . as much as I hated to admit it, that little title of DJ Pon3's was making my life easier.

"I'm Archie. Come on in," goggle buck said as he turned and trotted back into the hospital. It looked like this was some sort of emergency ward or the like. It'd seen much better days. The butterfly wallpaper was peeling off in brown strips, a layer of muck coated the floor, and it looked like the emergency beds had been converted into sleeping quarters. A strange drum hummed softly in the corner, providing power to a number of flickering terminals. There were a dozen or so ponies working in the dingy space.

"So are you the pony in charge?" I asked.

The brown buck with scraggly black mane nodded. "For now. My boss went upstairs a week ago and hasn't come back," he said nervously as he looked at the three of us. "Prince Splendid's tried to take over more than once. First he tried to sweet talk us, then bribes, then he attacked."

"Must be something really worthwhile here, then," I commented lightly, and got a worried look from the twitchy brown buck. "Something that a lot of ponies need," I amended quickly, and he noticeably relaxed.

"There is. When we got here, we found that the upper levels are completely untouched. They must have sealed hermetically when the bombs fell and only disengaged when radiation levels dropped to survivable levels." He looked at several racks with medical goods stacked on them. "Unfortunately, the team who went up

there didn't come back. Neither did the team that went in to look for them. Now we're stuck here till the Collegiate can send reinforcements."

"Prince Splendid thinks there's something here that will help him with his sick father," I said as neutrally as possible as I saw Archie frown.

"There is! Well... probably," he said as he turned to the terminal. "We've found notes on several new healing potions. Targeted antibiotics. Even regeneration spell infusions." He pointed at the terminal. "If we could find samples and study them, we might be able to discover how to make more. That could take years though. The prince just wants to take the samples and use them. Even offered to buy them, as if you could put a price tag on this knowledge!"

Great. It looked like what everypony was after was above us. My mane started to twitch. "Well, how about this, then: my friends and I take a peek upstairs, see if we can find your teams, maybe find something to make both you and the Society happy, and everypony lives?" What were the odds that I'd only find one dose of magical experimental super heally stuff?

Damn, my mane was itching like crazy.

We left the emergency room and walked into the central atrium, stepping into a virtual forest. The interior of the massive structure was hollow, and far above us the domed skylight had shattered, allowing rain and runoff to cascade down into the fountain set in the center of the chamber. Chipped and faded concrete vines coiled up the interior, giving the impression of being within some mythical wood. Butterflies and birds perched, frozen and forgotten for two centuries. Glass tubes had once held elegant brass elevators, but now they were smashed or leaned out over the interior.

In the center of the fountain rose the bronze statue of a pegasus pony, one hoof around the shoulders of a young unicorn filly, the other stroking the mane of an earth pony colt. On her shoulder perched an elegant bird. At her hooves, a small rabbit seemed to glare rather indolently out with his forelegs crossed. A plaque at the base of the statue read, 'We Must Do Better.' Looking at the pegasus' gentle smile, I couldn't shake the feeling that the statue wept for all the decay around her.

"Who was she?" I asked Glory softly, feeling a strange sense of reverence and sadness.

"Fluttershy. She was a ministry mare, and a friend of Rainbow Dash. She founded the Ministry of Peace and dedicated herself to helping the ponies of Equestria

throughout the war.” Morning Glory looked wistful as well as she looked up at her. “As the war progressed it took its toll on her. Some claim she aided the enemy, despite orders to the contrary, and gave zebras medical supplies and other care. At the end... well... I was taught she went mad with grief and wandered out into the Wasteland to die. She simply couldn’t live with having failed Equestria.”

I stared at the bronze statue a moment longer. “If she failed, I can’t believe it was for lack of trying,” I said softly as we headed towards the stairs. Morning Glory, however, examined the remaining elevator curiously. “Something wrong?”

“I think it’s still functional. It just needs a spark battery and some scrap metal,” she said as she pried up a panel in the center of the platform. I looked at P-21. No need to make him climb ten flights of stairs if we could avoid it. I checked my inventory and nodded, floating the components to her for the repairs. A few minutes later the brass platform hummed softly inside its tube and an eerie noise filled the air.

“What is that?” I asked as the three of us stood upon the metal disk. It wasn’t music but... similar.

“Birds,” Glory replied simply as we lifted into the air. Higher and higher the platform rose, and I suddenly had to clench my eyes tight. There was way too much space around me and the glass walls didn’t provide enough illusion. I levitated out my shotgun and reloaded the drum, checking the wear and tear that had built up over the last day. I was definitely doing a number on it.

When the doors to the fifteenth floor opened I jumped through, breathing hard as I fought the urge to be sick. When my heartbeat slowed I looked back at the elevator where P-21 and Morning Glory were frozen in place. “What?” I asked as they stared at me... no. Not at me. Slowly I turned and looked at the wall opposite the elevator. In flaking black-maroon letters, a single word was written as if with a paintbrush. ‘PLAY’.

Oh horseapples...

Time had stopped as effectively as if I’d triggered S.A.T.S. and simply left it there. My PipBuck’s chronometer might still mark the time, but every minute felt like an hour. Normally I’d be bored to stupidity, but here my every nerve was screaming at attention. Step by cautious step we walked together, me first, then P-21, and lastly Glory watching behind us. The word was painted every few feet; sometimes in elegant cursive and sometimes in wild, broad letters. The lights flickered and

dimmed, but I was used to dim and uncertain light. I was not used to the soft chime music that played softly all around us like an invisible music box that kept playing just a touch too slowly.

“Hush now, quiet now, it’s time to lay your sleepy head...” a filly sang softly in the hallway behind us. Slowly P-21 and I turned and looked back at Morning Glory without saying a word. Our combined look was enough to silence the pegasus. “Sorry,” she muttered. I did not want to hear my childhood lullabies right now.

There were other little variances; dolls hanging from in the middle of the hallway. A stuffed rabbit tucked into a hospital bed... no, not tucked. Strapped. Two dozen bed sheets stretched across the hallway, decorated with maroon houses and stick figures. And more detailed pictures of ponies. And... fire. And ponies fighting. Ponies dismembered.

Something moved beyond the sheets, but when I yanked them aside I saw only empty hall.

“What the hay is going on here?” I muttered softly. I suddenly found myself longing for Pony Joe’s. “Give me bodies... or something shooting at me... or something. Not freaky pictures and words written in dark paint.” I glanced back and saw both of them staring at me. “What?”

“She doesn’t know?” Glory whimpered to P-21.

“Apparently not,” P-21 said as he looked behind us.

“Know what?”

Glory swallowed. “That isn’t paint, Blackjack.” She pointed at the black-red letters on the wall.

I closed my eyes. Oh I really really wish she hadn’t said that. “Right. Of course it isn’t.” I looked down yet another empty hall and shouted, “Okay! You’re officially sick fuckers! Now come out so I can shoot you!”

Then we heard a soft ‘thump, thump, thump, thump’ in the hallway ahead of us. A bright red ball bounced down the dimly lit hall towards the three of us. No... not a ball. It was too irregular for that. It rolled to a stop at my feet, leaving bright wet splotches on the floor. The face on the severed head was a mask of terror.

A foal giggled in the darkness.

“Cute,” I muttered. This head was fresh.

“Shit. Shit. Shit.” P-21 repeated over and over again as he stared down at it.

“Calm down,” I muttered, trying my best not to freak out. “It’s just a head.” As we watched a little door opened up and a small mechanical pony trotted out and washed off the smears of blood with rotating buffers on its hooves. It ignored the severed head. Now that was some shoddy programming. Then it turned and disappeared back into its little door.

“Maintenance robots,” Morning Glory whispered as we continued down the hall past empty hospital rooms. The music box tune continued its soft, too-slow melody as we reached a nurse’s station. Everything neat. Everything put away except for the creepy little artifacts and associated body parts. After so many ruined buildings, the cleanliness disturbed me almost as much as the music.

I tried my radio, but the only channels I could find had the same music box melody.

We came across an active terminal. “Finally! Maybe there will be an inventory,” P-21 said with some relief as he focused on the terminal. I slowly panned the E.F.S., but my vision kept flickering as if something here jammed my signal. I knew that head didn’t come from nowhere though. He struggled for several minutes as the music box looped over and over again. Then there was a soft beep as he cracked the password. I looked over his shoulder, and then frowned as the screen went blank.

>Peek a boo. I see you.

The scream that began to play from the terminal rose and fell at ear splitting volume. “KILL ME!” she screamed over and over again between agonizing cries. I grabbed P-21’s mane in my teeth and pulled him away from the terminal. Then I put an explosive orange shell into the thing. Silence dropped around us till our ears recovered and picked up the sound of the music box.

“What the fuck is going on?” P-21 whispered, staring down the empty halls.

“Want a gun?” I asked softly.

“I’d just start shooting wildly,” he muttered in return. Well, that was an improvement over saying he’d deliberately shoot me. We resumed our search. ‘Play,’ the sanguine words demanded. Yellow and red bars flickered so wildly in my PipBuck’s E.F.S. that I deactivated it before it made me sick.

We came across a door with something new carved in the wood paneling. ‘Ollie Ollie Oxen Free’. I carefully opened it telekinetically, revealing a desiccated corpse ruled in a fetal position in the tiny space at the bottom of the linen closet. She wore

a nurse's uniform. Scratched in the wood before the body was a simple eulogy: 'I don't want to play anymore.'

Morning Glory hyperventilated as P-21 talked to her in his soft low voice, holding the young pegasus to keep her from falling over. Given that she herself had almost died of thirst in an equally tiny space, it was understandable. That left me with the task of checking the body. Her hide had dried to a leathery texture that crackled when I carefully swept it with my magic. I found an ID card that read 'Chief Nurse Tenderheart.' A little magical glyph glowed on the bottom of the badge. "What's this?"

Morning Glory refused to look towards me, so I floated it to her. "It's a key for special door locks. The kinds that can't normally be picked and need magic to bypass them." Hopefully door locks like the kind that protected experimental healing goods. . . Fuck that. Hopefully it would get the three of us out of here.

Going up a floor hadn't helped. If anything, the scenery worsened. We came across storage rooms that had been raided. A cold room that Glory had described as a blood locker was completely empty. Drained potion containers were stacked from floor to ceiling. We found what I guessed was one of the Collegiate ponies. . . he'd been skinned and bristled from head to hoof with spent syringes. 'Mr. Needle is your friend' had been written above him.

I really wanted to introduce somepony to Ms. Shotgun.

We encountered a box in the hall, a large metal cube with small pink hearts painted on each side. I couldn't explain why, but I had the strangest fondness for the box. There was a little handle sticking out of the side. I glanced at the others, reached out slowly with my magic, and began to turn it. "All around the mulberry bush. . . the monkey chased the weasel. . ." Glory sang softly, and I couldn't bring myself to stop her. I knew what was coming, but I was powerless to stop. The note hit 'pop', the metal top snapped open and out flew a pony. No. . . half a pony. The skinned front half bounced back and forth on a heavy metal spring, front hooves crossed as if hugging itself. Bony wings flopped around behind it.

"A pegasus?" gasped Glory in horror.

Then the box suddenly played the rest of the tune and there was a second metallic boing as its front legs popped wide and dropped three metallic apples. Through reflex more than thought my telekinesis flung them away as the three of us hit the

deck. Silence. Silence. Silence. Slowly I lifted my head and carefully turned the nearest grenade with my magic. A hole had been neatly drilled in the bottom of each.

Sick fu- wait...not sick enough. "Run!" I yelled as I grabbed P-21 with my magic and scooped Glory up as I bolted down the hall. A few seconds later the bombs hidden inside the box exploded. The three of us landed in a heap.

"How'd. . . how'd you know?" P-21 muttered in shock, blood dripping from a nostril.

"The only thing more messed up than scaring us with duds is scaring us with duds, letting us have a moment of relief, and then blowing us up with the real bomb."

"I don't know which concerns me more. That someone thought of that, or that you figured it out," P-21 said with his usual dry smile.

I stood and carefully trotted back towards the box, not sure how to take that. I doubted there'd be a second bomb. It wouldn't be as much fun. Far more effective, yes, but whoever the fuck was behind this wasn't trying to kill us. That wasn't the point. I found the pegasus torso and head. "Is he Enclave?"

Glory glanced at the body, shuddered and looked away, then looked again with a small frown. "I. . ." She swallowed and walked closer. "I think so. He's slightly desiccated. . . maybe dead a month or so? But we weren't supposed to go anywhere near the clinic."

Only near raider nests. "So this guy's not with the Volunteer Corps?"

"No. He must be with security," She said softly. Surprise surprise...

I looked ahead with a scowl. "Whatever's in here had better be worth it; I'm in shooty kind of mood."

Things didn't improve as we encountered more bodies. A tea party of four bony ponies around a petrified cake with their hooves nailed to the table and party hats on their heads. A body dressed in a foal's tutu impaled on a turn table. I was starting to become numb to the next horror around the corner, yet I couldn't stop looking. The music kept playing; I could barely hear things moving around out of sight.

We found ourselves in a staff lounge. Everything was neat and clean and tidy; I was starting to hate the cleanliness. I longed for a wrapper. An empty tin can. A soda bottle left on a shelf. Anything that was a sign that at one time normal ponies lived

here. I was getting sick of wooded wall paper and frozen birds and butterflies. Oh... and grotesquely posed corpses. I longed for the boring gray walls of 99.

I used the bits we had to clean out the soda machines, sharing one with each of them. Anything that might have been a personal item was by and large missing. I did find a newspaper clipping posted to the bulletin board. It was so yellowed and brittle I feared even touching it with my magic as I read. The beginning had fallen off, but the remainder I could just make out.

...intosh was ninety minutes from Ministry of Peace care following the assassination attempt on Princess Celestia at Brokenhoof. Thousands of soldiers and countless non-combatants suffer while waiting for medical care. Today, the Ministry of Peace, working in concert with the Ministry of Arcane Science and the Ministry of Wartime Technology, has devised a means of preserving injured or sick ponies until such time as treatment is available.

No small measure of thanks goes out from the Ministry of Peace to the Office of Interministry Affairs. Without their tireless work bringing together ideas from all across Equestria, we would never have been able to complete this new facility. Countless young lives would be cut short or left to misery. They are a testament to what needs to be done to end this war and open a new chapter for us all.

-Fluttershy

A means of preserving injured or sick ponies. "This is it," I said in excitement. "If Splendid can bring his father here they can keep him alive till the Collegiate makes a cure. Heee! I love it when a plan comes together!"

"Blackjack," Morning Glory said softly. I glanced at her, and followed her gaze into the top corner of the room where a carved white bunny watched us sternly. There was the tiniest little hum, and I watched a camera in one eye of the bunny slowly focus.

"We should get going," I said softly, leading us back out into the empty hallway. As soon as we were through it, the door to the staff lounge closed behind us and locked with a solid click. "Oh, that's not good."

Suddenly the lights clicked out, plunging the hall into absolute darkness. Then a red light appeared at the end of the hall. "What the heck is...?" I started to ask, taking a step forward. From the roof came a sharp flash and I felt the bite of a beam weapon hit my chest. Suddenly, the red light turned green, and from the hallway behind us something metallic screeched, coming closer. I fired blindly down the hall, but the

muzzle flashes only illuminated something big and bloody. Suddenly the light turned red and it stopped. We all froze.

Oh Goddesses. . . it's a game.

The light turned green and I screamed, "Run!" My magic grabbed P-21 and dragged him along beside me as the machine crashed along behind us. Red light. "Freeze!" I bellowed and everything stopped. One second. Two. Three. Four. Green light! We raced ahead as fast as we could, but the crashing behind us grew closer. Red light! Silence. Green light! Red light! Green light! Red light! Morning Glory staggered a half step forward and cried out as the beam turret struck her leg.

This red light I could feel the soft tickle of a breath on my hindquarters. I just stared at the red light as I floated out a little disk and set it beneath me. My magic hovered on the button. Green light! I pushed the frag mine's arming tab and wasted no time dragging P-21 closer towards a door beneath the green light. The mine beeped immediately and a second later there was a resounding PONG of metal being struck. Three feet. Two feet. One foot. I was through the door, and pulled P-21 after me, but Morning Glory was a few feet behind us. Red light. In the sanguine glow I could see the vaguely canine grin of metal right behind her as she trembled, frozen in terror.

Then the door closed in our faces.

"Glory! No! Glory!" I screamed as I fired several rounds into the door. It didn't even dent. I beat it with the butt of my shotgun and kicked it with my hooves. "What the fuck do you want, you fuckers?! What!" I screamed down the hall. "Whaaaaat?!" My own voice echoed back at me.

'PLAY' answered the blood on the walls.

Do you want to come with us?

I'd killed Scoodle through ignorance. Now I'd killed Glory through incompetence. How could I have gone through the door without making sure she'd been through first? I'd seen her get hit by the beam. I should have known she'd be a few steps slower. I'd sunk down with my back against the door, knocking my head against it with the shotgun cradled in my hooves.

"Come on. We need to keep going," P-21 muttered softly. I levitated the shotgun, shoving it controls-first towards his mouth. "What are you doing?!" he stammered in shock, trying to push it away.

"You said if I ever got another pony killed by being stupid that you'd end me," I muttered, looking at my hooves. "Time to make good on it."

"I'm not going to kill you for this, Blackjack," he said softly. "This wasn't your fault."

"I'm the leader. Whose fault is it if not mine?"

"Whatever sick fucker is behind this," he replied. I didn't move, still just trying to give him the gun. His stoic mask crumbled as I saw fear creep into his features. "Blackjack, I can't do this without you," he said softly as he sat down beside me.

"Either I'm incompetent or I'm cursed. Either way, you're better off without me," I muttered. Is this it? Is this the part where the wasteland breaks me? "I don't know what to do and I keep getting ponies killed that don't deserve it," I whispered.

P-21 sighed, hugging the shotgun with his hooves. "I don't know what to do either. If there isn't a terminal or a lock I might as well be back in 99. I'm so scared right now that the only thing I know for sure is that I'm going to die, and it's going to be ugly. I'm not you, Blackjack. I might be smarter than you, but I'm not as brave as you are."

It hurt so much, but what could I do? Give up and die... that was the easy out. The contemptuous way out. Give in to hatred and just kill and kill and kill? That was so tempting right now. A bloody part of me craved it. Kill the Collegiate, take their stuff, kill the Society ponies and repeat the process. Kill, take, kill, take, and never feel again. It was a more thrilling form of suicide.

You keep going, knowing that it will never be enough. You spend every second trying to make it right, knowing you never can.

Slowly I reversed the pull on my horn and took the gun from him. I rocked forward and stood. I wasn't quite done just yet. Despite everything, despite the fact I was not a smart pony, a plan crept out of my meager brain. Worse... I was looking forward to it. "P-21... you're ten times sneakier than I am. You know terminals. You can open locks and get where you need to go. Somewhere in this place is someone controlling everything. You've got to shut them down." I passed him the key card.

"You're splitting us up," he said flatly. "You know nothing good can come of this, Blackjack."

"It's the only way I can think of. Together we're a big target. Alone... you might be able to shut them down. I'll be a nice, big, stupid pony to keep their attention," I said with a grin. I tried to keep it as I added, "You might also find Glory."

“You really think she might be alive?”

No. “I’m not going to give up hope just yet.” Giving up hope was so ten seconds ago. “Just do what you do best and leave being a decoy to the not smart pony.”

“You’re not stupid, Blackjack,” he said quietly, then caught my arched brow. “Okay. Well. Good luck.” I loaded up the drum with orange shells and spun it once loudly as I trotted in the opposite direction. As I trotted I felt an old song nibbling at the back of my mind. I started to hum the tune as I slowly smiled. It was phenomenally stupid, but that was something I excelled at!

“You put your right hoof in. . . you put your right hoof out. . . you put your right hoof in, and you shake it all about,” I sang, tired of the music box playing in the background. Okay, it was more shouting than singing as I charged down the hallway. “You do the pony pokie and you turn yourself around. That’s what it’s all about.” I paused and grinned as I heard the music box cut off, replaced by the very tune I was singing! That’s it, you sick fucker. Pay attention to the crazy filly with the shotgun!

“You put one shell in! You take another one out!” I shouted as I blasted another bunny camera. “You load another shell in and you blast it all about! You do the pony pokie and take the fuckers out. That’s what it’s all about!” Move fast, shoot, and shoot some more. If a turret popped out of the ceiling I popped it before it got to fire more than twice. Don’t think. Don’t let the fucker mess with me with spooky fucked up shit. Shoot. . . shoot. . . kid.

I froze in the hallway, and the music cut off as if with a knife. The foal stood there in a strange pink dress. Her lavender hide sported a massive scar running up her side and disappearing into her pink mane that fell across her eyes. Her mouth was sewn in a grotesque grin as she stood before me in a doorway.

Shoot, Blackjack! “Play?” she whispered without moving even her lips. Shoot her! “Do you like my costume?” Slowly she tilted her head up towards me. Shoot shoot shoot! Her mane fell aside, revealing two red lights for eyes. Her mouth wasn’t sewn in a grin. It was sewn shut! “I wanna be a unicorn,” she hissed. The gun shook in my magical grip as my focus wrestled with what was before me. “Can I be you?”

The shoulders of the filly ripped as two metallic tendrils burst from her shoulders. A razor sharp scalpel gripped in one slashed across my face, and I barely blocked it with my PipBuck. The shotgun roared, and the shell struck the filly in the face. The lavender hide ripped like cloth, revealing the smoking head of a small maintenance robot within the sewn together skin. I put a second round into it and it crackled softly before collapsing. “Tag!” I shouted down at the thing. “You’re it!”

“We’re it,” a voice whispered down the hall. “We’re it. . .” In the dim light I saw two red eyes looking at me. Four. Six. Lots. “Play!” they whispered in delight.

Okay. I definitely had their attention! Now it was time to run! “Catch me if you can!” I laughed as I ran like I’d never run before.

I had no idea if I’d evaded the abominations, if they’d gotten bored, or if they were setting up more games. I’d moved up a floor, and there weren’t any more hospital rooms. This floor was for surgery. The lights kept flickering on and off, making me jump as portions appeared and disappeared. The music had returned, this time a cheery tune about cleaning up winter. Not only was it creepy, it muffled what little noise the abominations made as they moved.

I found an office and pushed my way inside. I was heartened to see the lock on the safe had been opened and the terminal decoded. Whatever else had happened, P-21 was still out there. The safe held a few healing potions and some gold bits. I walked behind the desk, setting the shotgun down in front of me. The specialty shells had one downside I hadn’t realized: they wore down my weapon like mad. I really didn’t want to try and fire it again if I could help it. Not without some significant repairs. That left me with the automatic pistol from the weather station and Folly, which had no bullets. Carefully, I took out the pistol and loaded the blue spark rounds interspersed with normal lead rounds.

This office had been thoroughly trashed, but I really couldn’t tell if this was the result of the abominations’ vandalism or if the owner had just been particularly sloppy. The stacks of papers were almost as high as my horn. With a wry smile, I picked up a file on top of one of the towers. ‘Marigold: P:H medical authorization: Denied.’ Only the Ministry of Peace could have a form denial stamp with frowning bunnies, I supposed. Then, stamped on top of it in pink ink with butterflies: ‘Medical waiver: Approved.’

“Lucky Marigold. I could sure use some of that luck now,” I said as I flipped through the first few pages and glanced at the picture of a blue unicorn with bright glasses standing in front of some kind of missile. I was sure that, if I didn’t have monsters after me, I’d somehow be even more bored. I tossed the file back on top of the stack and then started as the entire pile collapsed to the floor with a rustling, sighing soft crash. “Great,” I muttered, rubbing my eyes and hoping P-21 could find a way to stop all this. I sure wasn’t smart enough to.

I noticed a sound file loaded on the terminal. Why not? I hit the playback as I prepared my clips. At least it would give me something to do.

Entry one: We've taken control of the facility here. Data files have all been corrupted or deleted. We need to find the central maneframe if we're going to find anything worthwhile. Took us forever to get in through the roof, but thank Celestia this place is intact. We'll probably move our entire biomedical team in here once it's secure. I've never seen so many medical supplies in one place; nothing special but we've got healing potions to burn.

Entry two: Found the stasis chamber and the maneframe. Dozens of pods still with power. They can just stay asleep for all I care. Some idiot severed the maneframe control ...kzzzzzt... scalpel and got electrocuted for her trouble. Shouldn't be a hard fix. Once it's connected we'll bring in the biomedical team.

I stood and looked at some of the pictures hanging askew on the wall. Fluttershy looking rather terrified on a stage in a weird dress; goddesses, she looked adorable! The yellow mare smiling shyly beside a purple unicorn with a pink streak in her mane and an orange-coated, blond-haired mare in a cowboy hat; the construction site in the picture looked like it might be that of the Fluttershy Medical Center.

Entry three: Everything is up and running. Still some kinks to work out. We've got to kill the sound system; that music box is driving me crazy. Is this what they actually listened to two hundred years ago ...bkzzzttt...

Entry four: Brighthoof and Sky Sparkle are both AWOL. Probably fucking in the staff lounge again. Toys keep on showing up in the hallway; I think the soldiers are starting to get antsy. I need to organize some ...kzzzzzt... should be okay though. The biomedical team found the ...kkkkzzzt... experimental of course, but it's almost a megaspell level infusion. Practically a cure for death.

Looking at the computer terminal, I spotted a little square of note paper, 'Please don't ask about that procedure again, RH. We've only had one success. I won't risk any more babies. I can't. I'm sorry. F'

Entry ...bkzzzzt... gone. Something cut them apart. Skinned them alive. They were... posed. It's got to be Morn... kzzzzt... or Nigh... kkkztttt... find them, they're arrested and command can figure out who to shoot. Fuck it. I'll shoot em myself and save command the trouble.

Skzzzzzt... roof access is sealed. The biomedical team is just gone. Somehow he took them out. He's the only one not accounted for. Somehow he got control...

kzzzzzt. . . fuck. . . I'm tired of this game. How the fuck could anyone in my team crack this hard?

. . . zzzzzt. . . tired of playing. . .

I finished loading the last drum and clip for the shotgun and automatic pistol; shock rounds in the latter, slugs and explosive shells in the former. Then the recording started screaming. I didn't pale or freak out or shoot the terminal. I simply sat there a moment listening to the screams. Then I stretched out a hoof and clicked it off. I loaded a clip into the automatic, worked the slide, and walked to the door. I stood in the hall, looked left and right, and then shouted at the top of my lungs, "Play time!"

It started as a whisper. Then a mutter. Then a roar. Pick a hall. Any hall. I started running, but I was done with running away. Keeping the automatic in a careful grip, I fired the rounds ahead of me at any nightmare stepping into my line of fire. The maintenance robots sparked and jerked, ripping apart the skins that had been sewed around them. "Bad pony!" they cried as I used S.A.T.S. and dumb luck to chew my way through them. I paused only long enough to smash in their heads with the baton, just to make sure they didn't start moving again.

"That's right! I'm a bad bad pony! And I'm coming to spank you!" I yelled out, half mad and all furious. I giggled as I saw some turn and totter away. "That's right! It's time for spankings!" I screamed as I chased them down.

"Bad pony," a deep voice said from the doorway. I turned and looked at a huge heavy robot draped in slabs of meat. "Time out," it said firmly as, with shocking deftness, it flung a glowing white ball of glass at me. A grenade or. . . something. I reached out with my magic to swat it back at the machine and. . .

oooOOOooo

What the fuck was going on? Why couldn't I move? Why couldn't I talk? Why couldn't I scream? Instead, I was lying on a couch and reading a newspaper about the continued outcry over the assassination attempt at Brokenhoof. It was as if I'd somehow been shoved into this strange mare resting on the couch. The only thing vaguely familiar was a PipBuck, a far fancier version than my own, strapped to her hoof.

A white mare with graying pink hair stood behind the desk in...an undamaged version of the office I'd just been in? She had a bright red cross on her flank and a white lab coat draped over her shoulders and forelegs. She fidgeted with her pencils on her desk, nudging them back and forth. I looked over at her. "Calm down, Doctor

Redheart.”

“Calm down? How can I calm down, Garnet? She’s coming here.” She tapped her hooves against the desktop.

“It is her hospital, after all,” Garnet said, and I could feel her smiling.

Redheart sighed, frowning. “Still, I can’t believe Cheerilee went straight to the Ministry Mare for this! I thought all objections had been dealt with. How could she bring this up now?”

“I’m more impressed that the Ministry Mare is coming all the way here to talk with her about her reservations. It can take days to arrange a conference with Applejack or Rarity. And forget Rainbow Dash or Twilight.” The pony I was in sighed and folded the paper, her sparkling red hooves glittering from her pony pedicure. “They’re almost inaccessible, even for the O.I.A.”

“Are things that bad? I hadn’t heard,” Redheart said in concern.

My host waved a glittering hoof dismissively. “Oh no. I wouldn’t say things are bad. Just... tense right now. Everything would be so much easier if we could just disband the Ministry of Awesome and tuck whatever she’s doing into the Ministry of Wartime Technology. But Luna won’t hear of it.”

Then the door opened and admitted a purple mare with smiling flowers on her flank. She had wrinkles around her eyes and her hair was completely gray. The two mares looked at one another with clear dislike... and yet I could tell there’d once been the foundations of friendship between the two. No pony shows that much regret without having lost something dear. “Cheerilee. So good to see you again. How are things at the education bureau?” my... host?... inquired, rising and giving a polite hug.

Cheerilee seemed quite relieved to have somepony to talk to. “Things are... well... like they are everywhere I suppose. Thank you for working with the Ministry of Image for us, Garnet; sometimes it seems we always get bumped down the priority queue. If it wasn’t for your help, we’d probably never get the materials we need.” Then Cheerilee frowned. “Though, could you please tell them that the Ministry of Peace’s schools don’t need their more... creative... history books? I received a text telling how ancient zebras drank blood and practiced ritual pony sacrifice!”

“Ah, yes. Sometimes the Ministry of Image can get a touch... inventive with their textbooks.” I didn’t have a clue what they were talking about. If zebras didn’t drink blood, why say they did at all? Since I couldn’t get off this ride, though, I thought I might as well pay attention to it.

Then the door opened and all the talking stopped. I'd seen her cast in bronze; now I was seeing her in flesh. The yellow pegasus may have been smaller and less dramatic than her statuary counterpart, but as I watched I couldn't shake the grace and beauty and aura of kindness that seemed to radiate off her. She greeted everypony by name, shook hooves, and talked with clear sincerity and interest. Just touching her hoof made me feel special, and it wasn't even me!

Once everyone settled in to a little circle, Redheart immediately spoke to the purple mare beside her. "I know you've had second thoughts, Cheerilee, but we're already committed to their use."

"Redheart. We can't use these devices yet. We don't even know all the spells that have gone into them!" Cheerilee looked across at me as she said that. "We have no idea what the long term effects will be." She turned to Fluttershy. "You need to stop until we're sure they're safe."

"I know that you're upset, Cheerilee, but we've tested them for three months with no ill effects, aside for a few complaints about boredom." The mature mare's tone reminded me of Mom saying 'trust me'.

"You've tested them on animals and adults. These are children, Fluttershy. Three months being trapped in your own body might be tough for an adult who understands what's going on, but what about a child? They want to run and play and talk. They can't simply be locked up for weeks on end. Fluttershy, it's cruel!"

Then Fluttershy spoke in a soft and gentle voice, "Are you saying I should leave children to die when I have a way to keep them safe and alive until they can be healed?" At that instant I knew that Cheerilee was screwed.

Cheerilee paused and then let out a struggling, "No... but... Fluttershy..."

"Tell me that I should let children die and I will stop the use of the pods right now and start long-term testing. A year at least," Fluttershy said in that soft, reasonable voice. A pony would need a heart of stone to say those words.

"Fluttershy, I don't want any colt or filly to die. You know I don't. But I know kids. I know this isn't an answer."

"I know children too..."

"No, Fluttershy. You like kids. You don't know them. You never even had one..." Cheerilee cut off at a soft gasp from Redheart. Awkward silence. "...I'm sorry." Fluttershy simply closed her eyes as if bracing against an inner hurt. Cheerilee looked horrified at what she'd said, but the words were spoken.

More silence. Then Fluttershy spoke softly, “Me too. I’m sorry, Cheerilee, but I can’t delay using something I know can help.” Slowly she stood. “Excuse me.”

“Damn it. . . why did I say that?” Cheerilee asked with a snotty sniff. I saw the spectre of Redheart and Cheerilee’s friendship appear as the former walked over, bit a box of tissues, and offered one to the other mare. She took it and blew her nose.

“Don’t worry, Cheerilee. It’s not as if the children will be left alone. They’ll have constant interaction with the staff, me, family, and teachers. They won’t be neglected.” Redheart assured her. “Most of the time they won’t even be awake. We can keep them sedated and dreaming sweet dreams until they can be woken up. Beautiful dreamers.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of. Children don’t stay children forever. They always become something else.” The purple mare rose and quietly left the room as well.

Redheart shook her head. “I’m sorry you had to see that.” She put the tissues away and looked to me. “She’s a teacher, and a good one. I think she’d been much happier staying a teacher rather than working with the ministry’s schools.”

Garnet nodded. “I can appreciate her concern. I’m glad she hasn’t found the report of the subjects developing resistances to the sedative over time. Certainly twenty years is a long time, though. It’s not as if we’ll keep them in stasis for centuries.”

“She was right about there being some confusion regarding the spells involved, though. Some of the nursing staff is concerned. There was a memo about spells from the Ministry of Image being involved, but that couldn’t be right.”

“No no. I’m sure that it was an error, Redheart. Some days we can’t tell what’s coming out of the Ministry of Technology and what’s originating with the Ministry of Magic. We just do our best. Still, we’re quite glad to see the Ministry of Peace going ahead with the facility. I’ll try and get more specifics sent your way.”

“Thank you, Garnet. I appreciate it.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. Oh, just a heads up that Robroco will be here to tie the maintenance robots into the system maneframe. Once their control system is linked to the bots, your nurses shouldn’t have to worry about them causing messes.”

oooOOOooo

I returned to my body, screaming as fire roared from crotch to ribcage. I lay on my back, strapped to an operating table, pulling against the restraints on my limbs.

Overhead, a robotic spider on a white boom hovered over my body. Little scissors were slowly snipping open my belly as I screamed and thrashed against the restraints. “You fuckers!” I hissed through clenched jaws as spit ran down my chin.

“Bad pony. Potty mouth pony. She said a bad word!” gibbered the sewn-together abominations around me as the scissors went ‘snip snip snip’. “She needs a time out. She needs to be punished. Bad pony!”

The children were sleeping.

All around the perimeter of the room were metal pods with observation windows and padded interiors; at least forty was the best count I could make under the circumstances. In the pods were foals. Some were missing legs and eyes. Others appeared burned or worse. Others appeared intact, so I could only guess they suffered from some internal disease or condition. They all lay so still they might as well have been corpses. Each had a tiny monitor with zigzagging lines on it that was too far beyond my intelligence level to understand. The cables all ran to a central drum decorated with a dozen terminals. Running from this drum was a thick cable that disappeared into the floor. Blackened marks showed where the hoof-thick connection had been mended.

I wouldn’t scream. Crying was unavoidable, but that helped me focus. “What do you want?” I yelled as I focused every bit of magic on the scissors and pushed the arm away, leaving the foot-wide incision.

“Mommy! Play! Die! Live! Cry! Hug! Blood! Mommy! Please! Cookie! Fuck! Daddy! Pain! Skin! Mommy! Toys! Puppet! Doggies! Birthday! Outside! Home! Die! Kill! Costume! Sleep! Hurt! Out! Play! Die!” the robots around me chanted.

We’re not going to leave them in stasis for centuries, Garnet had said. What if they were left anyway? How many years had it taken before the children became resistant to the sedative? How many more before the handful of survivors had been unable to keep the children focused? How long before they went mad and sought ever bloodier and more terrible games?

Somepony, Redheart I suspected, had cut the connection between the repair bots and the facility maneframe. They’d sat here alone, incapable of any interaction at all. Unable to sleep. They couldn’t even kill themselves. Then the Enclave arrived and connected the maneframe again. The children had resumed their games, honed after decades of being trapped within themselves.

Now I was next. My telekinesis pushed against the medical robot as I clenched

my teeth so hard that I felt a tooth crack. It wasn't enough. A three-fingered hand reached in and pulled out a loop of gray-pink intestine like a thick noodle. I wouldn't scream. I might choke on the vomit rising in my throat as I felt inch after inch slipping out.

Then I heard the sharp crack from near the roof and the air vent tumbled into the room. Glory poked her head in, eyes wide, teeth clenched on her beam pistol. Right now she was a more welcome sight than Splendid stepping out of a hot shower.

"Bad. Bad. Bad ponies. Bad." the robots chanted as the medical arm released my guts and reversed to slam itself against the grate. Glory leapt into the air, circling the arm as she looped above me. All eyes were on her, except for mine, which noticed the small blue shape of P-21 slip in through a door. Carefully he picked his way towards the terminal. Glory wouldn't be enough.

I lifted my head and looked at the buckles on the straps holding my limbs. Pain made the world black out around my edges of my vision as I fumbled with my magic. One of the buckles came free.. Then another. Then another. Slowly I kicked myself free as the abominations surged forward. "Bad ponies. Bad ponies." I sat up, spotting my shotgun. I could make out the orange shells in the drum.

I levitated the gun to me and slowly rolled off the table. And then I discovered something truly disturbing: I could either handle the shotgun or hold my guts in, and I wasn't doing the latter. A hot, wet slipperiness moved out of me combined with a sensation that made me want to put a shell through my skull. It was only twenty feet to my target, but that was the longest twenty feet of my life.

P-21 typed desperately. Glory flew desperately. I tried to walk desperately. Had the abominations realized what I was trying to do, they could have stopped me easily. I think they just took glee in watching me struggle. Maybe they thought I was trying to help P-21 or run. Instead I staggered my way to where the cable emerged from the rear of the machine. Suddenly my intestines went taut and I almost blacked out again. "Would you mind getting off my guts?" I croaked.

The cable was thick. Even with the explosive rounds it'd take me several shots to chew through. The shotgun didn't have that many shots left in it. That was okay. I only needed one. I grinned back at my abomination audience. "Playtime is over!" I ejected the drum and kicked it underneath the cable. One round remained in the chamber. I pressed the tip of the shotgun to the ammo drum and fired.

The explosion was barely equivalent to a grenade, but it did the job. The cable snapped once more as I was showered with shrapnel. With a soft hum the arm

froze in its pursuit of Glory. The abominations froze in place, puppets with their strings cut. The zigzagging lines went crazy as darkness finally caught up with me.

Heh, crazy kids.

When I came to, I felt good. Great. Wonderful in fact. I opened my eyes, and immediately felt my midsection. Only an ugly red line remained, and that was healing before my eyes. The table I was lying on had a strange talisman that covered me in a pink glow. Some kind of regeneration magic pulled my torn body together.

“Oh, good. You’re awake,” Glory said from beside the table. The pegasus looked like she needed a few days sleep and a few years of therapy. Maybe we could get a two for one special.

“Oh good. You’re alive,” I replied, and got a little smile in return. I looked at the strange egg-like talisman. “Please tell me there are more of those.”

“There are more of these,” she replied softly.

“Oh thank goodness—” I began, then saw her looking away. “There really aren’t more of these, are there?”

“You told me to tell you. . .” But I shut her up with a hug.

“I thought you were dead. I was so sure I got you killed,” I said as I hugged her tightly. “How’d you get away?”

“Red light,” she said softly with a little shiver. “It went on and on. I think they were paying attention to you on the other side of the door. The vent was right above me, so I shot through. They called me a cheater. After that it was just following the shouting and gunshots.”

The wound across my middle had completely healed. At once my eyes widened. “Get P-21 in here! We can heal his. . .” There was a buzz and the pink glow disappeared. “. . . fuck.”

“The talisman only works on one subject,” P-21 said as he limped in from the doorway.

“I wanted to heal your leg,” I muttered softly.

“Why? You didn’t break it.”

I sighed as I climbed off the bed, looking at the burned out talisman and feeling as if it'd been wasted on me. "I thought if I healed your leg I'd stop reminding you of 99. Then maybe we could be friends."

He arched a brow and smiled, shaking his head. "Ever think it's not about you, Blackjack?" I blinked stupidly at him and he sighed softly. "Guess not. Come on. We've got one last thing to deal with." He started back out the door. "And it's going to suck. It's going to suck a lot."

We trotted back into the operating room. I tried to ignore the drying bowel strung over a quarter of the room. He stopped in front of the large central terminal. Ofillia Stasis System Review: >Current patient survival prognosis: 0.00> Patient intercom system: Error. System disabled. >Terminate Power: Y/N?

No. "No no no... fuck no. Fuck!" I yelled as I looked at the pods around me with their wildly zigzagging readouts. I could imagine their screams as they were locked up once again. I rounded on P-21. "I'm not killing forty children! Are you out of your mind?"

"No. I'm not," he replied as looked at the terminal. "We have two choices: we leave them in stasis, or we shut down the whole thing and they die."

"Wake them up! See if they're crazy." I could kill crazy foals... I hoped. Oh Goddesses, did I actually just think that?!

"We can't, Blackjack," Morning Glory said softly. "They were dying when they were put in the pods. They're still dying. Some wouldn't last a day, according to their records. If we leave them... maybe... I don't know. Maybe someday the Enclave can do something to help them."

P-21 shook his head firmly as he looked at the wide eyed pegasus. "The Enclave lost a biomedical team to these kids. And they've been trapped here for two centuries. Are you willing to leave them trapped, again, on the hope that someday they might be able to be saved?" He sighed. "I told you this would suck."

"Why are you asking me?" I said softly as I looked at him.

"Because there is no right answer here. Because she's right. Because I'm right. And no matter what, they're going to suffer." He sighed. "I want to do one. She wants to do the other. You're the tie breaker." 'And you're the leader', his eyes seemed to say.

No. Fuck him! Fuck me! No! Put me back on the table and rip out my guts, but don't leave the decision up to me! I slowly looked around at all the pods. "I can't... I don't... fuck!" I shouted, clenching my eyes closed. I wanted back into that dream

the orb had put me in. Neither of them would look at me. I gazed at the pods. There was no right answer here. I was damning myself either way. I thought of flipping a cap, but what if it came to the shutoff and I tried for two out of three? Or vice versa? Damn me! Damn me. . .

Slowly I straightened as I looked at all the pods. "I don't know if you can hear me, or understand me. I don't know who any of you are or what you want. I only know you didn't deserve being trapped like this. I'm sorry." I whispered as tears ran down my cheeks. "I don't know. . . I don't know what's going to happen yet. Where I'm from, when you die, you just go away." I sniffed as I bowed my head. "I hope. . . I hope that if you do go somewhere. . . I hope that it's some place better."

I turned and looked at the terminal. 'Y' and 'enter'. The hum of fans died one after another as I murdered forty children. I swallowed, knowing there was no forgiveness possible for this, and sang softly, "Hush now, quiet now. It's time you lay your sleepy head. Hush now, quiet now. . . It's time to go to bed."

I choked, but then Glory sang after me, "Drifting off to sleep, leave exciting day behind you. Drifting off to sleep. Let the joy of daylight find you." She was falling apart as badly as I was. The only light in the room was the jagged readouts on each pod that became less and less erratic till they became flat lines.

P-21 then shocked us both as he raised his voice and finished, "Hush now, quiet now. Lay down your sleepy head. Hush now, quiet now. It's time to go to bed." With that he bowed his head as well as I sank to the floor. Finally the flat readings winked out one after the other.

Damn me. Damn me. Damn me. . .

Redheart had crawled into the storage room that had held the regeneration talisman. Half her hide had been skinned off before she'd severed the connection. Had she come in here to try and save herself? To protect the various talismans and experimental goods? Did it really matter? If there'd been a cure in here for any of the children, I had no doubt she would have used it. She lay curled on her side, covered by a bloody, shredded lab coat. The body had mummified in the sealed storage chamber.

I noticed she seemed to be cradling something protectively in her hooves. Given what I'd already done, robbing the dead was icing on the proverbial cake. To my surprise, Redheart yielded the object to my magic surprisingly easily.

It was a figurine of Fluttershy. Her soulful blue eyes looked up at me as she hugged a disgruntled white rabbit beneath her hooves. So gentle. So forgiving. 'Be kind' was written on the base. Her head was cocked just so, as if she knew I desperately needed to talk to her.

"I'm sorry. I tried. I tried to do better. I tried to help..." Slowly I held the Fluttershy figurine to my chest as I slumped over onto my side, weeping and blubbering like a foal. "I'm so sorry." As I lay there alone in the storage room, I suddenly knew exactly why Redheart had come here:

To beg for forgiveness she would never receive.

Footnote: Level up.

New perk: Foal at Heart- This perk greatly improves your interactions with children.

Skill note: Speech – 50

7. Prices

“YOU TOUCH IT, YOU BUY IT. We take cash or credit.”

I’m a killer.

The first pony I killed had been a male unicorn getting removed; that had been before I even got my cutie mark. I’d been told to tell him that he was now U-21 and ask him to report to security. I didn’t know what that meant at the time. I took my sweet time doing it, going to the atrium cafeteria for a green gel smoothie, poking in on Midnight trying to learn her PipBuck routines, and taking a nap on a humming moisture condenser before I finally found him. He’d just smiled sadly and walked back with me.

I remember his white and red striped mane, like a candy cane. I remember his laugh. How sad his eyes looked as he walked beside me. Mom read the formal statement, I gave him his last dot, and then we stood by as the medics gave him a shot. He closed his eyes. Let out one last breath. That was it. I could almost imagine he was sleeping except I knew he’d never wake up.

I know the excuses. I was just doing as I was told. We were just following the orders of the Overmare. We had no choice. There was nothing we could do. We had to prevent an Incident. I never actually gave him a shot. It was peaceful. It was merciful. I didn’t know any better.

Horseapples. I killed him because I never once asked the question: Is this right or wrong? I killed four other males in exactly the same way. I would have killed P-21, too, if the Overmare hadn’t let Deus in first.

The first pony I killed with my own horn had been a raider. She’d surprised me. She’d had a shotgun and nearly used it on me. She’d killed others in my stable, one right in front of me, and would have killed more. Again, I know the excuses. It was self defense. I was protecting Midnight. I was defending my stable. There was no time. There was nothing else I could do.

Raiders. At first, I didn’t think much about them. They were mangy psychotic killers or ponies who’d decided to be evil. Killing them had been required. My PipBuck turned every moral question into a simple answer: red it’s dead, yellow be mellow. The next time I’d faced them, I’d killed many. Then I’d spared one, for the simple reason that the PipBuck had gone from red to yellow. Suddenly, she wasn’t a raider

anymore. Suddenly, she was free to go. I even laughed while she fled.

I'd deserved to be shot in the back.

Scoodle was the next pony I'd killed. Hers was the first death that actually got to me. Before that, all I'd demonstrated was that I was a slightly more effective killer than the diseased and maddened raiders I'd faced thus far. I hadn't listened to her... no, that wasn't true. I'd listened. I hadn't believed her, and I'd been so full of myself that I was sure I could face anything the Wasteland had to offer. I thought that after forty-eight hours I knew more than a filly who'd spent her entire life on the surface. I was wrong. Dead wrong. But I was "lucky" enough that somepony else had been killed by my pride, arrogance, and stupidity.

At Pony Joe's I'd tried to turn Glory into a killer just like me. Mad? Upset? Scared? Kill somepony. Pick you right up. Of all the ponies I'd faced, though, the one that stuck with me was that poor bastard shitting himself, and me feeling so clever and cocky for sneaking up on him while he was occupied. I hadn't learned one thing. I thought I'd changed. That I'd devoted myself to being the better pony. And then I smashed his head in with a baton. I'd thought he'd yell or attack or something. Red is dead. Execution by PipBuck.

Now I'd just killed forty more colts and fillies. Some had been sick; there was no question of that. Letting them live would have been... what? Who the fuck am I to judge if a pony deserves to die? How did I know the Enclave couldn't have helped them? Or the Collegiate? Or... somepony? Fluttershy said to do better. Better for me was increasing my body count. And the final twist? I ended up with my body completely healed. I felt great.

"Hey, Blackjack. Are you okay?" P-21 asked as I tightened up the brace on his leg. He looked down at me with some concern as I buckled the straps.

No. I'm not okay. I'm a killer. I'm a cleaner, healthier raider with better aim. "Yeah, sure," I replied with a smile. "Not too tight?" He shook his head. "Did Glory get her healing potions, antidotes, and drugs squared away?" The gray pegasus had found some Enclave remains with a flight harness that doubled her pockets and holster. He nodded again as I straightened and walked to the exit into the stasis pod chamber.

"Blackjack. Are you sure you're okay?" P-21 repeated the question, his dark eyes locked on mine, lips curled in a worried frown.

"Yeah. Just fine." Shoot me now P-21. "Let's grab Glory and get paid." Shoot me

before I kill somepony else. "Come on." Please, P-21. "Let's go." Please.

Prince Splendid was not happy. The Collegiate ponies were not happy. I really couldn't care less, but I didn't want them killing each other once I left. "The Collegiate can figure out what systems work and don't work and see if they can reproduce some of the more powerful spell talismans. The Society can feed them and keep adequate guard so that they can work without being harassed." I looked at Splendid with a level stare, seeing him start to fidget and frown. "They can also see about getting the stasis pods to work again to deal with your problem, and you'll have first dibs to their findings."

He opened his beautiful mouth and closed it once more. I stared into his eyes, unblinking as I felt my horn twitch. Finally, he smiled and said graciously, "That will be acceptable to the Society."

"And you," I said as I looked at Archie sharply. "If somepony comes needing medical help, you try and help them. You've got a whole hospital to scavenge; I know you'll find enough. Charge caps if you want, but help. Do better," I said as I glared into his eyes, stressing each word. He swallowed hard and backed away so quick he landed on his rump.

"Right! Sure. The Collegiate is always happy to help. I'll make sure my superiors know when they get here," Archie stammered quickly.

I looked up towards the broken dome atop the interior chamber. "Also, keep an eye out for Enclave. I don't know why they were here, but they were after something and they may be back." Hopefully Glory would fill me in soon on what that something might be. I knew she'd found more than just parts for her beam pistol.

Prince Splendid signed the note to Bottlecap to pay me for his contract, and with no further delay we were on our way back. I took point, as usual, letting the pair trail behind me. Glory was showing off something she'd found. "It's called a battle saddle. Most of the security forces use them. They let us handle larger guns without occupying our mouths," Glory said as she fiddled with the strange harness she'd found. It looked more to me like some kind of weird bondage gear with beam pistols attached. I wasn't quite sure she knew how to work it.

As we followed the road back east, I walked slow and steady. My head crashed over and over with what I'd done, pushing the mystery of EC-1101 from the forefront of my thoughts. Maybe I should have turned the kids over to the Collegiate. No...

while they'd been fascinated by the notes I'd found, they'd been relieved that I'd disposed of the foals. Not their problem. The Society? Same. Everypony was glad they didn't have to deal with forty traumatized and dying young.

"She's not okay," P-21 muttered softly. My jaw set.

"I thought she was going to shoot both of them if they argued," Glory replied in her own whisper.

I glanced back at both of them and didn't say a word. Glory immediately stepped back a few steps. P-21 just looked sad. "Blackjack. . ."

"What?" There was no good answer to my question. I was so angry I felt like a broken Sparkle-Cola bottle.

"It wasn't your--"

"Shut up," I snapped, and I was glad to see him angry. Because he was about to say it wasn't my fault. If it wasn't my fault, was it his for leaving the choice up to me? Glory's for not stopping me? The Enclave for reconnecting the maneframe to the maintenance robots? Redheart? Fluttershy? Should I just blame ponies who fucked up two centuries before I was even born? Celestia? Zebras? Who was to blame? Who had to pay for what I'd done?

Somepony had to pay the price. Better me than P-21. Maybe if he was smart he'd ditch me before I got him killed. They'd be better off together without me. Perhaps in a few months they'd find me frothing mad, psychotic, and put me down.

I was so preoccupied that I walked right into the ambush. It didn't help that I hadn't reactivated my EFS after the interference in the hospital. As I walked past an overturned sky trailer there was a resounding bang and the familiar shove of buckshot against my barding from behind. Tally up a new bruise, but nothing penetrated. I looked up at the two ponies in the trailer, shotgun reloading as another gripping a pool cue jumped out at me. Two more stepped out of another overturned carriage.

Out came the automatic pistol and S.A.T.S. popped up. Four shots to Shotgun's head. Execute. Then I noticed that instead of turning his head into meaty goo, the two shots that hit just sparkled off his hide. Shit. I'd forgotten I'd loaded the clips with shock rounds: great against robots, but lousy against everything else. Pool Cue swung with all the strength she had, but I raised my PipBuck and let the wooden shaft shatter on its casing. My horn glowed as I plucked a foot-long shard with my magic, seized her shoulders with my hooves, and drove every inch into her eye socket. One.

Glory flew above, her aim wild as she tried to get her battle saddle to work. P-21 had his binoculars out. "Blackjack! Fifth one on the hill! Sniper!"

I wasted no time. When Shotgun reloaded, I heaved the female's body into his line of fire and felt only a sting of a pellet or two. Then I was in the trailer with him. I had no wish to use a whole clip of ammo, so out came the baton. He backed away, but there was nowhere to go; his hiding spot was also a dead end. He tried to say something, but simply gagged as I shoved him hard against the wall and magically swung the baton till his head went from convex to concave. Two.

One look at the shotgun and I tossed it aside. A single shot between reloads? My baton was better. I did levitate a clip of lead rounds for the automatic pistol out of my pocket and swapped ammunition before running back at the second pair Glory was keeping occupied. Her aim was horrible, but the beam pistols she'd hooked to the battle saddle were quite effective at keeping the pair moving as she circled overhead. One with an automatic pistol didn't even see me coming. Automatic turned his head just in time to see me take a stance, pistol raised, and aim five shots into his noggin. There was little left. Three.

The fourth one with a baseball bat tossed his weapon at me. At first it seemed nonsense till I saw him duck his head for a grenade hooked to his vest.. His mouth closed around it just as my magic flicked the tab right off the end. His head lifted, tongue working to remove the pin that was already gone. I just stared into his eyes as his gaze widened in horror. Then his head exploded. Four.

The rifle round struck me in the neck at the line of my security barding. Sniper was already running for his life now, though. My PipBuck showed a red bar. Red is dead. Without listening to the shouts behind me, I tore up the hillside after him. A large concrete tower stood at the apex, with dishes pointed every direction. He could run, but not hide. I wove up through a gap in the dead trees, putting my gun away so I could telekinetically push dead bushes and branches out of my way. I saw him, and he saw me coming after him.

So did his friends. I staggered into the camp at the base of the tower with four more red bars and a number of yellow. "Granite, you dumb fucker! It's Security!" a unicorn screamed as she levitated a SMG at me. I'd seen a brief demonstration at Megamart. No time to use my gun against that rate of fire. Instead I snapped out the baton again with a very specific target: her horn. The swing fell just as she started to fire. With a purple sparkle and a spray of blood the lavender spire shattered and the SMG fell uselessly into the dirt.

Sniper tried to put another round in my back, but I'd ducked for the swing and his shot went wide. The others drew a knife, baseball bat, and tire iron.

I levitated up her dropped SMG.

I braced my magic and legs as I stood over the squirming, dehorned unicorn and unloaded a spray of lead that started with the sniper and then washed over the other three. Five. Six. Three seconds later the clip was empty. Thirty-five bullets in three seconds? I gaped at the weapon. The only way I could waste ammo faster would be to just dump it down the barrel of a shotgun and pull the trigger! Two ponies were still squirming; my automatic stopped that. Seven. Eight.

What the fuck am I doing? What the fuck am I doing?! The automatic started to shake in my telekinetic grip and I dropped it into the dirt. They had been done! Why did I just kill them? Just. . . killed. Eight. Eight. Eight.

"Thank you," somepony whispered from nearby. That was when I noticed that these raiders hadn't been alone. There were at least a dozen ponies chained together in a row by collars. They were filthy, many bloody.

The dehorned unicorn lay curled up, hooves pressed to the sheared-off stump of her horn as she shook. I'd once heard getting your horn smashed was like having all four legs cut off. It'd take some serious magic for that injury to heal. "What the fuck is going on here?" I'd seen plenty of raiders. These weren't raiders. Not unless they were going for a full on twelve course banquet. P-21 and Glory ran up from the road.

"They're slavers," the lead pony in the chain said as he stared hard at the unicorn.

"Slavers?" I asked, frowning in confusion. The lead pony looked a little concerned that I didn't recognize the term. "I thought they were raiders."

"Not much difference except in levels of crazy," he muttered. "Not every wastelander is a psychopathic cannibal," he said as he looked at my stable barding. "Slavers round up ponies and sell us to places like Paradise, Appleloosa, or Fillydelphia." The gray pony glared at the squirming unicorn. I knew that glare. "They work a pony to death, and it doesn't take long." Nine, my head started to count.

"Blackjack," P-21 said in worry as I lifted the SMG, ejected the clip, and loaded it with explosive rounds.

Glory landed next to me. "Blackjack, stop. Please!"

Red rage boiled in my vision and I ignored them as I pressed it against the unicorn's

head. Nine...

"What the fuck is wrong with you people? Aren't fucking raiders enough? Why the fuck are you doing this shit? Why!" I screamed in her face, pressing the short barrel against her clenched eye. "Am I going to have to kill every single fucked up pony in the Goddesses-damned Wasteland just to end this shit? Am I?" I roared as I stared into her terrified eye.

"I just... gotta survive," she whimpered as tears ran down her cheeks. "I have a kid..."

If I pulled the trigger I wouldn't stop. Nine. Not ever. Make it nine. But here was a pony willing to sell ponies for caps. I could almost forgive raiders now; they were at least crazy. She'd chosen to perpetuate this nightmare. Her life was forfeit! I just had to end her. End everything. Make it nine!

Be strong. Be kind.

My grip on the SMG trembled as I slowly pulled away from her eye. "Well how's that working for you?" I snapped. Eight was enough. One was enough. Fuck, I was crying now too. I tossed the SMG aside, grabbed her head between my hooves and clenched it as I stared into her eyes. "Get the fuck out of here. Find another line of work. Tell every slaver you know to find another line of work. I see you doing this shit again and I will turn you into paint! Do you understand me?" I shouted into her face.

"Yes..." she whimpered.

"Do you fucking understand me?" I roared.

"Yes!" she screamed. I shoved her away from me. She took one last look and ran as fast as her hooves would carry her. I saw fourteen pairs of eyes all staring at me. Some looked just as scared of me as the unicorn had. Others appeared angry I hadn't ventilated her.

Fuck them if eight wasn't enough. My death count was one less than it could have been. I looked to P-21, saying in a shaky voice, "Unlock them... please..." I walked away from the slaver camp. I found a rock, pressed my face to it, wrapping my forehooves around it, and I wept, choked, and sobbed. Then I felt a hoof stroking along my mane. I peeked up at Morning Glory as she gave me a soft smile.

"You did the right thing," she said gently.

I lifted my head. "I wouldn't know the right thing from a hole in the head," I said as I

curled up on the rock. "I wanted to put every round into her, reload, and do it again."

"Blackjack," Glory said quietly. "I wanted to kill her too." Slowly I raised my head to stare at the delicate, compact pegasus as she closed her eyes. "At first it was because I thought she was a raider, but when I saw they were slavers... I wanted them dead. How dare they buy and sell ponies for bottle caps?" She sighed softly as she looked away in the direction the maimed slaver had taken. "I couldn't have. I don't think I could ever kill a pony that wasn't trying to kill me first. But I wanted to."

"But you said I should have let her go." Now I was just confused.

"Yes," she replied as she looked back at me. "What she did was wrong. Killing her won't undo it. But she's still alive and she'll have to make a choice. Maybe she'll choose to stop. Maybe she'll convince others to stop. Maybe she won't. No matter what, we're not going to make the Wasteland any better by killing everypony. Even if we really think they deserve it."

"I'm no different from her," I muttered softly, voicing the poisonous words.

"How can you say that?"

"Because it's true. I'll kill anypony if my Eyes Forward Sparkle says to. Red it's dead. Yellow be mellow. Right?" I felt disgusted at my supposed wit.

"Was she red or yellow?" Glory asked as she lay down and crossed her forelimbs.

"Huh?"

She nodded in the direction the slaver had fled. "Was she red or yellow when you spared her?"

"I..." I frowned. "I don't remember. I don't think I checked."

"So you chose to spare her. Not your PipBuck," Glory said with a little cock of her head that made me smile. "You're a killer, Blackjack, but you're not a raider. You can choose. You care enough to choose."

"Right," I muttered, and I gave her a smile. Clearly it was what she wanted. "Well, we should probably head back then." She rose to her hooves and flew up and over the trees back towards the camp. I hesitated.

She was right. I could choose. I chose to kill forty colts and fillies. No pep talk or show of mercy would change that. There was a price to be paid for being a killer. I was going to pay for it.

It took about an hour to get the captive slaves freed and distribute the slavers' weapons. I'd thought the dozen freed ponies would travel together. Instead they began to bleed off in ones and twos. Many shot me nervous glances; apparently my little display proved just as unnerving as the slavers themselves. The gray colt in the lead got the SMG, though I'd replaced the bullets. The explosive rounds would probably detonate if fired on full auto. I probably could have sold it for enough to replace my shotgun, but at the moment I felt so damned numb that I couldn't care less about caps. They headed off to the north, perhaps because I'd already wandered around it and cleared most of the raiders.

The gray pony with a bow-tie cutie mark was the last to go. "I'm heading down to Flank," he said with a grateful smile. "If you get that far south, look up Frisk. I'll see about putting a good word in for you." I didn't deserve a good word. I deserved a good warning. Blackjack: contents under pressure. Highly volatile. Reacts poorly to bullets.

Once we were alone again Glory took her time seeing to my spreading bruises. Nothing serious, but I was thankful for the relief. Then I watched with a detached, surreal feeling as she took the dropped knife, tested the edge, and started to saw off the head of one of the slavers. My eye twitched slightly at the sight. "Um... Glory? What are you doing?" She didn't seem like the kind for desecration.

She jammed the knife between vertebrae and gave a sharp twist. I winced at the loud pop. "Well, you were talking about raiders, right?" Was this a rehearsal? "I got to thinking... why are raiders so aggressive? They attack everypony on sight. Even if they already have food, they attack. The only time they flee is in the face of overwhelming odds. So I was thinking that if I could examine a raider's brain compared to a non-raider's brain I might be able to detect something."

"Um... I doubt Bottlecap will be okay with us bringing in heads," I pointed out as she wrapped up the intact noggin. "Besides. What are the chances we'll run into raiders between here and Megamart?"

I had to ask.

The fight with the raiders proved terribly short. Nine. Almost disappointing. Ten. There were only four of them and they didn't have a gun between them. Eleven. Glory got her second head and looked decidedly happy about the fact. Twelve. Walking back, P-21 asked about the radio. I hadn't turned it on since that broadcast by DJ Pon3, but it'd be hours to reach the Finders. Nothing hostile on my EFS. No excuse to not turn it on.

I had to admit, I liked the music. So much of it was upbeat. The parts that were sad were also a relief. When DJ Pon3 came on I cringed, but he just warned folks around New Appleloosa to keep their eyes out for trouble and to watch out for each other. Occasionally he referenced other ponies fighting the good fight all across Equestria. One that he called the 'Stable Dweller' seemed to have completely shut down a town of slavers. Now that was impressive. I doubted the Stable Dweller would ever kill a room full of helpless ponies.

"And for all you folks out east who don't feel like you don't have a 'Stable Dweller' of your own, here's a little heads up on what Security's been up to. Yes, Hoofington, she's been busy busy busy. If you thought cleaning up the Manehattan Highway was impressive you should see what else Security is doing for the Hoof. It looks like the Fluttershy hospital is open for business again, courtesy of... whoa, can this report be accurate? It must be! Looks like Security actually got the Eggheads and the Bluebloods working together. Talk about a miracle. And it seems like she's got a bone to pick with the slavers in Paradise. Let's play the audio!"

I froze dead in my tracks as my voice, slightly strained and tinny, played out from my PipBuck. "Get the fuck out of here. Find another line of work. Tell every slaver you know to find another line of work. I see you doing this shit again and I will turn you into paint! Do you understand me? Do you fucking understand me?!" Followed by her cry of 'Yes!' Did I really sound like that?

"Looks like the Security Mare is just reminding Paradise that ponies selling ponies to ponies who work ponies to death is wrong. And Security doesn't like wrong. So in light of that, Hoofington, this is just for you from Sapphire Shore's hit..." Whatever else he said and the heavier beat that started went ignored as I felt numb from horn to hoof.

I sat down right in the middle of the cracked road, then turned the radio off. Looking at P-21 I gave my sweetest smile. "Shoot me? Please?" Please please please...

"Like it or not, you have to admit DJ Pon3 is helping you. It's clear that the Finders and the Collegiate only were willing to work with us because he told them what you'd done." Glory said with a curious smile and tilt of her head. "So why resent it?"

I sighed. How to explain it without saying the wrong thing? "It feels like a lie. Like he's playing up all the best parts and overlooking what really happens. Sure, I got the Society ponies to work with the Eggheads, but what about all the other stuff that happened?" Would DJ Pon3 give me such high praise if he'd known what I did back in the hospital? Even playing that recording... like I'm going to take out every slaver

I come across. . .”

“Are you saying that, if you did come across a band of slavers and your PipBuck labeled them yellow, you’d let them past?” P-21 asked skeptically.

“No. Of course not. But. . .”

“And. . . how did DJ Pon3 put it. . . Ponies selling ponies to ponies that work ponies to death needs to be stopped?” Damn it. They were both smiling. I felt my heart start to pound.

“Yeah. . . but. . .”

“Then what’s the big deal? Let him call you a hero,” P-21 said with his sure little smile, “and just be a hero.”

“I’m not a fucking hero!” I yelled at him, so angry I was glad that I wasn’t holding a gun. Thirteen. Oh wait. . . I was. . . “I kill ponies that try and kill me or try and kill ponies who don’t deserve it! I didn’t kill those slavers because they were evil and wrong! I shot them because they shot first and my PipBuck was red.” Thirteen. . . “If I hadn’t chased after that sniper I wouldn’t have had a clue there were slaves up there at all!” I said, watching their smiles vanish, seeing the gun tremble in my magical grip.

I couldn’t catch my breath as I covered my face with my hooves. Thirteen. I felt my magic tighten more and more on the automatic’s handle. Every part of me was shaking as my breathing became louder and louder, faster and faster. I saw a snapped off tip of a knife rammed into a skull. One. I saw a teal foal torn in two. Twenty. My body felt like it was burning up as I felt P-21 shaking me. . . or killing me. . . whichever he decided. I saw a skinned pegasus pop out of a box on a spring. Everything started to spin as I felt like I was falling off the world.

I clenched my eyes shut but all I kept seeing were ponies dying. An eyeball popping under my baton. Twenty-two. A head disintegrating as I raced out the tunnel. Nine. Guts spilling out amid bones. Twenty. Automatic fire tearing holes in three ponies. Seventy-three, four, five. . . Pushing a button. Twenty-seven to sixty-seven. My heart beat harder and harder and I could make out the distant noises of them saying things to me. Guts spilling from my torso; I felt like I was falling into the sky to break against the dark clouds overhead. The roaring in my ears chased me into the blackness.

What was the price for killing so many?

I awoke to the steady tap of water falling into a coffee tin near my head. My head pounded as I opened my eyes. I wasn't exactly sure where I was, only that I was alone. For once I didn't feel like crying. It felt as though something inside me had snapped. Maybe I'd finally gone off the deep end and killed both my friends. Wouldn't that be something? Water dripped through a hole in the roof into the tin, and I could dimly hear the sound of rain.

The room was small but neatly organized. A desk in one corner with terminal. A safe. A shelf held numerous books. A refrigerator in the second corner. Wastebasket. Then the cot I occupied in the third corner. I saw a toilet and sink through one open door. A faded plastic banner hung near the ceiling reading 'Megamart, always lowest prices, always highest quality.' Lowest prices. . .

There were other things too. Little hints of a world before this one. The Megamart employee of the year had been somepony named Boxcars. There was a little award for record profits selling 'canned and preserved foods and ammunition'. A strange photograph of two groups of soldiers in the parking lot; one in green combat armor and the other... zebras with red stripes? A curly-maned mare with purple glasses bumped hooves with a red zebra filly. The caption read 'Macintosh's Marauders invade Megamart with the Red Stripes. Great deals ensue.'

I was back with the Finders, which meant that my friends were probably alive. I felt a little relieved at that thought. I should have felt more relieved. Slowly I rocked back and forth before tipping over onto my hooves. I could only assume that this was Bottlecap's office, though why I was here I didn't have a clue. My stomach felt like a pit, but there were some biological urges that needed addressing. Once I'd flushed, a drink of rainwater from the tin helped alleviate some of the pounding in my skull.

"Welcome back," Bottlecap said softly from behind her desk as she casually turned the pages of a book, making me jump. My magic immediately grabbed for weapons that weren't there. It took me a moment to finally sit back on my haunches and blink at her as she scanned a hoof along the page.

"You are a very quiet pony," I muttered, feeling embarrassed by my alarm.

"Not really. You have very noisy bowels. Leave the fan on and close the door," she said as she continued to read. I reddened but did as she asked, feeling apprehensive. I expected a question or comment but Bottlecap didn't say a word as she just read. Then she said softly, "Your friends handled the transactions while you've been

indisposed. They took your barding to be repaired. I recommend some additional protection. Four hundred and twenty-five caps for the glands. Twenty-five hundred from the Society Account. Twenty-two hundred from the Orion Brotherhood. You're halfway to your goal, minus the cost of resupply."

News that we'd amassed a small fortune in caps didn't do much for me. "Did they. . . did they tell you what happened?" I asked as I sat back down on the cot in that vertical fashion that drew a curious look from Bottlecap.

"Should they have? You were unconscious when the three of you got here. I felt you'd recover better with some privacy." She looked up from her ledger and gave a little smile and shrug. "I'm usually too busy to sleep, so it was no trouble."

I rubbed my face. "I fell apart out there," I admitted. "I must have gone a little crazy."

"Perhaps, but I doubt it. I suspect it was simply the result of you throwing yourself at a bit too much wasteland. I take it that, DJ Pon3's accounts aside, your experience has been somewhat terrible?" I cringed in anticipation of the h-word, but it never came. Instead Bottlecap looked back down at the book. "I never understood his habit of casting ponies in the role of hero or villain. It seems a bit immature."

"So you don't think I'm a hero?"

"Hero." She said the word almost with disdain. "The Wasteland is no place for heroes. It chews heroes up and swallows them. They burn out, burn up, or change for the worse. The price of being a hero is just too high in the Wasteland," Bottlecap said as she sat, looking at me with a warm smile. "I think you are an individual and judge you accordingly, instead of holding you to some romantic ideal of how I think you should act."

I gave the yellow mare a grateful smile in return. "Well, thanks for loaning me your bed. I'm better now. I should probably check in on P-21 and Glory and look for more work." Yup. All better now. Whatever had happened on the road was done with and I didn't have to worry about it. Nope. Not at all.

Guts spreading over cracked asphalt. . .

Not at all.

"It's three in the morning," Bottlecap said simply. "Your friends, and most of the Megamart, are asleep."

"Oh. I didn't mean to keep you awake," I said as I looked over the ledger, but it made little sense to me. "What are you working on?"

“Finding a way to keep the Megamart in business,” she replied as she looked at the numbers. “The same thing I do every day. Your work on the Manehattan Highway gave us some wiggle room, but we’re bleeding trade month after month.”

“Really? I’m sorry you’re losing money.” I knew less about business than I did terminals and medicine. My condolences seemed to amuse her.

“Money comes and goes. What we’re losing is trade,” she said as she closed her ledger. “There’s three trade hubs for the Finders and we’re all in competition with each other.”

“Competition? If you’re Finders shouldn’t you work together?”

Bottlecap sighed and walked to the fridge, taking out two Sparkle-Colas. She bit the caps off and spat them into her desk drawer. I levitated one over and enjoyed chilled carrot goodness. “It’s more complicated than that. You see, my father is the owner of the Finders. He has three daughters, one of which is me. Each of my sisters controls the other two hubs. Unfortunately my sisters and I have... differing economic philosophies,” she said with a scowl and a regretful sigh. “When Father dies, one of us will assume control. I’m sure you can see the dilemma.”

“I’m afraid I still don’t get it,” I replied. “Sorry, I wish I was smarter about this whole marketing stuff.” One good thing about talking with Bottlecap: it occupied all of my brain power. I barely thought about pushing a button... barely... I swallowed as I felt my hooves shake on the bottle. “What, you don’t get along with your sisters or something?”

“Caprice is of the opinion that the Finders should diversify away from pure salvage. She peddles sex and chems to anypony willing to pay for it from the Finders hub in Flank. She sees nothing wrong with sucking every last cap out of an addict. She’s quite experienced at that.” She scowled in thought, then glanced at me with a small smile. “As you can guess, she thinks I’m simply a prude.”

“I don’t understand. Isn’t getting caps the point of business?”

“What would be the point of having a pile of caps? To swim in?” Bottlecap said with a smile as she dug out one of the caps and held it up. “This is just a stamped piece of metal. What matters is trade. Taking goods for caps. Selling goods and getting caps. The amount of caps doesn’t matter compared to the trade. If anything has a chance of holding us together; its trade. After all, everypony wants something.”

I laughed softly, hoping I wasn’t being too rude. “Sorry, but you sound so serious about it. How do merchants save Equestria?”

"Is that so shocking? Trade requires rules, understanding, and agreements. It demands a certain level of respect and acknowledgement for others. I suppose I could have pushed my profit margins a little more aggressively, but that would strain trade even more. This way I help contribute to the peace and order of the Wasteland," Bottlecap said as she finished her Sparkle-Cola. "I know it might seem silly, but it's a big wasteland and I'm absolutely lousy with a gun."

I remembered how often I thought I was useless because all I could do is shoot things. "Trust me, being good with a gun isn't much better."

"I disagree." Bottlecap cocked her head with a pleasant smile. "You do things, Blackjack. By your hoof and your will ponies live and die. That's a power that. . ." Her eyes looked at me solemnly and sadly. "I see. . ."

My heart had redoubled its pounding. I struggled for breath. The bottle of Sparkle-Cola slipped from my magic and the brown fluid sloshed over the floor. I did everything I could to stop the shaking in my forelegs. "It's not... It's not a power I should have. That anypony should have."

She looked at me steadily and didn't say a word. She waited for my heart rate to slow; for the vertigo to pass. Then she spoke in a softly respectful tone. "But it is a power you do have, Blackjack. And it's a power that many ponies are willing to use. Eager to use."

"I used my power to kill children," I said as I clenched my eyes shut. I could still hear the singing. Why had we sung as they died? Forty. . . I couldn't help myself. I poured out every terrible event that occurred, finishing with what happened with the raiders.

Bottlecap closed her eyes, seeming to ruminate on everything that I'd told her. Then she said quietly, "There was no right choice, Blackjack, but I would have done the same thing." Slowly I opened my eyes to look at her solemn features. "The Collegiate are fine ponies, but they don't care for fixing ponies broken centuries ago. They're more interested in discovering lost spells and technology. Those foals would have remained as you left them for centuries. They wouldn't have pulled the plug. They simply would have closed the door. As for the Enclave helping. . . why would they? They weren't Pegasus foals."

"Maybe. The blood is on my hooves though. I'll have to pay for it someday," I muttered. I levitated the bottle up, drank what remained inside, and then carefully levitated the fluid off the floor. I wasn't very sure I could do it, actually, but I managed to get most of the spilt soda into a fizzy, dirty, faintly radioactive ball and down the

sink.

Bottlecap waited for me to finish before continuing. “Yes. You will. You’re paying for it right now.” I looked at her in shock. I’d expected. . . what had I expected? “And you’ll keep paying until you don’t care anymore. You’ll pay for that blood even if you do nothing but sit back in a glorified store.”

“You? But. . . unless your employee discipline policy involves executions, who have you killed?” I gasped. Bottlecap, a killer? I wasn’t seeing it.

“You’ve seen the bounties posted. I’m not naïve enough to believe they’re all guilty and deserving of death, but I connect bounty hunters to bounties. I sell the ammunition and weapons that kill them. In my own way I’ve facilitated the death of thousands of ponies. But I have to hope that in the end I’ve helped more than I’ve hurt.” She looked at me, saying levelly, “If I lose that, then I’m no better than my sister Usury in Paradise.”

“Usury?” I straightened as I remember the freed ponies mentioning Paradise. I may not be a smart pony, but I made the connection. “Your sister runs the slave market? The Finders are involved in the slave trade?”

“We are now,” Bottlecap said as closed her eyes with a reserved frown. “Usury believed it was a mistake to ignore the slave market. That ponies are every bit as much a commodity as salvage or sex.” She sighed softly. “Like I said, Megamart is losing trade. More and more ponies go to Paradise and Flank instead of here to exchange goods. And when Father dies I’ll either be selling drugs and flesh, or ponies.” She smiled grimly. “Though, more likely, I’ll simply quit and set up shop in Tenpony or Friendship City. Some things I’m not willing to buy or sell.” Somehow I figured she wasn’t talking about salvage any more.

I looked at Bottlecap for the longest time, feeling odd emotions churning inside me. Respect. . . no. Admiration. Here was a pony that had lived in the Wasteland her entire life and refused to sell out her integrity. Even when it hurt her business, she insisted on doing the right thing. I didn’t really think it was possible for businesses to care more about their effects than wealth.

I suddenly had a feeling about how I could pay off some of my debt.

“So. . . how do I hurt her trade?” I asked quietly.

“Are you able to?” Bottlecap stood and walked to me with a probing expression. “Because if you want to do something in the Wasteland, somepony is going to get hurt. Maybe you. Maybe your friends. Maybe somepony who deserves to hurt.

Maybe somepony who doesn't. Can you handle it?"

Then I realized what she was asking me. Could I hurt? Could I kill? Could I handle paying the price for being a killer, or would I keep breaking over and over again till there was nothing left? "I don't know," I replied. "I thought I was. Now I don't know what to think."

"Guess we'll find out," Bottlecap said softly. "You already struck a blow against her, thanks to DJ Pon3. I'll never know how he got that recording, but I'm sure every slaving band is wondering just how much of a threat you really are. The more you disrupt supply, the better. But, eventually, you'll have to tackle the demand. Some, like Red Eye in Fillydelphia, probably wouldn't stop unless he died. But there are others, like Brimstone's Fall, where the slave operations are smaller and more manageable."

I glanced at my PipBuck and noticed that it had added a square far to the south and west of Megamart. How did it do that? Bottlecap noticed my look and smiled. "I can't, of course, offer you a contract for this. If my sisters thought I was deliberately undermining them, it would be all out war within the Finders."

I looked back at her. Do better. Could I? I had to. Otherwise I'd be nothing more than a killer. "Know of any contract work in the area?" I offered a tense smile. "After all, trouble seems to find me easily enough. When it does, who can say what'll happen?"

The jobs were simple and legitimate. Patrol the Sunset Highway between Megamart and Flank, poke through the Miramare Air Station for some electronic parts, and deliver some mail to Flank's residents. The route would also take me within spitting distance of Brimstone's Fall. If something should happen that put a dent in the demand side of the slave trade, then it'd not only help the people of the Wasteland but Bottlecap as well.

I wasn't sure if I was good with this or not. Unlike my first talk with Watcher, I didn't feel much more confident. I still wanted to do better, though. Watcher, DJ Pon3, Bottlecap... even the figurine of Fluttershy all extolled me to do better. Do more. Help others. If I did, maybe I'd be able to come to terms with all the wrong things I'd done. Pay my price.

Still, first things first: get a new shotgun and pick up my barding. The specialty rounds were effective, but hell on the workings of a gun. I'd need to save them or

start carrying backup shotguns. Actually, given that everypony was asleep at this hour, what I should do was go back to bed till dawn. The thought of trying to take a nap didn't appeal much, though.

"Ante up." I heard a mare, Keystone, I think her name was, say from the entrance. My ears stood right up and I moseyed over to where five ponies sat around a table. And they had cards and colored chits. A true, real smile crossed my face.

"Deal me in?" I gave her my widest and sincerest 'I won't tell the Overmare' smile.

The mottled gray and green mare looked up in surprise, and a little suspicion. "You know head and hoof style?" I shook my head, but I guessed that they knew we'd gotten paid today. It was actually really similar to a style of poker Rivets had been fond of. You got two cards face down (your head) and then two cards were turned face up (your hooves). Every round you added a card to either your head or your hooves as you raised the bet. Everypony made the best hand out of seven. With six players, that meant keeping track of forty two cards. With half a deck in play, it was more gamble than figuring out the odds. They forwarded some chips for me and we got to playing.

In two hours, the game broke down more and more between me and Keystone. She was a lot smarter than me, and she kept making smart bets. Me? I won big. I lost big too. Still, I won just a bit more than I lost with each hoof dealt. The cards and the winning were only half of it, though; contrary to what I'd thought, I'd missed this. The banter. The jokes. The remembrances of a life where I didn't expect to kill somepony every day.

Then, of course, there was the whiskey. I had to admit that I'd never really drunk before. We didn't have alcohol in Stable 99, so my first drink went down like a Sparkle-Cola. Once I'd stopped coughing and choking, I figured out that whiskey was supposed to be drunk slowly rather than fast, and soon I had a pleasant warmth in my belly that quickly drove out all the fears and doubts rolling around in my skull. I felt happy.

Then I saw a ghost. The unicorn buck stood at the end a row of scrap metal. His brown mane and tan hide were nothing spectacular. The only thing that stood out was an odd cutie mark. A cutie mark identical to P-21's.

U-21. I rose to my hooves as he disappeared out of sight. "Deal me out this round. I need to... take a leak."

"That was information I did not need to know," Keystone replied, happily taking my

cards. When I ran down the row... okay, weaved down the row... she called after me, "Hey! Toilets are that way! Don't be pissing on the merchandise!"

"Heeere... pony pony pony..." I called out as I made my way to the end of the row and turned. "I just want to ask you a few questions about Mr. Deus and Sanguine. I'm not gonna hurt'cha." I really hoped I wouldn't have to hurt him. It'd be nice to get some answers without hurting anypony.

I spotted him fidgeting next to two pallets stacked high with rusty generators or electrical equipment. He stared at me, swallowing as he trembled. "Hey. U-21. You met somepony named Sanguine. I really want to meet him too."

"I'm sorry," he muttered, and then his shaking stopped. His lips curled in a small satisfied smirk. "But he only wants your PipBuck." His horn flared brightly.

"Oh horse..." I started to say, when a powerful telekinetic field wrapped around my throat and squeezed tight, lifting me into the air. Then what I'd taken for a heap of scrap slowly rose to his hooves.

"Hello, Security Cunt." In the stable, he'd looked big. Now, he looked huge. Even ignoring the metal plates fused to his hide and the pistons supporting his weight, he stood a whole head higher than me. The sight of metal plunging into flesh, distorting it as he moved, would normally have turned my stomach. Just at the moment, though, I had enough sobriety to notice but more than enough inebriation to not care about it. Or that I was dangling helplessly between his massive guns. "You have no idea how aggravating it's been to find you."

"Hasn't been fun for me either," I gasped with a forced grin. "So. Heard you want a certain computer file I've got? Won't do you any good. It's encrypted."

"Sanguine doesn't care about that, cunt. All he wants is your PipBuck." He reached out with his hoof and caressed my cheek... it was like being touched by manufacturing equipment. "If you'd given it to me right outside that damned stable, I might have let you walk away. Eventually. Crawl, perhaps. But after leading me on a chase for nearly a week? I'm afraid I'm not in the mood anymore."

"Funny." I laughed in his scowling, ugly face. "If you'd pulled this a few hours ago, I'd probably have just given you my PipBuck. Probably the leg too," I said as I gave him a little smile. He blinked in confusion as he looked at me. "There's just two little problems right now: One, I dunno if you noticed, but I'm really stupid. And two..." I paused as I looked over at the cannons. Yup... that was probably it right there. Least I knew my guns. "Two... I'm pretty sure I'm drunk."

And my own magic reached out and deftly depressed the trigger mechanisms on those two cannons pointing to either side of me. The roar of the shots blasted second by second just feet away. Shells sent pallets of scrap flying and tumbling down on U-21, breaking his magical grip on me. I landed in a heap in front of Deus, curling into a little ball. I couldn't hear anything as my ears rang and I went fetal. Oh thank you sweet merciful whiskey for you have taken the concussive beating that comes from hanging a few feet from a firing cannon muzzle and rendered it into a nice full body numbness.

He stood over me, his mouth working as his metallic hoof pressed down right over my leg. It sounded like he was screaming at me from under water. "What did you think that accomplished, huh, cunt?" He started to apply pressure; I wondered if he could just stomp my leg clean off. Probably.

"Wrath of Gun," I muttered, and then he looked up. The massive turret was swinging the barrel around to point right at Deus. He stepped back, eyes widening, and I curled up as tightly as I could giggling, "Mine's bigger." Gun fired.

Wee. . . . I'm flying!

Whoopsie. Never mind. Gravity works.

I crashed through the chain mesh draped across a firearms stall and landed behind the counter. Ammo boxes weren't particularly soft; actually, they were the antithesis of soft. But they did hold ammo. And so, as I lay there behind the counter, marveling at the many painkilling properties of alcohol, I took said ammo and loaded said firearms.

It was crazy time in Megamart. I could make out the long drawn out noise of 'Cunnnnt!' being shouted by Deus. Keystone and the other ponies were scrambling. Gun was tracking Deus, but not firing. And me, I was staggering out from behind the counter with my new. . . shotgun? Rifle? It was all kinda blurry at the moment. Oh well. I could tell the business end from the trigger and that was all I needed. "Hey Deus! You still want my PipBuck? You can have it when you pry it off my cold. . . dead. . . ." Oh. Vomiting. Not nearly what I'd been going for.

Oh look! There was Deus. Minus one gun. It looked like he'd missed getting shot by Gun, but his gear hadn't. That made him keel over with each step as he fought to keep his balance. I blew him a kiss. He blew one back. . . wait, no. That was a shell. It was only luck and him being so off balance that kept me from turning into a Blackjack colored stain.

Another low, deep ‘crump’ from overhead and the shell buried itself in the concrete, throwing rocky debris everywhere. I guessed Gun’s shells didn’t go boom like Deus’. . . made sense being inside and all. Off balance and heavy as he was, Deus was still a quick pony!

“Hey Deus. I got a gun too,” I shouted, or I think I shouted. I might have just said, ‘Hadahhhhsss! Mwahhhguaaataaa!’ but he was charging and I really had no time for elocution. Instead I pointed my gun thing and fired, hitting S.A.T.S. as the shell left the barrel and rocketed towards him. Wait? S.A.T.S. then fire. . . S.A.T.S. then fire. . . Cancelling S.A.T.S. I watched as the shell hit Deus right in the chest. Darn. I’d wanted to aim for his head.

Then Deus exploded! I looked down at the weapon in my magical grip, focusing on the bleary letters. Grenade. . . launcher? I thought you just threw ‘em! Unfortunately Deus was not a dead pony. He wasn’t a happy pony either. Actually, looking around, there were a lot of unhappy ponies. Well, not me. I was happy. I had a tummy of whiskey residue and my head was going around and around and whee.

P-21 and Glory found me and immediately started pumping healing potions into me. Funny, but why did I hurt more when I was healed? The spinning and the underwater noise receded and I became aware of the copious amounts of blood coming from my ears and nostrils. Heck, I looked like I’d gotten peppered with concrete buckshot. Suddenly I didn’t feel so good. In fact I was rapidly going from good to ‘aw fuck’. Why couldn’t I stop shaking?

They helped sit me up as Bottlecap, flanked by Keystone and the rest of her security team, kept weapons trained. “This is done, Deus. I’ll send the bill to Big Daddy. You two can settle it between you.”

“This isn’t done yet.” He pointed a hoof right at me. “Hand her over, Bottlecap. I’ll pay fifty thousand for her right now.”

“You don’t have that kind of money,” Bottlecap said, but I could hear her doubt. “Besides, even if you did, some things aren’t for sale.”

“Bullshit, Bottlecap. This is a store. Everything’s for sale!” he said with a wide grin.

Bottlecap looked at him with complete disdain. “You’ve got me confused with my sisters. You don’t have a clue what it is you’re trying to purchase from me. Now get out, Deus, or I’ll sell what’s left of you to the ghoul’s.”

He glanced up and around, then scowled. “Fine. But I got one last piece of business here.” He pointed his hoof at me and yelled, “Bounty on Security. Fifty thousand

caps. You want to collect, bring me her head and her PipBuck -intact- to the Arena! If she's alive, one hundred thousand bottlecaps! Usury will back me up on payment. After all, she's the sister who doesn't give a fuck," he added, sneering down at Bottlecap. He grinned at me one final time and then the cybernetic pony walked for the exit. U-21 limped after him, smirking at me with malicious glee.

Suddenly more ponies were glancing at me and muttering to each other. "Come on, Blackjack. Let's get you to Bonesaw," P-21 said as he shoved up underneath me. "Ugh, good Goddesses, we just fixed you up, Blackjack. It's like there's some universal rule that you've got to get hurt all the time."

"Just the price I got to pay," I muttered softly as they helped me away.

I was getting pretty familiar with Bottlecap's office by now. Deus had come in like any shopper and simply waited, knowing that I'd arrive eventually to collect on my contracts. Now that there was a price on my head, Keystone and Bottlecap had thought it best I recover out of sight before I started a riot. Without putting up a single piece of paper, Deus had created the largest bounty in Hoofington history. And that was me dead; me alive was twice as much.

"Most ponies are lucky to see a thousand caps in their life," Keystone said with a scowl as she brought me my barding. "We've got to get you out of here or they'll tear the whole place apart looking for you." My whole body throbbed, most particularly my head. I'd thought that Bonesaw took care of patching me up, but the throbbing in my head made me wonder if I had a skull fracture he missed. Even with everything he'd done, I still felt like I'd been shoved in a dryer set to spin.

I regarded Megamart's security chief with a curious half smile. "Not looking to collect yourself?" Keystone didn't smile back.

The mottled gray and green mare gave a snort. "I'm not an ungrateful shit. You helped us and helped others. I get my paycheck the honest way now," she said as tossed the barding down on the cot beside me. "Courtesy of your poker winnings."

I levitated it and then frowned. Why was it heavier? "What happened to it?" I felt stiff plates sewn underneath the kevlar weave.

"Armor plates. I thought you needed something a little more substantial. You get shot way too much," Keystone said with a small smile. "I also included something special. Hurry up and kill Deus so we can have another game."

“Any clue where I can find him?” And head in the opposite direction?

“He’s a Reaper. If he’s not killing somepony, he’s probably at the Arena.” I looked at my PipBuck. . . yup. ‘Hoofington Sports Arena’ was now on the map. If I wasn’t wrapped head to hoof in healing bandages I’d be screaming about how. “He’s one of Big Daddy’s Four Horses of the Apocalypse. . . and yeah. They really do call themselves that.”

P-21 and Glory had spent a sizable amount of our caps on a new drum-fed shotgun. I’d take better care of this one. There was also a backup automatic pistol and a brand spanking new baton. “Thanks. It’s not even my birthday.” I looked over at Bottlecap. “So I’m guessing those jobs are going to be on hold for a while?”

The lemon mare smiled. “Why? Your bounty doesn’t disqualify you from getting paid for other jobs. Every trade hub is supposed to be neutral ground, and you can send Glory or P-21 in to collect payments. Just be careful. That is a lot of money for a bounty, and I know many ponies won’t care if you’re Security or not.”

“Not to be a wet blanket, but how are we supposed to supposed to get out of here without said hordes of avarice descending on us the second we set hoof out the door?” P-21 asked, in perfect deadpan wet blanket fashion.

Bottlecap just smiled, and my mane proceeded to itch.

Footnote: Level up.

New Perk: Quick Draw- Holstering and drawing weapons is 50% faster.

Quest Perk added: The Stare (level 1) – You can intimidate non-hostile contacts through eye contact.

8. Long Roads

“Are you sayin’ my mouth is makin’ promises my legs can’t keep?”

The word spread like wildfire. Did you hear about the bounty? What bounty? THE bounty. The bounty of the year. The bounty of the century. Fifty thousand caps dead. A hundred thousand alive. A hundred thousand caps, imagine it! All for the head and PipBuck of some stable dweller? A stable dweller? Yeah, Security. Security? The mare DJ Pon3 talks about? Yeah, she’s somewhere around Megamart. Are you going after her? Are you?

The answer had been yes. As I watched through P-21’s binoculars I saw them drawn by the promise of easy money. That very morning a camp formed outside the main gates; only a half dozen. By noon it was twenty. By sundown, fifty. Most of them had pathetic weapons; rusty rifles and barely mended work implements. But that was changing. The professionals were starting to arrive. Professionals who were asking questions; what did Security look like? What weapons did she carry? What foods did she like to eat? Who were her friends?

By morning the next day, Megamart found itself inundated with ‘customers’. Keystone made sure every one of them paid the toll, and even restricted weapons in case Gun wasn’t enough deterrent. Each of the ‘shoppers’ kept an eye out for the mare with the black and red mane. Had a single one of them laid eyes on me I think they’d have torn me to pieces and hauled me to Deus in a bucket.

Still, for all the watchful eyes, nopony seemed too interested in the four wastelanders and their brahmin. Dressed in rags and cloaks, reeking of brahmin droppings, their packs rattled with salvage from all across Hoofington as they slowly crept north. Reaching the overpass, a gang of ten stopped them. “We’re looking for Security.”

“Oh, Security escaped last night. Didn’t you hear? She was an Enclave agent. Cut her wings off ta fool us all,” the old buck leading the caravan of wastelanders cackled.

“Horseapples,” spat another caravanner, a gray mare with crossed knives for her cutie mark. “She’s still in there. Security’s from Tenpony. Got enough money ta buy the Finders. They’re finally making their move on the Hoof!”

“She’s travelling with a pegasus and an earth pony,” the crème buck gang leader said as he glowered at the caravanners.

"Ain't no turkeys here," the old buck cackled again as the gang searched the packs. He was obviously telling the truth; clearly none of the traveling ponies could be hiding wings beneath their dusty robes and cloaks.

The leader of the ten looked at his fellows. "Yeah, well, we think Security might try and sneak out."

"Shit. Ya caught me," the left head of the Brahmin muttered.

The other head gasped, "You're Security? You fucker. What'd you do with Hank?"

A few of the bounty hunters snorted at the two jabbering heads. The leader looked at the remaining buck and mare. "You. Get over here," he demanded briskly of the mare. "Get over here and get those rags off."

"Don't you lay a hoof on my girl!" The olive green buck glared, his eyes drilling into the leader. His wild black mane rose in a mad tangled ridge from brow to tail. A trio of varmint rifles fixed on him, making him bristle but step back.

The purple mare gave a coy giggle. "Oh, don't worry hun; I'm sure they'll be gentle." She wiggled out of the robe, revealing a petite body dressed in frilly, if slightly worn, lingerie that covered both flanks and back legs.. Quite a cute mare, if you overlooked the male bits between his haunches. He fluttered his lashes at the leader. "Happy?"

The ten immediately lost interest and returned to looking at Megamart, scrambling as they realized three more caravans were leaving for three other directions. The caravan continued north, laughing and sharing jokes. A few miles beyond the overpass the two ponies following them turned back.

I never thought I'd be glad to see Pony Joe's again. As our 'caravan' walked around the back of the donut shop I glanced behind us once again before cackling with glee. "Ya caught me. . . you nearly made me laugh," I said fondly to Hank and Tony.

"I do standup," the Brahmin's left head said with a chuckle.

Bottlecap smiled fondly as she reached back, licked over the crossed blades, and then carefully peeled off the cutie mark decal, spitting it into the garbage. "Are you sure you won't keep the disguise a little longer?" Bonesaw didn't really have much to remove from himself, as all his disguise entailed was his robes, so he helped me pull off the wiry black hair that'd been stuck to me with wax.

"Folks need to start spotting Security somewhere other than at Megamart. If they think we're still hiding there, sooner or later they'll try and storm the place or burn you out. If I know DJ Pon3, soon as I plug a raider he'll be all over it." Plug a raider. . .

'cause killing them was a joke. I really was that callous.

"You're lucky you've got such a puny horn. Never woulda been able to cover it otherwise," Bonesaw said as he magically yanked the clump of hair-coated wax off my brow.

I frowned, feeling a little hurt. "My horn isn't puny."

"It's barely bigger than a foal's!" he cackled.

I feigned an injured, yet dignified expression. "It's not puny,"

P-21 removed all his wastelander garments, frowning as he glanced at me with a small, almost amused smile. "Bonesaw, does the size of a unicorn's horn have any indication of their magical prowess? Because, Blackjack, I have to admit that I've never seen you do magic before," P-21 teased. The wrinkled old buck rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"My horn isn't puny! I just wasn't taught any magic. That's all," I said defensively. "I was supposed to learn spells once I took over for Mom." Okay, that was a lie, but it was the best excuse I could manage.

The truth was that I couldn't really do magic. Oh, I could levitate guns and swing batons as well as any unicorn, but my telekinesis was hardly all that impressive. In medical they concluded that my magic hadn't fully developed yet. I still had bad dreams of spending hours with Marmalade trying to summon magic hoofcuffs or cast a stunning spell. Trying to get interrogation spells to work had been an absolute nightmare, particularly when my mom decided that it might help if she demonstrated them by using them on me. Having your mother dig through your porn stash was bad enough, but having her dig through the memories of how many times you put yourself on the breeding queue? And having her critique your performance and offer suggestions?

P-21 was looking at me in concern. "Blackjack? You okay?"

"Yeah. Just... yeah..." Oh Goddesses, was I really becoming that much of a basket case? "I didn't freak out, did I?"

"Well..." He gave me a definite smirk... oh yes, he was really smirking! That was a Blackjack kind of smirk, instead of a sullen, P-21 smirk. "It seemed like you were turning pretty interesting colors under that paint job."

"Ugh... leave the mental patient alone," I countered, but I was glad I wasn't thinking about Mom recommending I raise my hips—Goddesses, I was thinking it again!

Groaning, I fished around for any other topic I could think of. “Hey, Bottlecap. Are ponies like Deus common in the Wasteland?”

She took out a bottle of mildly radioactive water—no way you’d waste filtered stuff for washing—and started scrubbing the gray paint off her hide. “There’s always been Reapers around Hoofington, but most aren’t as strong as Deus. When you become a Reaper they do something to you, make you stronger and tougher. But the oldest Reapers like Big Daddy and Deus have potent internal healing talismans and the like; the only ponies that come close to challenging their firepower are the Steel Rangers.”

“Oh, why is that?” I asked as I peeled off my cutie mark decal and started scrubbing off my olive paint. For some reason wearing it made me... twitchy. I liked seeing my ace and queen of spades. Then I glanced over at P-21’s male symbol and twenty-one dots before he covered them up with his saddlebags. What would his cutie mark have been? A book? A candle? A stubborn jackass?

“Steel Rangers have the Ironmare naval station. The HMS Celestia’s tied up there. If they get the guns working on that ship, they’ll be able to lob shells across half of Hoofington. They’ve got numbers and ammo and they’re stocking up on every missile they can get their hooves on.” Bottlecap looked to the east, but highlands to the north and east of us blocked our view. “Most Steel Rangers just worry about stockpiling weapons and technology from the past. I’m pretty sure ‘Star Paladin’ Steel Rain plans on something bigger. Fortunately, the Reapers love to pick fights from the west and the Enclave has them bottled up from the south, leaving them mostly stuck in Ironmare.”

“You think they’re going to try and take over Hoofington?” P-21 asked.

Bottlecap chewed her lip. “Elder Crunchy Carrots... never. But Elder Crunchy is growing increasingly old and feeble, and I think Steel Rain would just love to show Equestria what the Rangers can actually do. Unfortunately, the Enclave’s of similar feelings. If they go to war, a whole third of Hoofington might be lost.”

I frowned as I scanned the skies. “Speaking of the Enclave, where is Morning Glory? She left before us. She should be here.” I glanced behind me at the door to the donut shop. “No. she wouldn’t have actually gone inside...”

I walked to the back door and carefully opened it, expecting a wash of pure nausea. Instead, all I smelled was hot air. DJ Pon3 played calmly from within. Inch by inch I opened it and peeked inside the kitchen of horror, only to find... “It’s clean.” Well... clean in a figurative sense. The industrial mixer had been removed. The ovens

and food preparation surfaces were so clean they sparkled. The bodies were all missing. Somepony had come by in the last day or two and scrubbed away every sign of atrocity.

Okay, this was one of the more creepy experiences I'd had in the last week. Not as bad as a few places, but still. I walked inside and found Glory reading a magazine in one of the booths, the radio in the corner filling the dining area with soothing music. A Sparkle-Cola sat on the tabletop beside her. If she hadn't been wearing that Enclave uniform and battle saddle, I would have thought she was a ghost, a pegasus filly from two centuries ago sitting here and waiting for her date to arrive. "Hey Blackjack."

"Hey. I don't suppose you've been holding back a shocking talent at housecleaning, have you?" I said as I sat in the booth opposite her.

"Um, nope. You mean it wasn't like this before?" She gestured with a hoof. My duffel bag with shotgun and reinforced barding rested next to her. She also had P-21's things in a sack.

I gave her a skeptical look. "This was a raider nest. You saw how they lived. This place should have bodies for decoration and guts for streamers." Fuck, did I really say that? I took a deep breath, feeling my head start pounding. "Somepony cleaned this place up."

"Well, it wasn't me. I've been waiting all morning," she said with a little smile, gesturing at some empty bottles of cola next to her. "There's running water in the sinks, but I think it might be radioactive. You should have P-21 check in the ladies room. There's a locked first aid kit in there." She sighed, propping her hooves under her chin as she looked back down at her Scientific Equestrian. "Though why anypony would lock up emergency medical supplies is beyond me."

"It does seem counterproductive." I agreed, then went out to tell the others they could come inside. P-21 went right to that locked first aid kit. The bathrooms were much more effective at removing the rest of the paint, even though Glory was right about the radiation. My eyes started to itch and my vision turned decidedly more amberish: minor magical radiation poisoning for sure. No patch and purge special this time.

I left the bathroom decidedly cleaner, went to the duffel, and sucked down a pack of Rad-Away, enjoying the tangy orange flavor. They could have bottled this stuff! Then I put on my new and improved... and heavier... armor. It certainly felt much more substantial. There was also a reinforced helmet made in the same blue and

gold motif. I could feel the metal plates sewn inside. Hopefully it would prevent more 'Blackjack got blown up within an inch of her life' mom-

Somepony had sewn the crusader patch on the flank of my left side; right below the words 'Security.' It might have been dingy, but seeing the little gold filly pawing defiantly at the air made me smile and choke up at the same time. Somehow I'd pay back the Crusaders as well. The faction everypony forgot about deserved help the most.

Stepping out, I saw Morning Glory talking with both Bottlecap and Bonesaw. I hung back, pretending to be interested in Glory's scavenged magazines. "Once the slides are prepared, please see they get to Dr. Morningstar at the RDSP with my notes. I'm sure he'll be interested in more. Let him know I'm travelling with Blackjack."

"You could just take them yourself," Bottlecap pointed out. "It's hazardous, but Keeper's caravan goes by the Skyport every two weeks."

Glory looked over at me with a small smile. "Well. As terrifying as it's been, I think I'll stay with Blackjack. She's saved my life and she's trying to do the right thing. Maybe I can find more samples, too." D'aww, watch me blush.

"Well, glad to have you with us," I said, and I meant it. She was a little... literal, but she'd seen a lot of the same horrors I had and hadn't fallen apart nearly as badly as I did. And she could fly. Her Enclaveness was certainly concerning, but I was convinced her heart was in the right place.

Once everything was squared away, the three of us headed west towards Weather Monitoring Four, the broadcast tower a handy landmark. Now that I had shed the disguise, I felt a definite twitching between my shoulderblades. I also felt... good. Maybe it was just the day of downtime not killing anypony or Glory's vote of confidence or just the fact that I'd run into Deus and come out alive.

"So did your brains tell you anything?" I asked her, half teasing. I figured anypony after my head would show up as red on my EFS, but the only hostiles in these woods were bobbing bloatsprites.

"Yes. The raider sample had some severe ulcerations in the pre-frontal lobes..." She caught my 'I'm not a smart pony, remember?' look and coughed. "The fronts of their brains were full of little holes. It looked almost like a sponge." See? Translate smart into stupid and I had no problem following along. "The front of the brain is where most of your long-term decision making happens."

"You'd probably see the same thing with Blackjack's brain," P-21 said; grinning at

me. I did all I could to not say a word, feeling my heart throbbing in my ears. “So what do you think causes it?” he continued, not noticing my discomfort. “There’s lots of ponies that live in the Wasteland who manage to stay sane.” Sure, they might kill us anyway for a mountain of caps, but that was sane.

“Some bacteria or virus, I think. The decay is progressive; likely it takes months or years for full psychological breakdown. Given that raiders are so aggressive and cannibalistic, they might spread it through eating infected ponies,” she replied. “The Enclave reports that there’s something down here that turns all ponies into raiders, but we’ve come across plenty that aren’t. The slaver brain was perfectly healthy. No ulceration at all.” She looked positively ecstatic. “More samples are needed, of course, but the Enclave can get that. If I’m right, once they lock down the source, they can work on a treatment. Imagine a Wasteland with no more raiders!”

“That just leaves radiation, ghouls, bandits, killer robots, slavers...” P-21 listed. I gave him a little shove. Taking raiders out of the equation would go a long way towards making Hoofington a safer place to live. He was right, but if she was right and the Enclave could come up with a cure, I’d sure be happy. Then they could just do something about those clouds...

While I wasn’t exactly thrilled about resting at the weather station, I knew there was food we’d left behind, and unless the robots rebuilt themselves we should safe. By the time we reached the station, the rain had started to pick up and turn the ground into mud soup. We slipped back into the reinforced structure and I carefully and respectfully cleared out a room for us to use; I might not have been up to burying dozens of skeletons, but I didn’t have to toss their bones around like garbage, either. I levitated some mattresses over and we got settled in for the night.

...have I mentioned I hate being bored?

I had one little curiosity sitting in my bag. Slowly I pulled out the glassy memory orb I’d received from the broken gazebo beside the lake. Lying on my mattress, I batted it back and forth between my hooves. Bonesaw had explained how they worked: a trip down somepony else’s experiences. See what they see and feel what they felt. I assumed the first orb had been Miss Glitterhooves’ memory: Garnet, recalling an actual meeting with Fluttershy, Cheerilee, and Redheart. Granted, this time I probably wouldn’t wake up with my intestines... okay. Not thinking about that now.

“I think I’m going to take a peek inside,” I said as I looked at the orb.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” P-21 asked with obvious skepticism.

"It's one of my ideas. Of course it isn't good," I said as I lifted it in my hoof. "As soon as I go into this thing we'll be stormed by bounty hunters, ghouls, and Deus. But I'm bored and I'm curious, so I'll need you two to protect me from Deus raping me with his cannon."

Glory frowned, rubbing her chin with a wingtip. "I really don't think it'd fit. That bore has to be a hundred and twenty two millimeters and that's almost the width of a mare giving birth so figuring in the thickness of the barrel. . ." She finally caught my look. "Oh. Blackjack humor. Sorry." She smiled sheepishly. "Yes, we will protect you from a hypothetical Deus and his hypothetical cannon."

"Next you should teach her about innuendo," P-21 observed dryly. Then he looked at me in concern, "I'm not sure exactly how that thing works, but be careful if you can."

"Heh. . . it's probably a nightmare phantasmagoria of blood and death, the way my luck's been." I touched the tip of my horn to the glowing orb and made the magic connection; the world faded to black...

oooOOOooo

Stars. They'd been a five letter word and a black page covered in white speckles in a history book I'd been too bored to really read. Now a million points of light filled the heavens above me. That was nothing compared to the moon: luminous and white like a polished bottle cap. Ugh, had I just used junk money to describe the moon? I had no poetry in my soul.

The lake before me looked as if it were a piece of the night sky: no scummy gray water, swampy weeds, or radigators fouling its flat peacefulness. The air was filled with the sweet smell of clean water and delicate fragrances I could only imagine were flowers. The unicorn mare I occupied fit so well I felt as if I myself were standing there. I wanted to taste that water and explore those sweet scents. Sadly, I could not, as she stood underneath a gazebo roof that hadn't yet been crushed by falling sky wagons.

I heard hoofsteps on the bridge to the shore and I felt her lips curl. "You're going back again, aren't you?"

"Ayep," a deep, mournful voice said softly. I felt him brush up against her flank, felt her body lean against his, her eyes closing as she took in his rich smell and felt his strong body beside hers.

"Isn't fifteen years of your life enough, Macintosh?" she asked softly, stroking her

cheek against his neck.

“They need me,” came his slow reply. “The Princess will be there. I think this might finally be over.”

“Over...” She opened her eyes to look up at his powerful jaw and those soft yet so wonderfully strong eyes gazing down at her. “Will it ever really be over for you, Macintosh?”

He smiled and lowered his head to nuzzle me with shocking tenderness for so powerful a stallion. “Now that I’ve got you, I reckon so.” Oh how I adored this... she adored... oh Goddesses, it was getting hard to tell where she ended and I began. “I gotta do this. For my sis. For all my friends I’ve lost. For the Princess. Heck, for you. Gold says the zebras respect me. If I’m there... maybe they’ll be more likely to go for a ceasefire.”

I felt her lean against him. “Then I guess you have to do it,” she whispered. A soft sigh, and then she asked in a much firmer tone, “Have you told your sister about me?”

He jerked and gulped, “Well... um... she’s busy... and... ah...”

“Big Macintosh! We’ve been together for a year and you still haven’t told her?” I kicked his leg with a forehoof, but felt myself smiling. He was far too strong for my hoof to hurt him.

“I’m sorry. I just hoped that if we were together long enough that she’d figger it out.” He gave a sheepish smile. “I’ll tell you what, Miss Mari pony. When we’re done at Shattered Hoof I’ll hand over my resignation then and there...”

“And?” I felt myself arch a brow.

“And I’ll tell my sister and everyone who this wonderful pony is...” he added as he lowered his head to my own.

“And?” I asked softly. He looked apprehensive for only a moment before he sighed.

“And... I’ll tell ‘em we got to start planning for a wedding.”

I melted against him once again, kissing him and feeling him hold me. Finally, like trying to tear out my own heart, our lips parted. “Well... all right then.” I whispered, tears running down my cheek. There were the sounds of a sky carriage approaching and landing by the house on the hillside beside the lake. “I’ve waited this long. I can wait a little bit more.”

"I love you, Mari pony," he whispered in my ear.

"I love you, Macintosh," I replied. We stood together like that for a moment or two longer, and then parted. I hadn't realized how cool the night was till I stood there alone beneath the stars. I listened to his fading footsteps across the bridge, glancing back to see him looking at me. Then he boarded the sky carriage.

Then my eyes closed and I felt my lips move; a whisper so soft that I could only make it out from the shapes of my lips.

You're going to be a father.

oooOOOooo

I came out of the memory at once, staring at the softly glowing curve beneath my horn. Love. It was like stars. I'd never seen it before, not like that. Not love so obvious it made my chest hurt. Glory and P-21 looked at me in concern. "You... are you all right, Blackjack?" P-21 asked.

Was I? I had no idea. Could I do anything without having my brain or emotions wrenched in an entirely new direction? I sat up, trying to sort my emotions into the correct holes. "Who was Macintosh?" I asked, looking at both of them.

"Did you sleep through all your classes?" P-21 asked with a still concerned frown. "Big Macintosh was the hero of the Equestrian army. He never became an officer, but he was pivotal right up to his death at the Shattered Hoof assassination attempt."

Assassination? Suddenly I remember old Hoss' journal entries at the flooded field farmhouse. "He died saving Princess Celestia," I said as I looked back at the innocuous orb. "Did he have anyone?" They looked at me in confusion. "Did he have anyone? A family? A kid?" I swallowed hard against the lump in my throat. "Somepony named Mari? Maripony maybe?"

"His younger sisters were Applejack and Apple Bloom... but other than that, no. I don't think so," Glory said as she shook her head.

Shit. Now I knew how to feel. Was there some sadistic being out there beyond the stars serving up a buffet of misery and regret for me to wallow through? No... I couldn't let myself start thinking that way. There was no way out of that hole.

"I'm sorry. I guess it was bad," Glory said softly in concern.

"No..." I said quietly. He'd died and left her alone with a child, completely forgotten by everypony. "It wasn't bad. It was wonderful." And that made it so very much

worse. I closed my eyes as I walked out of the room to step outside and let the rain wash some of the sorrow away.

When I'd come in out of the rain, I shared what was on the memory with both of them. Surprisingly, P-21 looked more touched than Glory that the hero of Equestria had a love that never made it into the history books. I wondered why she had been forgotten. Had she remained silent, bearing a colt or filly free of the stain of that tragedy? Did she try and connect to Applejack? Had some editor just thought she wasn't worth printing? And, most pernicious of all, what had been her ultimate fate? Had she died beside that lake with Big Macintosh's child, the waters fouled by radioactive fallout as the world crashed around her?

I knew that I shouldn't care. She'd been gone more than two centuries. So why care about a pony that no longer existed? Was it vanity? Did I want somepony to remember Security two centuries from now? Was it loneliness, now that my world had gone from a stable of a few hundred to less than a half dozen ponies, and was I desperate to connect to somepony good? Somepony that could teach me about positive things in life? Just seeing Fluttershy's statue had inspired me to do better. I needed to do better.

I watched the memory three more times, but there was nothing there but regret.

I'd like to say that in the morning the rain stopped. Actually, I'd like to say the rain stopped and for the first time I saw the moon and stars and maybe the sun too. The reality was the rain slacked up enough to travel, but drizzled enough to turn everything into wet muck. We were north of Ironshod R&D, but I wanted a good look around with P-21's binoculars. A hill rose to the west and I guessed that we might be able to see the Sunset Highway from the top. It'd be nice to find out just how many bounty hunters were on our tail.

The slope wasn't anything terrible and it was covered by patches of yellowing grass and thorn bushes. Still, the saturated ground sometimes slumped alarmingly underhoof as we made our way upwards. My PipBuck mapping tool chimed: Hill 255. Suddenly there was a metallic groan beneath us. The entire hillside started to slide out from underneath our hooves. Glory took to the skies as I wrapped my magic around P-21's leg and we scrambled to the side.

To my amazement a vast metal shape turned over as it breached the water-drenched surface. Slowly it came to a rest behind us, and I stared at the mud-slathered turret

of a two hundred year old tank. Around it and beneath it, poking from the slumping mud, were hundreds of rotten bones freed from the earth. Slowly, I swept my eyes across the field to the west of us. There rose the mountains, stark and sheer; Canterlot was supposed to be on the far side still, clinging to the stone face. Northwest I could make out the distant sight of some vast city; Manehattan, I supposed. North lay the lake; was it my imagination or could I see the tiny remains of the gazebo from here? South I could make out the many wings of the Fluttershy hospital.

But south and west lay only battlefield. Even two hundred years hadn't obscured the battle lines. Armored skeletons lay next to strangely graceful zebra weapons. I made out one large glowing crater southwest of the hill; it wasn't alone. Small lakes and ribbons of contaminated water lay everywhere; even atop the hill my radiation scanner ticked softly.

A ring of concrete crumbled at the top of the hill and I could make out something spraypainted on the it: Take care of. . . but the rest had been lost to time. Taking out the binoculars, I scanned the terrain behind us.

"Wow. . . there's a lot of folks between here and Manehattan." I could see them moving like bugs along the two lines of asphalt between the Boneyard and Megamart. South of us there seemed to be quite a few wandering eastward from the clinic. Past the clinic, though, it looked like most of the road was abandoned. I made out a few large rectangular buildings beside the winding highway. I smiled a little. "I think if we just skirt around the Fluttershy Clinic and keep our heads down we might be able to get past." Then I noticed P-21 wasn't listening as he looked down at the tank.

P-21 rubbed his chin thoughtfully with a hoof as he looked at the wreck now laying on its muddy treads. "Think we could get it working?"

"You want to fix the tank? It's a two hundred year old relic that been buried upside-down in a hill!" I said incredulously. Then I blinked and looked at Glory. "Think we could get it working?"

Thank Celestia the gray pegasus simply gaped at the wreck. "I wouldn't have a clue where to begin!" Leaving the wreck and visions of rolling along in an armored war machine behind, we picked our way south. The PipBuck mapping function just labeled the entire battlefield as 'No Pony's Land'. Given the number of decaying zebra weapons and sets of armor, I'd say it was accurate.

I clicked on the radio, glad to have the music to cut some of the gloom. We didn't have long to wait before the DJ -Bottlecap had finally explained what a DJ actually was yesterday- came on. "Can't beat Sapphire Shores for sass and spunk. That was

'Ain't gonna hang my head.' Well, if you were listening earlier you probably heard Security Mare's little declaration of war against Paradise Mall. It looks like Paradise has responded in kind by putting a big bounty on Security.

"Now I know times are tough. I know a number like that is bound to turn anypony's head. But given where the money's coming from I just gotta ask: what's to stop 'em from turning around the second you step out the door, taking the money back, and tossing your tail into Brimstone's Fall? Even if they do let you walk away, enjoy spending every day of your life keeping an eye out for bandits and slavers. Oh." There was a shaking of paper and a conspicuous clearing of his throat, "And I got a little memo from the Tenpony Tower management: those caps count as raiding activity should you collect, so don't plan to come here with 'em.

"We're never gonna do better if we kill everypony trying to do the right thing. Ponies selling ponies to ponies who work ponies to death is just wrong, no matter how you buck it. So with that in mind," the music began again, "Here is Sweetie Belle with 'Priceless'."

For the first time, I was starting to warm a little to the DJ. I had to agree, making me out to be a hero was annoyingly helpful, but it was good to hear anypony arguing against fifty thousand caps for my head. I just wish he'd got it right that it was Deus that made the bounty... though on second thought that bastard would probably enjoy it. It also explained why so many hunters were watching every inch between Megamart and Manehattan: if DJ Pon3 was in my corner, maybe I was running there now.

Somepony started shooting.

First, it wasn't any of us. Second, it wasn't at any of us. I relaxed as I took out the shotgun. The gunshots came from the south, and moving quickly I could make out lots of yellow bars on my EFS. Glory glided carefully between the hills as we came across a siege. A dozen ponies fired pot shots at a bunker that returned fire through armored slits.

"Getcher tails outta there!" shouted a mustard brown pony in a battle saddle armed with two automatic rifles as we circled around behind them. "We're gonna skin ya for them Brahmin ya eet!"

"Not a very convincing argument for them to get out," P-21 said as he glanced at me. "We could just go around and let them shoot it out."

That would be probably the smart idea. Unfortunately, I am not a smart pony. I

moved up behind Assault Rifles and levitated out my baton. "Hey. What's up?" I asked brightly.

"Got a bunch o' them thieving Crusaders holed up in there. Ate three of our brahmin." Assault Rifles said as he scratched his pockmarked hide with a hoof. I might not have cared for his hygiene, but I had to admit that I liked the mirrored sunglasses he wore. Very snazzy.

"Twelve adults shooting at Crusaders?" I said incredulously.

"Yeah. . . well, it's our third brahmin they eet." He glanced at me and then at the door of the bunker.

"And you're sure it was these kids and not, say. . . a radigator or something else?" I said as suggestively as possible. Doubt flickered in his eyes as his scowl turned sourer.

"Well. . . I guess. Maybe," he muttered, and then he looked over at me. He lowered his glasses to stare at my barding. Then his eyes widened as dreams of avarice bloomed in his eyes.

"Don't do it," I warned, giving him the look, pressing the tip of the baton against his chin. "You won't live to get your share."

"Right. Well. Guess we might as well git outta the rain. Come on boys," he said with a sickly grin. The other ponies gave a few more shots, but quickly the moved off into a clump, talking between themselves and looking back at me more and more.

"I've got a distinct feeling we're going to have to fight them pretty soon," P-21 said sourly as the mob moved further south. "That bunch is just screaming 'ambush' to me."

"Then when they shoot first they can find out how bad an idea it is," I said as I approached the door to the bunker. "You can come out, Crusaders. They've gone."

The rifle shot against my barding told me they weren't convinced. It stung like mad, but no penetration. The bars were still yellow, so I could only guess that that was a warning shot. I reached out with my magic and gave a hard yank on the muzzle. The rifle came flying out the slot in the door. "Hey! Not fair!" somepony protested inside.

There was some tense muttering inside and then one by one fillies and colts stepped into view. All wore the same cloak with the same patch on it. A chartreuse unicorn's eyes widened at the sight of me. "Woah. . . it's Security." A little bit of pride blos-

somed inside me. Then she turned to the other three, "If we take her out, we can get thousands and thousands of caps!" That pride shriveled and died and rotted in a pernicious cloud of decay.

If I had to kill Crusaders, I'd just put my head on a platter for Deus and give 'em the full bounty.

"Don't be an idjit, Medley," a rose colt with magenta mane snapped. "She kills raiders by lookin' at 'em. Besides, she helped Boing's band out of a pinch."

"And got Scoots ate by ghoulies, Allegro," a lackadaisical blue colt with purple mane replied.

"And she got us outta a pinch too. Or you think them Brahmin farmers were gonna just let us outta here?"

A purple filly with a silvery-white mane looked curiously at the patch on my barding. "And she's a Crusader too." She easily had to be the youngest of the four.

"What? No she isn't, Sonata. She's too old!" Medley said as she scowled at me, walking around to look at the Crusader patch. "Wha. . . what are you doing wearing our patch?" she demanded crossly. "You're old!" I wonder if she thought there was a certain age that the patch would just pop off.

"How old do I have to be before I can't be a Crusader?" I asked her and she scowled, opened her mouth, then closed it again in confusion. "I do want to help the Crusaders if I can."

"Well. . . don't hear that often." The rose colt said with a grin. "I'm Allegro. That's my bro Adagio. Over there is Sonata. And the horn head is Medley." He leaned towards me and added in a stage whisper, "Don't worry about her. She's a pill."

"I am not!" she shouted back at them. "I just don't think we should be nice to her. She got Scoodle eaten!" Medley pointed an accusatory hoof at me.

I sighed, sitting down in front of the four. "I did. I was stupid. She tried to tell me what to do and I didn't listen." Medley's scowl faded a little. "I thought she was stupid and frightened. I was stupid. I should have been frightened. If I would have died it would have been fair, but I didn't. She did. For that I'll always be sorry." I could only hope that they'd believe me. I don't think I could have fought them if they didn't.

Medley frowned but looked away with a huff. The three earth ponies seemed to accept my apology. "It's okay, miss. Ghoulies what don't talk'll munch most anypony," Sonata said solemnly.

"So why were those ponies after you?" P-21 asked with a nod of his head in the direction the dozen ponies had taken towards the south.

"Oh, those lot think we're poachin brahmin," Allegro said with a snort. "We got one rifle and brahmin ain't stupid! Well... not as stupid as radhog. But they got it out fer us. Bad blood and all." He pointed a hoof towards the crater. "There's a bunch o' mutant critters livin' in them old bunkers what got blowed up."

"They're dragons," Adagio said lazily as he lay down next to the rose colored colt. "All mutanted up."

"Dragons?" Glory said in alarm.

"Mutanted up." The blue colt gave a slack grin, "Ain't nearly so big and dumb as mud. They come out, snatch a brahmin that's strayed, run back into the rocks. Some breathe fire too. But Crusaders is easier than going huntin fer dragons critters."

I looked to the south. "Are there a lot of ponies at this ranch?"

"The Stockyard? Oh yeah. Biggest town on Sunset till Flank," Allegro supplied. "Twenty... thirty ponies?"

I didn't want to have to add twenty or thirty ponies to my list. I looked at P-21 and Glory. He sighed, "You want to go dragon hunting, don't you?"

"If we don't we might have to shoot our way through a whole bunch of ponies. I'd rather avoid it if I can." I looked over at the Crusaders. "And besides, maybe we can patch up some of the... uh... bad blood?"

"Blackjack, do you even have a clue what we're going against?" he asked plaintively, cocking his head.

"Yup," I grinned as I sat with the Crusaders. "Dragons. Mutanted up."

Okay. I admit it. I had no idea what I was facing. I didn't know how tough they were or how many of them there were. All I knew was that for a change I had an option to help ponies instead of shooting them. That was what I was going to do. I didn't want to die. I just wanted to do the right thing.

If these dragons turned out to be sentient and starving with a pitiful sob story... well, then I'd want to die. Till then...

The cave the dragon mutants lived in was a crevice in the ground that I almost

fell into before I spotted it. Just to the south stretched the pasturelands and their brahmin. I could make out a few ponies with rifles, but either they hadn't seen us or weren't that fussed about us being on the north edge of their land. I loaded the shotgun with a drum of slugs and a second drum with black needle rounds and orange explosive rounds. I had no clue how tough the dragons' hides would be. Just another reason why this was a bad idea.

I was going anyway of course.

I dropped carefully into the crevasse, sliding down ten or twenty feet. Glory floated P-21 down with her. I didn't like him going in unarmed, but that was nothing new. Inside the crevasse my rad meter started to click. Glory deftly pulled three syringes from one of her many pockets and gave us each an injection. The clicking slowed to less worrisome levels. "Let's go quick," I said as I took the lead. As the light dimmed, my vision turned amber and the interior of the cave grew in sharp relief.

We didn't have to go far. As we slid down a slope, my EFS lit up with eight or ten red bars. The first two picked over the bones of a slain brahmin. They were much smaller than I anticipated: barely larger than foals. Their heads were flat and topped with wide staring eyes that glowed bright yellow. Sharp claws tipped their fingers and toes. Thank the Goddesses they didn't appear sentient at all, just dangerous.

Soon as I stepped around the corner they opened their toothy maws wide, hissed, and charged, gnashing their teeth ravenously. At such close range I hit S.A.T.S. and placed both shots right in the closest one's mouth. The buckshot easily took its head clean off. These things might look like dragons, but they weren't nearly as tough as in the stories.

Glory's beam pistols slammed into the other and the fourth soft beam 'krak' transformed it into a heap of popping ash. I chuckled, looking at P-21. "Piece of cake. These things aren't nearly as tough as dragons."

"Or they were babies!" Glory cried out, as from the tunnel emerged one twice the size of the first two. Its mouth looked large enough to bite me in half. Glory leaped up to a ledge a few feet higher as I tried to move to the side and find more room. The shotgun blasts did little to its hide and it bit down, grabbing me in its mouth. Its little forearms tried to tear through the barding as its teeth scraped against the steel plates.

"Stop chewing on me!" I yelled as S.A.T.S. recharged and I swapped out the baton. I levitated it right above the thing's head and targeted four blows, then released the spell. As resistant as the mutant was to bullets, its neck smashed just fine. On

the fourth strike something in the dragon mutant snapped and it fell into a twitching heap.

Unfortunately, more were coming up the tunnel. I swapped drums, mourning the damage the specialty rounds would do to the weapon. Then I noticed P-21 sneaking closer to the dragons and tossing two mines out in the middle of their path. Why was he carrying mines? He fell back and covered his head as the first mine beeped, then the second a moment later. The explosions blew the legs off two leaders. "Yes!" I cheered at P-21, who now did all he could to disappear against the cave wall. I charged forward, screaming, grinning like a madmare as Glory nimbly sprang along the rock ledges above me. Her beam shots did little, but I'd take all the help I could right now.

S.A.T.S. let me target two shots to one mutant's chest. The first explosive round blew out a plate-sized circle and showered me with shards of shell. The second shot fired a fist-sized spread of the razor-sharp darts into the hole. Blood sprayed from the creature's mouth and chest wound as the flechettes sliced through its meaty interior and into vulnerable organs. Maybe it was just luck, but the dragon mutant went down in a heap.

With no time for S.A.T.S., we wore down the sixth dragon through a barrage of shots. It died messily; I was plenty beaten and bruised under my barding. I definitely owed Keystone for upgrading it. I slugged down a healing potion and then turned to look coolly at P-21. "Okay, Mr. I-don't-trust-myself-with-guns. What are you doing with mines?"

He shifted a little in embarrassment. "Well they're not guns, are they?" He opened his saddlebag to show a number of the round tins. And some grenades. And round sticks tipped with brass caps.

"What are these?" I asked as I lifted one out, casually flipping off the brass cap as I did so. It instantly started to hiss and smoke. Oh that can't be good.

"Toss it! Toss it!" P-21 shouted, diving for the ground. I threw it as hard as I could down the tunnel. The boom was both sharper and quieter than the detonation of a grenade. He firmly closed his saddlebags. "It's called dynamite; as explosive as a grenade, but a lot cheaper."

"Right. Pop the top, throw. Simple enough." I found myself unsurprisingly unnerved by the explosives. "So why are you carrying them again?"

"Because I'm sick of being useless," he replied sharply, closing his eyes, pressing

his lips together. "I still don't like firearms, but explosives take more. . . deliberation. It's harder than just pulling a trigger. So I think I'm safer with them."

He's safer with explosives than with something that puts a nice, neat hole in things? Why did that not make me feel better? "Well. . . please don't blow us up, okay?" He nodded. I still didn't feel much better!

"We'd better hurry," Glory said as she landed beside us. My rad meter now crept into yellow.

I could still make out two or three further in. Theoretically we could have taken one corpse, left, and said 'Huzzah, proof!' but it'd be head and hooves better if we could say 'Huzzah, they're all dead! Please don't shoot at me for the bounty.' So without further ado we moved forward as quietly as we were able. The path sloped downwards and after several twists and turns disappeared into a hole in a concrete wall. Inside was a bunker of some sort, half filled with rubble and numerous crates and containers. Most of them were all manner of smashed, but a few looked intact. Of more immediate concern was the beast charging at us.

Glory immediately took to the air and began strafing maneuvers while I stepped forward with S.A.T.S. ready. Then I noticed a stick of dynamite fly over my head and directly into the path of the mutant dragon. My mane rose on end, but the detonation sent the charging monster sprawling on its face. I glanced back at P-21 with a wide-eyed look; clearly this would take a lot of getting used to! With S.A.T.S. I finished off the torso. I winced at how loose the feed felt as I reloaded.

Some of my luck must have rubbed off on Glory because one of her beam pistols neatly incinerated the remaining dragon mutant. She landed beside me. "That it?"

No. . . actually it wasn't. There was one red bar remaining in the room, but all that lay in that direction was a big heap of rubble. Then I cocked my head and groaned softly, "Aww. . . fuck me. . ."

The rubble shifted and rolled, and from behind it raised a gray shape even larger than the ones we'd just finished off. Climbing out of a depression, this was clearly much more dragon than mutant. The back legs had atrophied almost to nothing, but it's forelimbs pulled it over the ground. It let out a mindless shriek and opened its maw wide to spray flame across the three of us. We managed to jump behind the cover of some storage crates, but there was definitely some scorched mane smell in the air.

"Okay. Beam guns. Shotgun. Explosives. What sounds best against a dragon?" I

asked, looking from one to the other with wide, bulging eyes.

"I don't think I have a bomb big enough. Even all my bombs!" P-21 shouted.

It was crawling towards us, making the bunker shake and sending rocks and pebbles raining down on us. I looked up. The ceiling was a mess of cracks and gaps. I grinned. "Wanna do something stupid?"

P-21's mouth hung open for a second. "Sure! Why not?" he said, throwing his hooves up in a shrug.

"Use those explosives of yours to bring the roof down."

"Oh top of us?" Glory said, her eyes wide with shock.

"There's more of him than us," I pointed out as her brows furrowed together.

P-21 looked at where the cracks snaked down the walls. "I'll need some time. These bombs will have to be deliberate." He reached into his barding, drew a syringe of Med-X, and jammed it into the side of his leg through the brace straps. Then he sighed and...pulled out a magazine?

"You're reading now?!" I shouted as I saw the dragon was coming after us. The magazine seemed to have something to do with explosives.

"I am if you want this to work!" he shouted, not taking his eyes off the diagrams of the article. "Keep it busy!"

"I love when a plan comes together. Let's do this!" I shouted and ran out to the side, ejecting the drum with explosive rounds, snagging it, and taking out an empty drum. As I raced ahead of the spewing flame, a stream of green-banded rounds slipped into the drum.

I saved S.A.T.S. and shouted, "Go for the eyes, Glory!" I went for everything else. I began to fire the green rounds. They didn't penetrate in the slightest. Instead, green gunk spread over its limbs, then flared bright green and sank through the thick hide. The dragon lurched, now looking a bit ill as the toxic rounds went to work. I had no idea if their effect was cumulative, but it seemed to slow and disorient the beastly as P-21 raced around the edge of the room.

"Hey! Hey dragon! Hey! Yo ugly!" I shouted and shrieked as I kept light on my hooves. Glory buzzed around, her battle saddle strafing him with little effect. The dragon's mouth opened wide, and she tucked almost into a ball to avoid being bitten in half. Me? I had to worry about a tail thicker than I was snapping out and sweeping

around. Unfortunately, even though I dodged it, it created a wave of debris that swept me off my hooves.

Come on, P-21!

“Blackjack!” he shouted from the crevice leading out. I dared to take my eyes off the dragon long enough to see the dynamite he’d stuffed into the cracks.

“Get out, Glory,” I yelled as I focused my horn. Trying to flick off a brass cap from a stick of dynamite from across a room while a dragon wanted to pulp me wasn’t exactly easy. I holstered the shotgun and raced around the perimeter of the room ahead of another massive tail sweep. Every group of dynamite I passed, my magic swept out and popped off a half dozen caps.

The debris carried by its tail caught me just as I finished arming the last row of caps. Knocked off my hooves again, I rolled along with the dented crates and hunks of mutant dragon spawn. BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! Suddenly the air filled with dirt and rock as the cracks gave way and the other half of the bunker fell in. I found myself crouched in the tiny gap between a block of concrete rubble and a heavy steel crate. Clouds rolled overhead and rain trickled in. A half dozen farm ponies poked their heads over the edge, looking down at me laughing like crazy.

Then the dragon got out.

Okay. Not completely out. I should have been clued in when I saw it slept underneath these armored crates. But it was definitely not going to stay pinned long.

“P-21! Grenade!” I yelled as I rose to my hooves. Wooo... not steady. No time for that. I hit S.A.T.S. but this time I queued up a little improvisation. The first attack involved a six foot piece of rebar. I had so much radiation poisoning my vision was perfect and the jagged metal pierced its eye like a knife. Steaming yellow mung immediately spurted out as the second attack triggered. P-21 pulled out a grenade and tossed it towards me. I flicked off the stem of the grenade and magically plunged it deep into the eye.

The blast covered me head to toe in mutant dragon eye gunk.

It also didn’t kill the dragon.

Of course it didn’t fucking kill the dragon!

“Die! Die! Die!” I screamed as it worked itself free and I charged towards its snapping head. Luck kept me from being bitten in two as it spasmed. I leaped into the cleared out eye socket and slammed the tip of my shotgun into the tiny bloody hole

in the back of the eye cavity. Round after poisoned round deposited the toxin directly into its brain. It lifted up, clawed at the wound, then gave one last shudder and collapsed.

Slowly I stepped out of the dragon's skull. Blood and yellow vitreous fluids dripped from my security barding. My eyes glowed like mining lamps as I looked up at the farmers and Crusaders and yelled with a wide grin. "Now who wants to try and collect on that bounty?" I yelled up at them, waving my steaming shotgun overhead and laughing wildly into the rain.

There weren't any takers. Honestly, P-21 could have finished me off with three hooves tied behind his back. The dragon, curiously enough, had been the source of the radiation in the cave. Seems crawling into the irradiated body cavity of a dragon was as smart as climbing into a barrelful of magic waste. When I emerged I was radsick. Oh sweet Celestia I had radiation oozing out of every hole. I felt like I could piss balefire at this moment. I wondered if it'd be better to just keel over dead or try out ghouldom.

Fortunately, Stockyard had their own medic. Okay. She was a vet. At this point I'd take medical care from Deus. Her local remedy of Brahmin milk, Rad-Away, and Rad-X along with a healing potion did the trick. Okay. It got me off death's door, and stopped the more embarrassing side effects of radiation poisoning before I was shitting myself. A plus. Really. I was also fairly sure that once word of this got around I wouldn't have to deal with swarms of poor desperate ponies.

I really didn't want to deal with killing poor desperate ponies. Sweet Celestia, please don't make me have to kill poor desperate ponies!

Roundup, the buck with the assault rifles from earlier, was apparently the leader of Stockyard and gave some mutters of thanks, along with some apologetic sounding words to the Crusaders. Then he told me to leave. Given that he wasn't trying to shoot me in the back, I considered this a fair enough trade. I did make one small demand. I took his snazzy mirrored sunglasses and slipped them over my glowing eyes. "Thanks, Boss." I said as the seven of us continued down the road.

"Then she was like 'Die die die!' and the dragon was all like ROAR and she was all 'Who wants some!' and they were all like 'not me' and that was so awesome!" Sonata shrieked as she bounced in glee around me on the tips of her hooves. Clearly the event of her life. Adagio hummed along with Sapphire Shores on the

radio.

“We know, Sonata. We were there, remember?” The chartreuse unicorn certainly hadn’t repeated that if they turned me in they’d have enough caps to swim in. Now that my body was far less radioactive, I had to admit that the fight with those dragon critters hadn’t gone that badly. I may have been battered and bruised, but I hadn’t gotten burned or munched.

“You know, I got to wonder. . . how’d you four hear about the bounty? It’s only been two days.” I couldn’t believe word got out that fast.

“Oh. Redbeard was going on about it on Paradise Radio. You can pick it up this far south,” Allegro said as he pointed at a my PipBuck. “Gotta warn ya, he’s a bit o’ a jerk. We just listen ta him ‘cause sometimes he’ll talk about a big score. We make sure we ain’t tha score.”

I frowned and switched channels, getting a sigh of disappointment from Adagio. After two channel changes there was a sharp crackle, and then a buck’s harsh and grating voice filled my ears. It sounded like the voice of a rusty bucket. “. . . know what I think? I think it’s a scam, that’s what I think. We’ve got it pretty good around the Hoof. We got better tech, better food, better water, better everything. In bad times we’re on top. So what does Tenpony do? They dig up some cunt, dress her up, and send her here to stir up trouble. We already got Enclave poking their snouts where they don’t belong. We got Steel Raiders. . . oh, sorry. Rangers. . . threatening to blow up half the city. One outsider after the next coming here stirring up trouble.

“And now Security. Either she’s a Manehattan thug with an itchy trigger horn, or she’s one of these brain damaged stable ponies now out in the wide world and can’t help but fuck with us. This is our home! Our lives! She butchered Roses’ group, smashed her horn clean off, and then gave her a five second head start before sicking the goods on her. Oh, yeah, Security is all up in arms against bad things happening to ponies, unless you’re the pony she doesn’t like. Then she doesn’t give a fuck about you! That’s why I’m glad Usury didn’t just back Deus’s bounty but matched it. The sooner this hypocrite is out of our manes, the better. So, someone put Security to rest and collect yourselves a hundred thousand caps. Or, better yet, give her skanky ass to Deus and double that! What do you say? What do you fucking say?!” The sound of cheering and stomping hooves answered him.

I switched the radio off, feeling like I was going to be sick. Okay. I hadn’t expected that. I’d thought that DJ Pon3 was bad enough. “Two hundred thousand caps. . .”

“Yeah. That’s pretty amazing actually,” Adagio said lazily. “I thought that 10k for Bill the Slasherpony was a lot, but that’s nothing.”

Honestly, I had no idea how many monsters I could kill that would be a deterrent for desperate ponies after my head. Ponies after a lucky shot. Ponies who’d kill me in my sleep. Worse. . . I had to agree with him. If you were red on my PipBuck, there was no mercy or consideration. I’d basically threatened every slaver with death, but like Roses had said: she had a kid.

Then P-21 smacked the back of my head. Hard. I hissed, hugging my throbbing skull. “What you do that for?”

He rounded and looked me square in the eyes. “I know that look. I’d rather not have you pass out again.” His blue eyes narrowed, “What was miss Roses doing when you ‘butchered’ her group?”

“She was. . . slaving?”

“As I recall, she was trying to kill you, Blackjack. Remember that machine gun? But yeah, she was slaving too.” he said with a huff, sitting in my path. “So to review, she was trying to kill you while slaving. Do you think when she started that career she was aware that maybe somepony might kill her for that? Or did somepony issue some sort of slaving license to her that makes her immune?”

“Actually, Paradise does that. Slavers ain’t allowed to shoot slavers what have a Paradise license,” Medley offered with a smile. She received a number of dirty looks and the unicorn filly gave an injured, “What? They do!”

P-21 took a deep breath. “Right. So unless you started working for Paradise slavers, you have no reason to blame yourself for any of that. You are not responsible for the grief and blood that others bring on themselves by being greedy, cruel, or stupid.”

“I don’t want to kill ponies that just want a better life.”

“I do! Especially if the way they’re trying to get that better life is by killing my friends!” he shouted at me. “Anypony that takes a shot at us has forfeited any right to live, Blackjack. You have got to learn this!”

“No!” I shouted back. “I can’t do that! I can’t just kill somepony because they’re red on my PipBuck.” I took a step back, trying to get my heart and breathing under control. “If somepony comes after me. . . I kill them if I have to. If I can get away. . . or scare them off. . . or something... ‘Red is dead’ can’t be my first option, P-21!”

He covered his face with his hoof, shaking his head. When he lowered it, he wore a

small smile. "You are absolutely amazing, you know that?"

"Comes from being stupid," I countered lamely, pawing at the cracked asphalt with my hoof. "So... um... I'm your friend?" I gave the smallest smile of my own.

He coughed, eyes going wide as he rubbed the back of his head with a hoof. "I don't know a word for a pony that drives me crazy with her stubbornness and refusal to use basic common sense. If that's a friend, then that's exactly what you are."

I heard a crunch and looked over at the Crusaders and Glory sitting in a row. Allegro had pulled out a box of two hundred year stale popcorn and munched it. The pegasus was red from ear to throat as she stared at us. "Just kiss her already!" Medley shouted.

We glanced at each other and I started to laugh as P-21 stammered and then snapped, "Oh, shut up!" Somehow that made it all the funnier. So, I finally had a friend. I wondered if I'd ever get a chance to tell Watcher.

Medley shrieked as the buck ploughed into her over and over again. Sonata just whimpered with every shove as she took it like a broken doll. Adagio curled up as he was stomped again and again till bones cracked, skin split, organs spilled... Allegro tried to fight. Out came the knives as they started to carve him into pieces. Glory screamed as they pulled her wings clear off and then fell over in a bloody heap as they proceeded to mount her as well. P-21's severed head lay beside me as he muttered, "Should have fought 'em, Blackjack. Them or us."

I screamed as I felt Deus pin me beneath him and with one shove rip me in two.

My eyes opened as I lay in the darkness of the culvert, listening to the gurgle of water flowing beneath the platform built in the middle of the concrete pipe. Four mattresses lay in a row; they smelled a bit like mildew, but they were more comfortable than the ground. It took me several minutes to get my breathing slowed enough to look over at the sleeping forms of the Crusaders and P-21. My hooves trembled slightly as I unzipped my duffel and took out one of Keystone's parting gifts: a bottle of whiskey.

I carefully undid the top and sipped some down. Not enough to get drunk, I hoped, but enough to put a little warmth in my stomach and steady my legs. One more sip for luck, and then I put the bottle back in the duffel. I didn't want to wake everypony putting the security barding back on, so I simply seized the baton. Then I carefully

walked towards the edge of the culvert to climb up to where Glory was keeping watch.

“I don’t get her. I don’t understand her behavior at all.” I heard her voice from above. Looking up, even with the glasses, I could see her in my amber sight lying perfectly on the edge of the bridge. “She can be obtuse, vulgar, and obscene in one moment and then in the next she’s kind, laughing, and more noble than any pony I know. She killed children one day and saves them the next. Is it some kind of schizophrenia, or can a pony actually survive being torn in two directions so severely?”

“Her companion is equally inscrutable. More of a realist, perhaps; it’s clear he’s dealt with far more long term psychological trauma. It seems to have helped him adapt to the realities of the Wasteland better than she or I have. His insistence on deliberate self control is remarkable, but I worry about its source. Unlike Security, he doesn’t seem fixated on some ideal self standard but instead has a deeply repressed rage kept contained. I think he’s right to not want a gun.”

I carefully moved up the slope and saw her talking into a small device between her forelegs. “And me... have I adapted at all? I still operate inside a bubble of terror. I feel like if I leave her presence I’ll be trapped under the floor once again. I’m a constant state of anxiety. She throws herself in harm’s way with almost suicidal eagerness; I’d likely have died many times had she not. When I came here, I expected savagery, not protectiveness. I have to do something.” Her mouth lowered as she whispered softly into the device.

I smiled and backed away down the slope to the mouth of the culvert, coughed, and climbed up the slope with much more noise. When I reached the road again, the device was gone. “Hello Blackjack. What are you doing up? Your watch doesn’t begin for an hour.”

I stood there for a moment, staring out into the still night before answering, “Had to take a leak. I doubt I’ll get back to sleep now.” I looked at her with a smile. “Why don’t you go tuck in early? You look a bit spent.”

She looked concerned, but then nodded. “All right. Good night.” She hopped on to the edge of the bridge.

“Glory?” She froze. “I got to wonder... we friends?”

She looked back at me, her mouth opening and closing soundlessly before she gave a little worried frown. Finally she showed a shy smile. “I’d like to think so.” Then she gracefully leaped off the edge and disappeared into the concrete pipe beneath the

road.

“Yeah. Me too,” I said softly as I looked up the road in the direction we’d come.

Five red bars slowly approached. I twirled the baton in my magic grip. I saw them trying to sneak along the road towards our camp. Trotting in the middle of the road, I approached them instead. Two unicorns. Three earth ponies. A shotgun, a rifle, a pipe, a shovel, and a pitchfork. Exactly the kind of ponies I didn’t want to fight. I tapped the baton against the cracked asphalt. “I don’t want to fight you.”

“Make it easy then. Come with us nice and quiet. Your bounty will go a long way helping the Stockyard,” the unicorn mare with the shotgun said softly.

I asked curiously, “You ever lose someone to slavers?”

“We’ve all lost someone, Security. Except you, it seems.”

I sighed softly as I closed my eyes. “Yeah. I guess you’re right.” Who had I lost? I heard them moving closer.

When I opened my eyes, S.A.T.S. activated and out came the baton. In slow motion it swung down before me. The unicorn tried to use her shotgun as a shield, but she wasn’t my target. The baton smashed into the upraised gun once... twice... and it tumbled away in two halves. The third swing brought the baton around upwards, connecting to the other unicorn’s levitating rifle and knocking it skyward. Coming out of S.A.T.S., I battered the weapon with two more swings, glad when the clip knocked free. The unicorn pulled the trigger wildly, but it merely clicked.

The other three moved, trying to ponypile on me. I ducked my front and tagged one on the face with a double hoof kick as my magic swept the baton low in front of me. Legs buckled and folded as the joints gave way to my swing. I kept moving, light on my hooves as I swung the baton. When S.A.T.S. recharged I unloaded one strike each per opponent rather than simply beating in one skull after the next. I raised both front hooves and blocked the shovel with my PipBuck, glad for the reinforced casing, and then brought my baton up smartly between his legs. He dropped his weapon, but I got a pitchfork in the ass for my trouble.

I telekinetically grabbed the end of the prong, pulled it out, and gave the whole pitchfork a hard twist. The wielder’s jaw cracked like a gunshot. Shotgun mare grabbed the shovel with her magic and tried to stab me with the sharpened tip. The baton popped up in my own glowing magic grip, deflecting the implement up as I ducked beneath it and body slammed her to the ground.

“I!” Kick. “Do not!” Stomp. “Want to fight!” Ram. “You!” I finished as I stood over her.

Then I realized she wasn't breathing. Oh sweet Goddesses. Not again! "Glory!" I screamed as the other four backed away.

The gray pegasus dropped from the night sky, beam pistols ready as she landed. P-21 emerged from the gloom with a grenade in his mouth as he looked at the remaining four and slowly shook his head. Glory at once started to pull out equipment. She administered a healing potion, and then pulled out two small talismans on wires connected to a spark battery. "Get back," she told me as she connected one talisman to the fallen unicorn's horn and the other to her cutie mark: a brahmin, curiously enough. There was a crackle and a rainbow light shot through her as she was revived by the spell.

"She just killed you," Glory said quietly to the gasping unicorn. "And she just saved your life. Leave her alone now, please. She's got better things to do than beat up farm ponies after a quick cap."

The unicorn mare staggered to her feet and the other four battered ponies together started their way back towards Stockyard. "Thank you." I muttered.

"I knew something was wrong. Those five must have been waiting till your shift. You saw them, didn't you?" She gestured to my Pipbuck. I nodded. Glory looked down at me and said softly, "We're friends, right?"

"I'd like to think so," I replied softly.

"Then don't do that again. Understand?" Glory said firmly. "Friends let friends help them, even against themselves." Morning Glory then crouched and the petite pegasus leaped into the air, flying back into the culvert.

I sighed, noting that she hadn't given me a healing potion for my own injuries. I looked at P-21. "Your turn?"

He just thought a moment and spat the grenade back into his saddlebags. "Nah. I think she covered it." He started back towards the culvert. "No offense, Blackjack, but sometimes you really aren't a smart pony."

I groaned and flopped on my back, my butt throbbing as I covered my eyes with my hooves. "Tell me about it."

Footnote: Level up!

New perk added: Rad resistance – You resist 20% of radiation exposure. This makes you 20% cooler!

Skill note: Melee 50.

9. Stone

“There was no talking. There was no smiling. There were only rocks.”

I am not a smart pony. I’ve said it before. Others know it. I’m impulsive. Immature. Reckless. I know two very smart ponies. P-21 taught himself picking locks and hacking terminals when he wasn’t even supposed to be allowed to read. He somehow convinced Duct Tape to break just about every rule for fraternization and teach him the skills he’d need to eventually escape from the Stable.

Morning Glory was a medical technician of the Enclave. She was younger than me and she was already working for the only ponies who seemed capable of designing anything new. She could discern injury and administer drugs at the drop of a feather. She’d even begun researching reasons behind the mental degradation and psychotic tendencies of raiders by analyzing their brains.

Me? I shoot things. It’s not an intellectually demanding job. In fact, I’m pretty sure it’s one of the top three most common skill sets in the Wasteland. It involves a steady horn, a wanton disregard for personal injury, and lots of ammunition. When shooting things is insufficient, then I swap to bashing things with a heavy metal stick. The effectiveness of both methods varies greatly from situation to situation. For instance, when I’d ignored the warnings of a young filly, both proved woefully inadequate in preventing her from being torn in two.

So I have come to accept that I am not nor will ever be a smart pony. Thus, when P-21 and Glory state that I was an absolute idiot facing down five farm ponies almost unarmed and unarmored, I can only conclude they are right. When they elaborate that I should have involved them because my safety matters to them, I likewise can only assume they know something I’m missing.

There’s just one catch. It seems that with two events I had somehow placed a rather gargantuan bounty on my head. The simple act of cutting my head and PipBuck off and presenting them to one Reaper named Deus would earn a staggering amount of wealth. Capturing me alive would double that amount, presumably so that Deus could take his time torturing me and violating my anus. He’s that kind of pony.

P-21 would have me kill any and all would-be bounty claimants. By attempting to take my life, he says, they have forfeited theirs. Eye for an eye. Hoof for a hoof. Everypony ends up blind and lame. I can’t do it. Those five ponies weren’t Deus.

They weren't monsters. They had a need for the money, same as anypony. I could have killed them easily. Playing it back in my head, it wouldn't have taken much. They'd hoped to take me unawares and alone. A lucky shot in the night.

Was I wrong to let them live?

Morning Glory is put out with me for quite another reason. In facing said threats alone I somehow violated one of the tenets of friendship. One of us faces a threat, we all face it. That is apparently a rule of friendship. Trying to protect her was wrong. Better she stand beside me like she had fighting the dragon mutants. She wants to be there when I fight monsters. When I face bounty hunters. When I murder a roomful of traumatized children.

Doesn't she realize I'm not a good pony? I'm not a hero. I'm just trying to do better because everywhere I look I see things getting worse and worse and the only thing that makes any sense is trying to make it better. Old Hoss said Big Macintosh was a hero because he would have given his life for anypony. I sometimes wondered if I could turn in the bounty on myself and split the proceeds among the Crusaders, P-21, and Glory.

She's going to get hurt if she stays with me. Hurt very badly.

To top it all off, I had a mystery inside my PipBuck. A computer file that is apparently so valuable that my Stable had been raided to retrieve it. It was encrypted. Finding out just what it was supposed to do was going to be likewise very expensive, yet it was the only reliable chance I had short of trusting the Enclave, which I wasn't ready to do.

At the moment, though, none of that mattered a damn as I sat in 'detention' in a classroom on the second floor of the Roosehoof Academy library building with P-21, Glory, and the Crusaders. We'd found the academy under 'lockdown'. I didn't want to speculate on what had happened to any students caught in the lockdown two hundred years ago, but at least there weren't a lot of bones in the classrooms. Robronco sentries patrolled the academy perimeter, and so far no bounty hunters had faced the metallic protectors.

The seven of us had stumbled onto the grounds and been ordered to report to the office or face immediate vaporization. I had to admit, I considered the shooting option first and second. But the fact was that the academy buildings were the closest and largest structures to Brimstone's Fall, and if we started shooting it'd not only draw attention but also take away a layer of protection I could use right now. The seven of us had been taken in to see 'Acting Dean Hardy', one of the spidery levitating-style

robots.

The office was a complete disaster area, which was actually pretty typical given that Equestria as a whole was a complete disaster area. A skeleton lay in the corner with a bullet hole through its skull. “Please explain why you are breaking lockdown procedures, Miss. . .” A buzz, click, whirr, and beep. I looked down at some of the yellowed papers on the desk, scanning them for a name.

“Marigold,” I supplied, and seizing on a sudden whim I threw my hooves around P-21, who went stiff as rock. “I was just looking for some alone time with my buck-friend. . .” A glance at the page. “Um. . . Sureshot? Please don’t call my mom.” Because she was in a stable and I was pretty sure she’d be miffed if she had to come pick me up from school.

More clicks and beeps. “Miss Marigold, this is the third infraction for fraternizing with male students you’ve made within two hundred and -bzzzt- years. I’m afraid I have no choice but to contact your parents and have you all report for lunch detention in the library for the duration of the lockdown.”

“Yes, Dean Hardy,” I said as adolescently as possible. “Can we at least go to our rooms and get our homework?”

The dean beeped as his camera swung from one of us to the next. “Very well. Please carry your hall passes with you at all times or risk vaporization.” He reached into the drawer of the dean’s desk and withdrew a stack of faded flat paper cards covered in yellowing lamination. Each one hung from a lanyard and still had a faintly glowing glyph stamped on it. “Now please report to detention in room 203 of the library.”

Thus the seven of us became the newest students of Roosehoof Academy. “That was brilliant!” Glory gushed as we trotted by Robroco sentries urging us to get to class. “How did you think of that?”

“Do you have any idea how much time I spent in detention?” I asked her with a grin.

“Oh!” Suddenly she went red.

I blinked at her and then grinned. “Let me guess: your first time?”

“Well. . . yes,” she admitted.

I put a hoof around her neck and pulled her close, grinning at her. “Well then, let me give you some advice. Always sit in the back row. Always pass on notes. If the teacher asks what you’re doing, the answer is ‘working’, not ‘studying’. Oh, and

remember: you have a bladder the size of a pea.”

“You really were in detention a lot,” Glory muttered with some worry as I lowered my hoof. She looked over at P-21. “You were probably a much more diligent student,” she said to him. I winced. Please don’t bite her head off, I silently begged.

Thankfully, he was in one of his more wistful moods as he looked at the decaying library. “No. But I would have been,” he said as he looked down at a textbook showing two red-striped zebras. I thought they looked a bit like hooved candy canes myself. I looked at the caption beneath. ‘The Proditor, or ‘traitors’ in the zebra tongue, were those few zebras willing and allowed to fight for Equestria against their own kind. Using talismans to permanently alter their stripe color, they fought with distinction until being phased out due to security concerns after the Battle of Shattered Hoof Ridge.’

I noticed the Crusaders were looking a bit nervous. “What’s up?” I asked them. “First day of school jitters?”

“No,” Allegro protested, trying to look tough.

“It’s just. . .” Adagio muttered, “. . . there’s supposed to be ghosts here.”

I would have laughed, but then again I laughed when Scoodle had seemed afraid in the boneyard. Not again. Besides, with the Wasteland, who knew what you might run into? “Well. If there are they’ll have to get through me first!” Sonata looked a little more at ease, at least.

Using our hall passes, P-21, Glory, and the Crusaders dispersed from the classroom and set about looting anything edible, drinkable, or medical they could get their hooves on. If they found an armory here, well... that’d just show how hardcore Cheerilee made education prior to the bombs going off. This left me alone in the second floor of the library and looking out at Brimstone’s Fall. And we were doomed because I was going to have to come up with a plan. Me. The not a smart pony.

Brimstone’s Fall wasn’t much to look at, really; just a round, jagged hole punched in the badlands’ surface. It had been a gemstone mine. Then, during the height of the war, a dragon had fallen right on top of the mine workings. The ‘Shadowbolts’ pegasus strike force, along with heavy ground support, slew a powerful dragon allied with the zebras, but hundreds of soldiers had died before the dragon perished. I knew all of this because there was a framed news article hanging next to the window.

In two hundred years it hadn’t changed much. It lay right beside rail lines stretching to the southwest, towards Fillydelphia. On the surface were a large administration

building and two long barracks-style houses. Since I didn't see any slaves, I assumed that they had to be quartered underground. Two nested chain link fences topped by razor wire surrounded the hole and the three buildings, with a guarded hoof bridge built over the rail spurs where they passed through the fences. A chain link gate blocked the space under the bridge. Maybe we could find-

What the fuck? I stopped and stared at the corner of the room. Had something just moved? One of the Crusaders playing a trick on me? My mind finally cracking? Slowly, I rose to my hooves and checked my E.F.S. Nothing. My eyes scanned the room slowly, mane itching like crazy. "Huh. . ." I muttered. Nothing at all.

Bullshit. In the Wasteland it's never nothing. I put my back to the wall until the others returned. It happened again; I'd swear that I'd seen some dingy papers shift on their own right before the six entered the room. I rubbed my eyes, but then the others were inside. "You okay? You look spooked," P-21 said concernedly before he tossed me a Sparkle-Cola.

I caught it with my magic and deftly popped the top. It was warm, but it was Sparkle-Cola. "Yeah. Just trying to figure out how to get in there," I said as I scanned the mine once again for some chink in their defenses. The guards moved in threes and fours. There wasn't the slightest bit of cover to use to approach from the ground. And then there were the neighbors. Along the highway between the mine and the road was a strip mall. Most of the shops seemed more or less intact and there was a large gathering of ponies there. At least twenty or so. "Allegro? Who's that?"

He trotted to the window and I held the binoculars for him. "Oh, them. Pecos. They're just a gang outta Flank. Not as crazy as raiders. They usually work protection for the slavers."

Great. Between the Pecos and the slavers I was looking at forty or fifty enemies. "They're not slavers?"

Medley huffed, "I told you but no one listens to me. Slavers gots ta have a license outta Paradise to be slavers. Otherwise they'd just make slaves of each other. The licenses are, like, super expensive."

"Explains why they could afford my bounty," I said as I pursed my lips. Then I frowned as I watched a train come out of the mine. It was only four cars, which were being hauled by a dozen slaves as a slaver liberally lashed them with a whip. To my amazement, I saw several zebras among the slaves! I supposed slavers couldn't be choosers. The train slowed to a crawl as it passed under the bridge, the guards above sweeping their weapons while two ponies checked beneath for escapees.

Once past the checkpoint the train started to crawl towards Hoofington.

“Where are they going?” I asked.

“Tracks lead to the tunnels. Ain’t safe down there. Ghouls and worse. Not sure where they go past that,” Allegro said with his own curious frown. I chewed on a hoof as I looked down at the strip mall again. If I attacked the mine, then the Pecos would reinforce the slaver guards. If I attacked the Pecos and lived, then the mine would be alert. I looked from pony to pony. They all wore cowpony hats and leather jackets with some twister or tornado patch on the back. Better yet, this gang was co-ed.

I smirked. “Hey, P-21. Think you can sneak down there and snag me a hat and jacket?”

“Why? What are you planning?” he asked with a frown.

Something not too smart. “Well, if we’re going to be stuck in detention all day, at least one of us needs to be in a gang.”

It took P-21 quite some time to get the garments I needed. That was fine. I asked the Crusaders for every bit of trivia on the Pecos I could; the gang had muscle, pride, ambition, and not much else going for it. Not quite a joke, but definitely a long way from the top of the gang food chain. The sun was just starting to set when the train returned. Lots of empty boxes and crates; apparently the trade was all one way. Did the gems go back to Paradise, or somewhere else?

As I waited, Glory and the Crusaders went to look for more supplies. That left me alone with my thoughts. The plan wasn’t quite together yet. I wanted the slavers out of operation, but niggling questions kept popping up. What’d stop another band from returning to the mines? I could blow the mines, assuming P-21 had the skills and the mine had the dynamite. What about the slaves that had nowhere to go? Sending them to Stockyard was hardly a sure bet, and sending them anywhere else would be making them bait for raiders or more slavers.

And I was not alone. I could feel it. My mane went nuts as I slowly looked around the room once more. I couldn’t see anything. I couldn’t hear anything. I still didn’t think I was alone. I rose to my hooves, looking at the overturned desks, the bookshelves and cubbies. The teacher’s desk. The teacher’s desk. . . I trotted over to stand right in front of it with a small frown. My horn glowed as I shoved the large desk back

against the wall as hard as I could.

Something shimmered faintly as hooves clattered on the teacher's desk top. Then a long, thin rifle barrel appeared from thin air, pressing right against my forehead. This close, I could make out the faintest of blurs in the air. "Hey. You've had hours to shoot me in the back. So what's up?"

No response, and that rifle continued to press just underneath my horn. I didn't blink, and somehow I doubted they did either. Then there was a blue flash and a shimmering gray cloak appeared draped around a lithe equine. A lithe... striped... equine. He reached up with a hoof and brushed the hood of his cloak back to look down at me with deep azure eyes.

I had to admit I was impressed and scared out of my gourd at the same time. I also didn't dare show it with a rifle to my head. He held it in his forelegs in the strangest way I'd ever imagined, yet without the slightest bit of strain, his mouth resting lightly on the trigger; I wasn't sure how he avoided falling on his face, balancing on just his back legs. "Blackjack," I said, gesturing to myself. "And I really hope I don't have to talk slow 'cause then I'll really look dumb," I added.

His voice was just as soft as P-21 on his surly days. "Lancer." Name? Occupation? Hobby?

"Okay, Lancer. Like I said. I don't think you want to kill me. I'd rather not kill you."

"Liar," he said quietly. "All ponies do. It is what you live for."

"Of all the shit going on my life, you're telling me I'm going to get killed over a war that was over two centuries ago?"

"The war is not over. The Remnant persists," he answered.

"Right," I groaned as I folded my hooves on the desktop, rested my chin on them, and closed my eyes with a sigh. "Who is holding a rifle to whose head? Who pushed a desk rather than firing a gun? I don't want to fight you." Particularly since he could turn invisible and had a rifle longer than my body pressed to my noggin. Those were pretty impressive liabilities to overcome. I was taking a good long look at that weapon while trying not to go cross eyed.

You're going to make me do something stupid, aren't you, Lancer? The sound of Glory and the Crusaders (and possibly P-21 as well) returning made his eyes dart to the door. Yup, time for stupid. My horn flashed as I deftly depressed what I prayed was the magazine eject while my magic ratcheted back the bolt and ejected the round in the chamber. Then I caught the shell with my magic and beaned him right

in the face with the heavy bullet. My hooves on the desk shot out and yanked his rear hooves out from under him.

He recovered quickly. Damn, didn't he though! He flipped through the air, catching the fallen magazine in his hoof and slamming it back into the weapon as he landed on all four hooves. The rifle lay along his back, his tail curling around the trigger as he sighted along the underside of the rifle. Then he felt the barrel of my shotgun press against the underside of his chin and his eye glanced down at the glowing weapon.

"I do not want to kill you," I said quietly. But I would, and damn him if he forced me to use P-21's universal counterattack policy from here on.

Lancer slowly pointed the rifle away, looking surprised for a moment. I took my gun off him. As Glory's hooves reached the door I said loudly, "I have company, Glory. Please don't spook him. He's very good with a rifle."

Glory frowned as she poked her head around the door. "Oh," she said delicately, eyes wide in shock as she laid her eyes on Lancer. Slowly he backed up, keeping his rifle roughly between the two of us. "A... ah... oh..." The Crusaders immediately took cover.

"Right. So. Like I said. I don't want to kill you. I'm pretty sure you don't want to kill me." I looked out the window and gestured to the mine with my head. "In fact, I bet you're here for the same reason I am: free the slaves?" He didn't nod. He didn't smile. He didn't blink. I covered my face with my hooves, groaning, "Ugh. Would you just trust me?"

"I would not be opposed to seeing my people returned to freedom," he finally answered.

Progress! Progress is good. "Okay. So. I'm trying to get a plan together. A zebra with a gun like that would fit in very nicely." I had no clue how, but I'd like to know if he'd cooperate at all.

"Do you serve the stars?" he asked me bluntly. Wha...?

"I've never even seen the stars with my own eyes. Or the sun. Or the moon. All I've ever seen is that." I pointed out the window at the cloud layer.

"Then who do you serve?" As calmly as he said it, I was pretty sure that my answer might lead to me getting shot soon. I really did not want to get shot by that rifle.

"Of all the ponies in the Wasteland, you had to ask me a philosophical question?"

You should know that I'm something of an idiot," I said, hoping for a reaction. A laugh? A smile? Nothing. Great. I sighed, closing my eyes. "I don't know if there's a who anymore, but I guess I serve a what: doing better, making things better," I said as I looked at him. "If that's not good enough or specific enough then I'm sorry. I didn't know there was going to be an oral exam today!"

He straightened, and I relaxed as he sat and directed his rifle at the ceiling. "It is sufficient," he said calmly. "How do you plan on freeing the slaves?"

"Well, that depends on if P-21 had any luck shopping," I said as I leaned over to look past Glory at the blue pony, who looked positively stunned at the sight of a zebra in our detention room. I hadn't seen his eyes so big since Prince Splendid. I smiled at him. "Hey. P-21? This is Lancer. He's been very nice to not shoot me. Please be nice back."

He set down a jacket and a beaten cowpony hat, and some boots. "Oh. I'll try." And he did. He actually managed a smile. "Um... hey." Lancer did not respond. Apparently zebras had a stoicism... thing. At least Lancer certainly did.

The hat and jacket had clearly seen better days. I shucked my security barding and shrugged into the jacket. I really hoped the material came from something other than a Brahmin, or worse. I looked at Glory. "So here's the plan. I'm going to go down there and find out just how keen these Pecos are on protecting the mine. If things go bad, I'd like you on the roof of that building at the end. If I have to bolt, some covering fire would be great."

"You realize that the Pecos wouldn't blink at killing you for the bounty, right?" P-21 asked. "I heard them talking. Apparently the only thing keeping them from running off looking for you is their deal with the mine." I could use that as a plan B if I had to.

"I figured as much, but if their leader's smart, I might be able to give them a better long term arrangement." I had to saw the back of one of the boots apart to get it to fit over my PipBuck; fortunately Glory had some duct tape that closed it up. Hey, in the Wasteland, beggars couldn't be choosers. I unzipped the duffel bag. "Okay. Alcohol, booze, cigarettes... if you picked them up anywhere, put them in here. I'm going to need to make myself pretty popular on short notice." P-21 and Glory went through their saddlebags and produced a fair enough amount of the things I'd asked for. "Where'd you find all that?" I asked as I looked at the half empty bottles of scotch and cartons of cigarettes.

"Teacher's lounge," P-21 replied, not quite taking his eyes off Lancer in the corner.

Figures. “Okay. It’s getting dark. I’ll start down now. If you see me running, do what you can to keep them off me,” I said to Glory. The gray pegasus beamed brightly and nodded once. P-21 nodded as well. Lancer just stared. I set my bag across my shoulders and floated up my shotgun as I headed for the stairs down.

“Blackjack,” hissed Sonata from the filly’s bathroom, her eyes wide as she glanced through the door at Lancer. “You shouldn’t trust him,” she warned.

“Why? Because he’s a zebra?” I asked with a little half smile.

“He’s a bad zebra. The Remnants. . . they do terrible things, Blackjack,” the filly said as she shivered. “We can’t stay here. Soon as we can, we’re gonna run. Robots won’t chase us far if they catch us at all.”

“But where will you go?”

“We got a place over near Chapel. We’ll head there.” She pointed with a hoof along the railroad tracks.

I glanced back at Lancer again as he looked coolly down at the textbook I’d glanced at earlier before kicking it aside. Maybe she was right, but I needed all the help I could get. “Okay, Sonata. I’ll remember what you said.” I stepped back and let her run down the hall towards the stairs. The other three peeled out of their hiding places to follow her. Great. And now my mane was itching again.

I am not a smart pony. For example, none of my plans are completely pulled together. There’re little gaps here and there that I have to fill in on the fly. Actually, if you look at all my plans, that’s how they generally run. Nice strings of improvisation piecing together a tiny bit of solid reasoning. This plan was simple: send the Pecos off on a wild parasprite hunt to the north. It’s not always just because my brain is being lazy, though. Sometimes, it’s because that no matter how well you plan, you’ll always hit that point where everything falls apart.

For instance, I wasn’t even halfway to the strip mall before somepony started shooting. Again, it wasn’t me. And again, it wasn’t at me. The fact that somepony was shooting this close to me, though, certainly put the nice and simple plan behind determining just what was going on. My E.F.S. gave me one clue: a big red bar and two amber non-hostiles. I put my rump in gear as I raced across the scrubland towards the shooting. Escaped slaves? The Crusaders in trouble?

Nope. Radscorpion, one every bit as large as the monster that had nearly eaten

Glory and me in the gravel pit. Two ponies tried to return fire with a lever action rifle and a revolver, but in the twilight their accuracy was at a huge disadvantage. Me? I had enough radiation in me that I knew exactly what I was aiming at! “Yeah!” I shouted as I raced towards the scene. Just in time, too; as I got close, the monster knocked one of the ponies down with a swipe of a huge claw. “Here! Here! Come here!” I didn’t even bother with buckshot, loading slugs on the fly. The heavy shot battered and splattered its many eyes as I fired into its front as fast as I could.

Its heavy pincers snapped at me as I moved, but in the minimal armor of the Pecos outfit I was able to leap aside while blasting it again with the shotgun. I laughed like a maniac; anything to keep its attention on me and off the fallen pony. The other, a unicorn with the lever action, wasted no time picking her shots. The magnum rounds fired by her rifle were almost as effective as my own slugs. With two targets so close, the radscorpion stung at one of us and pinched at the other. Finally, my luck worked out and a slug obliterated its skull; it collapsed into a twitching heap.

“Tumbleweed! You stung?” the unicorn asked as she rushed to her fallen friend. The earth pony curled up in a ball, shaking. “Shit. Damn it.” I knew exactly how that felt.

“I got something for that,” I said as I opened the duffel bag and pulled out some of Glory’s anti-venom. I jammed it into the poisoned pony’s flank and pushed the plunger. She shook a little bit longer, then relaxed a touch. “Anti-venom. Never leave home without it.”

“Thanks. How you managed to dance around that critter I’ll never know. Can’t see my hoof in front of my face,” she complained as she searched around. I pushed the mirrored glasses a little further up my muzzle as I checked the earth pony’s breathing. She seemed like she was doing better.

“What are you two doing out here?” I asked.

Before they could answer, a spotlight from one of the towers on the fence lit up and washed us in its harsh yellow glare. A voice over a loudspeaker said, in mock sympathy, “Awww. I shouldn’t have bet on the scorp.” There was laughter, and then the voice warned, “Get back to your hole, Pecos.” A bullet smacked into the dirt at our hooves.

“They were in range?” I marveled, and then seethed. “Assholes.”

“You must be new. Fresh out of Flank?” she asked as we helped her friend get to her hooves and walked her away from the tower.

“Yeah. Name’s Marigold,” I replied.

"Dusty Trails. This is Tumbleweed." She snorted as we picked our way towards the distant lights. I had little trouble, but the pair stumbled over the uneven ground. "Well you want my advice? Keep walking. Being a Pecos is hell out here. It's fun enough when you can strut around in Flank, but we're getting screwed in the worst ways here."

"Oh yeah?" My mane prickled like crazy. "How so?"

"You just saw it. Sidewinder's got his protection racket, but he gets the caps and we get left out here for weeks. We're supposed to deal with the trouble, but all we really get is bashed around by those bastards at the mine, the critters in the waste, and any slaver looking to up their quota."

The strip mall had to be getting its power from somewhere, as neon light poured into the cracked parking lot. It wasn't a town, per se. I couldn't see ponies raising families here. It seemed more like a glorified hangout for the Pecos. One large shop bore flickering red neon letters: 'Pecos Bill's Western Wear.' The other was a bar named 'Twister's'. In the middle was a liquor store looted long ago, a gun store, and a barbershop. "Seriously?" I asked as we made our way towards the bar. "You're supposed to be protecting them, but they'll snatch you if you're alone?"

"Yup. We're not 'licensed' with Paradise, so better not be near the mine on your lonesome. They'll invite you in and then never let you leave." She sighed, "But being a Pecos is better than being solo, or so I keep telling myself every damned day." I gave a grin and prayed to Celestia she didn't ask me why I happened to be on my lonesome.

"I'm gonna go lay down, Dusty," Tumbleweed said, the brown mare giving me a grateful smile. "Thanks for the medicine, ma'am." There was something in her vacuous eyes that bothered me. She kept... twitching. And swallowing.

"You sure she's okay?" I asked worriedly, watching her twitch as she made her way towards the apparel store.

"Yeah. Probably just the poison, or something she ate," Dusty Trails said, the sandy-hided pony leading me towards the bar.

Suddenly three bucks rolled out the door, kicking and biting each other. Dusty just stepped around them. Inside were ponies drinking, talking, hoof wrestling, or reading very ragged magazines. It was the cards being dealt, though, that drew my eye. "You play?" Dusty asked with a nod of her head.

"A bit," I said with a grin. A few minutes later I settled in at the table, passing around

a bottle of whiskey and swapping cigarettes for poker chips. It wouldn't do for me to seem too ready to play. But once I settled in I felt more relaxed than I had in days. Sure, any of these ponies would kill me for a huge bounty if they had a clue that I was Security, but why worry about that now? Five hands in I wasn't winning, but I wasn't losing either. "So what's your story, Dusty?"

"My story? What am I, a two bit novel?" she asked with a chuckle.

"Nah. Five bits at least," I said with a laugh.

She joined my laugh as we drew new cards. "Well, the name says it all. I was born to a caravan family. Soon as I could walk we were roaming. Here to Friendship city. Even Fillydelphia, but that was years ago." She took two, shuffling her hand back and forth before raising. Then she continued, "He liked to say he specialized in ammunition, and he was happy to give out free samples to raiders. Then one day we did some business, and he found an armed grenade in his saddlebags. They came back and finished off the rest of us. I was only a year past my cutie mark, so they sold me in Paradise."

"You were a slave?" The thought of a pony who had been a slave protecting other slavers was beyond comprehension.

"Something like that. Got picked up by a Society pony. They like to call their slaves 'servants', but you're wearing an explosive collar all the same. Mostly was used for sex and housekeeping for an old mare in the Applette family. Coulda been a lot worse." I wasn't paying attention; my little pair was a joke to her three of a kind. "When she died, her granddaughter didn't really know what to do with me. Didn't want me for sex. Didn't need me for cleaning. So she just let me go. Sweet girl. 'Course, unarmed and broke, I wasn't in a real good position to survive long. Got into debt to one of Usury's little pet ponies. Joined with the Pecos to pay it off."

I didn't really know what to say. I'd thought I'd gone through a lot in my week in the Wasteland, but the reality was that I hadn't really experienced anything. She was so matter-of-fact about the circumstances that lead her to this point that I felt more confused than ever. Worse, it seemed I'd opened a door and, one after another, the Pecos were stepping through. A buck named Big Red, who was the smallest pony at the table, had been a whoreson in Flank. He'd nearly been sold for chems by his mother before running away. He'd bounced from gang to gang between Stockyard and Paradise before landing with the Pecos.

Poleaxe had been a bandit, a slaver, and had even ran with a Reaper gang, drifting from place to place for as long as he'd lived. He also freely shared his Sugar Apple

Bombs with me. Yeah, he killed ponies, but it wasn't personal. It was work, that was how he saw it. If he didn't work then he was gonna die. And apparently banditry and slaving was hard work: one mistake or misjudged target and you were dead. He didn't target foals though, and preferred not to force mares. After all, one good kick and they could take his bits clean off. His last band had gone raider. When they'd tried to get him to turn cannibal, he'd refused, and that'd put him on the menu instead. Now he was with the Pecos. 'Cause it was work.

Harbinger claimed she had been an acolyte for the Steel Rangers, but that a Reaper attack gutted their bunker. She'd gotten lost, ended up on the west side of the river, and signed up with the Finders for a spell in Megamart. Eventually, she got bored and the hooked up with the Pecos for some excitement. She'd been able to get the buildings power from a still-active subterranean powerline.

"You mean there's still power in the city?" That shocked me, given the devastation I saw all around us. "How?"

"Nopony's gone to the Core to figure it out. Anypony who does doesn't come back. The Collegiate thinks the spark turbines in the Hoofington dams are providing power, but the controls are all wonked. Or maybe there's some power plant in the badlands sending juice to the Core," Harbinger said as she checked her cards. "But yeah. They buried all kinds of stuff underground. Folks might not realize it, but Hoofington's a fucking fortress. The whole city was designed by the best minds at the MWT and Stable-Tec. The zebras seemed so dead set on destroying the city that they had to. At the end of the war, Hoofington was getting attacked by the hour. Zebras wanted it bad, but they never took it," she explained as she drew four cards with a soft hiss of disappointment. "Now the underground is ghoulish territory, and worse. Drives the Steel Rangers crazy, not being able to get at all the tech buried down there."

"So, which stable did you grow up in, Marigold?" Dusty asked me with a grin, just as I took a pull off the whiskey bottle. I choked, stinging alcohol burning in my sinuses. I didn't even have a chance to lie! "Knew it."

For a moment I was sure I was in trouble, but then realized nopony was screaming for my head. "That obvious, huh?"

"Stable ponies are always asking questions. So what's your story?"

"Not much. I was in my stable... Honestly I have no idea where it is," which was truth enough. It was somewhere north, but I'd be hard pressed to find it, even with my PipBuck's navigation software. "Our overmare went nuts and tried to kill everypony

in the stable.” Also kinda true given that she’d let in Deus and some raiders for her own aggrandizement and survival. “I managed to get out before everypony died. Been wandering around since.”

Something was wrong. My head felt... off. Like my thinking was slowed down a little. Then I caught the slight glow of magic around Harbinger’s horn. What were the odds that Steel Ranger acolytes were taught interrogation spells? Was she reading my mind? If so, she had a poker face to die for. A truth spell? No, or I’d be a lot more accurate. A lie detection spell! Easiest to learn... even if I couldn’t.

“And what did you do in your stable?” Harbinger asked sweetly.

I gave a non-committal shrug. “Honestly, as little as I could. Played cards mostly. 99 was all about the Overmare, so as long as I didn’t cross her I was in the clear.” Technically true. I hoped that it was at least true enough for her spell. Since Harbinger looked disappointed, I assumed I’d squeaked by.

“So why’d you join the Pecos?” Dusty asked me.

Technically I hadn’t. “I dunno really,” I said, thinking. If I had to join the Pecos, why would I? Then I looked at the bottle of whiskey, the cards, and the ponies around me. “Guess so that I wouldn’t be lonely any more. Have a life like I did in 99.”

Harbinger’s horn finally stopped glowing and I took a breath. “Well here’s to your life. Hope it’s worth it.”

A bit later the game broke up as Big Red and Harbinger left. I needed a little bit of air, so I stepped outside...and into the faint drizzle. Not even really rain. I looked down at my hooves. Was there still power underneath me? Even after two centuries and the bombing? Hoofington was like a country within a country. Lots of secrets are buried here. Hoofington’s a fucking fortress. I looked to the north at the faint green glow in the distance. Secrets. Why did it feel like EC-1101 was burning a hole in my leg?

A buck lay on the porch outside Twister’s, his muzzle pressed into a filthy plastic bag reeking of dung. He inhaled deeply over and over again, twitching. Dusty caught my look and chuckled. “Yeah. Believe it or not he’s supposed to be in charge here. Poor jackass is so hooked on Dash that he’s trying to get a buzz from huffing brahmin shit.”

“Can he do that?” I asked in a tone of disgust.

“Nope, but it doesn’t stop him from trying,” Dusty said, closing her eyes and letting the rain play along her sand colored face. “So, guess you’re not one of Sidewinder’s

more clueless spies.”

“You thought I was a spy?”

“Showing up in the middle of the night? Asking questions like you do? You’re something,” Dusty said with a grin as she looked up at the clouds. “Not a bad night. Didn’t get eaten by radscorps. Got a new Pecos that’s decent at cards. What more could a mare want?”

“A life of her own?” I asked as I looked at her speculatively. She caught my tone and looked at me. “Dusty, how do you feel about slavery?”

“Why do stable ponies ask the dumbest questions?” she asked in turn with a sigh and a frown. “It doesn’t matter how I feel. Slavery happens. It’s not even the worst thing that can happen to a pony. Ghouls losing their minds? Going crazy and turning into cannibals? Mutating into some creature? Being torn in half by waste critters? There’s a thousand and one ways to die. Wearing a slave collar is somewhere in the middle of that list.”

“But is it okay?” I pressed.

“It happens. Who cares if I think its okay?” she retorted with a frown as I pressed my luck. “There’s nothing I can do about it.”

“What if you could?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

She stared at me, now looking scared. “Who the fuck are you really?” I just looked at her, pulling off the glasses to look straight into her eyes. She shook her head slowly. “No... fuck... no... no you’re not... no fucking way...”

“Yeah. I am. And I’m going to do something about the mine. Just like I said I would. But I’m going to need help. I need your help. If you really don’t care about slaves then yell for the others. I wouldn’t blame you. And I won’t kill you. But if you do want to do something about those slaves, then help me.”

“No... I can’t... fuck... no! How- how the fuck can you do this?” she hissed as she paced back and forth. “You saved my fucking life. You saved Tumbleweed’s too. How the...” She clenched her eyes shut as she sat and thumped the sides of her head. “This is some fucked up booze dream and I’m going to wake up right the fuck now.”

I put a hoof on her shoulder. “It’s not a dream. It’s a chance to do better. I can’t guarantee it’ll work. In fact, given how my plans usually go, I’d be fucking scared to death. But it’s still a chance for a free life. For you. For those slaves in the mine.”

Dusty Trails closed her eyes, raising her face to the clouds as the rain drizzled along her muzzle. Finally she pulled off her hat and sighed as she glared at me. “Fuck. . .”

The strip mall rang with shouts and cries as the Pecos scrambled to their hooves. Security had breached their defenses, shared their liquor, bypassed their interrogation attempts, and basically pissed in everypony’s faces. Now the night was filled with cries for the hundred thousand bottlecap mare’s head and they scattered to the north and east in a vengeful frenzy. A lone spotlight opened up and swept across the empty buildings in an almost forlorn fashion, as if stung there’d been a party and they couldn’t attend.

There was such a rush for vengeance and money by those certain that Security was off east towards Flank that nopony thought to check along the railroad tracks just north of the ruined little strip mall. The sound of the nighttime drizzle, now punctuated by the occasional shout and gunshot, gave way to the grinding of rusty wheels on rusty metal and the snap of a whip on sweaty ponies’ backs. The incoming train rattled and banged its way towards the mine, the sound of the pulling slaves’ hooves loud on the track, until the cry of ‘rocks’ filled the air and the pullers began stumbling. The whip master immediately grabbed a wheel next to her seat with her magic and spun it as fast as she could. Rusty squeals filled the night air.

“Move them, you worthless slugs. Move them!” The brakes were released, and the railcars began crawling slowly along as the lead bucks shoved the rocks off the tracks and the rest continued to pull the empty flatcars forward. With only a few hundred yards to the mine spur, there was no time to build up their earlier momentum, and the cars crept slowly past the tumbled stones on the track and onto the spur.

The gate on the incoming track opened and the cars began to pass under the bridge, spotlights slowly sweeping back and forth over the cars and across the interior field of the yard. One or two guards gave a cursory glance underneath the flatcars, but the hard magical glare of the spotlights ruined any night vision they may have had. Once the train came to a stop, half the guards detached the slave ponies while the rest headed to the two long barracks, glad for a night’s rest. Apparently three trips in one day was exceptionally productive for them.

Some of the spotlights winked out. Others turned back towards the wasteland. Carefully, the four of us crept out one after another. We moved quickly to the dark

administration building. If I were a slave owner, I'd keep the guns as far from my own guards as from my slaves. Just inside the door was a meeting room with two bored guards; Lancer's rifle made soft little 'pffts, pffts' and they turned into two dead guards. I resolved to never, ever, annoy a zebra who could make two ponies dead before the first one even started falling. We moved inside before somepony spotted us.

P-21 and Glory went to work looting anything potentially valuable as I made my way up the stairs. Green light shone through an open door as a pony frantically typed on a terminal. "I don't care how much Sanguine wants. I'll sell for half price if he takes that thing out of here," I heard a pony whisper hoarsely. I peeked in, but saw only a fat pony typing his message and a filthy cobalt mare wearing a dark black collar and chained to the wall beside the bed. I carefully opened the door, the mare looking at me as I held my baton to my lips.

She looked at me, looked at him, and then made a quiet motion of her hooves slamming together. Was she telling me to beat him up? Gladly... wait. He wore something on his hoof. Too small to be a PipBuck. What if it was some kind of alarm?

He turned to spot me in my security barding and his hoof reached for the band. S.A.T.S. popped up immediately and I targeted four strikes, praying I didn't kill him. Not that in this case I'd be that fussed if he expired, but I had questions. In rapid succession I slammed the baton twice against each of his front fetlocks and was rewarded with crunches of splintering bone. He cried out, wetting himself as he curled up in a fetal position.

"You're going to get us all killed," he whimpered as his broken legs shook. Whatever the device on his hoof was, it was a lot less resilient than my PipBuck.

"Isn't that line supposed to be 'You're going to kill all of us'?" I asked as I searched his desk and found a key to the shackles the mare wore.

"He's talking about Gorgon," she said as I freed her. "He's taken over the mine's operation. Demands huge output. I don't know what he is, but he's a monster." The mare rubbed at where the shackles had chafed her forelegs raw. "Please tell me you can take this off?" she asked as she pointed to the collar she wore.

"What is it?" I asked, looking closely with a small frown.

"A bomb," she replied. Instantly I wasn't looking nearly so closely.

"A bomb?" I stared at the black collar and then hissed at the fat buck, "Why the fuck

would you put a bomb on someone you screw?!”

The mare gave a sigh but also small smile as she explained. “It keeps us from running away. Get too far and... boom. Can you deactivate it?” Deactivate it? I didn’t even want to breathe hard on it! I shook my head and she sighed. “Too much to hope for.”

Somehow I found the prospect of fighting something that had the slavers scared witless a little concerning. “What is Gorgon?” I asked the mare as I hauled the fat, whimpering buck into her place and chained him by his back legs. “Is he a Reaper?” Just what I needed, another cyber-monster to get blown up by. While she spoke, I went over to the terminal and transferred what files I could on to my PipBuck. The bastard had mentioned ‘Sanguine’. We were going to talk about that later. Searching his desk, I found a sack of caps and two glowing memory orbs. All of them disappeared into my bag.

“He’s... I don’t know. He’s strong and bulletproof,” she said. I nodded as I listened. If slugs wouldn’t cut it, maybe grenades? They seemed incredibly effective when used internally. “He also has... a spell I guess. He looks at you and he turns you into stone.”

“Into stone?” Okay. That just bumped him above Deus on the ‘what the fuckometer.’ A few days ago I would have laughed at such a claim. 41 young ponies later I admitted he could probably do exactly what she said. “So. Strong. Bulletproof. Turns ponies into stone. Anything else?”

“He can fly?” the mare offered. I face hoofed. I just had to ask, didn’t I?

I pointed at the mine boss. “Please sit on him and make sure he doesn’t try anything.” Downstairs I found P-21 picking at the lock of a door. A half dozen bobby pins lay scattered around him as he grit his teeth and scraped at the lock. His blue eyes swore a death oath to this door and lock. Then there was a soft snap as the metal broke in his teeth.

“Allow me,” I said as I floated the mine boss’ key to the lock, and opened it. From the look he gave me, I’d violated some lock picker code of ethics. Inside, however, we were greeted by quite the little arsenal. Assault carbines. Another shotgun. More ammunition that I happily dumped in my bags and let my PipBuck reorganize. There were energy cartridges for Glory and a strange pointy pistol-like object that smelled of ozone, so I guessed it was an energy weapon. I tossed it to her as well, and she gave a little squeal as she immediately swapped out one beam pistol for the new weapon.

“Do I want to know?” I asked as I tied the carbines together to make them easier to carry across my back. P-21 clenched his eyes shut as he dropped a few automatic pistols and revolvers into his bag. I’d have to carry the ammo, I knew. Lancer watched the door, utterly disinterested in our looting.

“It’s a disintegration pistol! It magically breaks down the bonds...” she faltered at my ‘I am not a smart pony’ look. “Well, they do much more damage than energy beams. There’s a chance it can start a chain reaction that... well... disintegrates things.”

“Good. You almost lost me at the word ‘reaction’,” I said as we finished cleaning out the armory. Glory spotted a medical container that had a few healing potions, but far more chems. “Just take it all.” No idea if it’d come in useful or not when things got rolling.

“Lancer, have you ever heard of a pony named Gorgon?” No reaction. “I take that as a no. Glory?” She shook her head. “Okay. Apparently there’s a... something... here named Gorgon. He’s strong. He’s bulletproof. He can fly. He can turn you to stone with a look.” Even Lancer looked taken aback at that.

“Fuck me,” Glory muttered softly, then blinked and went bright red as she looked at her hooves. “Sorry!”

“That’s my line,” I grinned at her. “Anyway... I just wanted to warn you. He’s in the mine. So dynamite and internal grenades if we can swing it?” I looked at P-21. He nodded. “Zappy zappy disintegration fun from above?” Glory, still embarrassed, gave a nod. “Shoot him in the eye?” I asked Lancer. He looked thoughtful and then nodded stiffly, seeming quite put out by taking a suggestion from me. “If all that doesn’t work... I’ll try something stupid.” Both Glory and P-21 winced.

“That’s your plan?” Lancer asked skeptically.

“Good one, ain’t it? Lots of flexibility.” Now he had a definite expression. Worry. It looked good on him. The stoic mask was getting old.

We dragged the bodies into the arsenal and locked them inside, wiped up the blood as well as we could, and then made our way quietly to the mouth of the mine. A barricade had been built across the entrance to the sloping tunnel that lead underground. Once again, the mine boss’ keys expedited our entrance, much to P-21’s chagrin. I passed him the keys once we were inside. “Just think of them as really accurate lock-picks.”

“Or I could think of them as keys,” he replied sourly as we slipped inside the mine.

“Cheer up. We’re facing a monster. No moral angsting here!”

He gave me a little smirk. “Oh yeah? What if it turns out he was tragically transformed into a monster and wants only to be normal and loved?”

“Oh. I hadn’t thought of that.” And suddenly the niggling thoughts began to rise up in the back of my mind. “Maybe we should talk first and...” But P-21 suddenly stopped smiling as he reached up and turned my head to look at the side of the tunnel. Broken statues, was my first impression. The most horribly accurate pony statues ever carved. Their faces were frozen in expressions of absolute horror and pain. “Right.” I grabbed those niggling little thoughts, wrapped them in duct tape, and tossed them into the closet.

We found a guard station and four guards behind a second barricade. The sounds of machinery and grinding rock reverberated in the air, making sneaking almost unnecessary. The lighting must have been abysmal to anypony without mutated eyes. Really, it was more an execution than an attack, with the exception that there was a large red button next to them. I didn’t know what that button was connected to. An alarm? A lockdown? Detonate slave collars? I just knew I didn’t want to find out just now.

Lancer’s silenced rifle took down the one closest to the button. Glory strafed with red beams from one pistol and slower-moving pink bolts from the other. The remaining guards scrambled for weapons and to hit the alarm, but my buckshot tore into them equally. No pony reached that button, and thanks to our barrage, no pony would. P-21 searched through the remains as I stared at the red button on the wall, chewing my hoof. What did it do?

“Stop staring at the button, Blackjack,” P-21 said without looking up.

“What? I wasn’t...” I huffed and made a big show of checking my shotgun. When we were ready to move on I glanced at the button again. Someday... Alarm? Self destruct device? Buzzer? Decoration? Arrrrgh!

My mood now thoroughly ruined by the thought of being transformed into a horrified statue, and thus being prevented from ever discovering the function of the mysterious button, I slogged ahead in the lead keeping an eye out for... oh, hello! The chamber was a massive dome pierced by a round hole at its apex. On the ground, white bones lay amid gem encrusted stones. Strange pink and green energy seemed to bleed slowly into the rock.

Crawling amid the immense slabs of stone were dozens and dozens of ponies and

zebras. A squad of guards bored down into the blocks using some kind of drill, set some explosive, and blasted them chunk by chunk into smaller pieces. These were loaded onto smaller flatbed minecarts that were then pushed up stone ramps by mares to a stone platform ringing the chamber and dumped onto a shaking metal ramp that fed into a rock crusher. The crusher fed a conveyor belt that ran up to the hole in the roof; young ponies, many of whom didn't even have their cutie marks, were running up and down the belt, pulling the brightly-colored gemstones from the gravel.

Somepony had thought of a mining system that effectively used foals in the production process. Somepony needed to meet Mr. Baton. Everywhere we looked were statues of ponies frozen in positions of agony. A few appeared to have been guards rather than slaves. The guards weren't guarding. They were working. Some looked as ragged as the slaves they were supposed to be watching. I felt a small sense of justice at work, but no pony or zebra deserved this.

And there, lying atop the softly glowing bones overlooking the whole mining pit, was Gorgon. At first, very first, I might have mistaken him for a white pegasus. Then you realized that whatever he was, it wasn't a pony. His wings weren't softly feathered like Glory's but instead were leathery. He had scales along his spine and flank. A long serpentine tail swayed back and forth behind him. For the first time ever, I saw a pony with eyes that glowed exactly like mine.

I knew they did because they were looking right at me.

Gorgon rose to his hooves, stretching languidly, first his bleached white wings and then his powerful legs. "Scatter!" I yelled, barely audible over the din of the machinery in the booming cavity. He launched himself into the air as we separated, landing with a thunderous crash where we'd stood moments before. I didn't target him. I simply fired wherever I thought he was and prayed to Celestia I didn't hit somepony else. I stole little glances as I could, dancing around on the broad stone ledge. The ponies up here ran for cover, but the ones below continued working.

Glory fired a stream of energy bolts from above that seemed moderately more effective than my shotgun shells. I tossed the carbines on my back at the feet of two mares. "Take them!" I yelled. The dust-coated ponies simply looked at me in horror and shook their heads. They actually grabbed pickaxes and resumed trying to gouge gems from the walls around the ledge.

They were so scared they didn't dare stop working. Even working to death was better than being turned to stone.

My shotgun was useless at this range, so I flipped it behind my back and drew one of the automatic assault carbines. I marveled as my PipBuck provided a clip of... interesting. Armor Piercing rounds? My curiosity was piqued as I looked at the solid-jacketed bullets. I didn't have many from the armory, but maybe I wouldn't need that many.

I flicked the fire select switch to burst mode, my eyes picking out Gorgon and Glory's shapes as they flew around and through the jagged dragon bones heaped in the center. When Gorgon came into view I gave a S.A.T.S. guided set of bursts right into his head. They didn't even seem to penetrate. "What the fuck is he made of?" I shouted, ejecting the clip and moving to green rounds. I bit my lip as he came around again. I had enough S.A.T.S. charge for one burst. The toxic rifle rounds just dripped off his hide.

Glory clipped the tip of a spur of bone, jerking in midair. Gorgon caught her in his hooves as they landed on the far side of the pit. His glowing eyes stared into hers, and I watched as I saw her writhe. I'd never imagined turning to stone would be... slow. Her equipment and violet mane turned white first. Then her limbs froze in their twisted state, and finally her head finished in still alabaster.

'Lancer, please tell me you can shoot him in the eye,' I thought as he took to the air once again. I raced past still-laboring ponies as I made my way to her. Not one looked at me. Not one dared to stop working with Gorgon still alive. Some of the workers were fresh statues as well, having been turned to stone by accident for watching our fight.

Suddenly I heard muffled booms over the din of the machinery. P-21 demonstrated his affinity for explosives with tossing dynamite as quickly as he could pop the brass tops. When Gorgon landed and advanced, P-21 backed away, throwing mines in his path. The monster didn't even try and step around them. The explosions scuffed his scaly hide, and not much more. I raced as quickly as I could to help. Maybe I could ram a stick of dynamite up his scaly ass! Where was-

I ran into a stone wall. No. Make that an invisible stone wall. My head spun for a moment before I looked up. I reached out with a hoof and saw the faint shimmer. Apparently being turned to stone hadn't disrupted the enchantment in his cloak. I looked through the petrified zebra, watching as P-21 was transformed into a statue as well.

Monsters. Deus was a monster. Gorgon was one too. My weapons were useless against monsters like them. How was I supposed to fight something like this? The

only thing I could do was see, which would apparently kill me. Then I looked at the magical lights illuminating the space. My mane began to itch. “Fuck. Something stupid, then.”

I immediately began to take out every light I could. With each detonation more and more darkness claimed the interior. As darkness spread, I saw Gorgon begin searching; he couldn’t see in the dark. Finally, I had something going for me! I couldn’t plunge the entire room into darkness; the radiation from the dragon’s remains provided some illumination. I needed some way to kill him. I looked at the pile of dragon bones in the middle of the room. . . they’d withstood two centuries of mining around them.

No. I needed another edge. Something to avoid being turned into stone. Gun had been my edge against Deus. Deus... Deus!

Oh shit. Would that work? My mane itched like mad. Deus and Gorgon were both monsters the likes of which I’d never seen. The mine boss had mentioned Sanguine. Maybe... maybe. I trotted into the gloom, hearing Gorgon’s wings whoosh even over the grinding machinery. Gorgon was bulletproof, beam poof, and bomb proof. I hoped he was as cocky as I’d be if I were him. I moved to the nearest edge, and then turned on my PipBuck, bringing the file EC-1101 to the top. The letters should be a nice bright lure in the gloom.

They were. Gorgon landed in front of me and our eyes met. Instantly I felt a needle stab through my eye sockets and into my body. It felt as if every inch of my body were being slowly pinched off cell by cell. I couldn’t look away if I wanted to, but I could scream. “See this! Sanguine wants this!” I yelled right into Gorgon’s face, and for the first time since the battle started, he balked. “You turn it to stone and the data is fucked!” I had no idea if that was true or not, but all I could hope was that he didn’t know either.

The sensation abruptly reversed and I swayed on my hooves a moment. That was a sensation I’d happily avoid. I pulled out my baton as I backed till my rear hooves touched the edge. I knew there were lots of nice jagged pieces of dragonbone down there. “Come on. . . you want it? You’ll have to take my leg first.” I had no idea if he could hear me over the din, but from the smile blooming on his face, I guessed he could.

He charged: a reckless, full frontal assault that only an impregnable abomination would undertake. I didn’t swing the baton, I threw it right at his head. Whether through reflex or annoyance, he closed his eyes before he rammed into me. I know

he probably planned on winging me away to tear me limb from limb. Only this time not only did I grab his scaly hide with all four hooves, I used every bit of magic I could to hold his wings in place. We tumbled end over end over the edge. . .

. . . and landed on the wide metal slide covered in rock chunks being fed into the rock crusher. Gorgon looked down at me and pulled back his foreleg, slamming it down with enough force to turn the rock next to my head into stinging powder. I didn't let go as we rolled back and forth over the rolling, tumbling rocks. A second kick grazed the side of my head, and only the helmet Keystone had given me kept my skull from being pulped. His wings struggled for freedom as he fought to get airborne once more. I gripped him as tightly as I could, not giving him the leverage. He struggled against the flow as the angle increased. I shoved hard, forcing myself a foot or two above him.

I saw the first signs of fear in Gorgon's eyes.

His scream was muted by the roar beneath us as his long snake-like tail was caught in the grinding teeth of the rock crusher. Not even I could hold him then, but now I didn't have to. I kicked and shoved and did all I could to keep him under me. "No you don't!" I screamed, not caring if only Celestia heard, as rocks battered both of us. The working jaws and flow of stone pulled him down inch by inch. Hooves slammed into the teeth, and for a moment I feared he might actually break the mechanism. Then one of them caught in the pumping jaws. There was a resounding pop.

I heard that scream.

I stomped my hooves into his face, watching as the heavy iron jaws of the rock crusher turned red with muddy pulp. Inch by inch he was fed into the machine, and it was all I could do to keep him beneath me. I clawed up the stream of rock as the poor foals continued their labors, kicking wildly as popping fragments and flailing hooves battered at my barding. Some mechanism within gave a yank and his chest disappeared into the gap. The teeth slammed down with a dry explosion of ribs, his mouth opening wide as bloody organs spewed over my legs. The jaws withdrew and Gorgon's glowing eyes stared up at me for one final moment before the jaws slammed shut.

His skull was just another rock.

Unfortunately, now I struggled to keep out of those jaws myself! I kept imagining a great big red button marked 'Emergency shutoff'. I hated to admit it, but I was getting tired; all I would need was one rock to pin my leg or crack my head. I wondered if I'd go through as well and these poor bastards would just keep working, never realizing

the monster was dead.

Then wings beat above me. I felt hooves hook in my barding. I glanced back at the glorious gloriousity of Morning Glory as the pegasus lifted me from the crusher's feeder and into the air above the work pit. The conveyor belt to the surface was a ribbon of pulped Gorgon. "If he regenerates from that, I quit," I said. At least, I hoped I said it. My ears were filled with endless ringing and throbbing.

Glory set us down and I saw that Gorgon's demise had finally spread to the workers. The unicorns were arming themselves with the carbines. The earth ponies took up the revolvers. I looked around for the guard workers, but saw they had had a complete change of heart after being on the receiving end. There were a few lips moving from my friends... my not petrified friends. Indeed, many of the petrified ponies were once more free to move around.

Broken stone ponies, though, remained broken stone.

The workers used strange hoof signals I didn't understand as we made our way up out of the pit. I enjoyed the sensation of a Med-X painkiller accompanied by a healing potion. I really could have used a Sparkle-Cola, but given how the slaves around us appeared it would have been crude. We reached the barricade and I looked at that bright red button with a parting sigh.

We stepped out into the drizzling night. The guards had gathered, looking unsure of what to do when we emerged. Most of the slaves were exhausted. Many had multiple injuries. All of them were hungry. Few were trained in firearms. Some ponies, the guards apparently included, based on how they began rallying, might think that that would put the slaves at a disadvantage against the twenty or so armed, healthy, rested guards that remained. They would be right, except that such a pony had likely never imagined the absolute rage a pony could feel when armed and facing their tormentors.

Even then, with the guards outnumbered three to one, the fight that ensued was vicious. Glory strafed the few snipers that tried to pick off the freed slaves from the towers along the wall. P-21 restrained himself from using explosives. Instead, he raced around the side of the battle, shouting directions and gestures to the slaves to return fire. When bullets ran out, the guns became clubs.

Then the Pecos arrived. The thirty or so gang members surged in down the rail line and under the bridge, the gate having been quickly smashed open. The slavers bolstered and readied themselves to put down the uprising once and for all. Across the fighting, my eyes met Dusty Trails's. I couldn't say anything. I couldn't hear

anything. I could only hope.

The Pecos crashed into the backs of the slavers and took them out in one charging wave. The nasty final moments involved a few desperate hoof to hoof fights.

Then it was over. Dusty Trails and the other Pecos helped deal with the wounded slaves. Whatever guards had been in the mine, they'd shed their uniforms by now. Any allegiance to the old mine was forsaken. When it was over, I yelled for P-21 to find the pantry to get them fed and Glory to do what she could to help the injured. Dusty Trails directed the Pecos to take positions in the guard towers; there were other things in the wastes to be wary of.

I had no idea where Lancer had gone, nor did I know what I would have had him do. The dozen or so zebras stood apart from the others, watching the development with trepidation. I rubbed my ear furiously, trying to rid it of the ringing as I approached them. "Hey. Rough night, huh?" They glanced at each other and made gestures. Then I realized every single one of them was deaf. An elder buck approached, bowed formally to me, and then said in an odd accent, "We thank you. We cannot hear your words. We must read them on your lips."

"Well. You are free to go. Or stay, if you want," I said, my mouth exaggerating a bit. I wasn't used to talking to deaf folk.

"That is not necessary," Lancer said behind me as his cloak deactivated. His shot between my shoulder blades slammed me into the ground, knocking the wind from my lungs and numbing my entire lower body. For a horrible moment, I wondered if I was paralyzed. Then I realized that that wasn't even the beginning as he pointed his rifle at the clump of zebras. "For your treason against the fallen Caesar..." The stream of pfffts filled my ears as I watched him butcher every buck, mare, and foal with stripes. When the shots ended, not a pony raised a rifle to stop him. Everypony seemed paralyzed... even me. "The war is never over, Security," Lancer said softly before the zebra's stealth cloak shimmered and he disappeared once more.

Footnote: Level up

New Perk added: Tough hide (level 1) – The brutal experiences of the Equestrian Wasteland have toughened you. You gain +3 Damage Threshold for each level of this perk you take.

10. Ante up

“Oh yeah. You think you can do better, Cowgirl?”

“I know I can... Oh for Pete’s sake!”

I hate the Wasteland. In less than half a minute I’d gone from feeling good... battered and slightly traumatized but good... to watching a dozen zebras gunned down right before my eyes by one of their own kind. I hate a world where the trust I give then turns around and kills somepony else; I can accept it if I’m the one who suffers for my poor judgment, but when I keep sailing through while innocents (or at least as innocent as a pony can be in the Wasteland) drop around me? I hate that this is even possible, that there is not some universal fail-safe that doesn’t kick in and say ‘time out, too fucked up.’ The numbness in my legs is just an errant worry compared to all that.

I hate that, as I’m lying here, I’m the one everypony is running to help. I hate that they’re telling me not to move, that they’re worrying for me. I can see a starved foal curled up no more than twenty feet from me. She could almost be asleep if not for her missing face. I hate that she had less than an hour of freedom before a zebra who had accompanied me ended her life. I hate that there was any reason why Lancer would ever do what he did. I hate that I’m so weak I can’t even draw a breath to scream out to the others ‘help them! Even one of them! Save just one if you can, and don’t worry about me.’

I hate that I was protected by another’s kindness but was incapable of the same. The quarter-inch steel plate had buckled as it deflected the bullet. I hate that I had been warned twice and still hadn’t questioned ‘why is Lancer working with us?’ I had arrogantly assumed that any threat he’d posed would be to me. Because I’m the mare with the hundred thousand cap bounty on her head. Because I’m a pony, so naturally his threat would be to me. I hate that I am such a stupid pony that I hadn’t considered that he might have wished harm to the prisoners.

I hate that right now all I can do is cry as Glory tells me to stop moving. I hate that P-21 and Dusty Trails are pinning me down instead of letting me drag myself towards those unmoving striped bodies. I hate that she’s wasting painkillers and healing potions on me when she should be using them on the zebras. I hate her for not saving one. Not even one. I hate that I’m not strong enough to make all this right. Most of all I hate the blackness that’s rushing up to claim me because I know

it will not last.

I hate the Wasteland.

I'm on my stomach. That makes no sense; I sleep on my back. I'm also on a table. Why am I on a table? You sleep on beds. You play cards on a table. There are ponies around me? Why do I smell blood? Why do my shoulders hurt so much?

Why is P-21 saying that I'm waking up? Why is Glory yelling? What's the big deal? I need to wake up. There was something important I was doing.

I look at Glory with a bloody knife in her mouth as she leans over me. I'm... cut open again, aren't I? I've got to get out of here. I need to go. Somepony needs my help.

P-21 presses a little glowing ball to my horn. A little zap and I'm in a nice place. The stars are so beautiful. So very beautiful.

The lake is gone and I'm back on the table. Glory is shouting about my heart rate.

Zap. Back under the stars.

Back on the table. Glory needs more blood? Less please. There's plenty of blood here.

Zap. Back under the stars.

Back on the table. I'm crashing? No, I'm floating.

Zap. Back under the stars.

Please let me stay with the stars.

"I can't send anypony after Lancer right now, P-21. He's a zebra who can turn invisible. Kinda hard to track," Dusty Trails said firmly somewhere below me, which made little sense given that I was on my stomach on a mattress smelling of blood, sweat, and bad perfume. I risked opening my eyes and saw I was on the mine boss's bed. One of the places I didn't want to be. "Besides which, even if they could, I wouldn't send them anyway. He'd just kill them too."

"We can't let him get away with it," P-21 said in his angry, low, pissed at the world voice.

“That’s exactly what we’re going to let him do. I know you want to get even for Blackjack, but I don’t have the ponies to go tearing after Lancer,” Dusty Trails said firmly. “And even if I did, P-21, Sidewinder’s not going to take our defection lightly. I got thirty or so Pecos to ditch that bastard. We might get another ten or so if we’re lucky. He’s got at least fifty and a powerful incentive to come here. If he kills us then he’ll not just have revenge but the mine and the bounty as well.”

“Please keep your voices down. Blackjack needs to sleep. She’s lost a lot of blood,” Glory said in concern. I closed my eyes.

P-21’s voice rose up the stairs. “Blackjack needs to get moving, Glory. Everypony who finds out she’s here will be coming. I mean everypony. To them she’s just a cap bounty ready to be cashed in. How soon till we can move her?”

I’d never hear Glory’s voice so sharp, so tense, “Do you want her dead, P-21? We can’t move her. I’m astonished she didn’t die in surgery. The trauma to her spinal cord. . . if we move her she’s dead or paralyzed. If I had access to some Enclave medical supplies. . . ”

“Then go get some!” P-21 snapped. “You got wings! Fly up there and get what you need, Glory.”

“I told you, I can’t!”

“Horse hockey! Why the hell can’t you? Give me one good solid reason.”

“Because I’d get killed, alright?!” Glory yelled at him in a wet snuffling voice. “Don’t you think the Enclave has protection against that sort of thing? If anything. . . pegasus, hot air balloon, flying machine, whatever. . . goes too high there are defense systems that will blast it to pieces. Thunderhead has more lightning rods than any place in the skies. We designed the lightning rod system! So I fly up there and I may as well shoot myself now.”

“Well, get them from somewhere else, then!” P-21 demanded. “You say you want to help us, then help!”

“Where, damn you! Point me to the Skyport and I’ll go right now! Tell me where there’s an Enclave base and I’ll go! I have no clue where the Enclave is in this damned city!” Glory sobbed brokenly. “I wish I’d never come. I wish I’d stayed in the clouds!”

There was silence for a moment and then P-21 said softly, “Don’t say that. Please. If you hadn’t been here, Glory, she’d never have pulled through.”

I closed my eyes. I'm so sorry Glory. You should have stayed in the clouds. You should have stayed where you could see stars. They're so beautiful... the stars...

I like playing cards. Like now. I'm playing cards with the Pecos: some draw poker. The whiskey is warm in my tummy. I've got a bowl of Sugar Apple Bombs. Life is good. "Ante up..." says the dealer. Not too sure about this hand so I put one chip in the pot. A teal filly looks up at me in worry. But it's a bad hand. Dealer wins. Guts spill all over the ground.

A new hand. Not bad. I win and add a chip with a pretty pegasus. "Ante up." Great hand. A surefire winner. I put forty foals in the middle of the table. Call. "Oooh, too bad. Ever wonder what if..."

"Shut up and deal," I hate this dealer. He never stops smiling when he's shuffling the deck.

"Ante up." I throw my chips in the pile. Get lucky. Get a few chips. "Ante up."

It's a hell of a set. A hell of a set. Not good enough. Thirteen zebra get taken.

"Ante up," the dealer tells me.

"I want to cash out," I mutter.

The pony skull grins endlessly at me as his hooves shuffle the cards before me. "Oh, you wanna cash out? Just stick around, Blackjack. You'll cash out soon." He started to deal the cards. "Otherwise, ante up."

I woke to the sounds of tapping on a terminal. I opened an eye, glad to be away from the card game for a spell. P-21 was at the mine boss's terminal, poking through the files. For the longest time I just watched him. He looked... tired. No. Not tired. Older. There were fresh wrinkles around his eyes.

"Find anything on Sanguine?" I asked quietly. He jumped, looking guilty. He doesn't do the guilty look well.

"Everything and nothing," he said, accompanied by another moment of typing. "This says that he arranged a contract for gems and expects the mine to deliver to the buyer over in 'Progress'. Here's one where he's paying a 10% bonus for increased gems. Arranging for one hundred more slaves." He tapped some more keys. "Near

as I can tell, the mine owner was pocketing the incentives. Then Gorgon came to 'encourage' production. After that all the messages are him begging Sanguine to recall Gorgon. I bet he never had to deal with a bulletproof pony that could turn folks into stone before."

I closed my eyes with a groan. It was so hot and stuffy in the room. I wished the rusty old fan overhead would work, but it seemed a century past its warranty. "Sounds like a lot of information."

"I wish it was," he said, thumping his hoof irritably. "There's nothing to say how we contact him. Where is he? What does he want? He seems to be a broker, a middlepony, so to speak. I don't know if he was getting gems for himself or somepony else." He closed his eyes. "I know you count on me to know stuff, but... I'm sorry Blackjack. I should have known better."

I looked back him hanging his head. "What are you talking about?"

"I knew Lancer was no good. I saw the way he looked at those zebras from the moment we left the mine. He didn't approach them. No hugging or hoofshakes. He just disappeared as soon as they were outside. I thought maybe he was sniping the last of the guards, but he wasn't. I should have warned you. Gotten them out of sight. Something." He rose to his hooves. "I got them killed."

I looked at him for a long moment. How... ridiculous? How could he be blaming himself? So what if he'd not said anything? Things were pretty hectic. I hadn't even noticed Lancer acting funny. "Not your fault. He never would have been there if not for me."

"No!" he shouted sharply, stomping his hoof hard and making me flinch, then wince. "Damn it, Blackjack, will you let me accept some of the blame for once?" he snapped. "You're always doing that. It's not always your fault. This was my screw up, Blackjack. Don't you dare blame yourself for this!" he said as tears ran down his cheeks. "Damn it," he said as he scrubbed his eyes. "I just want justice for a change."

I looked at him as he bowed his head, gritting his teeth as he tried to fight the tears. I wondered how many times he'd cried in his life. Slowly I smiled, then closed my eyes. "Okay. Fine. Damn it, P-21. How could you let your super amazing smarts fail to read the mind of a psychopathic cold-blooded zebra assassin? Really, I was totally expecting you to shove a stick of dynamite right up his rump."

P-21 gaped at me as if I'd kicked him, or kissed him, before he went bright red, and shook with snickers. Or more tears; I couldn't tell which. I'd like to think it was

laughter though. "Oh. . . That is wrong on so many levels, Blackjack."

"If I'm going to do something wrong, I prefer to go all the way. That way everypony notices." I closed my eyes again. "Can you pass on a message to Glory? Can you ask her when I'll be able to feel my legs again?"

He jerked and swallowed. "Yeah. Should be soon. Probably."

"Good. 'Cause we need to get going," I muttered softly. "I feel like I have a great big bulls-eye on my back."

"Yeah. . . we're looking into that," he said as he limped to the door. "You want something to read? Apparently there was a serial killer in the Hoof." He reached over and lifted a paper in his mouth. 'Angel of Death: 8 foals. Hoofington Guard: 0 killers,' read the headline. Beneath that was something about the 'Proditor' being suspended for their involvement in Shattered Hoof Ridge. Right now I wasn't in the mood for either... or reading in general.

He caught my look and chuckled, tossing the paper aside. "You go ahead and rest, then. I'll see if I can actually think of something for a change." I couldn't help but smile as he walked away. Leg brace or not, P-21 sure had a cute ass.

"What do you want?" Mother asked me, holding me in her hooves.

"To play."

"What do you want?" the Overmare asked me coldly, brown eyes digging into me.

"Revenge."

"What do you want?" Deus asked, sneering down at me.

"To kill."

"What do you want?" Lancer asked, with the rifle to my brow.

"Death."

"What do you want?" Dusty Trails asked, as she dealt the cards.

"Freedom."

"What do you want?" Fluttershy asked, hugging a dying foal.

"To do better."

What do ya want?" Big Macintosh asked, looking over his shoulder at me.

"Love."

What do you want?" Bottlecap asked with her calm, sure smile.

"I don't know."

"What do you want?" Scoodle asked, lying in two.

"Forgiveness."

"What do you want?" Morning Glory asked around the bloody scalpel in her mouth.

"Truth."

"What do you want?" P-21 asked, with that skeptical smile.

"You."

"What do you want?" Blackjack asked.

" "

I opened my eyes again to the feeling of a wet cloth across my brow. And my legs. And my butt. I looked up at Glory draping another across my shoulders. Ugh, I felt bad. Given my latest experiences with 'feeling bad', from getting shot to getting rad poisoning to getting battered in a rock crusher, this was oddly more mundane. Hot. Weak. Tired. Sick. That was it. I felt sick. I should report to medical... wait. Glory didn't work in medical. That's right. This wasn't the stable.

Crap. Was I that fucked up?

"What's up, doc?" I muttered, making her jump.

"Blackjack! I didn't realize you were awake," she said softly as she tugged the cloth off my face. "You have a slight post operative infection. I think we've used every healing potion we could to try and fight it and get you back on your feet but..."

"Don't worry about it," I muttered with a groan. "I'm sure you'll have me fixed up in no time, Glory." I wiggled a rear hoof and smiled. "See... almost good as new. Though... I have to admit I'm curious... you're what? A medical technician?"

"Something like that," she muttered before she dabbed the sweat off my brow.

“So where does a medical technician learn to do surgery like that?” I asked quietly, looking up at her before I closed my eyes. Maybe it was the fever; I figured I’d have to be on death’s door to put two and two together. Glory chewed on her lower lip as she looked away. I sighed and smiled. “You don’t have to tell me, but I have to admit there are a lot of questions adding up.”

Glory stroked her hoof along my mane. “I worked under a very good teacher. An exceptional teacher. I was. . . ugh, I hate the word. . . they all said I was a prodigy. I’d already completed most of my preliminary studies by the time I got my cutie mark. I was right on the track to go into full medical, studying under Dr. Morningstar.”

“I could really go for studying under a Dr. Whiskey right now.”

“Alcohol’s not going to help much at this point. We used all of it trying to sterilize you and the equipment anyway.”

“I’m sterilized? And here I was hoping to make Mom the first grandmare of Stable 99.” Oh the colors the small gray pegasus could change! “Pity the whiskey’s all gone.” Then I peeked at her. “Got any scotch?”

She laughed, trying to hide her grin by rubbing her hoof across her nose. “Funny, that was his favorite method of anesthesia after dealing with his students. That or it was the cure for his lectures. But he was a very good teacher and a wonderful doctor. I was given the opportunity to observe surgeries that I’d normally have to wait years to watch. He even let me assist on minor operations.” She bowed her head as she murmured softly, “I saw him perform a procedure on a spine trauma similar to yours.”

“So what happened?” I noticed her wince, looking away. “Oh no. Don’t you start getting all evasive on me now. You were really on a roll there, Glory.” She gave me a small smile.

She opened and closed her mouth several times, struggling for what to say. Finally she just sighed. “Well. The Volunteer Corps happened. The movement had been building for years. The Enclave always tightly controls access to the surface, but there were hundreds of students and faculty at the academy that wanted to do more. There were several petitions to the pegasus council. Finally the Volunteer Corps were established.” She sighed softly. “Dr. Morningstar was. . . well. . . not a supporter of the Corps. He’d been to the surface with science teams.”

Glory sighed, closing her eyes as she looked out the filthy windows. “We had a terrible fight. Absolutely terrible. I told him he was rude, callous, and monstrous

for keeping his skills to the pegasi. He called me an idealistic fool destined for a pointless death.”

“Ouch,” I muttered.

“Yes, well, he tried to mend our relationship afterwards, but I’m such an idiot sometimes. I was quite turned off by the attitude. Pegasi I knew for years accused us of being dashites and turning our backs on the Enclave.” She looked so... angry. It wasn’t an expression I’d seen on her often.

“Dashite? I’m guessing that’s a bad thing.” Given I was sick with an infection, I really didn’t want to risk pissing off my doctor. Still, this was the most I’d gotten out of her in... ever!

Her scowl faded, but the hard frown remained. “Yes, it is. Some ponies leave the Enclave. They don’t like the rules. A few flee to the surface to avoid punishment for their crimes. Others do it out of admiration for Rainbow Dash.” She gave a little shiver; “It is an unpleasant prospect. A few find feral clouds to settle in. Most are forced to the surface. Once you’re a dashite, you are banned from the Enclave forever. Worse is the shame you bring to your family. Parents can lose positions. Siblings can become pariahs. It’s not something that should be done lightly.” There was a firm certainty in her voice that I’d never before heard from the petite pegasus.

“Have you known any dashites?” That question had been a mistake. I’d never seen Glory looking... well... like P-21. “How are the Volunteer Corps different?”

“We wanted to change the rules, not break them. Our laws aren’t carved in stone. Clouds change. So should laws that aren’t needed any more. I think Thunderhead just let us come down to end the annoyance, but the point is they let us.” She closed her eyes and said solemnly, “Rainbow Dash was a fine pony whose heart was in the right place, but whose head wasn’t. Had she waited twenty years, just twenty years, she could have changed so much.” She then looked at me with a very odd smile. “She was a phenomenal pony. She and her friends. But she was a bit of an idiot.”

“Oh, see. I must be getting better,” I said with a grin. “I think that was a crack at me.” I’d had enough of angry Glory. I hadn’t believed she had angry in her.

“W... what? No, I’d never. You’re... I mean... well... you’re phenomenal as well, Blackjack.” She grinned nervously as I gave her the look, and then she sighed and added ruefully, “And, occasionally... you can be an idiot too. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Everypony knows I’m not a smart pony,” I said as I relaxed against the mattress. “I just wish I could have saved one. Even one. But Lancer killed them all.”

Glory didn't look sad, though; she looked confused. Then she brightened.

"Oh no, he didn't." Blink. What was this? "Sekashi and her filly Majina both survived. They're injured, and it was touch and go a bit with Majina, but they'll survive." Glory smiled at me. "Lancer was a murdering monster, but even he couldn't make thirteen fatal shots in ten seconds flat."

I could have kissed her, except that that would have required standing. And kissing. "I... thank you for telling me." I chuckled, closing my eyes and thinking of the bony bastard shuffling the cards. You don't get two. "He still has eleven to answer for," I said, taking a deep breath. You don't get two, you bony bastard. "I'd like to talk to them later. Right now, do you think I could take a nip into Macintosh's memory orb? My back is killing me."

"Ah... sure. And I'll take a look at your dressings while you're out," she said as she went to my bags, withdrew the orb, and pressed it to my horn. I smiled as I made the connection, looking forward to seeing the stars again. It was so different from looking up at the sky. It was... peaceful.

oooOOOooo

Not peaceful! Not peaceful! Get me down! Get me down now! I was flying and couldn't close my eyes as I snapped and banked through the smoky air. Bullets buzzed and popped in the air as monsters that were half bird and half giant cat yawed and cut back and forth behind me. I bit the bridle in my mouth as my wings snapped and I made a flip in the air. Facing backwards and upside down, one of the eagle creatures flew across my vision and it felt almost like I entered the stillness of S.A.T.S. The rifles at my sides led out a stream of leaden death interspersed with red fire. Burning, the eagle creature tumbled towards the ground below.

The ground way way below. A ground that became far far closer as the body I was in pulled his... his? -Holy shit... that was definitely a his!- legs and raced for the ground with the other eagle critter on his ass. Definitely not feeling much in common with this host right now! If I could have thrown up, cried, or wet myself, I'd have given all three a shot. A blue pegasus below suddenly powered straight up at me. She was going to hit!

At the last possible moment she rolled left and my host rolled right. They passed by each other so close their hooves clapped together. Then she unloaded a stream of her own automatic fire as soon as her guns passed my host's tail. The bursts tore into the eagle creature, and it banked away smoking and racing for cover.

"I hate when griffins get away," the blue pegasus mare said with a grin as she looked at him. I gave a shrug and she nodded, "Yeah yeah. There's always more. Let's get back to position. Zebras want something out here bad," she said, and we moved off.

Together we dove back towards the ground. I could see what she meant. We were flying over no pony's land and there was a zebra army pushing their way into the pony lines. Dragons swooped and looped towards the south; it seemed almost as if they were looking for something.

We landed at a concrete fortification atop a hill. A dozen or so ponies held off ten times that in zebra attackers. A huge gray pony swung a multi-barreled weapon in a socket back and forth, sending a killing stream of lead down the hill and into the enemy. "Eat it you bitchessss!" he roared in glee as the chain of bullets rapidly disappeared into the weapon. "Twissssst! Reload!" he yelled.

A red-maned mare with a buzz cut ducked down and ran to the gun's spent ammo feed box with a fresh box in her mouth. She kicked the almost-empty container aside and dropped the new one in its place. He took his hooves off the trigger toggles, his teeth champing impatiently. Flicking the lid off, she pulled out the end of the ammo belt with her teeth and with practiced ease used her hooves to latch it to the end of the one trailing from the gun. "All set!" she called out.

"Thanks!" he shouted as the gun started to fire it's raking line of hot metal again. "Die you striped mooootherfuckaaaas!" the gray pony shouted in glee as he painted them with lead.

"No problem," the crème mare said with a grin. She looked completely out of place with most of these ponies, being perhaps half the age of some and with thick glasses held together with duct tape. Yet despite the bullets and rattle of the minigun, she looked excited. As she passed the pegasus I was in, she said, with a snicker and a nod to the minigun wielding stallion, "Such a badass, isn't he, Stonewing." I heard my host snort and felt his wide grin.

A yellow earth pony buck with a headset and so much equipment on his back that he resembled a camel or something was fumbling with what looked like the most awkward PipBuck I'd ever seen; it was almost as large as his lower foreleg. "Command wants us to pull back to position 210. The weather monitoring station."

"Shouldn't we fall back, then?" asked a sober sounding buck draped head to hoof in a flack jacket. I couldn't even make out his face under the oversized helmet he wore. Unfortunately, my host barely glanced at him.

The blue pegasus looked over at a corpse in the corner. “Well, our officer can’t confirm the order with a hole through his head.” A big gold bar (now with a hole in it) decorated his helmet. Yeah, it sort of screamed ‘shoot me’. The pegasus mare just snorted, “Forget what command says. Half the time I don’t know who our command really is.”

“We need to follow the chain of command, Jetstream,” Flak Jacket said in a low voice as he glared at the blue pegasus.

“What does the big guy say?” Twist asked.

I’d expected everypony to look over at the maniac with the chaingun. Instead, all of us, including the maniac, looked over to the left edge of the fortification, where a big red buck stood in a battle saddle mounting an automatic rifle and a belt-fed shotgun. He chewed on a grass stem as he looked down at the advancing zebra forces. “Anope,” he said lazily. “We just got here. I reckon we oughta stick around.”

“All right, Big Macintosh.” Twist looked at the pony in all the electronic gear. “You heard ‘im! Tell them we’re pinned or busy or something!” She hopped to the edge while still remaining low, then pushed a helmet up above the parapet. The metal jerked as rounds struck it. Twist looked at the impact holes carefully. “Ooo... I’d say a hundred yards out,” she said as she grinned at my host.

Why was she looking at m—EEEEEEEEEE!? I was back in the air with the blue pegasus and we were cutting our way through the sk—no, the sky was definitely farther above things to run into. The male I was in spun, dove, and strafed along a low ridge at the foot of the hill. I couldn’t see anything, but suddenly zebras shimmered into being as the snipers’ invisibility cloaks flickered. From atop the hill came a steady pour of fire. Not frantic, though they were drastically outnumbered. They became a rock that the zebra sea broke upon.

And the foundation of that rock wasn’t the hill itself or the fortifications. It was Big Macintosh. He moved constantly but did not retreat or hide behind cover. He never swore or shouted at the enemy fighting their way up. With the rifle he fired precise and disciplined bursts of fire. When the enemy came too close, the shotgun would come into play with a deadly barrage of shells. Some zebras, running more swiftly than I thought physically possible, attempted to attack him with their bare hooves! Yet Big Macintosh remained atop that hill and took them down with awe-inspiring discipline and courage. Some ponies were wounded. Some ponies died. But while Big Macintosh stood, they would not break, even as the zebra line crawled closer and closer to their fortifications.

That small band of ponies returned fire and death against twenty times their number. Stealth cloaks were of little use against the minigun, but even the minigun couldn't fire everywhere at once; some managed to sneak all the way up to the fortifications. I was amazed to see Twist, the smallest, leap on them in furious hoof to hoof combat rather than let them attack her comrades. A white unicorn stood like a noble prince facing a monstrous horde as the guns in his battle saddle were supplemented by a pair of elegantly wrought pistols. I had to learn that trick! A black unicorn hardly moved at all as her rifle picked off zebra officers with disturbing accuracy.

These were heroes I could not have imagined. This was valor and courage I could never hope to match. I was so in awe of what I glimpsed that I forgot my fear of heights and the sky. Even my host and Jetstream amazed me. Remembering it was not actually me flying, I marveled at their skill and grace and peril. Jetstream was faster, my host stronger. I had more of those griffins try and attack, only to have Jetstream pick them off while their attentions were on me.

Eventually, the enemy was actually forced back down the hill, and I landed back atop it next to the other pegasus. "That was super, Jetstream," Twist said as she reloaded our ammo drums. She grinned around a peppermint stick lodged in her teeth. "Want one, Stonewing?" Stonewing, apparently the pegasus I was in, nodded enthusiastically.

The blue pegasus smiled and chewed hers happily. "Thanks. . . those are so good. When do you find time to make 'em?" I'd have liked the recipe myself. That was good eatin'! Of course, I couldn't cook to save my life, but it's the thought that counts.

"Eh. It's a complete mystery," she said with a grin, then looked over at a unicorn staring through a scope down the hill. "You want some, Psalm?" My host put his wing in front of Twist, shaking his head.

The pegasus beside me looked sad as we looked over at the black unicorn staring downhill, her lips moving softly. She made slow, almost mechanical, shots with a long barreled rifle. BLAM! "Forgive me Luna, for I have sinned: I have taken the life of another." BLAM! "Forgive me Celestia, for I have sinned: I have taken the life of another." BLAM! BLAM BLAM BLAM. . . each death came with a plea for forgiveness in a hopeless whisper.

I was seeing the forging of the Wasteland before my very eyes, one crushed soul at a time. Well. . . Stonewing's eyes. . . ugh! These memory orbs were confusing!

"How'd they get so close to the Hoof? We should have intercepted them long before they got here," Jetstream asked as she watched them reorganizing their lines for

another attack.

“Dragons. Brimstone and a dozen more managed to carry an entire legion with them,” said the handsome unicorn who reminded me of Prince Splendid, save for the emerald eyes and mane, and wore an automatic rifle on each side. I would have killed to know how he looked so delicious covered in mud and blood.

“But why here, Vanity? They’re not pressing towards anything!” Jetstream protested. “I thought they were going for the clinic but they seem to care more about these hills. Setting up a foothold for a bigger invasion?”

“Stop trying to think like an officer, Jetstream. You don’t have enough brain damage,” Twist said as she looked downhill once more. “So are we staying, big guy?”

All eyes went to Big Macintosh, who calmly chewed his grass stem. He gave a long slow nod. “Ayep. Figger they want this hill pretty bad. They’re gonna have ta pay fer it.”

Looking at all the zebra bodies on the hillside, that was a hell of a price.

The pony with the electrical equipment perked his ears. “Um. . . Command again. They want us to hold the hill now. Shadowbolts are inbound. ETA 2 minutes. All pegasi are to form up and give support.”

“Shadowbolts? They must be targeting the dragons. There’s a big one south of here.” Jetstream looked at my host with a lazy little grin. “Well let’s go ahead and give Rainbow Dash a hoof. You gonna try and get her autograph again, Stone?” My host nodded again, grinning eagerly.

“I tell you, I read in Stud magazines that Dash is all about the fillies. You’re wasting your time,” the big gray pony said with a lazy chuckle.

“Do you kiss your mother with that mouth?” Twist asked with a scowl.

“Nah. But I kiss yours.” Twist bristled and for a moment I was sure she was about to tackle the gray pony that was twice her size and age!

“Could you two please stop?” Flak Jacket muttered in irritation. Given that he was carrying a lot of grenades, I personally didn’t want to see his bad side.

“He’s right. Knock it off,” Big Macintosh said softly, and instantly all of them stopped and returned to the fortification. “Their big push is comin’ soon. Jet. Stone. Get goin’. Back up the Shadowbolts and take out those dragons before they get here.”

“You just be here when we get back. How can we be Macintosh’s Marauders without

Big Macintosh?” Jetstream asked before the pair crouched and flew off in unison. Dozens of pegasi from other units further east were rising as well, forming into long wings. I really wished I could close my eyes right now, but from Stonewing’s grin this was the time of his life.

Then they met the dragons. Fire and armored griffins broke the pegasi lines into snapping, screaming combat. The largest dragons had riders giving rifled air support! This was insane, and apparently a new challenge for the pegasi. They seemed at a loss of what to fight first. Griffins? Zebra snipers? The dragons spewing flame? For a minute or two I was certain that I was about to witness a rout.

Is that a rainbow?

The rainbow streak tore straight from Hoofington flanked by lines of crackling thundercloud. Below I had seen a squad of ponies fight like heroes. Now I saw nine pegasi who fought like goddesses—no. Not plural. Singular. As I watched, the nine never broke formation into smaller groups, as we had. The pegasus mare trailing a rainbow raced across the face of a dragon, blasting it with her guns. The next two did the same. And the next. And the next. The explosive shells of the concentrated fire blew the dragon’s skull to pieces. Slowly it wheeled over and dumped the snipers into the air. Okay, I really didn’t want to see that!

Wherever the rainbow went, the shadowy thunderclouds followed. If their formation broke, it reformed the instant they passed the obstacle. Whatever the rainbow mare shot, the others followed suit. I had never imagined such coordination or unity! They were not invincible, though. As they began to attack the largest dragon I could have imagined, one three times the size of the mutant we’d killed, two were caught in its fiery breath. Now seven, they closed ranks and never let up the attack.

“Stone!” I dimly heard the shout of warning. Then something struck Stonewing’s head with an immense blast of pain and he fell spinning into darkness.

oooOOOooo

My eyes popped open with a gasp of air, followed by a groan as my body reminded me that now was no time for strenuous activity. I was just glad I could move all my hooves. “You were out for a while,” Dusty drawled softly, the sand colored pony sitting beside the bed. “Last time we couldn’t keep you in the memory. This time I couldn’t snap you out of it.”

“She gave me the wrong memory,” I groaned as I lifted the orb and looked at its swirling light. “They need to find a way to slap labels on these things.”

"Afraid we all got bigger problems. You got only a couple hours before all hell arrives. Redbeard's found out yer here and wounded and I think every yahoo with a rifle is on their way. Got to get you outta here before then."

"What about you and the Pecos?"

"Don't worry about that. Your bounty is the only thing giving Sidewinder a chance at keeping most of the Pecos under him to try and take this place. With you gone and the freed ponies armed, I think we'll fight him off. Especially if I offer to hire 'em on." She chuckled and then shook her head. "If we get a few hundred bounty hunters after you... then things get impossible." She coughed and pulled out a crude mouth-drawn map. "Way I see it, your best bet is to follow the rails west, skirt between the Everfree Forest and the badlands, and come up through Ponyville. Heard somepony cleared out a healthy bunch of the raiders that live in those parts. From there you can get to New Appleloosa or try to get into Tenpony Tower." She looked at the map and frowned. "Should take about a month but..."

"I'm not spending a month just to run to Manehattan," I said with a groan as I tried to rise to my hooves. Emphasis on tried. Oh wasn't that a mistake.

"Maybe you haven't realized yet, but you're half dead and well on your way to becoming all dead. The slaves you freed here idolize ya, but they're just about a hundred and fifty or so folk against every greedy son of a gun that ever crawled outta their momma lookin' for caps. That'd be a lot."

"I didn't say stay here," I said with a groan as I looked at the map. Lots would be coming from the north following the Sunset Highway. Others would be coming west from Flank and Paradise. "What's the other way?" I asked as I pointed at the rails going towards the Core. "Somepony mentioned rail tunnels."

"I can shoot you now. It'll be easier. You'd need an armed escort to get through the tunnels. Feral ghouls are all over down there. Radiation. Taint. The Boss sent trains through there only on account he didn't want Gorgon petrifying him." Then she frowned. "Thing is, there's not much else that way either. Chapel's the only community, and I doubt they even have radios. There's other places you can hole up, too. Even a stable, or so I heard." Really... I had to admit I was curious. Terrified, too. Not something to mention to P-21 just yet.

"If we follow the train rails, we might be able to slip out with nopony the wiser. Let in a few bounty hunters to see I've gone. Let 'em chase me to Ponyville if they want."

"Funny. Does being sick raise yer smarts or something?" she said.

“Smart would be your plan,” I said. “Well, been in bed long enough. Best get to my hooves. . .” And I tried to rise again. Again, tried was the operative word. A more accurate way to describe the situation would be ‘moving one’s limbs and groaning in pain.’

“Okay. I take back the smarts part,” she sighed, scowling at me. “It’s going to take forever to carry you out of here at this rate.”

“Actually, I have an idea. . .” I said with a little smile.

Things were coming together. There were gaps in the plan, but I thought we could work through them. I was also able to stand. Walking... not so much. My fever had broken, but my back still felt like a hammer had been used on it... which technically would have been preferable to a bullet. P-21 had shown me the quarter inch-steel plate from my armor the last time he’d stopped by. It’d been bent in a U around the impact.

I’d taken the time to write a little letter to Bottlecap about Dusty Trails and the change of ownership of Brimstone’s Fall. With some luck, she might be willing to cut them a discount in exchange for first dibs at the mine. Magical gemstones like these were in huge demand, given how many magical weapons seemed to be floating around the Hoof. All that was left for me to do was wait for. . . ah. I heard the door close below. Time to get moving. My mane was starting to itch from being in one place for too long.

Funny. They were taking their time getting up here. Whoever was on the stairs walked with a slow, ponderous gait that I didn’t like at all. A raspy laugh rose up the stairs as the door to the boss’ office was slowly pushed open. The brown earth pony mare swayed as she stood in the door. I relaxed. “Oh, hey. How are you feeling, Tumbleweed?”

Those were the stupidest words ever to come out of my mouth. . . today. No. Something was very wrong as she swayed on her hooves. Tears ran down her cheeks as she slumped, and the most horrible laughing, sobbing noise rose in her throat. There was blood smeared across her lips. . . fresh and red. Bite marks covered her legs. Hooves shook as she stared at me with eyes that were already yellowing.

“Help. . . me. . .” she begged, giggled, sobbed... all at once. I’d gone through my own share of the shakes, but I’d never seen another pony losing their mind before my eyes. Weeks to months for ‘mental decay’ my ass, Glory! Tumbleweed was falling

apart in front of me, bloody froth creeping down her chin. She twitched continuously as her pinprick pupils jerked away from meeting my eyes. I started hoping this was some strange card game dream rife with metaphors. If so, I'd pass on whatever fucked-up wisdom my subconscious was trying to dredge up!

By the wonders of adrenaline, I shifted and prayed I didn't paralyze myself. I slowly pushed myself onto my side to face her, hooves pulled up and ready. I tried to speak nice and calmly. "Tumbleweed. Where's Glory? You need Glory." That was a lie. She needed a lot more than Glory. She needed a prayer and a bullet; damn me, I couldn't give her both.

"Turkey. . . I like turkeys... tastes good. . ." she whimpered, and I could only lay there in horror as I saw her raise her leg and suddenly spasm, biting down hard. As fresh blood spilled, I watched as she started to swallow. "Tastes. . . good. . . tastes so good. . ." she said a moment later. She gave one last sob, choking in the back of her throat. "Help me. . . " she whimpered before resuming giggling, long and slow, but building. My magic grasped around for something I could use as a weapon. Empty Med-X needles. Plastic jars of Buck. Fucking pillows. And as much as I wanted to help Tumbleweed, I had an even more horrifying thought; had she already come across Glory? What if some of that blood wasn't hers?

That giggle rose higher and higher. Her entire body was shaking now. "Tastes so fucking good. . . fucking good. . . Yeah!" It was like watching somepony dying of radscorpion venom, only when she expired I was next on the menu! Sweet Goddesses, if I'd known I'd have let her die from the poison! I tried lifting the terminal on the desk, but it was bolted down. I yanked the drawers open one after the next as I looked for something lethal. A knife. A pipe. A frigging pencil. Anything! My magic rifled through each frantically. Wait! What was this?

I yanked out a clipboard covered in two hundred year old finance information. Fuck fuckity fuck fuck fuck. . . She lunged for the bed, bloody mouth wide and screaming in glee.

Rolling onto my back hurt like mad, but it was the only thing that let me push her away as she tried to turn me into lunch. Unlike other raiders, she wasn't half starved and raw. She was quite a healthy pony, and she was trying her hardest to chomp on my belly. I pushed her snapping, giggling, biting maw aside with my telekinesis and forelegs, but it was so hard. Every motion made it feel like a drill was working in my spine. And if it was true that she had a disease. . . rabid raider Blackjack! No thank you!

Right now though, she was stronger than me. I'd die for my baton... my gun... which was funny given I was about to die lacking them! All I had was my telekinesis, but I had to have something to use it on. It wasn't like you could just shove telekinesis at something... right? I stared at her. "Tumbleweed. Please stop... please..." Oh don't make me try this... "Please!" This was not an experiment I wanted to do right now! I almost didn't want it to work. My magic focused from pushing against her head to pushing just one single point. There was no way this could work. No way. Crap...

Fuck it. I shoved my focused little cone of telekinesis right into her eye. She screamed and fell back, covering her head with her hooves as she writhed in agony. Finally she stilled, clutching the socket as clear, faintly yellow fluid crept down her cheek. "It hurts... it hurts... my head hurts... I'm so hungry... so angry... please..." she begged as she stared at me with her remaining pin prick pupil.

"Tumbleweed." I panted, my breath hissing as I nearly hyperventilated. Oh Celestia, did that ever sting! "Have you ever eaten meat?"

"No..." She started to giggle again as she rocked towards me. "But I'd love to!"

I focused all my telekinesis into another bolt and rammed it into her head. Still not enough. I glanced at my PipBuck. Would it even work? Looking at Tumbleweed I entered S.A.T.S. and to my surprise and a little bit of concern I queued up two attacks: 'Telekinetic Bullet.' My horn flashed twice and I watched the magic augur into her skull. The second time, the tiny cone of magic burst out the rear of her head. She jerked and spasmed before she slowly slid down to the floor beside my bed.

I prayed it was just my wishful thinking she looked so happy to be dead. I looked at the bites on my forelimbs, feeling a new cold worry settle in my gut. I brought up the ridiculously long list of things to worry about and scribbled the newest one on it. Then I sighed. Nothing to do about that now.

Slowly, I rolled onto my side, my horn throbbing as if I'd just been smacking myself with my own baton. "Not going to be trying that again soon," I said softly as I looked down at the mare's still form. Sweet Celestia, what was hell was going on here?

There are times, rare and momentous, when Blackjack, daughter of Gin Rummy, granddaughter of who knows, has a good idea. Perhaps the stars overhead were aligned just so beyond the clouds. Maybe I was finally getting a little karma in my

favor. Perhaps it was even something so radical as me getting smarter. Rather than try and get a whole flatcar together to haul my butt out of Brimstone's Fall, we simply rolled up two flatbed mine carts. The tracks in the gem mine had the same track gauge as the rail lines, and the mine carts could be pulled fairly easily by only one pony each. Dusty and two other unicorns carefully lifted me up and carried me down to the first floor of the administration building. I was glad to see that P-21 had gotten their collars off.

I slumped, my legs shaky and my back achy, wishing to know why I could slug down healing potions right and left and they didn't do anything. Healing potions should heal! My eyes passed over a framed news clipping: 'Officer Softheart clears Brimstone's Fall of involvement in Angel of Death killings. Investigation continues.' A unicorn mare in a uniform shook hooves with some manager-type pony. Personally, I thought 'Softheart' vs. 'Angel of Death' to be a bit of a mismatch.

Dusty was leading the way with my duffel bag slung across her shoulders. She still hadn't said much about Tumbleweed. I sensed the relationship between the two had been more than simple affiliation with the Pecos. Now that I was leaving though, she started to talk. "How could that happen? She wasn't a raider. She wasn't even a good Pecos! She didn't even eat meat!" She stomped her hooves in aggravation. "A week ago she was in Flank whining about her salad being all... wilted! What kind of Pecos whines about their salad and then turns around and tries ta eat themselves!?"

"Glory thinks there's something that causes raiders around the Hoof. Some disease that turns their brains all spongy." I swallowed as I was levitated through the meeting room. Thankfully, whatever Tumbleweed had said about turkeys, Glory had been seeing to the injured zebras. More's the pity. If only something could have been done. Get two zebra back, pay one Tumbleweed.

"Okay, stop." I said as we reached the door. "Set me down."

"Down?" Dusty trails asked, then looked at the door. "Oh no. You think you're going to walk out of here in your condition? That is a whole new level of stupid, Blackjack." She coughed and muttered, "Besides, Glory would probably kill me if I let ya."

"Then you're surprised? Good," I said as I looked at the unicorns. It was the look. Slowly gravity took its hold. My hooves touched down; as I assumed my own weight, my legs started to feel like they would bend like wet clay. I was still standing, though. Standing was good. "Good. Mind stepping out just a second? I need to ask Dusty something." The two unicorns looked at me in worry before they stepped out.

I'd faced a pony abomination, a mutated dragon, a glowing ghoul pony, and being

eviscerated. All of that was nothing compared to the challenge of standing. “Good. Pass me the Buck?” Dusty looked stubborn. I looked... probably really pathetic. Fortunately, I’d saved her life, handed her one of the most productive gem mines in the Hoof, and stopped her friend from becoming a equicidal maniac (okay, so I did that by killing her friend, but still...).

She floated the bottle over and carefully unscrewed the cap. “You know, Glory warned us to only give it to you if you crashed.”

“Good. I’m about to crash,” I said as my legs shook. She floated a tablet to my mouth and I chewed the chalky tablet before swallowing. I could almost feel the sensation as the chem hit my stomach and then rapidly spread. The shaking stopped and I even felt, dare I admit it, better. “Now my barding.”

“I think you’re turning into a raider too,” she said as she pulled it out and draped it over my body. I was hot. My limbs, fortified by Buck, still felt like jelly as the armor settled around me. On top of everything else, said armor hurt like crazy as it was buckled in place. I searched my pockets and found a syringe of Med-X. ‘For all your little ouchies.’ Boy did I have an ouchie. I jammed the needle into my leg and the fire between my shoulder blades dwindled somewhat. Now it only felt like I had rebar stuck there instead of one of Deus’ guns.

“Why are you doing this?” Dusty was clearly concerned and just a touch worried.

“Which do you think is better, everypony out there seeing me for the cripple I am, or everypony seeing me walk out of here on my own hooves?” I asked as I straightened. “Better yet, when the bounty hunters hear about it, hopefully they’ll think that maybe I’m just as dangerous as before and go the fuck home. I can do this. It’s just walking to the mine carts.”

“Well, that and dealing with the mine administrator,” she said with a little smile. “The ponies you freed wanted to give you a special parting present.”

Fucking what? Ohh! Maybe they were going to let me push the button down in the mine! Big red buttons should always do something amazing! But then the door opened and Glory stared up at both of us. Her lavender eyes widened and the gray mare stared at me. She then closed her eyes. “You are an idiot, Blackjack. Get on those carts before you die on your hooves in front of everypony!” she hissed as she stepped aside, giving Dusty a withering glare. The Pecos made herself busy looking at anything other than the glaring pegasus.

That was a lot of ponies. The entire mine yard was filled with dozens of ponies.

More than a hundred. Most had the worn look of slaves, but I picked out the Pecos with their hats and jackets. The few guards who'd joined the revolt were visible from their subdued expressions. I could tell it'd be a long time before they completely shed that past. I slowly made my way down the stairs, glad, despite the way my legs felt, to no longer feel the unicorns' telekinesis supporting me. If the sham were revealed I'd never shake most of the hunters off me.

Step. Step. Step. It was the longest walk of my life, longer than when my guts were dragging on the floor be... do NOT think about that now, you moron! The slaves parted in front of me with expressions of awe and concern. There was no way I could hide the pain. I doubted I could hide the fever. I just had to hide the weakness. Be strong. I lifted my head and forced my lips to curl back.

The crowd exploded into cheers. I nearly fell over right then and there.

Reaching the two mine flatbeds, I was relieved to see that it wasn't much of a step. I climbed aboard and sat with relief. There was just enough room for one pony per flatbed, or two if they were cozy. P-21 looked at me from the second flatbed with a sigh, shaking his head. "You're amazing. Ridiculous, but amazing."

"Thanks. And I'm glad you were able to get the collars off them safely."

"I'm glad I didn't have any accidents while doing it," he answered with a strangely smug smile. "And I'm glad they won't be going to waste."

I looked back at him in worry. "What... you're going to use them in the mine?" I rubbed my twitching mane. There was something being set up on the one of the flatbed train cars. The crowd began to back away.

"Better," he said as the movement of the crowd revealed the fat pony. His forelegs were swollen to the size of melons and he'd been beaten till he looked like he was part bloatsprite. But what really chilled my blood, despite the heat, was the sight of him wearing dozens and dozens of explosive slave collars. "For justice."

Sweet Celestia, what the fuck made you think this up, P-21? Dusty smiled as she floated over the flimsy little shackle I'd busted off him during the breakout. There was a shiny red button attached. "Thought it right you give the fucker a send off he deserves."

I felt a further chill wash over me, despite the lingering fever. "Are... you... fucking... insane?" I whispered as softly as I could. P-21 jerked as if I'd just shot him in the face with a telekinetic bullet. The crowd went wild, stamping their hooves as they yelled his damnation. I stared at the pathetic, blubbering mass on the end of

the car. He shook as if he was going to faint at any moment as he stammered for his mommy.

"I'm sorry, is there something to think about here? This buck is responsible for the death of possibly hundreds of ponies. He's been in charge of Brimstone for years!" P-21 said in a low voice, "He's hurt everypony here. Now they get justice!"

"This isn't fucking justice!" I hissed as I stared at him, unable to touch that button, unable to look away. "It's murder."

Now I regretted my show. If I'd appeared near death... no, that would have put the blood on somepony else's hooves. And he'd be just as dead.

P-21 would have killed me right then if he could. Cold rage burned in his eyes as he leaned towards me. "Do you know what fucking justice is? It's giving to others as is given to you." Be kind. "It's killing the fucker to make sure that she never does it again." Be kind. "It's making sure every bastard who even thinks of copying her crime hesitates because they know they might face the same punishment." Be kind. "It's what's fair!"

...be kind...

These ponies needed justice. Was this it? Killing him wouldn't bring anypony he had killed back. Would it even bring peace? Or would somepony else decide that it wasn't enough and drag one of the former guards up there next?

He was dead anyway. Send his broken body out the gate and the Wasteland would eat him. They'd track him down and lynch him. It wasn't any different in Stable 99; he'd be retired without hesitation. Recycled. If he was put on some kind of trial, what verdict would be returned besides guilty? How was this not justice? Just a week ago I wouldn't have hesitated. In fact, I probably would have been honored to push the nice red button.

...be kind...

Ante up.

"Listen!" I screamed at the top of my lungs. I almost fell off the cart as the entire world spun, and only Dusty's magic suddenly gripping me and stopping me from falling on my face preserved my illusion. Shouts faded away bit by bit as eyes turned upon me. "I know you want me to kill this pony. I know he deserves it. I know he's hurt you over and over again for his own gain."

I clenched my eyes shut, twisting my hooves against the metal beneath me. "A long

time ago there was a war between ponies and zebras. I saw a memory of it not long ago. I saw the hate and the blood and carnage. Some ponies think the bombs ended it. But I disagree. This is a war that is still being fought today, only now we're fighting between ourselves. And every single time we kill, we keep it going."

I wondered if, when I finished, I'd be next. "I've learned of a pony from that time who realized what everypony else didn't. The war had to end, and if we were ever going to win it we would have to do better. Be better. Not better killers. Not more ruthless. We would have to be... kind."

"I'm not an executioner. I'm Security. If he'd threatened another I wouldn't stop fighting him 'til he gave up. If he threatened your lives I'd do all I could to end his. But like this... I can't give you what you want. I'm sorry." I floated the detonator back to Dusty Trails, who looked at me with an unfathomable expression. Contempt for my weakness? Pity? Respect? "I know I can't stop you from killing him. I know that many of you need this. But I'm begging you... please... be better. Be kind."

Before, I think that some of the freed slaves had actually fought with each other for the privilege of pulling the mining flatbeds. Only Glory and the zebra Sekashi pulled the squeaking vehicles out of Brimstone's Fall. Her filly walked quietly beside us. Cheers had been replaced by little mutters and hard looks. I'd tried to look the hero. I'd tried to be inspiring. I'd tried to be better. I'd forgotten just what the Wasteland did with heroes. I didn't look back.

Still, my words must have had some effect. They were kind. They were kind enough to let me get out of sight before pushing the button.

I hated the Wasteland. I hated that bony bastard dealing the cards and stacking the deck. I hated ponies, "sane" ponies, killing other ponies. Raiders at least had the excuse of holey brains. I hated P-21 for thinking that I'd want to kill the mine administrator like that. I hated being a coward. I hated being weak. If I'd just pushed the button, everything would have been better.

Be kind. What kindness was there in what I did? What did kindness even mean in the Wasteland? What was it other than a liability? I'd tried to be kind to P-21, and his leg had been shattered. I'd tried being kind to Glory, and I'd left her feeling abandoned. I want to be kind, Fluttershy. I want to be better. I want to be good. Because the alternative was to become the Wasteland. Cruel. Hard. Murderous.

I couldn't think about that fat bastard on the train car. I'm glad I only heard the

explosion instead of seeing him turned to paint. I thought about Lancer. Was I really just a hypocritical coward? Lancer deserved to die. I wanted to kill him. But would I? Deus was a monster trying to hunt me down. He deserved to die. Was that justice? Vengeance? Or was it just the Wasteland trying to wiggle its way inside me and crush whatever good remained inside?

Good. Had I ever been good?

"I am reminded of a funny story," Sekashi said brightly as she looked over her shoulder. I admit, I hadn't paid very much attention to the zebra and her filly. She had a strange cute mark: all abstract lines that seemed to form a smiling face. Her green eyes looked back at me with a bright curiousness in them. I hadn't seen eyes like that in a long time. Without waiting for permission, the lithe yet strong zebra said, "Once upon a time in my homeland there was a very good but very silly zebra. He wished for some fine shoes and paid well for them. Walking home, however, he lost a nail."

"How terrible," he cried out. "How could I have lost it? Somepony will surely step upon it!" But he did not see the nail being picked up by another whose shoe barely clung to her hoof. He continued home, but soon the shoe came off entirely. It sailed through the crowd and struck a fleeing thief in the head. But he said, "Oh no, my shoe hurt him. How terrible I am!" He limped home, and once there met his wife and three children. He was very sad. He had the shoes removed and let each of his children take them away. "Oh wife, I am such a terrible husband. I have lost my shoes. I am a terrible zebra, for I hurt others. I am a terrible father, who gives only a shoe apiece to his children."

"But his wife was a very clever wife, and the next day when he went out he found the mare who had needed his nail, and she thanked him. If not for his nail, she would have lost her shoe as well. He thought that very strange, and as he walked he found the guards who thanked him for stopping the notorious thief by throwing his shoe. He thought this very odd as well. When he returned home, he found his lovely children playing with the shoes he had given them. They thanked him for the present."

"My wife! What a strange day I have had. Zebras keep thanking me for helping them. But I am a terrible zebra. I do not know why they do as they do!" But his wife just nodded. "Often it is the good we do not realize we do that matters more than the good we intend, husband." The zebra mare gave a long sigh with a smile over her shoulder back at me. "But of course he did not understand, for he was a very good but very silly zebra."

"I am sensing a moral," I said with a mirthless smile.

She looked at my lips carefully, but then gave an easy smile. Sweet Celestia how I wished I could smile like that again. "Ah, but that would ruin the story! So therefore it cannot have such a thing," she said with a prim nod. I chuckled despite myself.

"So, if I can ask, why did Lancer... do what he did?" I asked softly, hoping that it wasn't treading on sensitive hooves. The deaf zebra nearly tripped on a stone, yet she was so nimble on her hooves that I barely noticed her recovery.

"Ah. That is another funny story. Once upon a time there was a great king who ordered all his people to go forth and make great war against a terrible enemy. And so they did. It was great and it was terrible. And when it ended the king was slain, the enemy was slain, and all the armies of the world were slain. But afterwards, some who remained remembered the great king's order and so went out to do war with an enemy long past. And they marched left and they marched right and they raised their spears and shouted old cheers and all they came across they counted as their enemy. When they found other zebras they insisted they follow his orders as well. Any who refused were counted as the enemy. And so they fight a silly war against enemies of their own making for a great king long since fallen."

"That's not funny! That's terrible!" Glory protested. The zebra glanced at her, and Glory flushed as she spoke with exaggerated lip movement, "How can you call something so terrible like that silly?"

"Hmmm. Perhaps something is lost in the translation. Still, one might think such zebras to be quite foolish, and it is only fitting to find fools funny. Why would they try so hard at their foolishness if they did not wish us to laugh at them?"

I couldn't imagine laughing at Lancer, but I had to admit that there was something phenomenally stupid about continuing a war two hundred years past. I chuckled despite myself. "So you were zebras who refused to fight? He killed you for that?"

"Oh no no no. There are many tribes that refuse to fight. So long as they bow and quiver, they are spared. My tribe's crime was infinitely worse," she said with a solemn expression as she glanced back at us. "Our crime was that we laughed at their foolishness. I suppose it was too much to hope that they would laugh as well. A fearsome fool is a fool still, and it is hard to fear something so funny."

"So when I meet Lancer again, I should laugh at him?"

"Can you imagine anything more terrible?" she countered. For a pony like that, I had to conclude I really couldn't think of any.

“You seem incredibly perky for a slave,” P-21 said sourly.

The zebra looked back at the blue pony in surprise. “I am kinky for a slave?”

The look on P-21’s face was priceless as his eyes popped wide. “Perky, perky! Why are you so happy?!”

“Ah, I am sorry. I suppose I could think of many terrible things. Scowl. Weep. But I am alive. My daughter is alive. I may be hungry tonight and dead tomorrow, but for now I shall choose to think of better thoughts. They are fewer and all the more precious than those that are sad.” P-21 looked away with a soft hiss.

Glory frowned back at him. “What is the matter with you, P-21? Don’t you have any sensitivity at all?” He glared back at her.

‘You know this right and wrong shit,’ I’d once told him. Now I wasn’t so sure. It was as if we were swapping places and he was becoming more and more reactive and I more and more reserved. Our friendship had barely set and already cracks were forming. I looked at him staring away with his worried blue gaze. What should I say? Tell him it was all right? Say he was wrong?

As the cart ground towards the northeast, towards Hoofington, I wished that somehow I could be smart enough to know what to say. But I am not a smart pony. I am not a kind pony. All I could hope was that I found a way to be a better pony.

The mining cart passed the weathered bones of a pony stretched out along the side of the tracks. Its frozen grin said quietly: Ante up.

Footnote: Level up

Perk added: Intense Training – Your experiences traveling in the Wasteland have allowed you to add one to your intelligence.

Quest perk added: Telekinetic Bullet spell – you may now attack enemies at close range with a bolt of telekinetic energy equivalent to a pistol.

11. Peace

“Sweet Celestia, she’s drunk!”

Blackness. Unending. Absolute. Unyielding.

And then there was light.

I found myself laying naked on a strange mattress in a strange room, a dingy and cramped room that smelled of wax and hay. “Easy,” said a male next to me on the bed. “Don’t panic.” That was an incredibly stupid thing to say, because this seemed like an ideal time to panic. I opened my eyes, took in what looked like some sort of basement lit with a few candles and dressed in the usual Wasteland décor, and immediately kicked at the male sitting beside me.

I still had my PipBuck, so I entered S.A.T.S. and queued three telekinetic bullets at the black unicorn. Maybe it was all the sickness, injury, and disappointment I’d suffered, but for some reason I hesitated and used that moment of frozen time to get a good look at my captor. I didn’t know exactly what to expect. Ravenous raider? Blistered and bloated bounty hunter? Downgraded Deus? Okay, definitely not the last one.

He looked, in fact, quite ordinary. His black coat sported numerous thin scars all along his body. Mane was a dirty white, tail too. He wore no barding and I couldn’t see a gun. In fact, the PipBuck said he was a non-hostile yellow. His cutie mark was a strange outline of a pegasus with hooves stretched above her and wings wide, surrounded by a sunburst of rays of light. I’d almost blown the head off a completely unarmed, non-hostile buck. I could hear the bony bastard shuffling his cards in the back of my mind.

When time resumed I flopped back on to my seat and took a shaking breath. “Right! Don’t panic. Who’s panicking? Me? Psssh. I kill monsters and slay slayers. No panic here.” I grinned like an idiot; he looked at me with definite concern. I took a deep breath and thrust out my hoof. “I’m Blackjack. Nice to meet’cha.”

“Priest,” he replied. “Likewise.”

Priest, huh. What were the odds that he was religious?

“So. A few standard questions I like to ask when I wake up in a strange bed next to somepony,” I said, then cleared my throat. “Where am I? Where are my friends?”

Where are my clothes? Where's the bathroom? Was I good? Is this going to get back to my mother?" Then I blinked and added one. "And why do I feel... better?" I still felt on the battered and bruised side of life, but the 'Celestia fucked my spine with a power drill' pain was gone.

To my relief, he smiled. Maybe not laughed, but smiled. If I ran into another stoic buck, I was going to shoot him on principle. Maybe not kill him, but he was getting shot! "That is quite a list. Does this happen often?"

"Oh, after the last couple of days... yeah. It's become policy."

"All right. First question: you are in Chapel." Then his lips curled. "But of course you already knew that from your PipBuck." I did? Fuck! I tried to look nonchalantly down at the screen. "Naturally, you're testing my honesty?"

"Of course. That's it precisely," I said softly before glancing down at the navigation tool. Sure enough... "Oh Celestia! How did I get way over here?" Chapel was right across the river from the southwestern side of the Hoof! That should have been two days walking, at least! "How long was I out? Why was I out?"

"I love answering questions, but if you keep tacking them on, we're never going to get out of bed," he said with an arch of his brow. "And I don't know about you, but I'm hungry." I had to admit that I was too. Ravenous, in fact. Walking ahead of me, he opened the cellar doors and stepped out into the drizzle. Did it ever stop raining in Hoofington?

Chapel consisted of four or five small buildings circumscribed by a wooden picket fence. Each house had raised growing beds covered by tarps and canvas sheets. The post office across the street seemed to hold most of the life in the town, as I saw several young mares stroll inside. In fact, the ponies caring for the vegetables were young too. Aside from Priest, I didn't see a single adult anywhere. "Okay..." then I spotted the raggedy blue flag with a rearing white filly, fluttering weakly in the breeze. "Oh! Crusaders! This is where the Crusaders live?" Then I winced. "Oh, yeah. Adding it to the list."

"You must have quite a collection of questions already," he replied with a chuckle. You have NO idea. "As for your second question, about your friends, you were found alone. So I'm afraid I don't know where they are."

That brought me short. "What? They're..." I felt... I'm not sure how I felt. It was like all of a sudden two pieces of my insides had been yanked up into my throat. "Oh, shit... er... horseapples," I amended, looking at the black unicorn, giving a

small smile. Yeah, that was the best I could fake; hopefully I'd hidden at least some of the extent of my distress.

His amusement shifted to concern, "I'm sorry. When the Crusaders found you, you were unconscious and alone. They recognized your security barding and carried you here. That patch convinced them; not many ponies wear Crusader patches. Unfortunately, your equipment was more than they could carry, and they had to hide it there instead. So as for your clothes, they are back where they found you, beside the tracks." He arched a brow, "Do you really need to go to the bathroom?"

"No. And you don't need to answer if I was decent or about my mom. Stupid questions..." I muttered. My friends were gone. Dead? Oh, why did I just think that? My head felt like I was looking into the sky. I sat down hard on my rump. "Shit. I... sorry. I know you're not supposed to swear around clergy ponies." I admit, I hadn't liked stable 99's spiritual leader; she went around killing fun faster than the security ponies did, but I respected her. It wasn't easy, addressing the worries of a few hundred neurotic mares.

"Glory was just... she was starting to talk to me. Opening up." I didn't feel like crying. I didn't feel angry. There was just this hole where she'd been that was now filled with a great unknown. "She told me about her teacher. And her ideas about what causes raiders. And... there was more." Priest just gave an understanding smile as he waited.

And P-21. I'd called him insane! I'd said he was a murderer for setting up the execution of the mine boss. He'd been mad. Angry. I'd hurt him. I'd hurt him, and I don't think I apologized. And then there were Sekashi and her child. "I've got to find them. I have to. What happened?" I asked as I stood, looking at him.

"The Crusaders found you by some train tracks to the north. You were alone with your belongings scattered. I noted your injuries, but I suspect the culprit was this." He tugged a ragged plastic baggy from his saddlebags with his mouth. A memory orb glowed softly within. I reached out with my magic, but he tugged the bag back and muttered, "Don't!" around the mouthful. He dropped it at his hooves. "It's trapped."

"How do you trap a memory orb?"

"Carefully. When the war was at its peak, memories could no longer be left accessible to any unicorn that happened across them. Zebras had unicorn sympathizers. The Ministry of Morale, together with the Ministry of Peace, eventually devised methods of extracting and sealing dangerous or sensitive memories away. The process

was so difficult that it was used only for the most critical memories, but with constant zebra infiltration and sabotage, the technique of locking memories became vital here. Too many secrets in this city.” He nudged the orb with a hoof as he looked down at it. “It has a password: some thought, or idea, or name you need to be thinking of.”

“And if you don’t have the password?” I asked, looking at the orb like it was a bomb. He shook his head and sighed. “Most of the time, nothing. But if you try to force contact, it can render you unconscious. Place you in an endless nightmare. Even kill you.”

What the fuck? “Kill me? Are you serious? How can a memory kill me?”

“Your mind resides in your brain. Your brain keeps your heart beating. I’ve never encountered such an orb, but I’ve heard of them.”

“Yeah. Okay. No more memories for me,” I muttered, kicking the little bag away from me.

“Don’t say that,” he replied with a small frown, walking to it and returning it to me. He looked... sad. “Please, don’t say that. Memories are more than experiences. They’re lessons. They teach us things that others have gone through.” He cocked his head. “Is there any sense in suffering through the past twice? Have you not learned something from an orb?”

I sighed and looked away. Would I have ever seen the stars with my own eyes? Those beautiful little gems in all that black? Would I know love if I’d never seen it breaking in another mare’s heart? Or seen the courage and valor of ponies now long dead? “I guess...”

“Forewarned is forearmed,” he said calmly. “Fortunately, I’m decent with a number of spells and I was able to disconnect you from the orb. I also took advantage of your unconsciousness to heal you with magic.”

Wait? This was magic? “I’ve been slogging down magical healing potions right and left and I’ve never felt like this!” Well, that wasn’t true. The regeneration talisman had done a dandy job on me. “How long have I been out? I feel like I’ve been sleeping for a week.” Aside from the lingering soreness between my shoulders, I felt ready to hunt down my friends.

“A few hours. So you don’t know about the Enervation?” he asked as his horn floated two healing potions out of his bags. One was a typical watery purple; the other looked as vivid as wet paint.

“That’s one of those ten cap words I never picked up in the stable,” I replied, and pointed a hoof at the bright purple vial. “What’s that one? A super mega healing potion?” Maybe I could get it for when I found P-21.

He chuckled, “Comparatively, perhaps, but they’re both the same kind of potion. The fainter potion is simply a week older.”

“Wait... so what happened to it? That Enervation thingy?” I guessed, and felt pleased when he nodded. Miracle of miracles, could I be learning?

“During the war there were countless projects and studies. All the strange energies and magics scarred the landscape, even before the bombs fell. There’s contamination deep within the very soil of Hoofington. For miles around the city, the Enervation saps the life and magic of any living thing. In some places there are Enervation fields strong enough to kill a pony. You won’t see a thing. You’ll simply start to die. Your best defense is to get away as quickly as possible,” he added, seeing my horrified expression. Dying from bullets and raiders and monstrous vermin was one thing, but now I had to worry about keeling over from invisible magic?

“Can my PipBuck detect it? Is there an Enervation sensor on this thing?” I said as I waved it at him.

“No. But since the Enervation saps healing magic, keep an eye on your healing potions. If they go clear, that means the Enervation’s drained them enough to make them useless. If the potion starts turning other colors, gets cloudy, or starts to smell, run, and lose the potion. It’d only make you sick. And if you start bleeding from head to hoof, get away.”

“Why does anypony actually live here?” I asked, then glared at the towers of Hoofington. The blackened spires and scorched walls seemed to ask the same question. From the green light glowing from the depths of the city, it felt almost as if the broken towers had a special loathing of anypony within a hundred miles.

“Why do you think life is so tough and desperate here? Almost anypony who can leave the Hoof does. Those who can’t live in the safest pockets they can find. But there are also great opportunities to be had here. Weapons and armor. Lost technology. Mineral wealth. Secrets. Things worth risking lives for, apparently. Some ponies come thinking they’ll strike it big. Then they get a cut on the hoof, an infection, and wonder why their healing potions no longer work. The strong prey on the weak and the land dies a little more each day.” He bowed his head solemnly. “Celestia protects. Luna defends.”

Do they? I didn't see it. I never saw it. In 99, Hymnal usually went on and on about how Celestia had appointed the Overmare, how we should have faith in the Overmare. That questioning the Overmare was like questioning the divine Princesses themselves. I'd seen exactly what came of that kind of blind loyalty.

"It's just... ugh. I hate discovering one bad thing after the next. First it was raider disease. Then magical radiation poisoning. Now it's trapped memory orbs and invisible zones of death. Hoofington needs an instruction guide for idiots like me. With big print and bright colorful pictures!" I stomped my hooves hard, and then noticed his smile. "What?"

"Why didn't I have this a week ago?" I muttered as I lay on a mattress on the floor of the post office; in front of me was an open copy of 'The Wasteland Survival Guide: Hoofington Edition'. Dangers of scavenging! What's that beeping noise? Robots and you. The who's who of the Hoof. Information that would have come in so handy over the last few days lay right before my eyes. "This should be stapled outside every stable for any hornhead that goes racing out into the Wasteland!"

While I did want to track down P-21, Glory and Sekashi, Priest had pointed out that my friends knew I was coming in this direction. Chapel being the only community near the rail line, it was a good bet that they'd come here if they could. If we were all wandering around looking for each other, we might never find one another. As I'd read the book I'd told him what I could; he'd proven a wonderful listener and conversationalist as I'd outlined my the last few days to him. An inner voice, sounding very much like P-21, muttered that he was probably a foal-fondling cannibal who sacrificed ponies to his idols of Celestia and Luna. It seemed impossible that the Wasteland would allow somepony nice to exist.

The Crusaders had proven to be quite curious about me. Why was I lying beside the tracks? Was I a super mutant raider bandit Wasteland walker who could shoot deathbeams from my glowing eyes? Where was I from? Sugar Apple Bombs or Sugar Carrot Cakes: which side was I on? Dolls or colts and robbers? Did I lose my momma too? More than twenty foals were at the post office, which had been made part rec room and part hotel. Toys scavenged or manufactured by the young ponies lay everywhere; it was a bit of a trick not to slip and bust a leg.

"Would you have taken the time to read it?" he asked with a chuckle. "As I recall, you had a horse of the apocalypse after you at the time. I don't think I'd stop and grab a book with Deus Ex after me."

I glanced at him curiously, “You know about Deus?”

“Most ponies know of ‘Deus Ex Machina’; Zebra Imperial speak for ‘God of the Machine’. And yes, he gave himself that name. He’s been around the Hoof. . .” The black unicorn frowned a moment in consideration before continuing, “for as long as I can remember. He’s the Reaper’s Reaper. The Raider God. Number two in the Arena behind Big Daddy Reaper.”

I’d found the section about Big Daddy Reaper and the Arena. The old photograph of the Hoofington Sports Arena dominated most of the article.

Reapers: Your best friend or else.

You see that pony? Not the one foaming at the mouth, that’s a raider. Not the one with the nice explosive collars, that’s a slaver. Not the one taking all your stuff, that’s a bandit. No, that pony. The pony so badass over-the-top amazing-looking that you are sure he’s going to kill you with a glare? That’s a Reaper.

Reapers have been in Hoofington since before there was a Wasteland. The stadium was home to the Hoofington Reapers, and that’s where Big Daddy took the name from. What kind of ponies are Reapers? Well, before the bombs, the Hoofington Reapers hoofball team claimed the records for most consecutive injuries, fouls, and penalties in the E.H.L., and they were proud of it. That’s not to say Reapers kill everypony on sight, but they are very good at it. The only ways to become a Reaper are to kill a Reaper in one-on-one combat or to win against dozens of wannabe’s at a tryout, so whatever Reaper you’re meeting is probably more badass than the Reaper they replaced. That means they’re almost certainly tougher than you.

In their odd way, Reapers are celebrities around Hoofington. Lots of ponies have a favorite like Deus, Rampage or Psychoshy, and discussions of their various fights can usually be found across Hoofington. Reaper matches are one of the few forms of entertainment Hoofingtonites actually get to enjoy. So if you meet mister Reaper pony, be polite. Do what he asks. Pray that he’s gentle. Because if you cross a Reaper, you have just invited an entire world of hurt on yourself.

I was about to ask if shooting a Reaper with ceiling-mounted artillery counted as ‘crossing’ when a light pink filly. . . no, make that colt. . . approached us. “Excuse me, Priestie, but there’s pilgrims coming to the chapel.” His cutie mark was making me thirsty.

Priest looked solemn at the news. “How many, Sparkle-Cola?”

“Three. None our age,” the colt replied.

“Thank Celestia for small favors,” he said as he rose to his hooves with a deep sigh. He smiled at me. “Sorry. I really should see to them.”

“Is anything the matter? Can I help?” I asked as I sat up.

His smile was tinged with sadness. “You just did by asking. But no. This is my burden to bear. You should go on reading. The more you know, the better prepared you are.” He walked out, his head hanging slightly.

“Shouldn’t he be glad to have pilgrims? I mean, that’s a good thing, right?” I asked Sparkle-Cola, but the colt with the poofy soda-brown mane gave me the ‘stable ponies ask stupid questions’ look and returned to his friends. I sighed, looking down at the book. Quickly, I started to flip through the wrinkled pages, trying to find—there it was.

Chapel: A small community located on the Fillydelphia Turnpike outside the Core. Noted as a place for troubled ponies to find peace. Home of Hoofington’s Crusaders, see page 56.

I flipped to the cover, looking at the author’s name below the pony skull picture. “Thanks Ditzzy Doo,” I muttered sourly, then blinked. On the wall was a faded poster, intact only because of the glass pane covering it. A gray mare with a yellow, walleyed expression goggled at me with a stack of envelopes in her mouth. The caption beneath read ‘Sign up with the Equestrian Mail Service: Ditzzy Doo needs your help!’ I couldn’t help but find the pegasus with bubbles on her butt as incredibly cute. It had to be a coincidence. Ponies didn’t live for two centuries in the Wasteland. Not without becoming monsters. It was impossible.

I turned back to the section on ‘Places to go, Places to avoid’. Megamart, been there. Stockyard, Ironmare (only if you had Ranger business), Elysium, Flank (Only ponies eighteen and over), Hoofington U., the Arena (at your own risk), Meatlocker, and Paradise. I was a little amused to see Paradise listed as both a place to go and a place to avoid. Apparently, the Fluttershy Medical Center and the Rainbow Dash Skyport were ‘safe’ salvage places.

Most of the places to avoid had vague names and not much else. A few I knew: Pony Joe’s (any Pony Joe’s, apparently. Raiders seemed drawn to them). Brimstone’s Fall was there, too. I wondered if someday it’d pop over to the places to go side. I really hoped so. No Pony’s Land. Boneyard had a high feral ghouel warning. If I’d read this long ago, would Scoodle still be alive? Because I would have believed a book more than her? There were other places, though, that were little more than a list of names to me. Boom Inc. Refinery, Black Pony Mountain, the Luna Space Center

and Museum, the Hoofington Dams, and Robroco HQ, just to name a few.

What surprised me the most, though, was the section marked 'The Core'.

So, you want to go to the Core? Think you'll nip in, get some kind of super tech, get out, and be rolling in the caps? It's the city center, right? It's still standing. It's got to be a mother lode of wonders unimagined! It probably is.

Because every single living pony that's tried to go into the core has died. Every single one. There are some places in Equestria you do not go. Canterlot. The Badlands. Splendid Valley. The Hoofington Core. Do not go to these places. They are too toxic, too infested, or too radioactive to inhabit. The Core of Hoofington is different: it is all of the above plus a designed deathtrap. I know because I tried going there myself. I made it as far as the wall and I've only met one pony who can say the same. Automated energy turrets nearly vaporized me. Pegasi robot drones scrambled. If I hadn't gone for a swim, I'd have ended up a dusty ghoulie.

And for you ghouls who think radiation is another pony's problem, there's energies in that place that'll remind you of your death. I felt it sucking out. . . I don't know. My mind? My soul? Yes. THAT is how dangerous the Core is. So don't go. There are lots of other thrilling and exciting places in the Wasteland to explore, places that aren't guaranteed to kill you by simple proximity. Turn down the forbidden treasures and have a nice and happy life.

It was stupid, but for some reason, her warning made me want to go even more. I wondered if there was some way to neutralize the defenses. A sniper like that black unicorn I'd seen with Macintosh's Maruaders. Maybe Gun could be. . . ugh. What was wrong with me? The very magic of that place was deadly! There was just something so tempting about the word 'Forbidden.' Forbidden? Not to this little miss Blackjack.

"Ugh. I'm being an idiot again," I groaned as I stood up and gave myself a good shake. "That's the problem with reading stuff. It puts unhealthy ideas in your head." I closed the guide, glancing again at the poster on the wall. "One dusty ghoulie. . . really."

I trotted over to the customer service desk, which doubled as the store for the Crusaders. "One Sugar Apple Bombs and a Sparkle-Cola, please." I said to the young filly.

"Thirty-five caps, lady," she said as she dug around behind the counter.

I blinked. "Um, don't you think that's a little expensive for some cereal and a soda?"

“Nope,” she countered as she put them on the counter, and then covered them with her hooves.

“It’s highway robbery! Twenty-five caps.”

She looked at me flatly. “Oh, so I’m a robber huh? Forty caps.”

“Forty! That’s not how you haggle!”

“Go find yer sugar apples someplace else then,” she said as she pulled them back behind the counter.

I took a deep breath and gave a polite smile. “Hun, it’s just two little things. I’m Security, I gotta save money to buy bullets and guns and things to take out the bad ponies,” I said with a grin.

Her eyes got big. Her smile got wide. “You got the money ta buy guns and stuff? Seventy-five!”

I muttered about how the little extortion artist should intern for Bottlecap as the filly put the goods back on the counter. I reached back with my magic for my caps. . . reached back. . . I looked back and remembered that all my stuff was hidden out on some rail line or something. I looked back at the yellow filly with a wide smile. “Put it on my tab?” My growling stomach added ‘please?’

Forget Bottlecap, that filly should study under Usury. She had a heart of stacked caps. I’d at least gotten her to agree to spread the word to the other Crusaders to keep Glory, P-21, or Sekashi from following me till I returned. She also attempted to sell me the location of my stuff for fifty caps, even after I pointed out that I didn’t have money with me. This didn’t bother her in the slightest: I’d owe her when I got back.

Of course, as soon as she told me, even though I had no idea where the shed she talked about was, there was instantly a little toggle on my PipBuck telling me where to go. With no roads, I figured I’d climb up a low hill and get the lay of the land. I also turned on DJ Pon3; with some luck, I might hear something about my friends. DJ seemed to have a thing for heroines. I imaged he didn’t get out much.

Atop the hill to the north, I looked back through the still-falling drizzle at the little community beside the turnpike. Just past the post office, along the road to Hoofington, I saw what had to be Chapel’s chapel. The building was set back behind a

low ridge, so I couldn't make out more than the steeple and long roof. It didn't have quite the same level of neglect as the rest of the buildings. It actually looked as if somepony had painted it in the last decade.

Play.

Fucking STOP, brain. I am sick of it! Still, I felt my pulse spike and my head throb.

I had to take a few deep breaths as I looked over at the Core of Hoofington. That Steel Ranger acolyte had called the city a fortress. Now I realized exactly what she meant. Hoofington hadn't just been the R&D heart of Equestria's war effort, it had also been, in many ways, the primary target. The city had been built to withstand any attack. Gray walls of concrete rose above the slithering moat of the Hoofington river. The towering buildings behind that wall had no windows facing out. They'd forsaken a view of the world outside in return for greater security. I couldn't imagine an uglier city. I honestly couldn't imagine any ponies actually wanting to live there.

Hills rose to the south of Hoofington, but they were dwarfed by a massive, nearly-sheer-sided piece of granite rising from the southern end of the Core island; the Hoof. Atop the giant rock was another of those huge, tapering concrete towers, and from the cliff stretched a wall of concrete half as tall as the miniature mountain. The great curved wall stretched across the mouth of a wide valley to meet another, smaller tower built into the steep hillside on the other side of the valley, and from the base of the wall flowed the branch of the Hoofington River that flowed along the western shore of the Core island. I could make out an immense erratically-spotlit relief of a unicorn. . . . No. . . it had wings too. . . It had to be an image of one of the Princesses carved in the concrete. Given the pockmarks the dam had received, I couldn't guess which Princess it was supposed to be. One of the Hoofington dams, I supposed, but my PipBuck apparently wasn't close enough to pluck its name out of the ether. The lights still glowed atop the dam, atop that curtain wall surrounding the core, and on the ugly pillar-like buildings. If you overlooked the green glow of radiation and the cracks and leaning towers, you might almost imagine ponies still living in that damned city.

I looked away; I wasn't getting any closer to my stuff by standing on this hill. It was getting dark, but with my eyes that didn't mean much. I pretty much navigated by PipBuck, anyway, keeping the little blinking icon straight ahead of me to the north. What I didn't expect was for my PipBuck to chirp with a new location marker. Beyond the dead trees and thorny gray bushes rose a single large square building. Four round pillars were wrapped with desiccated vines, and even with my mutant night sight I couldn't make out the letters over the door. Fortunately, my PipBuck

supplied the location: Hoofington Museum of Natural History.

I had told the Crusaders I'd be going straight to my stuff and back, but honestly, walking alone in just my coat didn't sit well with me. Besides, I still had a ten-thousand cap goal to attain. If there was something useful within, maybe I should see if I could find it. The front doors were reinforced, and from the scorch marks it looked as if somepony had tried to blast their way in. Well, so much for that idea.

I picked my way around the corner, saw a clear path north past the building, and turned my mind back to retrieving my stuff. As I passed the next corner, though, I happened to glance at the back wall of the building. There was a concrete loading dock in the back, the remains of a wagon full of decaying boxes still sitting there partially unloaded (or loaded? I couldn't tell). Apart from that, rusty tin cans and scrap metal were all that remained on the concrete pad. And bones, of course. It wasn't the Wasteland without bones. I walked up to the loading dock door, where another unicorn skeleton huddled against the metal. There was a tiny cardboard box in its hoof. I lifted it and gave it a shake, looking at the two slightly rusted bobby pins.

I looked at the scratched-up lock. P-21 had explained the procedure of picking a lock to me; he'd even demonstrated once or twice. I didn't have a screwdriver, but maybe magic would do. I smiled as I recalled his calm, serious voice. "It's half feeling and half listening. You find the right angle, tap it against the pins just so, and twist." I'd gone through five of his bobby pins before he'd taken over and opened the medical box. Now I just had two.

Half feeling. Half listening. I tapped and scraped, listening to the tiny ticks of the pins inside the lock. My horn glowed as I rotated the lock, then felt it jam. A moment later the bobby pin snapped in two. I sighed, glaring at the lock. P-21 made this look so easy... I realized more and more how much I depended on him. I needed my friends. I moved the pin into a slightly shallower angle, and instead of twisting all at once, I stopped the instant I felt the lock struggle. Twist the pin a little more, rotate... and... I stared in amazement as the lock clicked.

"Hope for me after all," I said as I slipped inside. "Though, given that I'm breaking and entering, or trespassing, I wonder if I'll have to bust myself," I muttered, and then I paused. In a glance back out across the dark lot at the weeds and sickly trees, I thought I saw... something. Was it... no. That was crazy. I glanced through my E.F.S... yellow bar? I slowly took a step forward, then another. My amber eyes pierced the darkness to make out a vaguely pony-shaped object. A horn... wings...

“No way...” I whispered. Then, with a flash, it disappeared.

I sat there for the longest time, just wondering what it was I’d seen... because I knew I couldn’t have just seen Princess Luna.

Could I? I thumped my temples and closed my eyes. No, it wasn’t possible. They couldn’t still be around, and if they were, they wouldn’t be playing peekaboo with a security mare out for a midnight stroll. They’d be fixing things... I sighed, looking at where it had vanished. “Just... don’t think about it, Blackjack.”

Suiting the action to the word and putting it out of my mind, I slipped into the store-room in the back of the museum. There were tons of boxes, but nothing that looked as if I could really count it as valuable. Though... I looked closer. Yes, bullet holes. What were bullet holes doing in a closed-up museum? I couldn’t smell any cordite, so I guessed these weren’t recent additions. So what was with all the red bars on my E.F.S.?

One of the skeletons wore worker’s coveralls. I carefully removed the bones and wiggled into the clothing. Pockets. Pockets were good. Guns would be better. Few things were better than guns. Oh! Healing potions. And Sugar Apple Bombs. Personally I doubted I’d find any of them here. After all, what did they keep in museums besides crates and crates of boring?

More bones. Bullet casings. Small caliber automatics; small machine guns? Old, though, and covered with dust. I checked the bones for signs of bullet impacts. Yes, somepony had shot these workers a long time back. Great. Security arriving two hundred years after a multiple murder.

Speaking of murder, it looked like Softheart had finally caught her mare. ‘MoM victorious! Four-year murder spree comes to an end!’ was the headline of a paper beside one of the bodies.

The Ministry of Morale reports that the notorious murderer known as the Angel of Death has been apprehended by MoM officers. The Angel of Death is believed responsible for over twenty foal slayings over the last four years, with many cases unaccounted for. While her identity has not been released, Ministry officials have declared that “she’s an evil wicked no good very baaaaaad pony, and we’re going to make sure that she can’t do it any more!”

Huh... who would have thought that the Ministry of Morale had cops? I thought they only threw parties.

The success came at a terrible price, however, as Officer Softheart was critically

injured in the arrest. Ministry of Peace officials refuse to disclose her condition. The Angel's first victim was—

Suddenly, I noticed one red bar moving back and forth much faster than the others. I straightened, wondering what it could be. Feral zombie children out for an outing? Killer security robots? A two-century-old mummy glad to finally have somepony to eat?! Bring it on!

Then a particularly large bug scurried into view, waving its antennae at me. “Ew,” I said flatly, feeling slightly disappointed as I looked at the large bug and stamped my hoof hard. It gave a satisfying crunch. I was not going to angst or panic over squishing bugs.

I found the break room and rummaged through things a little. Some pre-war bits earned me a Sunrise Sarsaparilla from the vending machine. I missed the carrotiness of Sparkle-Cola. And really, what was a little radiation? I tried my horn at picking the lock on a simple medical kit. Success on the lock, but the healing potions within were a pale lilac. Not good. Then I really scored: a half-empty bottle of Wild Pegasus bourbon in a locker. “Somepony’s been naughty,” I said as I swirled the bottle before my eyes. The smart thing would have been to save it till later, but fortunately I was not a smart pony. I proceeded further into the display section of the museum with a warm glow in my gut.

Moving into the next room, I emerged into a large central hall and foyer. More bones. More bullet holes and shell casings. What the hay happened here? As I walked, the emergency lights began to flicker. There was a crackle of static in the air, and then music began to fade slowly in and out as the audio system struggled to play some sort of light and airy melody. The skeleton of a dragon posed in the entrance rotunda menaced patrons; I wasn’t impressed. As I touched the front doors, there was a buzz overhead and an automated voice said, “I am sorry -Bzzzt- patron, the museum is under temporary lockdown. Please contact -Bzzzt- in security.”

“Heh. I am Security,” I said as I looked at the open doors on the sides of the atrium, slightly put out that I hadn’t yet found anything particularly useful or valuable. ‘Rocks of Equestria.’ Pass. “Come on. Where is the ‘Guns of Equestria’ exhibit? ‘Batons of the Ages’?” I wondered aloud as I stepped down the side hall and into an exhibit. The emergency lighting flickered to life as I stepped closer.

“The Hoofington river valley was first colonized -bzzzt- ago by nomadic zebra tribes. Although their exact numbers are unknown, they eventually established some of the oldest communities in -bzzzt- bzzzt-. However, due to mysterious cir-

cumstances, the Hoof -bzzt krreak- was abandoned by all inhabitants. Equipologists hypothesize that a volcanic event may have led to a catastrophic -krakle bzzzt-primitive tribal communities. Other experts suspect a spread of unknown -zzzzzt-causing a population crash.”

I looked at the smashed display cases. These hadn't been looted, but the contents hadn't aged well. Torn woven baskets and smashed clay jars lay in abundance all over the floor. There were pictures on the wall that were either faded or eaten by mildew. I saw one diorama of a 'Potential Ancient Zebra Settlement' still protected inside its case. A tiny magical volcano puffed wispy rings of smoke as it loomed over the zebra settlement at its base. I picked up a zebra spear, only to have it crumble in my magic's grip; it was just a wooden replica. There was a picture of a zebra with red stripes being pelted with rocks and sticks with a caption above: 'Red stripes, the mark of shame.'

Moving into the next room, I was struck by the statuesque image of a white unicorn wearing leather barding and a metal helmet and levitating a brass spyglass before his face. The entire dramatic effect was spoiled by the statue lying on its side next to the base it should have been mounted on. The lights flickered to life. “The first Equestrian explorers to reach the Hoofington -bzzzzzzzt- ley were an expedition led by Prince Blueblood the 3rd. According to his highly questionable memoirs, he faced cannibalistic zebra pigmies, a swarm of highly territorial -kzzzt- griffins, and one ursa major. Despite his ardent claims, no proof has ever been found to substantiate -bzzt-. Upon his return to Canterlot, -kraaapop- denied his claim to the entire region, giving him a small part of the upper river valley as reward for his discovery.”

I didn't really listen to the playback. I had seen a sword, but not just any sword. A sword twenty percent cooler than any sword I could ever have imagined, a sword made of white silver metal and decorated with etched unicorns. One look at it hanging in its case and I knew that my self defense concerns would soon be dealt with. I hammered the case with my hooves. I levitated the heaviest thing I could manage and smashed it over and over. I even tried to pick the lock, but it was so complicated that I couldn't even get the bobby pin in to try! Figures.

There were four pictures that I found interesting. The display was titled, 'How the Hoofington Volcano destroyed the zebra.' The first showed a large volcano with a large zebra city at its base. The second showed half the mountain blowing out over the zebra city, The third had a large crater sitting at the base of the granite dome, the depression full of lava. The last showed the filled crater cooled, with the river

flowing in two branches around it. Ash coated everything in sight. It looked like the Wasteland.

Stepping into the next room, I froze at the sight of the alicorn. She stared down at me in complete contempt, horn leveled to strike me down. Then, as the lights rose, my heartbeat slowed as I saw it was just another statue. “The tiny hamlet of Hoofington played a small role in Nightmare Moon’s first appearance. Local lore suggests that, prior to making her challenge for supremacy over Equestria, Nightmare Moon was spotted many times -bzzzzzt-. While Manehattan academics strongly dispute these claims, sufficient eye witness -Skrrrr klick-.”

I really didn’t see anything else interesting in this section. Certainly nothing valuable. I trotted into the next section. The lights flickered several times. This room had more pictures on the walls and a small diorama in the middle; the diorama depicted the large knob of granite I’d seen outside, the town at its base, and some of the surrounding area. There were several smaller communities on either side of the forked river. “Over time, Hoofington developed from a rural -bzzzt- into an academic and cultural center for much of Equestria. While many prestigious -fzzzt- continue to operate out of Canterlot, Hoofington specialized in higher learning and technological advancement. Numerous doctors, scientists, alchemists, and other academics flocked -zzzzz- peace of Hoofington.” Lots of pictures of big brick buildings with white pillars out front. Yawn. Lots of eggheads. Got it.

The next room certainly wasn’t boring! It was made to look like it was on fire. The crackling music died, replaced by the sound of flaming timber. “The Burning of Hoofington will often be remembered as the night that sealed the city on the road to total war. Following the unprecedented slaughter of innocent students at Littlehorn, the Zebras wasted no time in committing another atrocity with a surprise attack on the city. Though it had never before been targeted in the wider campaign, zebra commandos penetrated deep within Equestria to bring the war to Hoofington. With incendiary explosives, the zebras ignited a firestorm that destroyed the city’s heart; an estimated nine hundred innocent civilians lost their lives trying to flee from the flames that consumed the island.”

Suddenly, there was a pop and then a whirring noise from overhead; I jumped back, expecting a killer turret or something. Instead, a projector started to shine an image on a blank square of wall. The image was so grainy that I couldn’t make much out. Burned buildings to the sides, a pony crowd looking up at some sort of platform, and somepony addressing them. Then a buck’s staticy, crackling voice started to speak.

“Today, zebrakind has revealed its true face to all of Equestria, not just in the killing of

the helpless and innocent foals of Littlehorn, but now against unarmed pony civilians deep inside Equestria. They have attacked our places of learning, of discovery, of creation. And I will tell you why: fear. Fear of what our accomplishments will mean. Fear of a future where their superstitions are left behind. Fear of what we are capable of. Well, I tell you now, they are right to be afraid!

“I call on all of Hoofington, all of Equestria, and all of the free-thinking intellects of the world, to come to Hoofington and make the nightmare of the zebras a reality. To build a city devoted to the victory of all ponykind. To dedicate ourselves to unlocking the secrets of the stars themselves and to making our enemies pay for their crimes! I call to the generosity of our wealthy to help fund this reconstruction; for all that you have given, your reward is the advancement of our people. I call upon the working ponies to lend their sweat and muscle to make this city a reality. I call upon the intellectuals to give the genius and vision needed to craft a city of knowledge and light.

“And I call upon the zebras to look on in terror and hatred. You thought to kill us through murder and secrecy. Never again! Hoofington will rise, and you will break your hooves and teeth against its foundations before we fall again! From this city, we shall return the pain and blood that you visited upon us a thousand fold! And when the future arrives, you will come to Hoofington in awe and wonder and shame! For Equestria, for Princess Luna, for all of Ponykind, Hoofington rises!”

The crowd went wild, breaking into mass stomping, and cheers of ‘Hoofington Rises!’ built and grew on each other. The cheers blended together into one massive voice chanting in unison ‘Hoofington Rises! Hoofington Rises!’ The projector flickered just as I thought I was about to make out the buck’s face. The speakers spat out some garblygook at me, then gave a static whine and went silent.

Oh damn. There was something severely wrong with me. . . I wanted to learn what happened next! After a speech like that, I could understand how the survivors of an entire city would rally together. Hell, this girl would give her all for the Hoof! Still, the effect was spoilt somewhat by the reality of knowing the zebras had, in fact, won against the Hoof. Somehow they’d gotten a balefire megaspell into the center and blown the entire city apart. So much for ‘Hoofington Rises’.

In the next section I paid more attention to the faded and decayed pictures. One showed four parallel rail lines with a train on each and building materials stacked high on every train cart. Apparently ten percent of Fillydelphia’s output went into the first two years of reconstruction; I supposed that was a lot. Another picture showed cranes and teams of pegasi lifting slabs of stone and concrete into place.

One picture had robots working alongside earth ponies as they dug trenches and underground tunnels beneath the city. A small corner talked about zebra ruins excavated in the reconstruction. 'The Manehattan Archaeological Society protested the destruction of zebra artifacts. Reconstruction office's response: 'Hoofington Rises.'

The display that caught my eye the most was on the six ministries. There was a large color picture that had browned with age, but I could make out six mares standing around a table, pointing at papers and designs while dozens of ponies looked on in concern and anticipation. The speakers crackled and popped before saying, "Following the kingdom's commitment to the reconstruction effort, it was decided that each of the new ministries would have a -bzzzt- presence in the city to interact with each other and help coordinate their efforts to protect Equestria. To facilitate this goal the Office of -kzzzt- was founded in -bzzzt, crackle, zzzzt- with the Princess."

Office of what? I looked around and spotted a tiny poster showing a grey ring. 'Office of Interministry Affairs. Join today.' Somepony needed to fire their poster designer.

A radroach's squeal was followed by a wet pop. I looked down...I hadn't stepped on one.

I froze and slowly panned my gaze across the museum. There were a whole lot more red bars in here!

"Idiot," somepony whispered as my ears twitched.

"I hate them damned bugs," a pony whispered back, right around the corner from the sound of it.

"You'll hate it even more if she bucks your head off. You lot get upstairs. The rest of you watch the back door. This is our best chance to get her alive if you don't screw it up!"

Well Celestia, shall I just kneel down now and spread my back legs wide for the fucking you've delivered unto me? I felt strangely... detached. No guns. No real weapons. No armor to speak of. Not much healing, and the museum was just full of ponies very intent on delivering me to Deus. So why was I smiling?

Two ponies came around the corner and just froze. There was a moment where their grins showed this to be the best night of the lives. I hoped they enjoyed that moment as I walked slowly towards them. My eyes locked with theirs as I turned my head and smiled sweetly. "Hey boys."

"Sweet Celestia's crotch, she's drunk," whispered the one in a dual-rifle battle saddle, goggling in astonishment. His companion grinned around the pistol gripped in his mouth. I winced at the rust I could see flaking the weapons. I approached, step by step, hips swinging as I took a pull off the bottle.

"Mmmm, just a bit," I said as I closed the distance between us. Suddenly concern began to strike them as I continued to stare.

"You. . . you stay back," the buck with the varmint rifles warned with a gulp.

"Aww. . . scared of a girl?" I teased as I felt my cheeks go all rosy. "One sec. Still got a little left," I said critically as I swirled the bottle one more time and then poured the rest into my mouth.

"Now. . . you come along quietly. . . no fuss. . . nice and easy," The blue battle-saddled buck said as he swallowed. "You ain't got a gun, so no point in making this hard."

"True. I don't have a gun," I said as I stood right before him, my lips curled in a happy little smile. "And you do make a good point," I purred as I stroked my hoof over his chest, making his eyelid twitch. "But there's just one problem with that surrendering stuff," I sighed with the bottle swaying beside me. "Like you said. . . I'm just a little bit drunk."

The bottle shattered as it smashed into the side of pistol boy's face, and I telekinetically drove every single shard as deep as I could, dragging the remains across his features and down across his throat while my mouth opened wide and bit the bridle of the other pony's battle saddle while I hooked my forehooves around the rifles. Then my horn glowed again as I lifted the dropped pistol. Blue buck opened his mouth wide to yell for help and received a mouthful of gun. I spat out his bridle. "And now I got a gun." And I sent the back of his head across the room.

"You hear that?" somepony muttered. There were sounds of things getting noisy in some of the other display rooms. "Hey! Joss? Haystack? You there?"

I rounded the corner back into the atrium and spotted a mare with a levitated sawed-off just ten feet away from my doorway. Three more stood further away. "Nope," I replied as I sent the remainder of the clip into her face. Releasing the pistol, I swept the double-barreled shotgun into my magical grip as I walked around the platform holding the posed dragon skeleton. Unfortunately, the other three further into the room were a bit outside blasty range. While whiskey mathematics might have made two shells equal three dead ponies, their return gunfire definitely skewed

my inebriated calculations. The bullets did nothing to the dragon bones, but the wires holding them together were another story; they started to ping and snap as the bones swayed. The three ponies advanced, firing wildly as I hunkered down, the dragon bones above creaking ominously.

I started to hum to myself as I looked at the skeleton and the two pipes holding its base. Twelve gauge shots took care of those. I shoved the skeleton backwards and the wires snapped apart, bones cascading down over the three. The gaping skull landed right on one's head, the impact snapping the widespread jaws shut. Before I knew it, I found myself singing a tune I'd heard the Pecos playing.

*"Oh they shoulda just sent the whiskey
When they saw the trouble coming,
Oh they shoulda just sent the whiskey!"
Then they wouldn't be a-running.
Times are tough and things are bad
So why be dumb and risky?
When you see the trouble come,
Ya better just send the whiskey!"*

One pony picked herself out of the jumbled bones and tried to bring her assault carbines to bear on me. I jumped onto the platform, she sprayed fire where I'd just stood, and I kicked two hooffulls of bones in her face. The flinch was all I needed as I jumped from the platform and onto her back, wrapping my hooves around her neck and smashing the butt of the sawed-off shotgun against her skull again and again. Eventually, something in her noggin snapped or crunched or something; she went down in a twitching heap. Unfortunately, the third one pulled himself free and grabbed one of the bones in his teeth, charging me as I continued to shout the song.

*"Now, I hear wine is mighty fine
It makes you feel so frisky!
But trouble's come, so get er done
And don't forget the whiskey!"*

He had a nice long bone in his mouth. I had pieces of a shotgun. This needed to be fixed. I grabbed a bone too, a much smaller one. He swung, but right now I wasn't feeling too much pain from the impact as I rose up on my hind legs, hooked my hooves around the bone in his jaws, and pushed down as hard as I could. His eyes stared wide, neck straining back, as I brought my bone across his throat. My bone happened to be a six-inch-long dragon claw. The ponies upstairs were rushing down, shouting. I could run for cover. Instead, I raced up the stairs to meet them,

yelling the song.

*“Oh you shoulda just sent the whiskey,
When ya heard that troubles coming
Oh you shoulda just sent the whiskey
Then all this woulda been nothing!”*

I rammed my shoulder into the lead buck, shoving hard and pinning him between me and the boys behind him. My dragon claw plunged deep into his chest over and over again as he tried to duck his head enough to blow my butt off with his mouthheld revolver. Unfortunately, I wasn't going to finish him off in time, so I stopped pushing and ducked aside. The shoving bucks behind sent him tumbling down the stairs in a heap. The nearest of his two friends lurched beside me. Our eyes met, and I was the one grinning as I ducked down underneath him.

I see Hoofton, I see Prance... My dragon claw swept before me, sending a horrified shriek echoing into the air; I then heaved my body upward, flipping him over the railing and down into the mess of bones below. Darn, he was still squirming, clutching his groin and howling in pain as I grinned at the remaining buck right above me.

He stood for one second and then jumped over the rail after his friend. Even with his newly-busted legs, he tried to stagger for the rear exit. He was unable to do this, as, in addition to his injured legs, that exit was now blocked by more ponies surging into the room below me. “Take her alive, you idiots! She's worth more alive!” Somepony wasn't up on the plot.

*“Now vodka grows from winter snows
That make you cold and shivery!
But that icy bite just don't feel right
So best send me a whiskey!”*

Fearless Leader calling for my capture looked up just in time to break my fall. Unfortunately while things under my hooves snapped nicely, the fall sent me staggering too. A unicorn swung her shotgun around towards my head. I responded by sending the dragon claw as deep into the barrel as I could. She fired, and the claw whizzed back inches from my head as the back of her shotgun exploded into her face. My telekinesis took her ruined shotgun, pulled it from her grip and spun it around, smashing in the side of her head.

Unfortunately, that still left two fully-grown bucks ramming into me with such force that I was slammed upright against the display case. “Cut her fucking throat! Hurry!” one yelled.

"But we got her!" the other laughed. I grinned into the face of the smart pony. Then I looked at his friend with the nice knife that would have done wonders if he'd used it. My horn glowed, plucking the weapon deftly from its sheath and stabbing it into his neck over and over again.

*"Oh you shoulda just sent the whiskey
When you knew that I was coming!
Oh you shoulda just sent the whiskey
Then you wouldn't get a thumping!"*

"Freak!" he shouted as he leapt back, biting his battle saddle bit and bringing his rifles to bear.

I queued S.A.T.S. and my horn flared brightly as three telekinetic bullets slammed into his face. He staggered, blind as he fired wildly where I'd stood.

*"Times are rough and things are bad
But don't you get sad and weepy!
When you know that I'm a coming
Just send me your whiskey!"*

I finished the song, cutting his throat with the bowie knife, feeling my heart pounding as I limped around the floor, stepping past the buck squirming and curled up, protecting his precious bits (or what was left of them, anyway). I searched the bodies, and sweet Celestia suckle me, I found a second bottle of Wild Pegasus. Levitating it, I walked to where Busted Legs and Nicked Jewels squirmed in terror. I took a drink and then sat beside them. "Sorry about that," I said as I felt that wonderful burn all the way down. "Still got 'em?" I asked the buck clutching himself with his hooves.

The pair looked at me in horror.

"Damn. That was low of me. Heat of the moment and all that," I said as I floated the bottle to Busted Legs. He took a gulp as he shook. "Now, I know we all need caps really bad," I said, trying to be the voice of reason. I gave Nicked Jewels two drinks. "But I need to live too. There's a whole heap of ponies that deserve my kind of trouble, and I'd rather you two not get it." I passed Nicked Jewels the few healing potions I had. "So I'd appreciate it if you could pass on to everypony you know that there's safer ways to get their caps and keep themselves intact." I offered them both another drink.

"Yes Ma'am," Busted Legs muttered. Nicked Jewels just whimpered. I don't think he wanted to check and see how bad his injury was.

"Now sit tight a second," I said as I went through to make sure I had all the guns, bullets, knives, ammunition, and dragon claw I could manage, as well as poking through the upstairs. I found a holotape recording and a terminal, but the latter defied me... and then locked me out. Damn it. Terminals needed to be easier. I did find a medical brace in the security office, and helped splint one of Busted Legs' busted legs. And I gave another healing potion to the other male.

"Well, take care of yourselves," I said, rising with a groan. I hummed as I took what I'd salvaged from the bounty hunters and strolled on towards the exit. The whole world was swinging as I sung to myself and swayed in return.

"She's a fucking monster drunk," I heard Busted Legs say to the other.

"Shut the fuck up! Do you want her to come back?"

"Sweet Celestia, kill me now. Give me a bullet," I groaned as I sprawled on my face on the mattress. Having both successfully scavenged the looted museum (and the unexpected attackers) and retrieved my belongings, I should have been quite pleased with myself. However, I had returned to Chapel in quite the state of amusing inebriation. The Crusaders, having discovered my alcoholic melodies the night before, now proceeded to take vicious advantage of my hangover by jabbering to each other at an earsplitting level.

"One bullet, three caps," the filly behind the counter declared firmly. "Otherwise use yer own. Priestie might put you out of yer pain fer free, but I ain't running a charity here." That young lady was going to run the Finders some day.

Priest strolled over with an amused look on his face. "Ah, the price we pay for the gift of Celestia's merriment."

"Heal me. Please heal me," I whimpered.

"I did, when you returned, singing," he replied with a soft chuckle. "What you're feeling now is your body teaching you that too much alcohol is bad."

"My body fucking sucks," I groaned, curling up and clutching my throbbing skull.

"I'd disagree," he replied calmly, and I opened one eye to peek up at him. Did he just make a pass at me? Was that even allowed? "Regardless, I'm glad you spared those two. Your mercy speaks better of you than your wrath."

"Priest, I think I gelded one of them," I muttered as I sat up. He looked at the counter

and asked for a bottle of water. To my chagrin she levitated it to him without once demanding payment. Her scowl to me told me to not expect the same treatment.

“Well, small mercy is better than no mercy,” he said with a soft cough before rising. “I’d suggest getting some air outside as well. Take a walk in the rain. Clear your head.”

“How are your pilgrims?” I asked, looking up at him, trying to ignore the headache pounding on my skull. Evidently those telekinetic bullet spells packed a wallop to my noggin, which didn’t help things much. I couldn’t even levitate the bottle of water to my lips with my current focus.

“Leaving soon,” he said softly, sadly. I guess he wanted more time with them.

“Sorry, I guess you don’t get many out this way,” I said as I sat up, held the bottle with my hooves and took a drink. Water... no rads... no buzz... sure it kept you alive, but where was the great taste?

“On the contrary. I get all too many, it seems,” he said cryptically before leaving the post office.

“Arrrgh... more elusive bucks. Why can’t they just say what’s bugging them? Why is that so- Owwww...,” I whimpered as my voice caught up with my hangover. “Stupid hangover. Stupid brain.”

“Ten caps for the water,” the salesfilly said sharply from behind the counter.

“What? You gave it to him.” I pointed towards the door with my hoof.

“But you’re drinking it.” She took a deep breath. “Ten caps please!” she yelled at the top of her shrill little lungs.

That little salesfilly was going to own the Wasteland some day. Every single cap would be hers. It was just a matter of time.

I hated to admit it, but the air did me some good. The rain tasted metallic on my lips; it was probably unhealthy, but it also helped soothe my throbbing brain. Clearly, museums and other places of learning were unhealthy to ponies like me. I trotted up the ridge towards the chapel and then froze.

That’s a lot of headstones. Row upon row of marble knobs stuck out of the yellowed grass. I couldn’t even begin to guess how many. Thousands? Tens of thousands? Row after row stretched back as far as the eye could see. I couldn’t even guess where the graveyard ended, with all the long grass. This wasn’t from the bomb. This was from ten years of Hoofington being right in the zebras’ crosshairs. I hesitated

for a moment, then slowly walked across the field. A name. A race. A date. A cutie mark engraving. The shortest of epitaphs on the small marble headstones: Loving father, caring mother, best damn bastard, surest friend.

I'd never seen something like this before. Not the dead. I'd seen so many pony bones that it seemed like they just blended into the background. Only when a name was attached did I care. These dead were cared for. In Stable 99, when you died it was as if you simply never were. Death had been an annoyance because you were then obligated to breed and train your replacement. The dead were taken to the machines and recycled, along with all the byproducts of the stable. Recycled. Reprocessed. Mixed with vat-grown algae, yeast, and fungus and made into chips. It wasn't cannibalism; there was nothing ponified about your meal. We didn't eat Leg of Duct Tape. It was just the way things were. You lived in Stable 99 till you didn't any more, and didn't think about it.

I read the epitaphs as I passed for as long as I could. Eventually, I think I'd rather have stared at the sky than imagine long passed ponies as I walked through the soggy grass.

The chapel had also seen better days. It'd clearly been vandalized several times, but somepony had fixed it more times than torn it down. Even slapped a coat of whitewash on the boards. I felt like an intruder as I quietly walked up the steps. There were two rows of threadbare pillows on the floor for the congregation and a balcony along the back wall. Most of the windows were boarded up, but somepony had taken the time and effort to restore one window with a design made of colored glass tiles. It depicted Celestia raising the sun, perfectly matching Priest's cutie mark. I turned and looked; over the door, a similar window showed a calm and certain Luna. Something about the image was comforting.

Painted on the walls were pictures of six mares: the Ministry Mares I'd seen in the museum. Time had done what it could to destroy the images, but somepony had painstakingly repaired them. I gazed at the image of Fluttershy, feeling the urge to hug somepony. Rainbow Dash looked like somepony I'd want to drink with. Applejack... reminded me of Mom. Pinkie Pie seemed... off. Rarity... yeah. Somehow a pony looking that good was simply wrong to me. And Twilight? I found myself thinking of P-21.

Priest was talking quietly to the three pilgrims; they looked horrid. Emaciated. Tired. One of them had a yellowing of her eyes and a twitch that convinced me she was on her way to becoming a raider, if Glory was right. Still, she wasn't trying to bite his hoof as Priest touched her brow gently.

A few other ponies sat scattered on the pillows, looking more like 'locals'. A gray mare reading a ratty magazine about the princesses. A pensive looking filly gazing at that stained glass image of Celestia. A large unicorn mare dressed head to hoof in black mourners garb. She whispered prayers softly to herself as she rocked back and forth on her pillow.

The three pilgrims stepped back away from Priest. They wept, yet they also appeared oddly happy. "You can return if you want. There's no need to hurry," Priest told them in his collected voice. He was crying too... but why? He said he had plenty of pilgrims stopping by. I supposed each one was precious to him.

"No. It's time. Thank you. Celestia protects," the twitchy mare said quietly.

"And Luna defends," Priest said in a tone of finality, and the pilgrims began slowly walking out.

"You know," I said with a small smile. "Last night I was almost certain I saw Princess Luna. It was on my E.F.S. and everything. Crazy, huh?" I held the grin that he didn't share.

"No. You didn't see the princess. She's gone now." He spoke with an iron certainty as he looked up at the picture of Luna. Weird; I expected him to be more... excited.

"Are you all right?" I asked softly once they'd left.

"No, but it's the price I pay for my virtue. Sometimes ponies just need a sympathetic ear and a kind word. I'd hoped to convince one to stay a few more days, but they arrived together and they'll depart together." Clearly he wasn't happy about that, but it seemed pretty intrusive, even for me.

"Your virtue?" I asked him with a questioning cant of my head. "That's just... being nice, right?"

"I suppose some might think of it that way," he said as he looked at the paintings on the wall. "Forgive me if I sound a little preachy; it comes with the job." He took a deep breath. "According to what I believe, all ponies possess a virtue. It's an aspect of themselves that is their most pure and honest self. It is what makes a pony good, an integrity that nopony can take from you."

I swallowed, feeling oddly guilty. "Ah... well that's easy. My virtue is getting drunk and causing huge disasters." I tried to smile, but for some reason my levity died as soon as the words left me. I mocked something clearly important to him. Strangely, it felt important to me as well. "I'm sorry."

He gave me a patient smile. "Ponies who know their virtue can keep a sense of self. Have you met any ponies who seem. . . together? Even with the horrors that we all face?"

Bottlecap, Keystone, Bonesaw, and even Dusty Trails stood out in my mind. "I do," I replied.

"Ponies who know their virtue and embrace it can last longer in the face of adversity. They have inner strength to support their flesh and blood." He bowed his head. "Unfortunately, virtue is not enough. It needs something more."

"More?" Great, now I really felt lacking.

"Friendship. A virtue alone will inevitably erode. The Wasteland will poison it, corrupt it into a dark reflection of itself. A virtue corrupted is a horrible thing," he said solemnly as he turned to look at me. "Friendships that support and bolster the virtues of the participants empower them against any challenge. Friends united in a common cause are stronger than anything the Wasteland can throw at them."

I remembered how I'd felt when I'd discovered I was alone. "And what about friendships of ponies who don't know their virtue?"

"They may remain together, but there will always be strain and struggle. I can't think of any friends lasting for long without knowing themselves. How can you be friends with a stranger?" he said with a soft shrug.

I could think of many things to describe myself, but none of them were particularly virtuous. I really doubted stupidity counted. "What's your virtue?" I asked softly.

"Only Celestia truly knows my virtue," he said quietly, but from the look on his face it would be all he'd answer. Maybe you didn't have to know it. Maybe you could just live it.

I looked back at the door behind me. "I hope your pilgrims will be safe on their trip home."

"They're not going home," he replied softly. "They're continuing their pilgrimage."

Now I frowned. "You mean to other chapels?"

"To Celestia."

I stared at him a moment, my eyes widening as they saw the sadness in his expression.

"How could you?" I whispered and then turned and raced out the door. I looked up

the road, hoping to see some sign of them. That I was wrong. Instead, I looked towards Hoofington. There they were, just starting across the bridge towards the city.

“Wait!” I yelled, running as fast as I could towards the trio. My heart thumped in my chest as busted asphalt cracked up under my hooves. My head be damned, I had to warn them. To stop them! “Wait! Don’t go that way! Stop!” I screamed as my hooves clattered on the bridge.

The twitchy filly with the yellowing eyes stopped to look back at me. The other two just kept walking.

“Please! Sweet Celestia, don’t!” I yelled.

She was still smiling as the red beams lanced out from the top of the wall and swept through their bodies. Red energy swirled, consuming every inch of her being and turning it to ash. Celestia damn them, her smile was the last thing to disappear.

Footnote: Level up

New Perk added: Tough hide (Level 2) – The Brutal experiences of the Equestrian Wasteland have toughened you. You gain +3 Damage Threshold for each level of this perk you take.

Skill note: Lockpicking (25)

12. Denial

“Obviously, that’s why I zipped my mouth closed, then locked it with a key, then dug a hole, then buried the key, then built a house on top of the hole where I buried the key, then moved into the house on top the hole.”

I sat down on the cracked asphalt, looking at where three ponies had stood. The rain increased, pouring out great wet drops that washed away any remains left on the rusting span. They were just gone, and even though I hadn’t known them, I somehow missed them. How could I miss complete strangers?

“I’m sorry,” Priest said over the rain hissing off the river.

“Why didn’t you stop them?” I asked as I slowly glared at him over my shoulder.

He didn’t look angry. Just sad. Somehow, that made me even more furious. “Because it’s not my place to stop them.”

“Not your place?” I whirled, glaring into his eyes. “You’re a . . . a . . . whatever you are! How could it not be your place to stop them?” No mare in Stable 99 would ever kill herself and deprive the stable of her abilities. Every life was needed! Important!

“What should I have done, Blackjack? Locked them up? Drugged them?” No anger. Why wasn’t he angry about this? How dare he be so calm about letting three ponies walk to their death! “I talked to them, just as I talked to you. I listened. I prayed. But in the end the choice was theirs.”

“You just let them kill themselves because it was a choice?” I felt my horn tingle. I was about to make a choice of my own.

“Yes. We get so few choices in the Wasteland, Blackjack. Most of them are too horrible to contemplate. Do I starve or do I let my children starve? Do I die or do I kill to survive? Do I do the wrong thing and live, or not?” Calm. “I try to talk each and every pony out of it. Try to convince them to choose to live. I tell them that they’ll have a home in Chapel if they want, or I’ll help them get to Stockyard or Guttersville. But the choice to live has to be theirs. Otherwise, I am no different than the Wasteland. I won’t take away the choice to die painlessly of their own volition. And if they do make that choice, how can I deny them a little peace?”

My pulse thudded in my ears as I breathed low and fast. “So if I were to walk down this bridge right now, you wouldn’t try to stop me?” I asked, my mane itching like

crazy.

“No. I would not,” he replied calmly. “I would argue, politely, that you have far more to live for than to die for. You have your friends out there, looking for you. You have questions for which you lack answers. You have enemies that wish you to die. And I suspect that Celestia and Luna would be disappointed if you took that walk.” He was so rational and calm about it. “You’ve never thought about that choice?”

“No! I...” but I faltered as I glared at him. Hadn’t I? Lying on a mattress dying of radiation poisoning, in the hall after I was sure Glory had died following me into a deathtrap...they’d both been moments when I’d have happily died to escape the guilt. If I’d been standing here now after killing Scoodle, would I be arguing against taking that walk? I wanted to be angry. I didn’t want to think about this! “What about young? Do you let them walk too?”

From the look of pain on his face, I knew the answer. “My only rule is that children must go last. The Crusaders exist for that reason: to give them a family to live with once their own is gone. But yes, some make the final walk too. And Celestia damn me, I let them.” He turned and slowly started to walk back towards the village. I watched him go, hating him for being capable of doing that. P-21 was right: there was no way the Wasteland would allow a nice buck to exist. It poisoned everything, and if you couldn’t see the poison right away, you just weren’t looking hard enough.

Don’t think about it. That’s all there was to it. Don’t think about it and get through the day. Somepony had written something on the asphalt long ago in flaking white paint. Carefully, I approached, looking down. The rain splashed down over the carefully written letters: ‘Mercy.’

When I finally got my butt off that bridge and back into town, I spotted a line of ponies funneling into the chapel. I didn’t want to go in after them. I’d have much rather just returned to the post office and slept off what remained of my hangover. I didn’t want to know what they were gathering for; it was probably just to discuss who was going to kill themselves next, or worse.

It wasn’t as if I’d never felt that suicidal impulse, but at the times I had there were ponies who stopped me. They’d talked me down, and I’d listened. I’d like to think that if I hadn’t, they would have done something to save me from myself. Yet as I stood there on the road, looking at the chapel and at Priest standing beside the door, I found myself questioning that. If I hadn’t gotten off that mattress, would Watcher have tried to force me? If I had tried to blow my own head off after thinking Glory was dead, would P-21 have fought me?

I don't know what drew me towards that white building. I know it wasn't something spiritual; I didn't have a single spiritual bone in my body. Curiosity, I suppose. If this was some morbid gathering of death, then I'd leave. That would be that. I stood at the door, looking in at a few of the occupied pillows. I smiled a little at the sight of Medley sitting alongside the little capmonger and a few other unicorns. I hoped the other four were here too, but I couldn't spot them.

Priest looked at the gathered, his eyes lingering on me just long enough for me to give an awkward smile in return. "Today we give voice to our hope for the future: that it may bring us happiness. We pray for our faith that the sun and moon remain just beyond the clouds. We stand together, shoulder to shoulder, together, for the day when we may be reunited with our princesses once again. Celestia protects. Luna defends."

Everypony bowed their heads. Well, everypony except me. Call me a cynic, but to me barding and a shotgun protected and defended much more reliably than belief. Then a tiny mote of light appeared at the end of Priest's horn. For a moment, I wondered just what was to happen. From the tiny little glow of magic emerged a soft melody. I'd never heard an instrument that could make music like that, like a hundred deep flutes playing in unison. I froze as the simple tune played once. A pause.

And then everypony (except me) began to sing. Motes of light glowed from the horns of the unicorns, and flutes, violins, banjos, a drum, an accordion, and a harmonica joined in, Priest's great piping music pulling them into a blend that almost knocked me to the floor. Thirty young unicorns on a balcony united in song, blending together into a tone of harmony. From below, the adults raised their voices as well, supporting the melody in soft voices, rough voices, quiet voices, and deep voices. All raised their voices to Celestia and Luna in hope and reverence.

One rainy night I'd discovered Sweetie Belle. I would always be a fan of Sapphire Shores. I'd heard music that could inspire, amuse, even invigorate. This was as if hearing all that music for the very first time. This was music that saved. It saved the adults from that final leg of their pilgrimage across the bridge. It saved foals from being consumed by the wasteland. Everypony belonged to it, except me. I don't think I could have made a tune or sung a note right then. I was too busy crying.

I'd never before experienced music so honest and good that it hurt. I ached as it swept me along, and yet it was a good hurt. It felt as if something dark was being drawn out of my chest and set aside. It wasn't perfect. I could hear off notes. That didn't matter. Ponies weren't perfect. But in this moment, for just a few minutes,

there was beauty in Equestria.

I'd finally had to leave. Maybe someday I could stay and listen, but right then I couldn't stand it any longer. For the first time since I could remember, I felt... good. Did Big Macintosh and his Mari pony feel this way? Had everypony felt this way before things had gone wrong? I didn't fool myself, I knew that there wasn't any greater magic to it. When they finished singing, the Wasteland would still be the Wasteland. Hoofington still loomed ominously to the north east. The skies were still dark with clouds.

But at least it'd stopped raining.

I'd done another sweep of the surrounding area, more to compose myself than to look for trouble. I'd come across some nasty radigators that'd gotten a bit too close for my taste, but my shotgun still took them out before they could do any damage. I'd tried my hoof at opening a locked ammo box I found, and instead of opening it I just lost my last bobby pin; not willing to lose something potentially useful, I decided to just lug the heavy thing around until I found another pin to try with. I'd also listened to the holotape I'd found in the museum:

"I am recording this message for legal purposes. Until I receive a formal request from the mares of both the Ministry of Wartime Technology AND the Ministry of Arcane Sciences, in writing, I will not turn over our mineralogical collection to your office. I do not care how many times you appeal to 'the greater war effort', miss Ebony. The museum is not a part of the ministries and the history of our collection began long before the war; the samples are not under your jurisdiction. Many pieces are unique. So please, end all requests for the collection, or I shall be forced to appeal to higher powers. Curator Buttercup," a mare said quite primly.

That hadn't been good enough for somepony. The museum had been attacked, and given that it was still locked down when I'd come across it, I could only imagine the attack had been on the day the bombs fe—. . . wait. There were a lot of bullets. That meant machinegun fire. I hadn't found any machineguns among the bones, though. That meant that the attackers had gotten out of the museum after they'd finished, but since the other bodies had just been left there. . . Whoever had attacked the museum must have done so with just enough time to get in and get out before the bombs fell; any more, and the lockdown would have ended so that the bodies could be cleared away, but any less and the attackers would have been caught too. That was some

freaky luck. Come to think of it, how had the attackers managed to get out while the museum was locked down? It didn't really matter; I doubted that the particulars of a two-hundred-year-old shooting at a museum would still be important.

I had quite a pleasant surprise when I got back: one of my friends had arrived while I was out. Okay, I wasn't quite sure that I had any right to call her that, but now that I was on my own I'd take even a friendly person as a friend. Sekashi sat in the middle of the post office, an enraptured audience in front of her as she told a tale with far more grace and amusement than I had at my 'interrogation' at the hooves of the Crusaders. Majina sat nearby, apparently unsure how to handle the attention from the several foals who were admiring her stripes.

"... and so that is how the first zebra got her stripes," Sekashi said with a broad smile, clearly in her element. When she spotted, me her eyes brightened; returning her attention to the Crusaders, she said, "Ah, sweet Security has arrived. Please, let me speak with her, and when I return I will tell you why ponies come in so many colors." That offer seemed to mollify the Crusaders a bit, and they let her rise and walk to me. She gave my cheek a nuzzle before leading me outside.

"Sekashi, I am so glad to see you. Where are P-21 and Glory? What..." then she turned around and gave me a wry smile. "Oh, right. You can't hear me."

"Sadly not. But Majina's hearing may recover. She is young and I have hope," she said as she walked to one of the houses and sat beneath the porch roof. The clouds overhead rumbled softly, reminding me that a lack of rain seemed to be the exception rather than the rule in Hoofington and prompting me to join her under cover. "Now, I know you have many questions about your friends."

"What happened? Where're P-21 and Glory?" I said, exaggerating my speech just a touch.

"Ah, that is a funny story. We were travelling along the rails towards the city. Your whining was quite impressive, whines to make the most savage hellhound cringe in terror. You did not like having nothing to do, and so it was suggested that you look into the other orb. This you did with some difficulty, scowling and swearing and insisting it was broken. Then there was a flash and you were out. It was quite a relief to the others."

"Soon we were not pulling up hills but fighting to go down them safely. We encountered a brown unicorn on the tracks. I set the brake, glad for a rest. Your friend seemed to know him. They talked. They argued. I could only see the brown one's words. He asked your friend to give you up. He asked your friend why he would

travel with a mare from your stable. He was. . . not kind.”

“What did he say?” I asked, finding myself whispering. I had to repeat myself so she could see the words formed by my lips.

“He asked if you still used your friend as reproductive equipment. Your friend was outraged, that I could see, but I fear he was hurt as well. The brown one asked your friend if he enjoyed being used. If you commanded him. If you cared at all about him. He asked your friend if you had apologized. I fear your friend was listening to his poisoned words.” I swallowed. I hadn’t apologized; instead, I’d insulted him at Brimstone’s Fall and hadn’t been able to make it right.

“After that, they tried to take you; numerous hunters waiting in the woods struck. The brown one used a spell, tying your friend head to hoof in straps and rope. They charged from all sides. Your winged friend did all she could alone, but she is not as ferocious a fighter as you. Then, from the sky came more pegasi. The fight was brutal, terrible, and fierce. I did not see how we could prevail. So Majina and I detached ourselves from the cart and released the brake. Then we fled, letting the cart roll away more swiftly than I had anticipated.”

“What happened then? What happened to P-21 and Glory?”

“With their prize lost, the brown one took your blue friend south. The pegasi took your winged friend north. I could see both their struggles. I’m sorry, but I left them, hoping to find you. I did not imagine the downhill track would carry you so very far.” She frowned and rubbed her chin with her hoof, saying, “Perhaps that story needs a bit more work to make it truly funny.”

“I fell off at some point. I should be glad I didn’t break my neck, I suppose.” Especially given how weak I was. I frowned, imagining the mine flatbeds rolling down the hill, going faster and faster towards tunnels filled with death and worse. How could I have survived falling off at those speeds? Was it really just luck? “Will you come with me?”

She started at my question and gave me a sad smile. “No, brave pony. I am not a fighter, or scholar, or healer. I am a teller of stories. I would not be able to help. Worse, I would fear for my daughter and you would fear for me. If you are to rescue your friends, you cannot worry about a silly storyteller and her child.” She gave me a warm smile. “I will stay here for a time. I am sure these children might appreciate my tales, and there may be fresh stories to learn here.”

“So close to Hoofington?” I asked in concern. I was astonished to see an almost. . .

cheeky smile.

“Ah yes. Let me see the Wicked City.” She said as she walked to the edge of the porch and looked out. “My, it certainly fits all the tales told. I can almost feel it sucking my soul and feeding on my blood.” She glanced over at me and my stunned expression, and then laughed, “I am a story teller. I can tell the threads of truth from the yarns of fancy.”

“You’re not afraid,” I said with a smile.

“It is a city. Stone and steel and machines and dark magics. Ugly, certainly. Dangerous, unquestionably. Yet, should I fear it for that? Should I act as if it is going to gobble me whole from here?” She snorted as she looked at it for another long moment. “Some day I would like to know its story, though I fear it will be quite a trick to make it happy.”

“I just thought. . . you being a zebra. . .”

She arched a brow. “Oh ho. And being a zebra I what?”

“Well. . . I’d heard zebras thought Hoofington was cursed.”

“Do you fear the city, Pony?” Still she was smiling, and I admit I hadn’t thought of it.

“A little. . . I guess. It’s dangerous, but so is a gun or grenade.” I cocked my head. “So what do you think about the Hoof if you’re not scared? Angry?” Lancer certainly seemed that sort.

“No. I am sad. I pity such loss and pain. So much folly. But it is not a bad feeling, because it encourages me to learn from others. So I travel this place, seeking stories to share. It is odd, isn’t it?” I could honestly think of worse things to do with one’s life.

“It’s the Wasteland,” I said with a smile and shrug. “You should talk to Priest. He’s got lots of stories to share. And I think he’ll like talking with a zebra like you; he needs to smile more.”

“Oh. . . oh ho!” Sekashi’s eyes lit up as her lips curled in a wide grin. “A he is he? Perhaps you would better suited to make him smile then? A foal I have already.”

“You! I. . . you are out of your perverted striped mind!” I snorted, shifting back and forth awkwardly. “He’s a priest. I’m sure he’s taken vows or. . . or. . . something!”

“What value in a vow that is never tested? Or is there another buck you have your heart on? Perhaps some blue pony?” She arched a brow. This was ridiculous!

I needed to get my stuff and get going, not answer questions about my... that! Besides I... he was... ugh... I didn't want to think about it.

"P-21 is my friend. He's smart and focused and..." wraps explosive collars on ponies and gives me the button to push. And helps keep me together when I'm falling apart. And I need him and he needs me. "Ugh... things were just easier back in the Stable. You put yourself on a male's breeding queue and waited for your turn. Easy." But now it was Sekashi who looked shocked.

"And these ponies... they could refuse?" There was a look in her eyes I didn't like.

Refuse? "Why would a male refuse? It's what they're for. I mean, all bucks like sex." I said with a small frown. Sekashi looked disappointed in me, even disturbed.

"And if a buck refused?"

"Well... they just don't. They don't want to refuse." Why didn't she get that? It was simple. It was just the way things were; there was nothing to think about. Males wanted sex because it felt good. It was what they were for. How they were wired. "Look, as interesting as your suggestion is, I need to get going. The sooner I find P-21 and Glory the better. Then I can get my caps and find out what's hiding out on my PipBuck."

Sekashi just looked at me in the strangest way. She smiled but looked like she wanted to cry. "I hope you find P-21 and Glory soon, Blackjack. And when you do, ask him about his life. And if he tells you, then please accept my apology."

And with that she turned and immediately walked away. I stared after her. Her apology? For what? "I tried asking him about what he was feeling and he told me he wanted to shoot me," I called after her as I rose to my hooves, but of course she did not hear. I'd tried to understand him. I had. I'd tried to be nice and then he pulled that stunt with the collars. He'd hissed about the need for justice, as if the mine boss had wronged him or something. The way he'd looked at me...

I couldn't think about that now. I had to get going. I stepped off the porch and started across the road to the post office where I'd left my things, but stopped when I saw Priest quietly walking up the road from the Chapel. Our eyes met. He had the lightest gray eyes. He smiled wistfully, "You're leaving?"

"I ran into one of my companions. She told me what happened and where to start looking," I said awkwardly. "I... sorry. For what I said on the bridge. I know that you care. I just can't think of doing nothing. Of just letting them die."

"I know you can't, Blackjack. You act. You do. But sometimes the best action is no

action,” he said quietly. “I know you can’t agree.” He was right, I couldn’t. “Good luck with finding your friends.”

“Thanks. You should talk to Sekashi. Can’t miss her with her stripes,” I said with a smile and added with emphasis, “She’s not here as a pilgrim.” That definitely lifted his spirits.

“Celestia protect you and Luna defend you,” he said quietly as he bowed his head towards me.

“Take care,” I muttered awkwardly. I wanted to. . . uggh, what did I want? Apologize? Feel that calm he radiated? Jump him? Well. . . that last one certainly; it’d been a week since anything had gotten betwixt my nethers. Instead, I just smiled like a moron, turned, and walked away. Damn it, why couldn’t I be a smart pony and figure this shit out?! I was missing something, but I just couldn’t tell what.

With my gear stowed, I was on my way back to the rail line; from what Sekashi had said, I could reach it more quickly than I’d thought by simply going straight west overland. I’d traded most of the weapons to the cap fiend (I’d gotten her name, but I simply refused to call her ‘Charity.’) for whatever fresh medical supplies she possessed, but I’d kept one of the carbines, now repaired to some state of decency, for some longer-ranged ordinance. I had my automatic pistol for close-in work, and I’d fixed up my drum-fed assault shotgun with whatever parts I could get from the museum’s salvage. I’d cleaned out my bags, amazed at the mass of junk within.

I turned on DJ Pon3 as I walked, keeping up a brisk pace that ate the distance under my hooves. For once, I wasn’t shot up, my back injury was only a distant ache, and I felt fairly good. Sekashi’s suggestion slithered around in the back of my head, but I just shut that door, locked it, dropped the key into the toilet, and flushed it away. Then, for safety, I welded the door shut and stacked some barrels of magical radioactive waste in front of it. I didn’t need to think about that now.

I was keeping my eyes up and looked for any threats on my E.F.S. Bloatsprites. A radhog. For once my passage was relatively danger-free. I kept the carbine out to get some practice with a longer-ranged weapon. Shotguns and automatics were what I’d trained with, but the practice of sighting and leading was a new one to me. There was nothing more embarrassing than taking six shots to kill one Bloatsprite.

Why did P-21 want to kill me? My mind dug the key out of the waste processor and turned it over and over. Don’t think about it. Safer and easier. He’d been mad

because I'd been the one to find him. 'If you give me a gun, I might shoot you,' his voice whispered from behind the door. I'd just spoiled whatever plan he'd had for his own escape.

The mare singing her indifference to the world trailed off her last glorious notes and DJ Pon3 gave a long soft sigh, "Ah, there's nothing like Sapphire Shores to make a pony strut their stuff. That was 'Fearless', and for me it brings to mind some interesting things I've heard coming from out east. Now, I'm sure you remember Security's bold declaration against the slavers operating from Paradise. Well, Paradise and Reaper Deus teamed up to lay a record bounty on Security. Sadly, ponies hither and yon have got into a bit of a frenzy for the elusive mare around the Hoofington region."

"Now you'd think forcing a change in management at the Brimstone's Fall jewel mine would convince someponies to come to their senses about hunting a mare who is working for the freedom of everypony. But no! Some have still taken it upon themselves to give her some grief. Well, I have a special recording from two of these would-be bounty hunters about their run-in with Miss Security. Let's play the tape."

There was a burst of static. Then Busted Legs's trembling voice stammered, "There. . . there were eleven of us. . . we spotted her alone. . . she was unarmed. . . unarmored. . . we had her cornered in the museum. She busted necks, smashed in heads, broke my legs. . ." I heard a snuffling in the recording. "She got our guns and just. . . just. . . blew us to pieces. And she was drunk. Drunk! And singing like a demon mare in heat!"

A mare then asked, "What happened to you, sir?"

There was a snuffle and stammer, and then Nicked Jewels wailed, "She fuckin' gelded me!"

DJ Pon3 coughed, then chuckled, "There you have it. You bucks might be happy to risk your lives for the bounty, but are you prepared to risk that? And Security, when you're done fixing the slavers in Paradise, how about a recording or two?"

I winced, feeling a little guilty as the next song wound up. I hadn't really wanted to cut him there. In fact, I hadn't been completely sure I'd done that until now, thanks to the hangover and all. Well, any deterrent was a welcome deterrent, right? I levitated out a box of Caramel's Corn Crispies and shook it into my open mouth. Sweet and crunchy good-

I tripped and landed flat on my face. That I tripped wasn't special; it could happen

to anypony.

That I tripped over a fresh corpse: only my luck could be that bad.

The poor mare hadn't just been killed. Whatever had done it had torn massive rents in her sides, cleaving right through her ribcage and spilling her organs across the field. I felt my pulse start to pound and backed away, clenching my eyes and fighting to slow my breathing. I could feel the incision in my gut being snipped open. Then I felt one of my rear hooves land in something.

Oh please don't tell me I stepped in what I think I stepped in.

I glanced back to see the hoof lodged in the splayed chest cavity of an earth pony buck. The gore on my hoof was still lukewarm. I fought to keep the corn in my stomach as I wiped the bloody smears off the end of my leg. Carefully I looked around, working to keep my breathing slow and level. It was half a dozen ponies, all of them armed with rifles; from the ratty clothes they wore, though, I doubted that fighting was their main occupation. The dead bushes had concealed them in death.

I looked in the direction from which I'd been walking to this little copse of trees and bushes. They'd have had a nice shot, and could I have taken them out if hit by surprise from a distance, especially considering that they had cover? Something had gotten them first, and it hadn't just killed these poor bastards. They were dismembered and their bodies crushed in, every weapon smashed in two. The only things intact were their ammunition, their caps, and two burlap bags containing some meager foodstuffs and bottles of rainwater.

Something had just done me a favor, and I didn't like it. I didn't like it at all.

Reaching the rail line, I picked up the pace a little. Running for more than short sprints wasn't something I was very used to, but right now I had plenty of incentive to try. The slaughtered ponies in that camp reminded me that I still had a price on my head. I noticed how much of the grade behind me was downhill; I could only imagine how I'd fallen off the cart in my crippled state without dying. If my luck was that good, I shouldn't have gotten shot in the first place.

My thoughts went back to my...helper. I didn't like somepony helping me all sneaky like, but I had to admit it was better than shooting me in the back. On the other hoof, though, I really didn't care for their methods. At all. Anypony that tore other ponies to pieces wasn't exactly what I'd call an ally. The idea of anypony who even could

do that didn't sit well with me. Still, at the moment I had other problems that sent me ducking down.

Crouching, in my amber vision I could see the turned-over mine flatcar. I could also see a camp made beside it. There was a crude barricade built around the area, and a campfire made my amber vision flare and fight with my normal sight. There were four yellow bars and a number of red bars inside. I frowned, rubbing my muzzle with my hoof. Slavers? Hunters? It couldn't be a coincidence that they were right at the flipped cart, could it? I could make out the four ponies, weapons pointed outward. Waiting.

"Great," I sighed as I floated out my rifle and focused down the barrel. Definitely not my weapon of choice. I saw the little twitches as the amber and red bars moved. Just pull the trigger and make your life easier, Blackjack. I kept the sights lined up perfectly. Pull the trigger. Pull... the... trigger...

"I really wouldn't have minded if Celestia gave me a few more brains," I said as I stood. "This is gonna get me shot." I kept the assault carbine up and advanced towards the camp, saying loudly and cheerfully, "I'd really love to avoid a wholesale slaughter, so if you folk would keep things cool I'd be much obliged!" I added the biggest, widest... possibly psychoest grin I could.

No shots, not that I minded not getting shot at. It was refreshing, actually. It was also driving my mane crazy. The fires turned the ponies into silhouettes. No replies. No warnings. Threats? Just red and yellow bars. I'm not a sneaky pony. Oh, I try. You'd think moving quietly would be a simple thing. Just don't step on anything noisy! Usually, though, there always seemed to be something noisy that I somehow missed. So the fact I reached the low barricade of desiccated tree limbs without getting shot gave me just a touch of confidence... until I got a good look at the inside.

There was a good explanation for why these ponies weren't shooting at me: they were all tied up! Their rifles had to be the flimsiest varmint rifles I'd ever seen, and were lashed to their hooves. On each pony's back was a sac that jerked and hissed with insect fury: radroaches. In the middle was a large metal box with a terminal on it.

Suddenly, floodlights illuminated the barricade from all sides and a ring of red bars appeared around me. The terminal flickered and flashed to life, and a mare spoke out in a staticy tone of glee, "I have you now, Security! You have fallen into the brilliant trap of Virgo Zodiac, seventh daughter of the Zodiac family!" I looked at the

five bound ponies and then out into the glare of the floodlights. “Your capture will earn me an impressive fortune for my research. Surrender in the name of arcane science!”

“Oh, really? And what kind of research are you doing?” I shouted, not sure if she could see or hear me through the terminal. I pulled off the bags with the radroaches and yanked out the dragon claw. A few dead bugs later and the four hostages relaxed a bit.

There was a stunned silence, “Oh! You mean. . . you really want to know? I’m trying to unlock the secrets of PipBuck manufacturing! They truly are a marvel of ancient magical technology. I’ve been able to repair one or two, but the arcane matrixes are so complex and difficult that components are dreadfully expensive!”

“Uhuh. Gotta say you got a good notion there. I’d have been dead long ago if it weren’t for mine,” I said as pulled the head of the closest hostage to me and whispered, “Don’t run just yet.” He swallowed, staring into my amber-glowing eyes and nodding. I sliced his gag and then his bonds, moving to the next. “Well, I gotta say I’m pretty embarrassed at getting caught at all. You must be the smartest of. . . what was it again? The Zodiac family?”

“Yes! The Zodiac family is the greatest family of bounty hunters in all of Equestria. Granted, I haven’t gotten far from Hoofington. . . experiments and all. . . but I am sure this is going to cement my fame with my siblings,” she said in a rush as I cut one pony after the next free.

“So. . . Virgo. Care to explain this trap to me? I’ve got to admit that I’m not the smartest pony. I’m guessing there’s something in the box?” I said loudly as I hunkered down. I could make out floating spiderbots similar to Dean Hardy at Roose-hoof Academy.

“Ah, yes. It took me days of planning to come up with it and hours to set it all up. See, I thought I’d lure you in with the hostages. Actually, I thought you’d just shoot them and go running in to loot the bodies. That’s what most ponies do. . . I wonder why. Anyway! Inside that box is a deadly neurotoxin specially devised to knock you unconscious in a matter of seconds. . . maybe minutes. It shouldn’t be more than that. There are landmines activated to keep you put until then. If you try get close enough to deactivate one, the others will get you. And finally, I have my sentry drones ready to finish you off if you somehow get past the mines,” she finished, then broke into hysterical laughter, then broke into a fit of coughing and wheezing.

I looked at the monitor. If somepony was going to watch my butt, why couldn’t they

have dealt with this piece of work? I looked around at the others and mouthed ‘any ideas?’ but there were only blank looks. Well, time for my standby. It’d probably get us all dead. “Yup. Just two little questions, if you don’t mind. One, are those robots the kind that’ll just swarm in and blast a pony to pieces if you shoot at them?”

“Yes, and they’re on a hair trigger. So I warn you now, don’t you dare think of trying to shoot them, or they’ll all be on top of you! Besides, do you have any idea how expensive sentry robots are? Really. They charge a hoof and a leg over at Scrapyard,” she said in a wounded voice as she whined, “You’d think they could give me a discount for being a loyal buyer, but nooo. Everypony’s just in it for the caps. Never knowledge!”

“Yeah, the world’s unfair like that. One last question: why do you call it deadly neurotoxin if it’s supposed to put us to sleep?” I asked as I rose up and sighted the closest hovering spiderbot. A stunned silence answered me, “You know, why don’t you think on that a bit?” And I took the shot.

“Better wiped than striped!”, “Die you zebra commie!”, “For the herd of the free and the home of the hay!” the robots shouted as they all advanced in unison. Pink bolts of disintegration energy lanced out from their spider legs.

“No! No! What are you doing?” There was a click and a hiss as a green gas started to seep from the metal box. However, the container wasn’t exactly what I’d call heavy, nor was it anchored to anything. I kicked the terminal off the ground and into the air, sending it bouncing and rolling toward the minefield.

“Get down!” I shouted. . . a bit redundantly, really, given that they already had their heads down to avoid the flashing bolts of disintegrating magic. Then a mine exploded with a resounding crak. This set off the three closest to it. And those set off the next, and the next, and the next... Within a second the entire minefield had detonated in a ring of shrapnel destruction, the sentry bots lying in sparking heaps. The floodlights fell over, their magical bulbs breaking and cutting off the harsh glare.

Something hot whooshed past less than an inch from my eyes, smashing my glasses off and singeing my hair. I blinked, then, in the thunderous silence (if you didn’t count the ringing in my ears) left in the wake of the world exploding, and carefully felt around with a hoof to be sure that my face was still attached; somehow, it was. I looked at the four prisoners, who were now staring at my amber gaze in terror, and grinned sheepishly, “Wow, close, huh?” The four looked as if they wished it’d been just a touch closer.

“My. . . my trap. . . you. . . oh, this is so not fair!” a voice—Virgo, I realized, but quieter

and without the static—whined, “Daddy’s gonna be so mad at me!”

“Oh. . . I don’t think you have to worry about that,” I said as I aimed the rifle at the sole remaining red bar on my E.F.S. I sighted right at her skull. . . and then sighed. I swapped targets. “Now, you and your family leave me alone,” I told her just before I fired.

“Yipe!” She shrieked as she rose, reaching back to grab her rump as my bullet grazed it. The red turned to yellow as she ran off, calling faintly, “You’re gonna be in so much trouble when I tell my daddy about this!”

I let out a sigh as I flopped back behind the barricade. “Wow. . . that was dumb of me. . . wandering into a trap like that.” I said with a sheepish smile, grinning at the other four ponies. The mares and bucks just stared back in amazement. “Um. . . are you okay?”

“Y. . . yeah,” a pale purple mare with a pitchfork cutie mark stammered. “Um. . . I suppose we should thank you? Yeah. Thank you.”

“Sure,” I thought about asking them if they had any caps they could spare for my saving hostages fund, but figured that that’d be a little bit crude. “Hey, look. I’m looking for two ponies. One was taken north by pegasi and the other south by a brown unicorn with lots of dots under his cutie mark. You see either of them?”

They looked at one another and tan buck muttered, “Well, my brother said he thinks there’s them Enclave ponies holed up in the Miramare Air Station up north,” he said as he looked at the other three warily.

“Thanks,” it was the best lead I had, and once I had Glory’s brains helping me I’d be able to avoid traps like this and save some time. “Well, you four take care of yourselves, alright?” I said. They nodded slowly and I hopped over the barricade to start on my way north.

“So, are we gonna jump her now? She’s getting away,” one of the bucks asked dully just as I left earshot. The sound of hooves against his butt was answer enough.

It’d been a great night! So far, I hadn’t had to kill anypony, and while falling into Virgo Zodiac’s trap had been annoying, I had to admit it’d turned out more or less for the best. I was on my way to find one of my friends. The rain had even decided to let things dry out a little. All in all, things were looking up! I had been walking for hours, though, and my legs were starting to feel a bit wobbly. Time for a snack and a nap.

Of course, finding the right place wasn't easy, but I happened across a ring of camp trailers at a old campsite. The first trailer I tried didn't have much in it besides a mattress, but that was good enough for me. I sank down on the soft (compared to the ground, at least) surface with a sigh. A few hours' rest and I should be ready to go. Just needed to nod off. Relax... relaxing... any second now... come on. Re...lax...

Fuck.

I was tired, but I just couldn't get my brain to turn off. I kept thinking about the day: that horrible bridge, the wonderful singing and music, that terrible scene of slaughter, and that interesting encounter with Virgo. Maybe I should have put the bullet in her head, but she'd been interesting at least. She'd nearly gotten me. If I hadn't been lucky, she would have.

The night was just full of dripping noises and silence. I lay on my stomach with a sigh, pulled my PipBuck in front of me, and started fiddling with it. I hated being bored. It was right up there with waiting. I brought up EC-1101 in the hopes that it'd gotten bored too and decided to save me trouble and caps by decoding itself. Of course, no such luck. Then I noticed the file directly above EC-1101.

'PipBuck #214: P-21 audio files.' I slowly moved the cursor up one space and just stared at the highlighted entry. Maybe what I needed was a little bit of...entertainment to get me to sleep. It wasn't like it was invasive or anything. I knew what P-21 had done in the stable, and I wouldn't see another mare from there again. So what was wrong with listening to some bumping flanks while I gave myself a good rubbing? The naughty idea took root, and I gave a nicker as I opened the audio files. Most of the mares' names were acronyms anyway.

OM... no thanks. I'd heard enough of that little sociopath to last me a lifetime. DT's were cute, but I needed something new. GR? If that was who I thought it was, no thank you. RIV? Two weeks ago I'd have killed for this file. MID? How could she? Well... probably pretty easily. I guessed that over five years P-21 had really got around.

BJ?

I blinked at the three entries. I only knew one mare in 99 who'd use those two letters; me. When had I ever been around P-21 to be recorded? Granted, I'd been around a lot of males. When you were born in 99, they gave you a sterility implant until your parent passed away. Then the implant was removed and simple habitual breeding would usually result in a foal. Implant back in. Simple. You did your job

and enjoyed what fun you could. If a mare died without producing a replacement (usually because of an accident or suicide; despite what I'd said to Priest, it did happen occasionally, but the perpetrators were even more thoroughly forgotten than the normal 99 dead), then the Overmare would allow an extra mare to be bred.

I swallowed as I moved the cursor over the first entry with my acronym. I felt a squirm in my gut. It was in the past. What could it hurt? Don't think about it.

The sound of Stable-approved recreational music in the atrium. The babble of many voices echoing. There were only three kinds of large celebrations in 99: A cutecenera, which marked when a mare could start performing duties for the stable, the birth of a foal (but that was usually a smaller affair in the cafeteria), and the Overmare's birthday. Since the music wasn't blaring about how wise and kind the Overmare was, I guessed the event was an example of the first one. My pulse calmed.

Nothing special had happened that day. There were six of us celebrating at once. Daisy and I were going into security. Midnight was going into her tech work. The others escaped me. There'd been green cake made, and a sort of punch that was supposed to be mildly alcoholic, but wasn't. Yeah, parties in 99 were pretty lame, but any sort of fun was craved. Even the Overmare's birthday.

"Lets go play with the bucks," I heard Daisy shriek. "Dibs on the unicorn!"

"Daisy! At least give me the unicorn. You take the blue one," I heard myself whine, my voice growing clearer. "I mean look at him. He looks defective. And he's just P-1."

"Too bad. I called the unicorn," she laughed, and I heard footsteps walking off with a laugh.

"Ugh, mule..." my petulant voice whined in my ears. "Well, come on, you."

"Please..." P-21 whispered softly, audible only to his own PipBuck. The sounds of the party dimmed. A door closed.

"Help me get out of this party dress. I don't want a work detail to cover a stain." Party clothes were passed from filly to filly each cutecenera. No pony owned fancy clothes, except for the Overmare.

"I..." P-21 stammered in a tiny, terrified voice.

"Huh?"

"I don't want to do this... please don't make me do this..." he whimpered.

“Ugh, are you actually talking?”

“[. . .”

“Look! Here’s the plan. You’re going to make me feel good. That’s your job. If you can’t do that, then get to medical and have them fix you till you can.” I gave a little annoyed sigh, “You don’t actually do anything here except breed, so the least you should do is be happy about it-”

I cut the feed. It’d been a horrible party. Daisy had gotten the unicorn buck. That was all I’d remembered. I’d gotten the P-1. The whiny one. The one who’d cried... the... whole... time.... That’d been him, and I hadn’t even remembered. I hugged my head, my mind trying to process this. Trying to find some way to accept what I’d heard. I’d been young. I’d been following the rules. It was Stable 99’s fault. It wasn’t mine.

They don’t want to refuse. All males want sex.

I looked at the remaining two files, feeling nauseous. There was no time to waste. There was no way I was going to be sleeping now. Or doing what I’d been about to do. Or taking the time to listen to... more...

I couldn’t think about it.

Like just about every major building in the wasteland, Miramare Air Station was an overengineered monstrosity, a black brick of a building topped by a tower. It was that overengineering that kept the building intact when almost every other structure was blasted away by the red-glowing crater on the east end of the runway. Armored sky chariots lay tumbled in heaps and piles. The hangars slumped in concave mounds where their roofs had collapsed. Ground carts had simply been reduced to scattered chassis, with the hulk of a tank the only recognizable vehicle.

It was also quiet. Too quiet. If there were pegasi here, they were being pretty sneaky about it. Not exactly the behavior I’d expected for a group trying to help the surface. I kept getting an impression of two personalities from the Enclave. The former was nice, idealistic, naive, and bumbling. Easy to trust. The latter had snuck into the Fluttershy clinic and ignored the psychological states of forty colts and fillies trapped in stasis. This place had entirely the second feeling to it: the Enclave here was up to no good.

Worse, there were red bars on my E.F.S., but I couldn’t see anything ahead of me.

The tarmac was empty except for scattered vehicles. My mane twitched like mad, suggesting this was the place. I just didn't know how to proceed. Traps? Invisible monsters? Pop-up turrets?

Well, when in doubt... if there was something here looking to eat me, I might as well ring the dinner bell. I strolled out towards the main building, whistling to myself as my eyes kept a watch for something shooty, pointy, or bitey as I made my stupid move. Then I spotted two ammo crates poking out from underneath a turned-over wagon. Well, I supposed that technically none of this stuff was the Enclave's. I didn't exactly see a flag planted, and... shit. Who was I kidding? Scavenge and pillage!

I turned sharply just as the crimson beam of an energy weapon popped the tarmac in front of me. Okay. Now that wagon took on a whole new importance as I dove beneath it, a trail of beam shots following in my wake. A quick look around. Nothing. Well, since I was down here I took the chance... to curse my inability to open the locks on these crates. Ugh. I really needed that blue pony!

So, there was somepony out there with either a beam rifle or a doozy of a beam pistol. I really did not want to end my days as a pile of smoldering ash. But where would the shooter be? Along the rooftop seemed natural. It's where I'd be if I was shooting somepony.

But the Enclave are pegasi.

They wouldn't be on a building. They'd be in the sky. Directly above me. No matter which way I went, they'd have my back torched. I looked up at the rusted metal overhead. It was intact, but it wasn't like it was an armored wagon bed. I brought out the shotgun and loaded one explosive round, clenched my eyes shut, and fired. The shot made both my ears ring. I looked around, but they were still taking their time. They had all the time in the world.

I rolled on to my back and looked up through the hoof-sized hole popped in the metal. There he... or she... I wasn't sure which... was. Clad in some sort of black armor and hovering with an automatic rifle on one side of their battle saddle and a beam weapon on the other. The carbine slid up through the hole. Then I took a deep breath and shouted at the top of my lungs. "Parley!" No response. "I really don't want to fight you!" Still no response. "Really!"

Fuck. Why was nothing ever easy?! I sighted up through the hole, hit S.A.T.S., and aimed for their hoof. Maybe if I winged them... so to speak... they'd be willing to talk. I had Deus, every slaver, and half the wasteland after my head. I didn't want to add the Enclave as well!

I popped off the first burst, the second, and the third. As the last three rounds tore into the pegasus's limb, I watched it fall off! The pegasus swayed wildly, blood raining in spurts from the severed stump, and then started back toward the main building. They didn't get far before folding and crashing with a definite crunching noise a few dozen feet away. Heads were not supposed to bend like that. I crawled out and looked at the body and swore, "Damn it, you bony son of a bitch! I didn't want to kill him!" I shouted at that card-dealing bastard I'd come to view as personifying the Wasteland.

I was Security, the mare seemingly dead-set to piss off everypony in the Wasteland. Well, nothing to it now. The fall had bent the barrel of his automatic, but I got some parts off it to improve my carbine a hair. The beam rifle I detached, along with the spark drum that provided its ammo. Maybe Glory could use it, but I couldn't even figure out where the trigger was! Also, his armor, made of hard plates of something somehow melded with some sort of thick fabric, was surprisingly lightweight, but still far more resilient than the flimsy gear she'd worn before. Pity it didn't cover the legs or head, though. I rolled it up and stuck it in my bag.

I made my way to a side door and found it locked. Still, this was a pretty simple lock. Easier than those tiny little things on the ammo crates. I nudged the door open and then carefully stepped into a bathroom 200 years in need of a cleaning. There were a lot of red bars in here. Either I'd already pissed them off somehow (it happens; I seem to have a knack for it) or they were shooting anything without wings. Well, one way or another, we'd get this dealt with. I switched from my carbine to my shotgun, loaded with standard buckshot for the moment, and moved past grime-encrusted toilets and chipped sinks.

The reek of mildew filled the air and glass from broken lights overhead ground against the concrete floor with each step. This was a locker room. I passed by the showers and walked silently by the rows and rows of lockers...okay, no, I silently checked the lockers for loot. There were a few that held useful things. A dozen caps here and there. A plastic jar of Buck. Some Med-X. Plenty of junk, too, most of which I skipped. I found book titled 'Martial Mayhem' and took it only because of the picture on the cover of a zebra kicking a head clean off!

I happened across a storage locker with some cleaning supplies and duct tape. Well, I could carry a little more, I figured. Into the bags it went. If nothing else, it would give me something to trade with the cap-monger back in Chapel.

I'd almost slipped out when I noticed, on a bank of larger lockers, one tiny placard on the front: Stonewing. These lockers didn't have the same degree of battering

as the others. In fact, it looked almost as if they'd been kept polished and clean by the soldiers. I read the next one. Jetstream. Vanity. Twist. Doof. Echo. Psalm. A...something; somepony had purposefully defaced the name tag. Big Macintosh. I couldn't see any locks, but a tiny terminal glowed at the end.

A prompt read, "Please specify locker." I entered Stonewing. "Please specify password."

I looked at the terminal keys, frowning at them. Slowly I reached out with my magic and typed, 'Rainbow Dash'. There was a soft click and the large locker door opened.

I don't know what I expected. There were a number of pictures glued to the inside of the locker. Stonewing grinning like an idiot as he shook the hoof of the rainbow-maned ministry mare. An autographed picture of Rainbow Dash giving a wink and writing, "Don't give up yet." Some money I wasn't interested in taking. A photo of him with his squad. Another with Jetstream at a beach. Several pictures of him grinning happily.

The only thing that remained was a folded note. "Hey. If you're reading this, please get out of Stone's locker. I took his harness and put it where it's safe. And if it's you, Jet, it's in the place where he did that thing that one time. Pick it up whenever you're ready. Big Macintosh. P.S. Honestly, Stone? 'Rainbow Dash?' What were you thinking?"

I chuckled and closed the locker. Really, it hadn't been that much of a guess. Whatever'd been important was gone and safe. I supposed that was all that mattered. Still, I have to admit I felt a bit of annoyance; something cool had been in here once. Unfortunately, none of my other guesses at the other lockers' passwords were any good, so I left the armored lockers and moved carefully out the only exit I could find and into some barracks. A few of the bunks had been cleaned up, but the majority were a mess. I carefully went from hooflocker to hooflocker, taking anything remotely valuable I could.

I stepped into the cafeteria and right in front of two pegasi eating. I had the shotgun raised, my amber eyes glaring at them. "Don't." They froze in place. "Take off your weapons." I said low and slow as I moved closer to the pair. They didn't blink as they pulled their pistols out of their holsters and tossed them onto the floor. "Ammo too." Their clips clattered to the linoleum. "Now, where is Morning Glory?" I asked as I levitated the weapons and ammo into my bags.

"Find her yourself," the red-wine-coated buck said levelly.

“Fair enough,” I said, and then levitated out the roll of tape. It was a bit tricky handling both, but I managed. As I started to tape down their wings, their eyes went wide. They looked indignant, but I just asked them softly, “Would you rather be shot?” That mollified them a little. Then I took out a bottle of wonderglue and squeezed out two globs on the floor. “Sit.”

They glared at me, then promptly put their butts in the hardening resin. Inside a minute it’d set. They’d have to be cut out of their uniforms to get free. I stretched out two last pieces of tape and covered their mouths. “If it’s any consolation, I really wanted to avoid this.”

The pegasus I’d found a minute later in the hallway hadn’t been nearly so easy to manage. As she spotted me, she immediately turned, crouched, and opened fire with the automatic weapons on her battle saddle. She didn’t seem to have much skill at hitting a moving target in a narrow hallway, but even those few impacts she managed stung like crazy! I dodged left and right as I closed the distance. She backed into the wall. Then she got a lead shower. With a cry, her guns went silent and she fell limp.

I took what I could and continued on, sweeping through the first floor. I found offices, record rooms, a gift shop, and a deli with some scrumptious Crispy Carrot Cakes. They were still fresh and went perfectly with a Sparkle-Cola. I also pocketed some pickle chips and Radish Surprise, and I found a new pair of aviator glasses. I grinned in the mirror. Oh yeah, freaky eyes hidden. That helped my mood a bit.

I found stairs up and stairs down. If I were a pony who could fly, would I want to be upstairs, where I could jump out a window, or downstairs, trapped in a hole? My money was on upstairs. Carefully, I made my way up step after step and pushed through the door at the top.

A veritable army of red dots appeared; something must have been shielding them from my E.F.S.! There had to be twenty at... then I heard the telltale scuttle. Radroaches? Well now, that was an indication that the pegasi weren’t up here. Still, since I was, I might as well check out the place.

The roaches weren’t hard to deal with. A broom handle and some focus took care of most of them. These rooms were mostly more offices, but of a nicer variety. There were terminals I couldn’t touch and safes I could only look at with undisguised frustration as dreams of treasures danced in my mind. Still, I found a medkit with good drugs and worthless, spoiled healing potions. More wonderglue. More duct tape. Some turpentine. Nothing special, but it might prove useful. In a break room I

rescued a case of Bridle Buck Beer and decided that, well, being drunk hadn't make me lose last time! An open bottle floated beside me as I reached a door that lead to a winding stairway up.

The stairs ended in the empty air traffic control tower. The terminals were all long dead. So were whatever operators were up here when the bomb went off. I looked at the scorched bones and blown-out windows. And... a memory orb? Yes, a memory orb, sitting out on the rail just outside the windows. I looked out and immediately got the sensation of everything spinning. Okay. Lots of nothing out there. Looking down was every bit as hard as looking up. I took a deep breath and the reached out with my magic.

"Careful... careful..." I muttered as I lifted and pulled the little glowing orb towards me. "Don't want to drop it. Don't want to..."

oooOOOooo

Damn it. . .

Flying again, a pegasus, a mare this time. Thank goodness. How did bucks even walk with that thing tucked between their legs? She was flying up towards the clouds as the sun set and the stars came out. In perfect synchronization, the moon rose over the horizon. Seeing it for the first time, I felt a little of what I imagined Priest felt when looking at his windows: comfort in a higher power. Tears streaked down my host's cheeks as she landed on a small white cloud.

Then there was a white flash behind me. My lips curled in a little smile. "Checking up on me, 'morale officer'?"

"Well it's in the job description. You should see the manual. Grief counseling, interventions, MoP procedures," then Vanity walked... wait, walked?! Yup, the unicorn was standing right there on the fluffy clouds! I felt a little part of my brain twinge and snap at that sight! "None of which means a damn when it comes to actually doing the job," the white unicorn said calmly besides my host. His emerald mane looked perfectly styled, even in the camouflage uniform he wore. "Let me guess, Jetstream: from the note you wrote me, you're blaming yourself. Then I'm supposed to tell you it's not your fault. Then you argue that it was your fault. We yell at each other." He sighed, "Ugh, we're going to be at this for hours." My host glanced at him, but his smile was soft and sympathetic.

"Everyone's told me it's not my fault."

"Oh, good. That cuts through a whole chapter on addressing denial."

"They're wrong."

"Or not," the unicorn signed, patting her shoulders. "Go on."

"I saw him dealing with those griffins. I saw he was getting targeted by those snipers. If I'd given him more warning. . . taken the threat seriously. . . ."

"Stonewing got shot all the time. You know this. We joked about it," he said quietly. "And you're not the only one. Twist is blaming herself for giving him the sweet, as if that did it. Psalm is having a crisis of faith. Big Macintosh is hurting and keeping it all inside. And of course it's the fault of all zebrakind to—"

"I was the one who flew with him."

Vanity just sighed, "You were the one who loved him." She sniffed and looked at him and his easy smile, "Did you think I didn't know? That's in my job description too."

"I don't feel love. All I feel is hurt. It's eating me up inside. I just want to forget. I want to forget everything I felt for him." I rubbed my eyes. "This shouldn't have happened."

"You knew something like this could, Jetstream. It's war," he said softly, but firmly. "In fact, something like this was likely to happen. The Marauders have been together for years and we've been lucky. That luck had to run out."

"I know, Vanity. I know. Damn it," I said, falling back and looking up at the stars. It was a rare time when looking up didn't make my guts clench. "It's just. . . stupid."

"It's not stupid. What you're asking me to do is stupid. Jetstream, you loved him—" Vanity began, but my host gave a dismissive 'tch'.

"And he loved her. Just the way it all works out, isn't it? Rainbow Dash. Twenty percent cooler in ten seconds flat." Oh boy, bitter much? She sighed as she rubbed her face. "I doubt she even knew he existed. Or that he died trying to clear the way so she and the Shadowbolts could get a little more glory."

"She had losses too," Vanity said as he sat calmly on the cloud besides me.

"Yeah. I know. Sky Ramble and Streak. I went to their funerals. Stonewing didn't even get one. All he got was a memorial and a little plaque in Cloudsdale." She slammed her hoof against the clouds, getting a little rumble of thunder from within. "And how could the Ministry of Peace just lose him?! They ask us to fight and die for that damned city, and they can't even give us a decent burial when we bite it?!"

"Things have gotten tense. You'd think Brimstone's death would have been a deterrent, but the zebras are getting more dragons and griffins than ever. Mistakes

happen,” Vanity said as the gorgeous unicorn looked down into her eyes. “Like this. Asking me to take your memories so you don’t have to feel pain isn’t going to make you feel better, Jetstream.”

She wept into her hooves and shook her head. “I keep seeing him fall. I keep seeing that bastard shooting him. I keep going back there, Vanity! To that second. And it’s ripping my head apart!” She sniffed and then sat up, looking at him. “Do you know what that’s like? To see something horrible again and again so you can’t get it out?”

I knew.

“We all have images like that. But I can tell you that this won’t make you happier,” Vanity said quietly. “You take a memory out and it might hurt less, but the hole will remain. It doesn’t heal.”

“He’s gone. I don’t plan on being happy ever again,” she said as she looked at her hooves. “I just want to be able to do my job. I want to make sure that if one of us goes again, it’s me.”

“Are you sure? Because I really wouldn’t mind it if Doof goes before you,” Vanity chuckled. “We took a poll and I’m pretty sure he voted for himself.”

She gave a soft, mirthless chuckle, “That idiot. . .” She looked down towards the setting sun. “So. Will you do it, Vanity?”

The green-maned unicorn sighed, “I’ll be fed to an ursa major if it gets back to the Ministry I did this, but I’m supposed to be our squad’s morale officer. Just try to remember that if you ever want them, I’ll give your memories back. I’m not going to throw them away. Deal?”

“Deal,” she said as she closed her eyes. I felt his horn touch her forehead.

oooOOOooo

Big Macintosh and his Mari pony. Now Stonewing and Jetstream. I had to wonder what it was like to love somepony but never feel it in return. Actually, I’d be happy just knowing what it was like to love someone. ‘Jetstream, it’s in that place where he did that thing that time.’ Now she wouldn’t even remember that.

I had to get Glory out of here. Once we were together, we could free P-21...and I could work stuff out. Glory might be naive when it came to love, but she was a smarter muffin than me. Maybe she’d taken morale psycho-thinky classes like Vanity? I tried to pull my head together and draw a line between then and now.

Ugh, memory orbs. I didn’t care what Priest said about them, they were just no

good. I—oh. Hello, Enclave soldiers. I'd finally pulled my head together enough to notice that I wasn't in the air traffic control tower. Four of the black combat armored, grim faced soldiers surrounded me in a stark cinderblock room with my weapons gone and my hooves duct taped together. I looked from one scowling pegasus soldier to the next. Okay, this was tough, but I'd faced worse odds! At least I had a little buzz going.

"Sneaky trick with the memory orb. You guys put it up there, didn't you? Just knew I'd go after it." Okay, I'd have to magically take them all out with my telekinetic bullets, free my legs through sheer force of will, open a probably locked door, and take out the rest of the base with my bare hooves. I could handle this!

"Actually, I told them to put it there," a familiar mare said as the door opened. In stepped Morning Glory, wearing a freshly-laundered black Enclave uniform. Her lips smiled warmly, "Hello, Blackjack. Welcome to the Enclave."

Footnote: Level up

New perk added: Finesse – Your attacks show a lot of finesse...or maybe it's just dumb luck. Either way, you have a higher chance to score a critical hit.

Skill note: Speech (75)

13. Turnabout

“Ahem. . . hint hint?”

I think it would be fair to say that I’ve been in some hostile situations before. There have been places the Wasteland has shown me that simply said: ‘This place is going to kill you.’ The Boneyard, Pony Joe’s, the Fluttershy Clinic, Brimstone’s Fall. Heck, I’m pretty sure Hoofington was built two parts menace to one part creepy. Granted, there had been a few times when I hadn’t taken the Wasteland’s warnings seriously enough and paid for it, but that was my fault; the dangers of the Wasteland were usually fairly obvious.

In the Miramare operations center, all the usual decorations that came with the Wasteland had been cleaned away. The lights had been replaced, the terminals had been repaired, and the debris of two centuries had been swept aside and removed. With only a dozen pegasi, the Enclave had restored a little bit of civility to the Wasteland. And since it was civil, I was expected to put all my ammunition and weapons into a secure locker in the base’s security station. I appreciated the irony. I also appreciated the firearms they’d collected from around the base. They’d repaired the collection to pristine condition.

So why’d they issue beam weapons that were nigh nonfunctional to Glory’s team?

“I really wish I could have contacted you before you came to the base, Blackjack. We could have avoided the mess above,” Glory said with a warm smile as we trotted through the metal hallway. We had to be at least a hundred feet down, maybe more. The operations center at Miramare’d been designed to withstand anything short of a direct hit from a balefire bomb. Too bad that that’s exactly what had happened to the base. I figured only the shielding of a stable could have blocked the radiation. “I told them you’d probably come looking for me, but Operative Lighthooves was skeptical.”

Operative: there was a title that just screamed ‘gonna shoot you in the back’. That crimson buck just gave a genial chuckle, smiling casually as we walked through his base. The athletic pegasus been quick to forgive me for killing two of his team, seeming more interested in laughing at me gluing the rumps of two of his ponies to the floor. I wasn’t laughing; I was inclined to shoot everypony in the ops center—not kill, just shoot—till they started answering questions.

“Not that I’m not thrilled you’re okay, Glory. But what are they doing here?” I asked

as my mane itched all the way to my shoulders...which I worried was appropriate, since that's where Lancer had shot me. "And why did they take you away from P-21?"

"Why don't we hold off on questions for just a tick?," Lighthooves said as he trotted along ahead of us, "But for a start, our purpose here is simple: to bring peace and stability to the surface and in doing so protect the pegasus community of Thunderhead." It sounded like a well-rehearsed line. I'll bet...

They escorted us into a break room next to a pair of doors marked 'Command'. Inside sat a pegasus and... what was a unicorn doing wearing an Enclave uniform? Maybe...maybe the Enclave really weren't just out for themselves? But then what...this was confusing. The green buck pushed his lips together in annoyance as he adjusted the round glasses on his muzzle. The pegasus, a deeper blue that bordered on purple, gave me a frown that was probably much more honest than Lighthooves' pleasant grin.

"Ah, good. Blackjack, may I introduce Special Adjutant Minty Fresh and Sergeant Wind Whisper?" The unicorn nodded at the former name and the pegasus nodded at the latter. Lighthooves walked to the vending machine, popped out three cold Sparkle-Colas, and, hugging them with his wings, returned and passed one to me and one to Glory.

"What is a unicorn doing with the Enclave?" I asked, pointing a hoof at Minty Fresh. Said unicorn twisted his lips in a smirk. A very kickable smirk. Everything about him screamed 'kick me'. I'd have liked to oblige.

'Calm down, Blackjack; these are Glory's people,' I had to remind myself, taking a deep breath and trying to dial back my aggression just a smidge.

"Interested in signing up?" Operative Lighthooves asked with a grin. I gave him a look and he coughed awkwardly before continuing, "When we were forced, regrettably, to seal away the skies for our own protection, there were a small number of unicorns still in the clouds. Some worked in the weather factories, others in the war effort. Thanks to spells and talismans, they were able to remain, and their assistance to the Enclave has been incalculable."

I nodded, remembering Vanity standing on the cloud with Jetstream. "Alright. Obvious question done. Important question now: what are you doing with Morning Glory?"

"Blackjack, they're bringing me back from the dead," Morning Glory said with a smile.

I blinked and looked up and down at the gray mare. “Come again?”

“I was reported missing a week and a half ago. Then I was assumed KiF, killed in the field, when they found the rest of my unit in Weather Monitoring Four,” she said, almost looking embarrassed. “When Bonesaw had my samples and notes couriered to the Volunteer Corps at the Rainbow Dash Skyport, though, they immediately launched a search for me. Then they heard about our liberation of Brimstone’s Fall and snatched us up. I had no idea they were so close.”

“I’m sorry that we weren’t able to extract your other friend, too. I imagine it would have made your life easier, but the Sergeant only had orders to retrieve Morning Glory,” he said with an apologetic look. I was getting sick of that look. It was wrong on his face.

“Yeah, well, better you than whoever took him,” I replied. “So what are you all doing here?”

“Observing, for the most part. For years the de facto policy of the Enclave was isolationism. Due to the efforts of vocal and influential members of the community, like Morning Glory’s father, we’re experimenting with engagement. If we can help stabilize the surface, then that increases security at Thunderhead.” A perfectly reasonable explanation, so why did I want to grab Glory and run? “Understandably, there are power blocs in the wasteland that resist our efforts.”

“Yeah, I can only imagine how the Society and Collegiate feel,” I muttered, though I didn’t actually have a clue.

“We try to operate with a low profile; some ponies take offense to some of the Enclave’s policies,” Lighthooves said, all apologetic smiles. Yeah, policies like blocking out the sun; who would have a problem with that? “Ms. Morning’s ordeal was actually quite useful to us in terms of the information she’s gathered; now that we have her back and safe, we need to do some debriefing about all that she’s learned while out and about with you. And her discovery of the disease associated with raider behavior: a stroke of brilliance! I’m fairly sure that all of Thunderhead’s Medical Research Division is going to want a piece of this young lady. Figuratively speaking, of course.”

Something in my heart sank as I listened to all this. The idea that Glory would be leaving with me was growing more and more remote; she was getting her life back and then some. It was like me returning safe and sound to the stable, only better because her home didn’t suck.

“Actually, I was hoping I could stay down here with Blackjack,” she said brightly. Habazawa? I gawked at her in astonishment.

“You what?” I asked, wondering if it’d been my imagination.

“Well the surface is extremely hostile, but it’s not so bad. I can better serve the Enclave out in the field than doing work in some laboratory. After all, if I hadn’t been with you, the disease never would have been discovered. I’m sure Thunderhead will start working on a cure at once.” Glory seemed quite thrilled by the prospect, but what struck me was who else seemed happy about it. Lighthooves and Minty Fresh both looked quite pleased by this turn of events.

“I’m sure something may be arranged. There’s just the paperwork to fill out. Reports to ready. Interviews. It’ll just take a little more time.” The Operative looked at me, his hooves folding on the table in front of him. “I know you want to rescue your other friend too, but that job will be far easier with a half-dozen Enclave soldiers backing you up. If you don’t mind helping us out with some local trouble, you can put down some raiders and help Morning Glory gather more samples while we work.” He smiled at me. They were all smiling. Perfectly reasonable.

So why was my mane going nuts?

I really hated flying. It didn’t matter that I couldn’t actually see how high up we were; the fact we were in the air at all screamed to me that I was seconds from plunging down through the clouds and transforming into a tiny smear on the wasteland. The armored skywagon we were in was an ominous monster in and of itself, armored front to back. It was called a Vertibuck, I was told, after its ability to climb extremely quickly; I hoped that I wouldn’t get a demonstration of that particular ability. It was pulled by two pegasi in bulbous compartments mounted above and to either side of the rounded front, with baffle-shielded holes in the back for them to thrust through and armored windows. A magical thingy mounted between them apparently gave them the ability to steer and lift the huge mass of armor. It boasted more firepower than I’d ever seen, with two racks of missiles and two enormous energy cannon turrets at the front.

The Enclave ignored me, with the exception of the occasional laugh and the constant disapproving attention of Sergeant Wind Whisper. They wore reinforced black armor and either pistols or topnotch battle saddles with quality gear. I heard one complaining about lacking power armor support; I could only imagine flying Steel

Rangers, and it was not a pleasant image to imagine. Sergeant Wind Whisper then told the speaker to close his trap, and that was it for conversation for the remainder of the flight.

The target was a farmhouse turned raider nest. Aside from some meager crops in muddy fields, I didn't see much in the way of a farm. Just a single two-story structure and a barn. It seemed pretty isolated. "You're sure there are raiders here?" I asked the Sergeant once I'd gotten used to having dead grass underhoof again.

"Yes," she replied tersely.

I looked around. Field. Dead forest. "It's just, every raider nest I've come across had some victims nearby. A road or something they could prey on." I wasn't seeing anything like that here.

"They're here," she insisted. "Maybe you'd like to lead the way?" The enclave soldiers chuckled, quite keen on that plan.

I unslung my shotgun, loaded it with buckshot, and ratcheted a round into the chamber. "Why not?" That got some looks of surprise as I marched up towards the farm. If they were raiders, they would attack. If not, hopefully they'd come out and explain the situation to the death squad commandos behind me. Everything about this felt nine shades of wrong. I could hear the bony fucker shuffling the cards. What was my ante this time?

When I reached the door, I could smell it: that sweet rotten odor of putrefying flesh mixed with the stench of sewage. It was like a mouthful of rotten meat. I started approaching the door when the first raider appeared around the corner of the farmhouse. He had a pitchfork clenched in his mouth, and his work clothes were soaked in old blood. The tiny pupils, yellowed eyes and rictus grin took care of any other doubts I had about his sanity. Even then, though, something was wrong: raiders didn't wear farm clothes, no matter how bloodsoaked. I'd seen them in some ridiculous outfits, but they were never remotely normal. They seemed to have a psychological need for spikes and black clothes.

Of course, none of his apparel prevented me from taking off his head with two sprays of hot lead buckshot.

The E.F.S. gave me a few more exterior hostiles, but I had no idea if they were raiders or radroaches. "If you keep shooting them in the head, it's going to be impossible to get decent samples," Wind Whisper said softly and smugly behind me. I just looked at her and with a snick drew the dragon claw. Her smirk faded as I

kicked the door open.

“Security!” I yelled as I charged inside. I’d hoped for some yellow bars; all I saw were red. A pair of bucks and a young mare were gathered around a grisly feast: their mother. They screamed, whooped, and giggled that insane little chuckle as they charged right in, heedless that both of us were armed.

It felt like an execution.

My claw cleanly decapitated the front running filly with a clean, lucky hit. I caught the head in my magic and tossed it over my shoulder at the Sergeant backing me up. The second one had the thought to grab a cleaver and charge with it, swinging wildly. I blocked it with my PipBuck’s reinforced casing, then drove the dragon claw into his throat with my magic. His giggles became choked whines as I cut him from ear to ear. Let Wind Whisper take off his head.

The third lifted the rustiest revolver I’d ever seen. He cackled and drooled around the weapon, tongue trying to pull the trigger. Too rusty, it seemed. Shaking with maddened rage, he threw the revolver at me.

Wind Whisper’s shots passed by my head so close that they made my ears ring. The young buck jerked and then went still. Wind Whisper, her nice black combat armor mussed with blood, gave me a look. “Any more?” Apparently she knew about E.F.S.

“One,” I said, glancing up the balcony overlooking the living/dining room. I paused to examine the mother: partly cannibalized, but what shocked me was the amount of food I could see on shelves next to the dining room. Far more than their scraggly crop suggested possible. And there were apples! Where had an isolated farming family gotten their hooves on fresh produce like this? For that matter, Glory had suggested the disease spread through cannibalism or fluid transfer. No pony would turn to cannibalism with a stuffed larder like this!

Sergeant Wind Whisper just narrowed her eyes as she walked over the shelf and deftly flicked up a fresh red apple. “Want one?”

I did, but there was a raider to deal with. “Afterwards,” I said as I tossed it aside. I’d hoped our banter would have drawn him down to us, but he was still up there. I trotted up, humming the pony pokey loudly. Two doors. I went to the first. Pushing open the door, I saw the four bunk beds, the scattered blood, the toys and meager belongings. These were not rich ponies. These were fucking poor as you got ponies. I turned to ask Wind Whisper how the fuck they could have afforded all that food

when I saw she wasn't behind me.

She'd gone to the other door. I reached the doorway just as she kicked it open. I saw the red bar race across my E.F.S. and Daddy came flying out the door and wrapped his hooves around her neck; the two went through the railing and crashed down into the middle of the gory meal with such force that the table collapsed beneath them. Her wings were useless on her back, her rifles extending beyond his shoulders as he lowered his mouth to her throat and started to chew.

I didn't have any time for stairs. I ran at the balcony rail and leaped out over the two of them. My stomach and the back of my brain screamed like yearling foals as gravity took me right down atop both of them. The impact of my hooves snapped his back, but it didn't stop him from trying to eat! I put every bit of magic I could to lifting his jaw. When it pulled away enough, I wrapped my hooves around his head and pulled his head further and further back. Be strong. Suddenly there was a snap, and the forward half of his body went limp as well. Damn me, though: he wasn't still attempting to chew!

I shoved his corpse aside and saw the blood gushing from the injury in Wind Whistler's neck. I might know next to nothing about medicine, but I knew that wasn't good! I pressed my hoof to the wound as hard as I could and floated out a healing potion. It was translucent and milky... better than bleeding out. I forced it down her throat. Please work. Please work. Please work...

She suddenly jerked and took a shaky breath. I pushed her back down, warning, "Don't move so much. He almost tore out your throat."

Wind Whisper stared up at me, going red as I climbed off her. "Well... yeah..." she muttered as she rose. I believe the word you're looking for is 'thanks', Sergeant? Weak on her hooves, I helped her out of the farmhouse. The rest of her squad seemed to be amusing themselves with looting the barn and setting it on fire. I knew from the smoldering that it was futile; nothing burned well around Hoofington. I escorted her to the sky carriage, where she got another healing potion that smoothed the raw circle next to her windpipe.

Now that the Sergeant was in sight, the others busted their butts to clear out the farm house. I thought about how wrong everything here was. One gun. One. How the hay had these isolated farmers turned into raiders? If they ran into raiders, period, they'd have been lunch! Had they come across a raider and gotten bitten? Boy, that sure didn't sit well with me. Secret cannibal ponies? I couldn't see it. Damn it, why couldn't I be as smart as Glory, or, Celestia forbid, P-21? The Enclave brought the

contents of the pantry out in two metal crates. I smiled and levitated out an apple as Wind Whisper watched with round eyes. "Now I can enjoy some lunch," I said with a grin.

To my amazement she scowled and smacked it right out of the air with her wing. Her hoof mashed it to applesauce in the dirt. "That's Enclave property now. Keep your mouth off it or I'll shoot you." She turned to the soldiers and snarled, "Get that shit locked up and let's get going," she said crossly, trotting off to the pantry goods.

'Cuuuuunnnntttt!' Roared the back of my mind, sounding rather eerily like Deus. Oh well, I didn't need her stupid apple. I had Sugar Apple Bombs, and I munched them sullenly as they finished loading the 'samples.' As we lifted into the air, I suddenly regretted my timing for lunch as the carriage swung around. A pop and 'Sssssss' noise sounded off from either side of the armored vehicle.

Things might usually not burn well in Hoofington's rainy wasteland, but the two missiles transformed the farm house into a pyre that burned quite readily before the sky wagon turned back towards Miramare.

Helping out Sergeant Wind Whisper helped in one regard: the remaining Enclave soldiers seemed to back off a touch. They didn't let me wander just anywhere, but I no longer had one or two of the black-armored ponies following me around. My zone of permitted access expanded from the interrogation cell in security to the beds upstairs, the cafeteria, and the break room where Operative Lighthooves had sold me his plan: cooperate now and get help tomorrow.

"I don't like it, Glory." I muttered, stomping my hooves as we filed out of the break room. "Everything about this feels wrong."

Minty Fresh looked back at me, smirking as his horn glowed. "I like this, Glory. Everything wrong like this I like," my voice said back to me. I was hoping to give him a 'die in a fire' glare, but I was too shocked by the spell. "Relax, Security Mare. Everything is under our control," he said to me with a dismissive sniff before he looked at Glory. "I've got some notes to go over, then we can finish your debriefing. Best to get it all done here, right?" He was already striding away.

"Ugh, there! See? They're up to something!"

Glory sighed, looking up at me. "I know their methods are occasionally... unconventional..."

“Creepy is the word you’re looking for.”

“But they’re Enclave. I’m Enclave. We’re both working towards the same end: protecting pegasi and helping the surface.” She pressed a hoof to my chest. “I know you don’t trust them, but can you trust me?”

Not fair, Glory. Not fair at all. I sighed and bowed my head. “Fine.”

“Thank you, Blackjack. Please behave yourself,” she said as she walked off after Minty Fresh. I mentally went through my entire list of insults for stubborn mares twice. It was a short list. I’m not that inventive.

Of course, that didn’t stop me from poking around. Something was off...I caught the smell of a backed up toilet mixed with the smell of blood, but I couldn’t tell if the source was down here, or if my barding just needed a wash. I poked around, only to get stopped. This was then repeated. The third time, Sergeant Wind Whisper personally escorted me up to the first floor. She walked me all the way to the gift shop by the front doors. Her dark purple eyes sized me up, frowning at something she saw.

The dark navy mare looked me levelly in the eyes, then said softly, “You should leave.”

I blinked, surprised. After Lighthooves’s schmoozefest, the blunt suggestion was almost refreshing, “Come again?”

She stepped closer, her voice low. “You should leave here right now. Go after your friend.”

“I was under the impression that the Enclave was going to help me get him back,” I said calmly, arching a brow as I smiled. She didn’t look happy, not one bit. “Guess not, huh?”

“The Enclave has only one priority: protecting ourselves and pegasi. Period. Like our methods or not, that’s our job. It’s why we’re here. You aren’t Enclave and you’re not a pegasus, so you should go. Let us deal with Morning Glory,” she said as she scowled at me.

I looked at her, frowning. I couldn’t imagine Operative Lighthooves approving of her candor. “Shouldn’t that be ‘escort her back to the safety of Thunderhead?’” No response, only a smoldering glare. “Ah, I see. So there is something going on. Mind cluing me in?”

“I don’t know. It’s above my pay grade or interest to know. I don’t like the Operative’s

methods or mission, but he is in charge. You should not be here. You reek of fuckup. You're either going to compromise us or betray us."

I sighed, shaking my head. "Wow, and I thought Glory was bad in the literal department. What exactly are you afraid of?"

"Everything!" she hissed, sweeping her hoof across the decayed walls of the first floor. "Look at this place. Mutants and psychopaths, radiation, taint, enervation, ghouls and killer robots, hostile parties everywhere we turn, and we're supposed to help these freaks? Fuck them and fuck you," she said with a snarl, then gestured to her chest, "We have safety. We have security. The pegasi earned our prosperity and I will not see it compromised because some of us want to play Nurse Nightingale to the Wasteland! You want prosperity? Earn it!"

I looked at her levelly for a few moments. "Easy words from somepony that already has a good life. You want to tell me how those farmers were supposed to prosper? You saw those fields. I imagine they worked every day trying to get something to grow. Kinda hard when it rains constantly and we never see the sun."

"We have to do that!" she protested.

"Horseshit!" I snapped back at her. "Every second of every minute of every day? You couldn't even give folks some sun one day a week? If I didn't know better, I'd think you were trying to starve us to death." And I still wasn't sure they weren't. Worse, Wind Whisper didn't look sure either.

"I'm telling you that you should leave. I don't know what the Operative is planning. I just know that he's been talking with her all day since she's gotten here. I don't think he's after answers anymore. But it's not my job." She turned and started back towards the stairs leading down. "I didn't think I'd ever owe my life to a dirt pony, but I do. So I'm telling you now: get out. Go save your friend. Leave Morning to us," and without another word she walked back down the stairs.

Did I mention how much I hated this place?

There were too many things being watched down below, so I decided to sneak upstairs to peek at those safes in the larger offices. I tried to imagine what went on here. Generals looking at maps with grim expressions? Meetings with notes and minutes being taken? I saw a few posters of Princess Luna around and a few others with a creepy stare from the grinning mare of the Ministry of Morale. I leaned to the

left, leaned to the right. Yes, it definitely felt like her eyes were following me.

How the hay could anypony work with that looking at them?

I tried messing with a few of the terminals, almost pressing keys at random. The safes were lost causes as well, and from the broken bobby pins around them, somepony else had already failed at picking them. Most of them I couldn't even imagine how to access. Then, though, I happened across one terminal that was still logged in after 200 years. I looked over at the unimpressive oil painting hanging askew on the wall of a fat white buck straining his uniform. Colonel Cupcake. Most of the data was corrupted, but there were a few files that stuck out.

10-11-XXXX: I don't care how good they are, the Marauders need to be brought to heel. They've lost three lieutenants in as many months. Send that big red bastard to the academy for a week and throw a bar on his helmet. Better yet, just throw a battlefield commission on him and make him a lieutenant. And if he protests, have him shot for insubordination! We can't have some of the most effective fighters on base tangentially controlled. At least make him a Sergeant or something!

I recalled the devotion the other Marauders held for Macintosh. Somehow, I had a hard time imagining him as an officer giving orders. He lead by being there and doing what he does best: being steadfast and courageous. I moved down to the next interesting-looking file.

11-4-XXXX: Thank you for your condolences, your majesty. The loss of Big Macintosh has been a blow to Miramare and the ponies he served with. There have been some severe depression issues among the members of the Marauders; I believe that it may be best to rotate them off the lines and separate them. I know a security officer is needed in Zebratown, and I think Twist might be useful as an instructor at the Camp Ponyton training center. I believe that if the unit is to remain cohesive to drum up enlistment, as the MoI suggests, we need to get them past this hump.

I winced as I leaned back, blinking at the amber letters. If the Marauders were shaken by Stonewing's death, then the loss of Big Macintosh must have destroyed them. The more I thought about it, the more it felt like his death, his sacrifice, had sent ripples through Equestria. Applejack had bitten off her cousin's head over the bullet used, all the worse given it'd been one developed at Ironshod Firearms R&D. Whoever that mare was in that memory by the lake, she'd been left all alone and pregnant. The Marauders hadn't just lost their core, but each other as well.

12-13-XXXX: When the Ministry sends us something to 'look at' you might want to remind them not to send the thing in a sealed container! We've been trying for weeks to get this damned thing open. I'm tempted to use it as a paperweight, but the MWT wants to know what Ironshod is up to. I'm pretty sure the OIA wants to take it too, and you know how grabby those bastards can get. I've already got a fine crop of hemorrhoids just dealing with the zebra, so see if you can magic it open or something! If I'm called to Canterlot, just use the key taped under my desk.

I reached under the desk, scraping with my hoof. There! The end of my hoof brushed against the duct tape underneath it. I peeled it away and the key softly

thumped to the mouldy carpeting. Carefully, I lifted it, slipped it into the lock and twisted, anticipating treasures! Instead, I received some two-century-old paperwork. I looked at the moldy papers and swept them aside with a sigh. Clearly ponies before the bomb had a weird paper fetish. That was the only explanation. Then I frowned as I saw something on a little shelf in the back: a black box as long as my foreleg. I cautiously levitated it out.

It was exactly like the box I'd seen in Ironshod R&D, except this one was much heavier. I reached out and touched it with my hooves. There was a click and the case opened. The bullet within was nearly a hoof long, the tip seemingly coated in gleaming silver. Something was inscribed on the base of the casing: 'BBP-001 #5.' A sudden sustained burst of clicking from my foreleg informed me that it was also radioactive! I snapped the box closed and tossed it into my bag. 'Silver bullet' appeared on my inventory screen.

"Silver bullet? That's it?" I shook the PipBuck and thumped it with my hoof. "You can magically tell me the value of radigator meat without ever coming across a radigator, but you can't do better than 'silver bullet'? You are so fired, PipBuck." A bullet this big could only fit in a gun like Deus' massive cannons.

I blinked as my ear twitched. I heard Glory talking from somewhere nearby. Finally! A chance to speak with her without our escorts. I trotted towards a far office, but then paused outside the door as I frowned softly at what I heard. "I can better serve Rainbow Dash out in the field than work in some extremely hostile laboratory. Thunderhead is like a disease; the surface is a cure."

"Glory?" I called as I pushed the door open. The room was empty. My mane felt like it had the mange as I tugged the glasses down a little and stared at the empty office. I had that same feeling as back in the classroom. Somepony was in here, whether I could see them or not.

And Glory couldn't turn invisible.

I looked over at the bookcase and ripped the pages from a ruined pre-war tome. "You want to play hide and seek? Fine." Manipulating a cloud of particles wasn't much different from digging in the dirt; as long as I wasn't trying to do something fancy with them. I guided a flurry of flakes of paper in around the office, sweeping it back and forth. Then the whirling flurry outlined an equine shape.

Right next to me.

There was a soft 'pfft pfft' and a numbness spread down my neck. I touched the

side of my head as the world fell out beneath my hooves. I saw blood on my hoof. ‘Sweet Celestia, did I just get shot again?’ I thought as everything went to black.

“This is an absolute outrage, Operative Lighthooves. Completely unacceptable. You told me that we were past this. I vouched for Blackjack and she willingly worked to help Sergeant Wind Whisper. Now somepony shoots her twice within a facility under your control? What is going on here?” I’d never seen Glory so livid before. She practically quivered with rage as she bared her teeth. “Is this the best the security apparatus can do?”

I had to admit, lying on the operating table with some fine, fresh, potent healing juice flowing into me, that I was really glad that rage wasn’t directed at me. Operative Lighthooves was trying the nice routine and it wasn’t working, “She killed two of my team entering this facility. Somepony must be bearing a grudge to shoot her from behind like that.”

“Do I have to contact the Enclave Operations Director about this? Or my father? Now find whoever did this to my friend at once,” she demanded in a low, dangerous voice I’d never heard before. “Now get out of here at once. I need to talk to my patient.”

No more nice buck routine. I could see Glory had crossed a line; his eyes no longer twinkled merrily as he smiled at both of us. Instead they looked at her like she was a problem to be removed. Worst of all though, he hadn’t stopped smiling. “Of course, Morning Glory,” he said politely with a nod of his head before he stepped out.

I slowly rose to my hooves, groaning. Wind Whisper had found me and gotten me downstairs. Fortunately, whatever the weapon had been, it packed far less punch than Lancer’s sniper rifle had. The Enclave had top notch medical supplies, that was for sure. “I can’t believe somepony shot you.”

“Everypony shoots me. It’s like it’s an achievement: I shot Security.” I took a deep breath, “Glory. There’s something very wrong here.” I said as I rubbed my throbbing head. She looked sympathetic, floating over a bottle of water. “I heard your voice up there. It was you talking about how the Enclave was bad.”

“What?” She seemed scandalized. “Blackjack, I would never say that. I’m a part of the Enclave. I have been my whole life. Just like my father and mother...” she trailed off as guarded Glory returned and looked at me in worry. “Are you sure that’s what you heard?”

"I..." I rubbed my head. Had I been sure? I'd thought so, but getting shot twice in the head did little to help a pony's memory. "I think that's what I heard. And that not the only thing. That 'raider' nest was just wrong. Isolated raiders away from victims? Tons of food available, but no clue how they got it?"

"Maybe they scavenged it? Maybe they traded some infected meat; you've seen ponies eating it. They could have been exposed in any number of ways." Glory gave me a sympathetic smile, "I know you don't want to be here. A few more hours and we'll take the Vertibuck to Flank and save P-21, and then we can continue together. I meant it when I said I wanted to stay with you. You've done more good on your own than the VC has since we got here a few weeks ago."

Okay, now she was making me blush. Still, there was something else I wanted to ask, "Glory. Who's your father? Cause what I just saw a second ago was not the mousy, blush-at-everything Glory I've known." The Glory I'd seen a second ago had been downright bitchy.

She now looked incredibly nervous. "I... an... well. This is awkward," she swallowed, "Well. My father is Councilpony Sky Striker. He's one of the... ah... elected leaders of Thunderhead." Oh Celestia, could you lube up before fucking me with these little revelations?

"Your father is a politician?"

She nodded, "Yes. A prominent one. He was the one who helped form the Volunteer Corps. He's worked closely with the Enclave for years, trying to make it a reality." She swallowed. "I told you I entered medical school because I was seen as a prodigy, but... really, that's only half true. My father's name carries a lot of weight in Thunderhead. He used to be Enclave security and he was instrumental in dealing with a dragon attacking the city ten years ago. He's something of a local hero to a lot of ponies."

But not, I wagered, to Operative Lighthooves. "And he doesn't have enemies? How do you know Lighthooves isn't going to kill you just to get back at him?"

She sighed and frowned, "Because I was already killed, remember? My father gave a heartbroken speech about the sacrifice he'd paid, but how he still believed in the goals of the Volunteer Corps. He even demanded the Enclave offer better protection to the VC." Glory put her hoof on my shoulder as she continued, "I know you're suspicious of some of the things the Enclave does, but they're good ponies trying to protect ponies. Their methods might be sneaky sometimes, but I swear that in the end they're trying to do what's right. Like us."

I sighed, knowing I wasn't going to break through to her on this. Not yet. I had to find some evidence, some something to convince her to get the hell out of here. Once we rescued P-21, I'd walk her right to the Skyport if she wanted, but I had to get her away from Operative Lighthooves. "Yeah, I guess," I muttered, looking away.

"You rest. Lighthooves said we'd go get P-21 in a few hours. I need to finish recording a message to father about everything that's happened here." She gave me one final pat and then slipped from the medical room. I watched the door close, then sighed.

How were you supposed to deal with somepony this deep in denial? There had to be something here that I could use to convince her to leave with me. Unfortunately—barring Glory being right and me just being paranoid...but, hello! Wasteland!—I couldn't see how I was supposed to do that from this one little room. I didn't even have my bags, let alone my guns! Plucking the healing potion feed from my PipBuck, I slipped to the door and peeked out. Yup. There was a guard. Of course there was a guard. Sweet Celestia, why couldn't I get an apple thrown to me every now and then?

I really didn't want to kill more pegasi if I could help it, at least not until I had Glory firmly on my side. I looked at the drugs on the shelves. Buck and Med-X, I knew. Mintals? Dash? I would have loved it if my PipBuck could be bothered to explain what these chems were for! Rebound... Alcohol! Yeeech... that was no Wild Pegasus! Tasted horrible. Aspirin. Chloroform. Acetaminophen? Words were hard enough on their own, now doctors were making new ones up?

Then I spotted it and thought, in my expert medical opinion, that this should work just fine. I popped open the door, and as the guard turned to look I smashed an empty oxygen tank upside his head. His helmet saved him from losing his brains, for which I was grateful. He staggered and swayed as I grabbed him with my hooves and magic and hauled him into the medical room. A second smack upside the head reduced him to a twitching heap. I stripped his black, reinforced armor and sidearm before heaving him onto the table and strapping him down. I put the the healing potion supply tube in his mouth and started the drip. Well, at least he was still breathing.

I wiggled into his uniform, tucking as much mane out of sight as I could. I was able to hide my compact horn, and hopefully nopony would realize that my 'wings' were just flaps of linen. It didn't have to be a good disguise, so long as it worked. With a sidearm in my hoof holster and a baton in my belt, I almost felt good.

Unfortunately, my freedom didn't seem to be doing me much good as I trotted through the underground tunnels of the Miramare base. I kept reaching sections that were clearly damaged by the balefire blast. One maintenance room had its floor collapsed into some concrete pipes. From the radiation clicks, I wondered what the odds were that they connected to the outside? I smiled, wondering if the Enclave were crazy enough to poke through a radioactive crater to check for entrances to their secret base.

Ahah. A door with a guard. That meant something useful, or at least important enough for a guard. He stared ahead with a bored, patient expression as I trotted over and adopted the same position on the far side of the door from him. "Boring, huh?"

"Yeah," he sighed softly.

"Can't believe they're making us guard this," I muttered.

"I know. They should just put the damned things on and be done with it. It's not like that Security mare will be able to do anything to them," he said with a bored sigh. Then he blinked as he looked at me, my 'wings'... my Pipbuck... my grin. The automatic pistol pressed into his ear canal. He swallowed and muttered, "Aw...shit."

I had him open the door and we went inside some sort of high-tech maintenance bay. Some electrical cord and duct tape later, I had him tied up and now carried two automatic pistols. Then I got a good look at what he'd been guarding.

I admit that I can be somewhat irrational when it comes to weaponry. I still had warm and tingly feelings in my crotch about the IF-88 Ironpony. What sat in this bay were two pieces of machinery so over-the-top lethal that I nearly climaxed at first sight. From the four sleek rifles to the glossy armored plates to the wicked scorpion tail at the rear, there was nothing about this armor that I didn't love. Had I the slightest clue how to use it, I'd have been happy for the rest of my life. But this armor looked like it was made to fly.

'Operative Lighthooves' was written on one; 'Sergeant Wind Whisper' on the other. If I couldn't use them, then I sure-as-Celestia didn't want either of those two using them against me. I looked at the shelves of wonderglue, duct tape, scrap metal, and turpentine. I looked at the taped-up pegasus and smiled, "I wonder just how much I can do in five minutes. . ."

Four and a half minutes later I left, confident that those suits of power armor wouldn't be used anytime soon and that I owed the Enclave a doozy of a repair bill. I could

only imagine how hard it was to get a suit of that armor on with all the seams filled with glue or fly in armor soaked in turpentine. I continued my way around the loop, and that was when I noticed it. If the Enclave had left everything a mess I probably wouldn't have noticed the scent of fecal matter.

I peeked around the corner at another guard and slowly approached. The mare looked over and immediately her eyes widened. I knew her; she had sat her butt in a pool of wonderglue for me. Her tail had been shaved to a stub in the process of freeing herself. I raised the pistol faster than she could draw her own. "Hi. Now, I said it last time and I'll say it again. I don't want to kill you. I just want some answers." I knew that stench creeping out around the hatch. I'd smelled it hours before. "Open the door."

She swallowed hard, "I can't. It's locked, and I don't have the key." I carefully took her gun from her holster and added it to my growing collection of sidearms. Then I looked at the lock. I doubted I could pick it AND watch her. I glanced at the puce pegasus, my lips pressed together, and transferred the gun to my mouth. Then I put as much of my telekinesis into the lock as I could, focused, and twisted. The resistance made my eyes water, then there was a metallic crack and the door swung open. "There. Inside." I said after transferring the Enclave pistol back into my magical grip.

The door opened and a physical wave of stench rolled out. I saw her visibly recoil, tremble, and then puke at the reek. Clearly she'd never been to a Pony Joe's. I poked her in the rump with the sidearm as she moved into a storeroom that had been converted into a prison. A half-dozen cells each held a foaming raider who jerked against their bonds and snapped at us in desperation as their haunting giggles filled the room. Some had chewed off their lips and tongues, greeting us with bloody grins and pinprick yellow eyes. This was the end result of raider evolution. If they couldn't eat somepony else, they'd eat themselves.

I was more interested in the tan pegasus strapped to a frame. She was missing her wings; they'd been amputated, and her cutie mark was just a round scar over an outline of a cloud and lightning bolt. The brand looked old. The amputation looked recent. Her eyes spotted me and started to shake as my prisoner started to vomit again. "Please... please... no more needles," she begged brokenly. I looked over at a tray holding several large sample syringes. Many of them held blood.

"Unlock her, now." I ordered my prisoner, who was just enough together to realize that I was in the perfect mood to toss her into the nearest cell. The puce pegasus hurried to unlock the tan prisoner pony. "What happened to your wings and your

cutie mark?" I asked her softly.

I could see the look of pain on her face at the question. She wasn't going to answer, and what would I have done if she had? Torn off the wings of my prisoner? After a moment, she sobbed, "It's my mark. . . the mark of all who leave the Enclave. I'm a Dashite." Once she was freed of the frame she took a few weak steps.

"What were they doing?" I asked her softly as I ground the gun against the back of my prisoner's head.

"I don't know. They kept giving me shots and injections. They were trying to get something to work," she was visibly falling apart before my eyes as she tried to flutter her missing wings and sobbed. It'd be like if they'd cut off my horn.

"Get on the frame," I ordered my prisoner, and she reluctantly moved into position while I buckled her into place. Then I turned to the mare, "You can get out if you go. . ."

She lay in a heap, the top of her head missing. I didn't think, I simply grabbed everything in range of my magic and threw it around the room. In one spot, the debris bounced right off an invisible barrier. I'd never lifted two pistols before. Theoretically, it should be possible. Two pistols came up, aimed right at the void, and I unloaded a spray of fire that would have done a small machinegun proud. There was a shimmer and Adjutant Minty Fresh appeared, bleeding from numerous holes in his armor as he staggered back.

He tried to bring the silenced pistol around, but I dropped both my weapons and seized it in my own telekinetic grip. As we struggled, I ducked down, spun around, and slammed both rear hooves into his face. That took care of what remained of his concentration. I quickly picked up all the guns; a dropped firearm was a useful firearm for a unicorn. Then I picked him up with my magic and hooves and slammed him upright against the bars. "Why?" I demanded as I glared into his eyes.

He spat in my face, smirked. . . and then I received help from an unexpected source. The raider within hadn't been as tightly secured as the others; she still had her limbs. And now she lunged at the bars and bit down hard into the side of his neck. He screamed as she started to chew.

"Why? What are you doing here?" I said as I slammed against him, pushing his exposed limbs through the bar. The raider giggled in delight at the banquet I provided.

"Fuck! I don't know. . . I don't. . ." He screamed as he tried to fight his way free.

I forced more of his limb between the bars. "The fuck you don't! You're one of the

Enclave's special unicorns. You fucking know!" I roared into his face.

"I don't! I don't! Sweet Luna save me I don't!" He screamed as tears poured down his face. There was a wet ripping sound followed by frantic swallowing. He started to pass out, and I levitated out one of the healing potions from the medical room and shoved it down his throat. He choked as he swallowed, then screamed again. "The disease! We need... It doesn't..." he struggled to speak as the raider chewed frantically.

"Tell me!" I roared, giving him another healing potion.

"It doesn't affect pegasi!" He screamed as the raider gave a twist and pulled his forelimb off. I administered another healing potion. "We don't know why! They're immune! Sweet goddess stop!"

He'd shot me twice in the head. He'd killed this unarmed and mutilated pegasus prisoner from invisibility like a coward. I could easily see the blood on his hooves, the fuck I was going to stop! "Then why do this?" I demanded and shoved his rear leg through the bars. The raider inside squealed in delight.

"Because-" he started to say when his head exploded in front of me in a flash of crimson light.

Operative Lighthooves stood in the doorway, his battle saddle on and twin beam rifles pointed at me. He looked... impressed. Perhaps a little bit nauseous. "I'd have sworn that Minty Fresh would have died rather than talked. Clearly I didn't anticipate interrogation by raider. I'll have to remember that one."

If I could have drawn and fired I would have, but he was on a hair trigger. He continued, his voice low and controlled. "If you'd just waited a day... just a day... all this would have been nice, clean and wrapped up. But no. You come in here, complicate everything, disrupt my operation, and then feed my trusted Lieutenant to a raider to make him talk..." He blinked and then smiled, "I don't suppose I could interest you in a job, could I? The Enclave security forces could really use you."

"Fuck you," I replied, not eloquent or catchy, but I was in a really bad mood at the moment. "So you vaporize me now?" He was clearly thinking about it. I saw him glance down at the ravenous raider pulling more of Minty Fresh through the bars before glancing back at me. Yeah, he was definitely thinking about it.

"I really should. You are not a pony for me to underestimate again. It would be wise to kill you," he took a deep breath, "But you have great value to my operations. Handing you over to Deus and Usury will calm a lot of air for me," he replied matter

of factly. It was refreshing to hear someone wanted to turn me over for something other than a ridiculous amount of caps. "So you are going to strip and you are going to walk very politely to security's jail. Then I can finish up here and things can get back to normal."

Carefully, I shucked the disguise I'd adopted. Two more pegasi entered; one freed the pegasus I'd strapped up and the other gathered my gear. "Clean that up," Lighthooves said to the released pegasus, gesturing to the raider and her green unicorn snack. "Fortunately, he completed his work before going looking for you."

"Why?"

"That's a question that is going to drive you crazy if you keep asking it," he replied casually, but I could feel his beam weapons aimed for my head. "Suffice it to say that Councilpony Sky Striker has forgotten that the role of the Enclave is to protect the Pegasus people from any and all threats. Even from our own good intentions. I really have nothing against you or Miss Glory. I'd be content to let you both go if you weren't so terrifyingly effective at times, Blackjack. But Glory's 'death' didn't make her father see the folly of his ways."

"So what will?" I asked as we reached the jail and he marched me inside, shutting the door behind me.

I could tell part of him wanted to make me squirm, not because I'd killed his men, but simply because he was a bastard. Then he replied simply, "Her defection." He looked at the guards. "No guns. No batons. Take a Buck, a Hydra, and shot of Stampede if you need to and beat her into paste with your bare hooves. There's two of you against a girl. If she tries something, yell for help and then kill her." He paused, looking at me with that sick smile, "She will try something."

With that he turned and left the room with my unarmed and very apprehensive guards. I paced back and forth, my amber gaze moving from one to the other. "So. He's a shining example of all the Enclave stands for. What all of you stand for," I said as I stared them in the eye.

"The moron knew she was getting in trouble by coming down here. It's her own damn fault," the first muttered with a sneer.

"Shut up. Don't talk to the prisoner," said the second. He also had a tail that was shorn short.

"Oh, relax. She's got nothing. She's in here and she's going to sit there," he said with a dull chuckle.

There was a crackle over the speakers. "My name is Morning Glory. I'm making this statement to notify the ponies of Thunderhead that I can no longer tolerate your callous and cruel abandonment of the surface. We live in our clean and safe world while below us is suffering and death."

I stared at the speaker in the wall. It was her voice but... off. "How?" But then I knew.

"Minty Fresh. I'll give it to that horned goat, he could magic around words like nopony's business. Make anypony say whatever he wanted," the first guard chuckled. "Pop that into a holotape recording and voila. Instant confession."

Glory's voice continued, slightly dull and monotone, as if her normal inflections were blurred together, "Years ago my mother left the Enclave because she realized she could no longer stand by while ponies suffered. She believed in Rainbow Dash. I believe in Rainbow Dash. The cowardice I see in your faces sickens and appalls me. At least some of you joined the Volunteer Corps, but it's not enough. I won't suffer foolishness any longer. I can better serve Rainbow Dash out in the field than work in some extremely hostile laboratory. Thunderhead is like a disease; the surface is a cure."

"Minty's been listening to her talk for hours. He could probably make her sound like she was turning tricks on Red Rainbow street," the first soldier chuckled.

"Shut the fuck up man. Stop pissing her off," the other said as he looked at me in fear. "You didn't see what she fucking did to him."

I closed my eyes, trying to ignore the tirade against Thunderhead. They were things she might normally have said, but stripped of her Enclave loyalty and pride in Thunderhead. I could imagine Rainbow Dash telling off her own kind for being too scared to fly down and help.

"Just what is she gonna do? What?" he taunted.

I looked from one to the other. "Quick question: Which one of you has the keys?"

The second guard looked at the first while the first's eyes went wide. I stared right into his eyes and toggled S.A.T.S. Three telekinetic bullets straight to his face. Luna must have been listening in; his head exploded before me. Coming out of it, I looked over and my glare drilled into the second guard's eyes. I didn't talk, threaten, or even blink as he started to shake, "Get the keys and open the door," I said slowly. "I don't want to kill you," I added. But I would if he did anything besides what I told him to do right now.

He shook as he dug out the keys from his friend's pocket and fought to control his shaking enough to unlock my cell. I could smell he'd wet himself; good. I stepped out, still staring at him before I nodded to the cell behind me. He stepped in and I closed the door. "Don't come out," was all I told him as I searched his ally and found the Buck, a large syringe marked with a four headed dragon critter, and the injection kit I figured was Stampede.

Then I heard Glory screaming. Not even the thick metal door marked 'Interrogation' could cut out her wails. I beat on it with my hooves, scrabbled at the lock with my magic. Nothing. I looked at the door past it: 'Observation' and kicked it open. It was empty save for a metal table. Then all my world turned red with rage.

Through the window I could see Glory bent over the table inside, one buck pinning her torso and the other fighting to keep her rump in place. It could have been textbook rape if the skin of her flank wasn't darkening, reddening, and smoking as some chemical burned away her cutie mark. The sunrise on her flank set forever, darkened to a dull hemisphere.

I slammed my hooves against the mirror. The glass rattled, but aside from drawing a glance they continued their work. One pulled out a brand; I'd seen the mark less than an hour ago burned in the flank of the Dashite prisoner. He stretched it into the flame of a blow torch and I watched as it slowly turned red, then yellow. I rammed my hooves as hard as I could into the glass, but it didn't break. Operative Lighthooves gave a long-suffering sigh as he looked at me from the far side of the interrogation room window.

The brand touched her blackened cutie mark, and it disappeared entirely behind a veil of smoke and a hiss and a scream that punched straight to my core. Do better. I chowed down on the Buck, shot myself full of Hydra, and then without the slightest hesitation injected myself with the Stampede. All the world went red in a scream that went on and on and on.

I knew it had been minutes because everything still felt warm, but cooling, when my brain restarted. I sat painted head to hoof in blood. Copper fluid filled my mouth, as well as strings of meat. One metal table jutted through the gaping hole in window; the other had been twisted out of shape. I could only count the dead by their torsos. Little else remained. The door hung open, and I had the furious certainty that none of these bodies belonged to Lighthooves. But all that didn't matter. Glory was crying.

I'd failed her. Failed to convince her of the risk. Failed to find the evidence in time. Failed to put together Lighthooves's plot in time. Failed to reach her. Her cutie mark was gone, taken by the ponies she'd trusted completely. And it was my fault. The raw brands were dark and oozing, a ring of black filled in with glistening angry red showing a circle with a cloud and lightning bolt within. A Dashite symbol.

"Come on," I rasped, my heart beating furiously in my chest and pounding in my skull. Gently I nudged her with my nose. "Come on," I groaned, then coughed as I hung my head and fought for my breath. We need to get out of here."

"Leave me," she whispered, almost too soft for me to hear.

I collapsed next to her. "Nope," I replied; glad to be off my hooves. Lighthooves had said 'beat her into paste.' Now I had a literal example all over me. "Not gonna do it."

"I've ruined everything," she said as she sobbed into her hooves.

Oh yeah. Been here before. And even though I thought I might pass out and was covered in pony goo I reached out and pulled her into a hug. "You haven't ruined everything, alright? He played you. It's his fault."

"I can't ever go home. I've ruined my father's work. The Volunteer Corps. Everything," she said as she wept with tiny little gasping sobs.

I patted her back gently. "Only if you give up," I said quietly. "If you give up, you're dead. One way or another."

She sniffed but finally opened her lavender eyes to stare up at me. "Thanks Blackjack," she whispered softly, "But I still feel like I messed up."

I just smiled, "Well, at least your fuckup didn't kill anypony. I've heard there have been ponies whose fuckups killed millions." I nudged her to her feet, like trying to help a foal walk again, despite the look of pain on her face. "Now let's get the fuck out of here."

"And wash," she said in a shaky little voice, "I really need to wash bad. I need to get this place off me. And..." she swallowed hard, fighting to smile, "You really need one too. You're gross right now."

"Oh? The raider look doesn't suit me?" Okay, that was a stupid thing to ask. Now I looked at the eviscerated torsos that I'd ripped apart with my hooves and teeth and prayed it was just the drugs at work. I rose to my hooves and step by step we struggled out the door. Thank goodness all my stuff was in security; I ignored the squishy sensation as I pulled it on. I could only see three bars on my E.F.S. down

here, and they were yellow. I would come back and loot the place properly once Glory was safe.

We made our way outside. I figured we could get to the camp trailers and then. . .

Everything exploded.

Sweet fucking Celestia, why the fuck does everything explode?! Why!

I pulled myself to my hooves, the face of the building collapsing behind us to bury the front doors. The Vertibuck swung around before us, its near-silent motion eerie for something so large, its turrets lining up to take a shot. "Glory, fly!" I shouted, but she was too hurt or too overcome to do more than curl up like a foal. I staggered as fast as my hooves would carry me. I had to lead it away from her before it could take us both out; with luck, they'd go for the running target and assume that they could take care of her later. My heart was still thudding in my chest as I weaved back and forth erratically, taking out the assault carbine and loading armor piercing rounds.

My 'armor piercing' rounds turned out to be pretty overrated; the bullets couldn't even damage the machine's windows, much less its armor. It's guns, on the other hand, spewed rapid fire bursts of glowing death that blew small craters in the tarmac around me. I leaped and rolled for my life, chips of flying concrete stinging my hide. The roar of the guns kept me moving and scrabbling for cover as I thought desperately of anything I had that could put a dent in it! "Okay. This is getting ridiculous!" I shouted as I staggered and tried a clip of explosive rounds. They just made pretty flashes across the reinforced glass protecting the two pegasi keeping it aloft. I could just make out the pilots in their armored pods grinning at me! They were fucking playing with me!

I needed more gun.

I needed a bigger bullet.

And, with a mental click, I realized I had both.

I swallowed as I dropped the carbine and pulled out Trottenheimer's Folly. The pistol's breach swung open with a heavy thump. I took out the black case with my mouth, the magical lock clicking open as the BBP fell free. I slipped the shell in as another burst of light hit the tarmac next to me, blowing me off my hooves and peppering me with more shrapnel. I really was tired of getting shot at today. Actually, make that in general! I saw the heavy pistol nearby and pulled it over with my magic. I snapped it closed as the Vertibuck came by for another pass.

My turn. I levitated the pistol and activated S.A.T.S. Strange arcane marks appeared

on my E.F.S. as the weapon did... something... with my PipBuck. I could only target one shot, which was good, given I only had one. Then I started—mentally, of course—as words appeared in my vision like on a terminal.

>PipBuck synchronization: complete.

>Blood pattern analysis: confirmed.

>Magical field analysis: confirmed.

> Authorization confirmed.

>Warning! BBP loaded. BGP armed.

>Do you wish to fire? Y/N?

If I hadn't been frozen in magical stillness I would have screamed. What kind of gun asks if you want to fire? I toggled yes over and over again.

>Firing.

A white field of energy wrapped itself around me, locking me in place. A second field formed a cone projecting forward towards the Vertibuck. I couldn't move! I couldn't breathe! The armored skywagon lined up its shot perfectly. Then I felt the trigger pull.

The recoil made a twenty-foot chunk of ground jerk around me as the world went red. The magical fields held me and the weapon steady, and the only thing that remained in my ears was the roaring noise. I needed to run. I'd stayed put for too long! I could imagine another pair of missiles heading in to blow me into...

The Vertibuck was gone.

As was the air traffic control tower.

As was a circle of clouds.

Distant stars twinkled at me as if waving before I slumped over on my side. As it happened, this gave me a perfect view of a hovering form that could only be Operative Lighthooves. Of course the fucker would escape on his own while the Vertibuck took me out. Somehow he'd managed to get into his power armor, too; I hoped he had scrap metal scratching at a green and tender place.

Lying like this, I was an easy target; all he had to do was take the shot. He hovered in place, and I could almost feel him looking down at me. I narrowed my amber eyes and lifted Folly up, my focus making the huge armored pistol shake. I took a

deep breath and steadied myself, pointing it at him. Like a flare, he flew straight up towards the cloud layer.

“Bang,” I rasped before I fell on my face with a groan.

I’d lost. It was like walking out of the hospital; sure, I was alive and breathing, but that bastard had hurt Glory and gotten away with his doctored confession. I had no clue how much damage it would do to her father. I honestly didn’t care. I just knew that the thought of what he’d done to her cause had carved out that shining light of optimistic hope inside her.

‘Not fair, you bony fuck. Not fair. Play your games with me,’ I thought as the rain began to drizzle once more. ‘Fuck with me all you want. Not her. Not P-21.’

‘Oh, can’t I fuck with everypony?’ I could almost hear that card-dealing bastard reply as I looked at the truncated air control tower. The hole in the clouds had closed up, but I could still remember those beautiful jewels in that terrible black. ‘I used him to fuck with her. Used her to mess with you. Used you to screw with him. You’re a piece in the game, just like everypony is.’

‘I’m not. I’m not your tool. My friends aren’t.’ I thought as I tried to pull Glory together. I wish I had a regeneration talisman on me; I wish my horn wasn’t so incompetent that I couldn’t even manage a healing spell for her.

‘Oh. You’re not? You don’t want to be a player, that makes you a card.’ That bony cheating bastard shuffled the deck in the back of my mind. ‘And what, I have to wonder, makes you different from everypony else? You think you’ve got virtue? Friends? You’re broken goods travelling with damaged wares, Blackjack. But don’t worry, I don’t mind busted things.’ I could hear the cards being dealt as he chuckled, like bones in a steel drum. ‘Ante up.’

The clack of power armor announced the arrival of Sergeant Wind Whisper. Reeking of turpentine fumes, she could evidently fly without her helmet. I looked up at her from where I sat beside Glory. I could kill her: three telekinetic bullets right to her head. But I didn’t want to. I was burned out, beaten, and my heart still hadn’t stopped thundering in my chest. But I could kill her.

“We’re withdrawing from here,” she said formally, not taking her eyes off me. The two pegasi following her had shorn-short tails: the pair I’d spared earlier. They looked at me now like I was a mutant dragon. Maybe I half looked the part. “The Operative

took our flight pass, so we'll have to head to the Skyport."

"What will you report to your superiors?"

"The truth. You attacked and destroyed an Enclave security operations base in the Miramare Air Station. That I heard the confession of Morning Glory broadcast over the speakers. That Operative Lighthooves was involved in some sort of project regarding the raiders." She said very matter of factly before she looked up at the remains of the air traffic control tower. "I will also recommend... strenuously... that we not attempt any retaliatory strikes against you."

"It didn't happen like that. That's not what happened," Morning Glory whimpered as she hung her head. "I'm not a Dashite. I'm not like her."

"That's what I know and what I heard. You find something else, have it couriered to me... specifically to me. Otherwise my wings are clipped." She looked back at the base. "We took care of the raiders for you. Anything that remains is yours."

Thanks for small favors. "Right," I muttered softly. The three started to fly away. "Wind Whisper," I called after her. She stopped and turned, hovering. My eyes narrowed, "Why'd you stop me from eating that apple?"

The pegasus looked down at me coolly a moment. "We gave those farmer ponies that food three weeks ago when we got here. A show of good faith, he said."

"You knew it was contaminated."

"No, and I still don't. I'm in security, not medical or research. But I suspected," she said calmly as she met my amber gaze. "But I didn't anticipate a dirtsideer would save my life. The least I could do was return the favor. Be careful, Security." And with that the trio flew away. I could appreciate the irony.

Footnote: Level up

New Perk added: Sniper – Your chance to hit an opponent's head in S.A.T.S. is greatly increased.

Quest Perk added: Telekinetic bullet (rank two) – Your telekinetic bullet now does damage equivalent to a shotgun slug. You are limited to a number of bullets per day equal to your endurance.

14. Strength

“THAT was a truly feeble performance.”

How had it gone so wrong? That was the question that kept bubbling up inside me. I'd come to Miramare expecting to find calm, reasonable, intelligent Morning Glory. I'd planned to talk with her about mending things with P-21. About that horrible recording and what it meant. She'd try to help me work through the thoughts niggling at the back of my mind, and I needed that help; those patches I'd welded across that door weren't holding as well as I'd like.

Now I was the one caring for Glory. The confession Operative Lighthooves had engineered from her own words was damning to anyone who didn't know her, and she seemed convinced of its impact. In her own way she'd been raped: not a violation of her body, but of her identity. Now, more than ever, I had to be the strong one. I had to be tough. Confident. Because if I wasn't then we'd be eaten alive by the wasteland. So I threw some more wonderglue on that door in the back of my mind, broke out the duct tape, and hoped it could hold for a little bit longer.

With the Enclave gone, we went in through the locker room. I tried to show her the Marauders' lockers, but she couldn't be more disinterested. Apparently when they left, Sergeant Wind Whisper had pulled out some critical components. The lights were now dead, with the exception of the emergency lighting; the food was also gone, and many of the fine weapons had been carted away. Still, there was still clean water for drinking and washing up. Glory found some bandages for her scarred flanks. I tried to explain to her how the Hoofington enervation sapped healing magics. The old Glory would have been keen for details.

Now she simply nodded and, without another word, went looking for healing potions instead.

I really wanted Lighthooves dead. I wanted Deus dead. I wanted Usury dead. I wanted Lancer dead. I really hoped it was a side effect of the Stampede, Hydra and Buck all wearing off at once. I felt my limbs shaking as I stood in the shower, letting the lukewarm water wash away the blood, grime, and gore that'd accumulated on me. I tried holding up the barding to rinse off some of the larger patches of grime. I wanted to find a bottle of Wild Pegasus, curl up, and sleep for a few days. I'd gone so long without sleep that I felt like I was floating.

I couldn't. No matter how much I wanted to, I couldn't. Don't think about it. I fought the shakes as best I could, breathing deeply. Don't think... about Scoodle torn in two... don't think... about my guts trailing behind me... don't think... about Tumbleweed's head being blasted open... don't think... about the mine boss exploding... I shook so badly that my legs collapsed beneath me. Not now! Not now! Don't think... please, I don't want to do this...

It took me a shot of Med-X and another of Steady to calm me down enough to stop wasting time worrying about myself and help the pony who deserved it. I went and got Glory, helped her out of her Enclave uniform, and started the water for her. "Blackjack?" she asked, barely audible above the water.

"Yeah?"

"Could you leave me alone for a little bit?"

"Yeah," I said as I left her there in the wan glow of the emergency light and tried to ignore her sobs. "I'll be..." I said as I glanced back at her; at those two burned lightning bolts where sunrises used to be, the only sunrises I'd ever seen with my own eyes... "I'll be..." Useless. Pointless. Worthless.

I sank down to my rump and leaned back against the wall. I couldn't cry; whatever part of me that enabled tears had been ripped out of me as surely as whatever part had powered the operations center had been ripped out of it. Glory finished her shower and stepped out, her wet gray flanks showing the burns in terrible relief; nothing else remained. Her sunrise had set forever. Together we went back upstairs. She never said a word; just covered herself in her blanket and sobbed for half an hour before she went to sleep. Me? I had another method for not feeling any pain.

Finding the bottle of Stalliongrad's Finest was the best thing that ever happened to me...well, since I'd gotten to Miramare. I unstopped the cap and took a gulp of the clean, biting vodka. My empty stomach clenched a little. I didn't care. I wanted to drink till I drowned all the thoughts and the terrors and the failure churning within me. I drank and drank till I went past doubts, fears, concerns, failures, and nightmares and plunged myself straight into merciful oblivion.

I awoke with my cheek in a pool of cold vomit. I couldn't tell if Glory was asleep or awake, but her back was turned to me. Hard to imagine that a day or so ago I'd felt on top of the world. Like maybe things were improving. I was such an idiot. I am such an idiot. I sat up as quietly as I could and finished off the last inch in the

bottle. I had hoped for warmth in my gut, but apparently there wasn't any to be had in vodka. Just a sharp bite that dulled the hurt inside me. But my limbs stopped shaking, at least. Kind of.

I flipped the mattress over as quietly as I could to hide my mess—let some other bastard clean it up—and went down to wash my face. The water was nice and radioactive now that the Enclave had left. Good. I needed my eyes glowing right now. Before I'd gotten sidetracked playing liberator, I was sent to get some equipment from the base. When I selected the contract from my notes—and sweet Celestia, how the heck does this machine know what is supposed to be a note—a tag appeared on my E.F.S. I picked my way down to the room marked 'Command'. Thank Celestia there was enough power to open the electric door.

Inside, it was clear the Enclave had been busy. Planning biological extermination of the surface or just playing games? I didn't really care anymore. The best Enclave pony I knew had just gotten her cutie marks seared off; the other two were bastards. Wind Whisper might not have tried to blow my head off, but she hadn't raised a wing to help Glory. I poked around the technological remains of the command center and found the terminal for 'Air Navigation.'

I had to keep moving. I had to be strong. I couldn't let myself fall apart. I couldn't deal with all those thoughts fermenting in the back of my brain. Focusing on trying to magic out the screws in the side panel helped take my mind off things. I was a stupid pony. I shouldn't be thinking. Thinking is what got me in this mess in the first place.

'We do not always see the good we do.'

Yeah, Sekashi, but sometimes we don't see the evil we do either. The evil I did...

"Fuck!" I shouted and slammed my head against the side of the terminal. "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" I shouted over and over again. "Stop thinking! Stop thinking! Stop thinking!" I felt blood trickle down between my eyes from a nick beneath my horn. I hugged myself as I drew a slow, shaking breath. Dear Luna, was I losing my mind? Was this when the Wasteland broke me?

I couldn't do this now. Not now. But I could barely focus my magic to unscrew the rest of the screws in the side of the large terminal. I sighed, looking around with my amber vision before I spotted a side door. More desperate to act than genuinely curious, I rose and looked at the name over the doorway. 'Colonel Cupcake.' Cracking the door, I was greeted by the familiar smell of dust and decay. Clearly, the office of a long dead officer was not high on the Enclave's repair and cleaning priorities.

Trash from the operations center had been tossed in one corner, and I had to step carefully over broken shelves, ruined manuals, and useless clipboards. In the far corner was the desk with the skeletal remains of Colonel Cupcake draped across it. His white uniform was now a soiled gray, but the brass buttons still seemed to shine.

Yellowed pictures lay haphazardly across the floor, shaken free from the walls by the balefire bomb. I levitated one up, looking at the fat brown pegasus with the white mane and tail and the cake cutie mark. Beside him loomed, with his easygoing smile, the image of Big Macintosh. A second picture showed the colonel in uniform facing a squad of ponies and saluting. The Marauders were right there in the front line, saluting back. They looked so clean. So eager to get into the fight. The third picture was of an incredibly skinny and thin blue pony holding up a tray of cupcakes. The colonel, wearing a golden helmet, grinned at the camera over a caption reading 'Guard cupcake eating champion ten years running.' The last was of a lime green pegasus wearing a string of pearls nuzzling up against him. The image was so... strange. So... not what I thought of when males and females were together.

Somehow, I didn't imagine an officer as being a cupcake eating champion. When I thought of officers from our lessons in 99 I always pictured grim-faced generals with tons of medals, eager to keep fighting. Carefully, I walked around behind his desk and saw his safe. I fished out the key I'd found in the office above and tried the lock. To my relief, it opened, and there wasn't a ton of papers in this one. I'd hoped to find another silver bullet; wouldn't that make my problems with Deus easier! Instead, I found two memory orbs, a revolver, some pre-war bits, a box of ammunition, and two folded pieces of paper. The revolver was for a much larger caliber of bullet than my automatics.

I opened up the first note, glad for the distraction exploration afforded.

Dear Director.

You can take your request and shove it up your tail sideways. I don't care what 'investments' you made in the Marauders, the buck was a patriot and a saint who gave everything for his country. His funeral will be at the Ministry Walk in Canterlot. I will be there personally, armed, and will blow your damned head off if you set one hoof at the funeral.

Sincerely, one pissed off Cupcake.

Underneath it was scribbled: 'Not bad for a rough draft. Now to write something I can actually send.' I laughed. Despite how rotten I felt inside and out, I laughed. I wished I'd known Colonel Cupcake. He seemed like a decent buck. I opened the

second.

To whom it may concern,

I am writing this letter stating my intent to resign from the equestrian army immediately. As per terms of service 2355.221J and article 12.1 of the Equestria Enlistment act, I have put in an excess of ten years combat service and am entitled to immediate release from active duty. I wish to thank the army for its support and diligence, but I can no longer participate in its operations.

Big Macintosh. SN# 23-110019-E.

A smaller piece of paper was stapled to it: 'Thanks for helping with the legal parts, Cupcake. Hold on to this for me till I get back from Shattered Hoof Ridge.'

I wondered if the rest of the Marauders had known.

Suddenly I heard my name called in a rather frantic voice from the hallway, saving me from thinking about the idea of a male giving up his role for his own interests. "I'm here Glory!" I yelled as I rose quickly, then grabbed the memory orbs with my mouth rather than risk a trip down memory lane. I scrambled for the door, slipping and sliding on the trash underhoof as I moved into the command center and then out into the hall. "I'm here! What is it? Raiders? Enclave? Ghouls?" Crap, where had I left my guns and barding?!

She stared around her and looked right at me. Then I recalled she couldn't see in the dark. I activated my Pipbuck light. "I'm here. What's going on?"

She stared at me as she shook and rubbed her nose. "I . . . I woke up and you were gone. I didn't know if I was dreaming." She said, her eyes bright and wet in the glow of my light. "This isn't a dream, is it?" I hated that tiny catch of hope in her voice. Almost as much as I hated smothering it.

"I'm afraid not, Glory," I said, and saw that little flicker die in her eyes.

"Oh. I guess you can't ask if you're dreaming in a dream, can you? And dreams don't hurt."

"Yeah. If it sucks, you're probably awake," I said trying to get a smile from her. It wasn't happening.

Her lavender eyes looked at me in the wan light of the PipBuck, "You look really bad. Are you okay?"

She'd just had her cutie mark burned off and she was asking me if I was okay. I had

to focus on the throbbing in my forehead to keep from bursting into tears right then. "Yeah, sure. I'm aces." Did I just refer to my own cutie mark? I deserved a few hours of intimate time with Deus. "Are you okay?"

"No," she replied quietly. Make that a few days with Deus. "But thank you for asking. What are you doing down here?"

"Work. . . well, actually snooping around. Seeing what was left that we can salvage. There's that job about those electronic parts." I looked over at the partially-disassembled terminal, "But I'm all hoof here. Can you get these parts out? I'm pretty sure that we're not getting paid by the pound."

"Wouldn't that be nice," she said as a touch of the old spark returned. She pulled a screwdriver from her Enclave uniform. I sat down beside her, giving her illumination. She took out one screw, then looked at me and put the screwdriver down. "What was your father like, Blackjack? Did he teach you cards?"

I moved my mouth like a mute idiot. Of all the things she had to ask, why that? It was like trying to talk with my heart on a spit. Finally I choked out. "N. . . no. I never knew my. . . my father." Father was a word in stories for a buck who was a mare's permanently devoted breeding partner. Somehow, I severely doubted that that was what she meant.

"Oh, I'm sorry. How did you lose him?" She replied quietly as she opened the door.

Some mare had taken him to security, gave him his twenty-first dot, and stuck a needle in his neck till he bled out into a jar. Then he was tossed into a machine that 'recycled' him into protein mixed with algae and fungus. And then we ate him. I jerked and slammed the back of my head against the terminal so hard that I thought I'd black out for a second. I wanted to black out. Glory jumped back, her eyes wide.

"I don't remember," I muttered, lying through my teeth. "Sorry Glory. I really don't want to think about Stable 99."

"I'm sorry. I thought it was your home," she said as she removed the panels.

"It is. It's just. . . not what I thought it was," I muttered and then stood. "I. . . do you have enough light to finish? I need. . . there's something I. . . I just need to go." Because if I thought that if I didn't I was going to explode, and she didn't need to see me melt down now. My heart beat so hard in my chest that it was getting hard to hear her quiet voice.

"Yes. . . and... I'm sorry, Blackjack," she said softly. "If I'd listened to you. . . maybe things would have been different."

'Yeah, it would.' I wanted to tear out whatever part of my brain had just thought that petty, snide, hateful thought. How could I think that? "Don't worry about it. I'm fine. I'll meet you upstairs when you're done. Alright?" I walked away without waiting for her answer. I couldn't stop shaking. I couldn't slow my heart down. My breathing was turning into choking gasps. My legs were so unsteady that I staggered into things, despite seeing everything in my piss-yellow gaze.

I wasn't fine. I wasn't near fine. I was fucked up bad. Dying of radsickness bad. But Glory was worse, and so I'd have to be better. Do better. That's what Fluttershy said. That's what... where the fuck was I? Where had I been going? I rubbed my eyes hard, trying to focus and setting the world spinning. I sat hard, my rump landing on a layer of thick, dried blood. My eyes saw the bars. The bodies within. The raiders. I sucked in breaths still reeking of fetid air, waste, and rot.

I saw Minty Fresh's headless corpse... what hadn't been pulled inside. I saw the raider with the burst belly, her face frozen in a rictus grin. The dead Dashite whose name I'd never known. I'd have vomited again, but I couldn't move and had nothing to bring up anyway. At the rear of one cell were the bones of a pony: a unicorn, blackened and twisted like melted wax. His mouth wide in a scream, a hole through his skull. How could he scream like that? How could he look like that? I could imagine my bones melting and twisting inside me.

"No... no... no... I'm not you. I'm not dead. I'm not walking down that bridge yet." I whispered into the still room to the motherfucker with the cards as tears ran down my cheek. "Glory needs me. And I need to talk to P-21. After that... fucking after... then you can take me. Not before... You hear me? Not before." I couldn't walk, so I'd crawl. I did everything I could to force myself to my feet.

I made my way to the infirmary, but I doubted that healing potions or the like would do me any good. Then I found a little tin marked 'Fixer- for those next day regrets' tucked away in a drawer. It was either a painkiller or a contraceptive. Either way, what could it hurt? I had to lick up two of the tablets because my magic focus was shit. I chewed. I swallowed. I prayed.

Bit by bit the trembles stopped. My racing heart calmed its pace. I took a few deep breaths that didn't feel like I was drowning. I lay on the floor of the infirmary, praying that Glory didn't find me like this. The cool tiles were nice under my cheek. I heard dusty cards behind shuffled as I closed my eyes. "Go away. I am not in a 'happy crazy' mood right now, and you're not real." This was definitely more of a 'fucked-up crazy' state I was in.

The old buck shuffled the cards deftly in his hooves as he sat on the examination table. His cobweb-gray mane and blanched coat were a small improvement on the bones. His raggedy hat looked like Applejack's after it'd been run over by a mutant dragon. He just looked at me with the softest of grandfatherly smiles, "Oh, well then. I'll just come back at a better time. How's four-thirty for you?"

I lay there and damn me, I chuckled. "I didn't expect my crazy to be funny. Now go away. I'm trying to pull myself together."

"Yeah, I noticed that," he rasped in his feathery voice. "Not been having the best of luck with that, are ya?"

"Too many chems... too much stress... not enough sleep," I muttered, feeling... less bad as the fixer worked its magic on me. The fixer seemed much more resilient to the enervation than the healing potions. "Any second now you're going to go away. Then I can get Glory and we can get the hell away from this place."

"Well then, I won't keep you," he said as he tugged his ratty cowpony hat over his eyes. "Just wanted to let you know... you're going to have to think about it. And... just my advice... you're going to have to listen to those last two recordings before you meet him."

I closed my eyes. "There's no point. I already know what I did to him. I know he'll never forgive me for it."

"No doubt. But what exactly is he going to not forgive?" He chuckled, and I looked up at the empty table. Deus, bounty hunters, radiation, ghouls... right now I'd be glad to lose my life to the wasteland. The last thing I ever expected to lose was my mind.

We finished looting everything that I could carry that might be valuable. I searched the medical bay for more Fixer, but there was none to be found. While Wind Whisper had taken the guns, she'd left some ammunition; I was able to replenish my supply of buckshot. We found Glory's Enclave uniform and battle harness in her room, and I admit I was surprised to see her put both on. "You're still an Enclave pony?" I asked as I cinched down my own barding.

She closed her eyes as she straightened the black uniform, "It's all I know. They might have put a brand on me, but I don't know what it means to be a Dashite," she said softly as she turned and loaded cartridges for the beam pistol and disinte-

gration pistol into the cartridge slots along her back. "I still believe in the Enclave," she said simply as she finished loading her pockets with the cartridges, saving her saddlebags for larger salvage.

"How can you after what they did to you?" I asked as we left through the side door in the locker room.

"Because if I don't believe in them, then I don't believe in anything," she said with that hurting smile. I just wanted to hug her then and there. I didn't know how she could do it, but somehow she was holding together better than me. Then I saw the tears in her eyes, caught the soft catch in her throat, and I knew exactly how: layers of denial and pain. I put my hooves around her, holding her till she calmed.

Broken wares and damaged goods: some terrors of the wastelands we were.

Finally, though, we were back on the Sunset Highway, and I had to admit I felt better. Sure, there was still P-21 to rescue in Flank, Deus to avoid, bounty hunters on my tail, and EC-1101 to unravel, but it felt good to be going somewhere. The rain had even stopped for a bit, though every now and then it threatened a drizzle. We were actually just north of the strip mall where I'd met Dusty and could see Brimstone's fall.

It was clear that, sometime in the last few days, Sidewinder had arrived and tried to storm the mine. There were a lot of bodies around those towers, and the bloatsprites and radscorpions were having a banquet on the carrion. Now I could spot a dozen camps around the mine. It looked like Sidewinder had gone from an attack to a siege, and I wondered if I'd left just to doom Dusty and the miners to a slow death by starvation.

Then, to my amazement, I saw a winged pony fly pulling a small sky cart almost vertically out of the center of the camp. A few feeble potshots rang out, but the pegasus was well out of range and flying west towards the rest of Equestria. Maybe it was just my mutant eyes, but there seemed to be something wrong with her wings. From this distance they appeared almost... skeletal.

Lying on our stomachs, watching, I noticed something that hadn't been at the strip mall before: boxes. Lots of wooden crates that seemed to hold most of Sidewinder's supplies were surrounded by a simple barbwire-topped chainlink fence. I smiled as I levitated out my carbine. "What are you doing?" Glory asked as her eyes got round.

"Better," I replied, slapping in a freshly loaded clip of bright red rounds. I sighted the boxes and with a certain smile started to fire the rounds into the crates. Even

though the boxes were wet, eventually the fires started to catch. The final touch was a crate marked with three X's, which exploded! "That ought to help Dusty Trails out."

Shouts rang out from the bar and cowpony livery store as a dozen or so Pecos began milling about. It only took a few seconds for them to spot the pair of us on the highway and with a yell raced towards us.

Glory just looked at me, smiled, and shook her head. "What?" I asked with a crooked smile as I loaded a fresh clip and raised the carbine. Damn, but it felt good to be in an honest to goodness fight. Now I could really practice my rifle work. I slipped into S.A.T.S. and used the magic to assist me in taking out the leader .

A pegasus's head exploded a foot from my face.

I swallowed as the rifle spat again and again while the spell reloaded. Morning Glory waited for them to climb the highway embankment before firing alternating red beams and pink bolts of magical energy. One Pecos ignited as the energy slowly transformed him into a crumbling cascade of ash.

Her smile was the last to go.

My legs staggered as my heart began to pound. I had to keep moving back. I did not want three Pecos beating on me with sharpened shovels and baseball bats; I didn't care how tough my barding was. The only problem was that my legs weren't working right. The shaking was getting so bad I almost couldn't move. I levitated out some steady and felt my jerking muscles relax as I swapped out the carbine for the shotgun.

I watched a raider's head disintegrate into bloody chunks as I fled through the tunnel from Stable 99.

A Pecos whirled and slammed both rear hooves into my face. I was knocked flying and landed on my back. His sharpened shovel rose up as he reared above me. I stared as my horn pulled out the dragon claw. The six-inch curved claw slashed diagonally across his belly and my horn glowed and I yanked out his viscera. He fell back, screaming for his mother as I stood and just stared at the bloody gray lengths around my hooves. Glory's beam silenced his screaming as my focus was lost and the claw clattered to the ground beside me.

"Blackjack?" Glory asked in concern. I was losing it. I had lost it, and there were four more still attacking.

"I'm fine," I lied. I had to be strong. She was trying to be strong. I couldn't think about it.

I could feel the cuts across my middle. Snip. Snip. Snip.

I levitated up the shotgun and swapped in flechettes. The big guy in the back reached into a burlap sack and started to toss sticks of dynamite as the other three used saddles armed with shotguns. The pump action shotguns were larger than my own drum-fed model and they had me skidding across the asphalt as my barding absorbed most of their impacts. “Fly, Glory!” I shouted as the red sticks started to explode.

“Yee haw! I’m gonna blow you into chili!” the buck shouted as we fell back. Glory, however, remained grounded and tried to keep back from the worst of the buck-shot. Her black Enclave uniform didn’t offer her nearly the protection my reinforced barding did.

“Eat this!” I shouted as my magic gripped the next tossed stick of dynamite and floated it right over to one of the gunpony’s heads. He leapt aside as it blew and it knocked him off his feet. I walked over, feeling my legs shaking despite the Steady I’d taken, and saw I’d transformed his head into paste.

I sat coated head to hoof in the blood and gore of three ponies.

My shotgun fell to the ground as I staggered. The three were now focusing all their attacks on me, and only the metal plates in my armor were keeping me from getting pulped. Fortunately, the boss had opted against throwing more dynamite my way; more’s the pity.

There wasn’t anything for it. I chewed down another Buck and injected myself with more Med X and Steady, trying to get some control over my own body. My head... maybe Dash or a Mintal? No time to experiment now. Not with my heart slamming in my chest and shotgun shells doing all they could to pound me into goo. I got my hooves under me and put some more space between us, letting the pellet spread dilute their firepower while I went back to the carbine. S.A.T.S. was up. I queued two bursts at one of the their heads and was rewarded with the gunpony dropping in their tracks.

Glory’s magical energy weapons finally liquefied the third. Boss ducked his head and turned, racing back towards the nearest camp and shouting for help. I got a few rounds in his rump, but I really wasn’t in much of a state to chase him down. My heartbeat thundered so hard it felt like tiny explosions in my ears.

“Are you all right?” Glory asked, wide-eyed as I grit my teeth together. I forced a grin... smile, damn it!

"Yeah. Sure. Those shotguns pack a wallop though," I said, grinning like an idiot as I sat on my rump. The supplies were cooking nicely, and while I'd have liked to loot some of it for myself, I was glad not to be keeling over. "Think you can get those shotguns off their battle saddles? I'd like that kind of firepower." She frowned at me but then nodded and rushed to the two guns that were still intact. I closed my eyes, breathing deeply as my heart pounded and pounded. I shook out two more Fixers and popped them in my mouth, chewing and breathing and recovering. They seemed to help I might have taken a beating, but at least I was still able to walk. Among the three chems I was finally able to relax enough to examine the firearms.

She returned with the two pump action shotguns, similar in design to the ones I'd used in the stable but of a larger gauge shell. "Nice. Well, we should probably get going. I think Mr. Sidewinder is going to be put out with me for burning up his things." Glory was still looking at me funny, but I think I put on a convincing enough act to convince her. She returned my smile, at least.

The Sunset Highway turned sharply east past the strip mall. On my right, the badlands stretched to the south: red rock and scrubland. To my left were the tangled weeds and dead trees around Hoofington. The terrain was much more hilly, and soon we'd left sight of the bonfire beside the mini-mall behind. The Fixer was wearing off and I could feel my heart pounding more. "So, why did you stay grounded that fight, Glory?" I asked to distract myself from the increasing pain in my chest.

She started with a little gasp, looking up at me with her wide lavender eyes before looking away again, her purple hair falling across her face as she hung her head. "I don't know. I just... couldn't. I wanted to. I tried. But I couldn't get my hooves off the ground. She then looked at me, "What about you, Blackjack? You look... terrible."

"Yeah, mom said the same thing when I was born. She told the doc to put that bun back in the oven; it wasn't quite done yet."

Glory looked skeptical, "I don't think they can push a premature foal back in, Blackjack. There's muscle contractions that..." She caught my cool 'you are missing the joke' look and flushed, looking... ashamed? "I'm sorry. I wish I was smarter like you."

"What?" I turned to face her... and the world kept turning. I sat hard on my ass so I wouldn't fall on my face. "Why would you call me smart? I'm so clueless I let a little

capmonger charge me double just because she knew I had the caps. And let's not go into my tactical 'shoot, shoot, and shoot some more' methods! And if I even look at a terminal it breaks."

"You knew that Operative was up to no good," she said quietly. "I didn't. I actually thought you were a little jealous of him. You were completely right and I was completely wrong. I—" I silenced her by pressing my hoof gently to her lips.

"If I was right, it was only by accident. I am not a smart pony. I'm lucky to remember which end of my gun goes bang." I said as I brushed her mane out of her eyes. "Your kind of smarts actually helps ponies. You got through school. You're a prodigy, so you're not so good with reading people. Your brain could kick my brain's butt with a brainy hoof tied behind its back." Then I frowned and rubbed my chin. "Or maybe my brain could win; I mean, it's got to be as hard as a rock."

"You're a good pony."

I felt a cold chill rush through me as my stomach clenched. "No, Glory. I really don't think I am."

"How can you say that? You're brave. . ."

"Glory. . ."

"Courageous, clever. . ."

"Glory."

"Steadfast, loyal, compassionate. . ."

"Glory! That's enough!" I snapped, and she jerked back looking scared and a little concerned. I sighed softly, hanging my head. "I did something terrible back in Stable 99. I didn't. . . I didn't know it was bad then. I barely remembered even doing it until now. But. . ." Say it. Just spit it out! Tell her and get it out of you. But what if she left? She'd be killed. What if she hated me? Right now, I could hardly stand. I let out my breath, looking away. "Sorry. Never mind. I'm just being stupid."

I started to move, but my legs didn't quite get the message and I staggered, tripped, and landed on my face. I groaned, and then there was a green line of energy cutting through where I'd stood only moments before.

"Get off the road, Glory!" I shouted as adrenaline helped me move my shaky limbs into the ditch on the southern side of the road. Three more shots lanced out from the hillside ahead of us, but I couldn't see the shooter on my E.F.S.; either they were invisible, or that was one hell of a sniper! Lying there in the dirt, I heard a soft blip

of a landmark being marked on my navigation program. Normally I wouldn't have cared...but the mark said: 'Stable 90.'

And if the ponies there were just as fucked up as in 99...

A stable? Here? Realistically, I knew the odds of there being a stable we could get into should be minimal, but I'd take them over being stuck out in the open with my legs shaking, my heart hammering, and my head spinning while some possibly invisible pony took shots at me with a long-range magic beam rifle! "Glory, this way!" I said as I tried to run south towards the broken rocks that might offer some cover.

If it hadn't been for my PipBuck, I never would have found it. The tunnel entrance was wedged between two heaps of stone, looking like an abandoned mine. Two heavy-duty rails ran underneath the door. Fortunately, it wasn't locked, and I pulled it open and stepped through. Once inside, I turned on my lamp to illuminate the tunnel. And the bones. Lots of bones. Twice I was sent sliding when a heap of bones shifted underneath me. Finally, we got though to the stable door. A huge 90 in the middle of a great round gear-toothed hulk of metal. "So... ah... how do we open it?"

Glory examined the controls next to it, then rolled on her back and started to dig at the underside of the control panels. She pulled out some scrap electronics, duct tape, and a spark battery. Once wired in place, the console lit up. "Well, it's got power. Try transmitting your overmare's access command?"

I frowned and dug through the files I'd taken from the Overmare's office. Glory actually had to pick it out from the list. It transmitted, and the light on the control flashed from red to green. There was a loud click... and then... nothing. "Well, it's unlocked at—"

The door slowly started tilting inward. With a resounding bang that made my teeth rattle, the heavy door fell flat on its back inside the stable. Within lay only darkness and silence and bones. Again, lots of them. The air was strangely hard to breathe, but that just may have been my own body. Step after step we walked into the empty space. The reason the door had fallen had been simple: the hydraulic mechanism that moved and closed it was gone.

This Stable wasn't finished. As we walked into the atrium, I saw was the barest bones of a Stable—walls, floor, ceiling, the balconies—but everything else was missing. Yet there were signs of ponies once living here. Two huge piles were formed: one of scraps of clothing and luggage, the other, bones. Of course.

“Why would they all come here if the stable wasn’t finished?” Glory whispered, walking so close to me our shoulders brushed together.

I couldn’t imagine. . . wait. . . “They didn’t know it wasn’t finished.” No terminals. No wires or pipes or equipment. No water talisman or air purification talismans. Nothing but bare metal. I could see only one door, and it was to the overmare’s office. We picked our way up the stairs to the balcony and to the office door. ‘Murderer’, ‘cunt’, ‘mother fucker’, and other epithets were written across its scratched and dinged surface.

Sure enough, it was locked, and I didn’t have any bobby pins with me. I glanced at Glory, sighed, and pressed my horn to the lock. Twisting. . . twisting. . . . Tears ran down my face, and then there was a snap. The door handle came right off! I beat on the door, but it was no less locked.

“Great. Now what?” I muttered.

Glory stepped back and looked above the door, at a gap between the structure and the armored ceiling of the stable. “Can you give me a boost?” She asked, her wings pressed firmly to her sides. It looked like she still wasn’t quite able to fly. I helped push her up to the space and there were little metal clops as she walked over to the empty round window of the office. They were followed by the noises of Glory slipping through the window, and then there was a click as she unlocked the door from the other side.

“Wow. . . I can’t believe that worked.” I muttered as I pushed the door open. The contents of the overmare’s office consisted of the overmare’s desk, a single set of bones, a suitcase, and several empty Sparkle-Cola bottles and Fancy Buck Cake wrappers. Cavities meant for terminals gaped in the walls. There wasn’t even a window in place.

I noticed the wrappers had writing on the inside. I carefully smoothed them out and started to read.

Day 1: Hello. My name is Buttercup, appointed overmare of Stable 90. If somepony is actually reading this, yeah. . . we’re fucked. Sweet sweet Celestia are we fucked. I was notified by Stable-Tec that the real overmare died in a skywagon accident three days ago. I’d been told the stable was finished, furnished and ready to go. I was even going to get a tour and inspection next week and do our practice drills. I got the memo from the president of Stable-Tec telling me how Stable 90 was supposed to be some sort of tech experiment. Newest Pip-Bucks and terminals for everything. Then we got here and. . . nothing. We had to push the door open and closed again.

The locks are the only thing holding it on, I think. There's no power. No water. No air. Yeah. Did I mention we're fucked?

Day 2: Things are getting ugly down there. Folks are screaming for my head. Anypony that had food and water has probably had it taken from them. There's been fights over bottles of Sunrise Sarsaparilla and Sparkle-Cola. Goddesses, if they knew I'd brought a twelve pack with me and some snacks... I guess the radiation shielding is working because no one has died... yet.

Day 3: Yet has arrived. The old and anypony who's sick. They're now yelling for me to come down and open the lock, but I know better. I go down there and I might as well slit my own throat. There's water, if you want to call it that, from the sumps and lowest places in the vault. I wish it were bone dry. I know what's coming.

Day 5: A mother begged me to let her and her daughter out. I told her plainly and simply that she could die in here or out there. She wasn't happy. Oh Celestia was she not happy. I keep thinking about all the work I didn't get finished, like it matters now. We were supposed to have a visit from the VP looking at the new tech coming out of our office. The best of it is probably going in 98, 99, and 101. Unless they got screwed too.

Day 7: I'd guess a quarter of the ponies are dead. They've made two piles: one of belongings and the other of the dead. Too bad they're not thinking clearly. If they heaped the dead on this side, then some of them would get the chance to climb up and kill me.

Day 10: I'm thinking of killing myself. That'd be just, right? I don't know what went wrong; communication screwup? Willful fuckery on the part of Stable-Tec? I think the only reason I don't is because I deserve to be the last pony who dies, so I can see this. I don't know if I'm responsible or not. I just know I feel responsible. I was with Stable-Tec. The paperwork said 90 was finished. I toured 89 just to the east of here. What the fuck went wrong?

Day 12: They've figured it out. Took them long enough. They've started to eat the dead. Goddesses, the smell; everything here smells of rot and decay. Some of them are throwing body parts up here to fuck with me. I throw them back. There's an insanity here. Something's snapped inside almost everypony. As we slowly starve, all the rules have broken down. It's not enough that we're starving; some of us have to kill.

Day 15: My last Fancy Buck Cake. It's banana. I hate banana. Funny, huh? I think it's funny. The survivors have a purpose: kill me. Or rape me and kill me, I'm not

sure which. They howl for hours about what they're going to do when they catch me. The air's going bad though. Funny. We might suffocate before we all starve to death. Won't that be lovely? I've stopped throwing the body parts out. I might need them before this is done.

Day 18: The cannibals are now eating their own. The corpses are spoiling faster than they can be eaten. The air is simply foul. Every breath tastes like shit. It won't be long now. I'm out of Sparkle-Cola. I wonder what's left of the Hoof. I mean, I've heard Applebloom say that the Hoof is so overbuilt that nothing could take it out. I hope that's true. I hope we have one city left as a great 'Fuck You' to those zebra bastards.

Day 22: I watched the last two fight to the death. They're not eating each other anymore. I think they're just... ending it. When they were over, the one survivor just looked at me like he'd lost. Just looked at me. For hours and hours. Finally he said, "My name is Muddy." And that was it. He just lay down and never got up again.

Day 24: Done. I'm done. Stable 90: Shortest-lived stable in Equestria. Thought of ending it... don't deserve the quick end. This is Buttercup, acting overmare of Stable 90, and these are my last words: fuck Stable-Tec. Our stables suck. No. Those aren't my last words. I wanted to say

I put the notes back together again, carefully, and tucked them under Buttercup's bony hoof. I couldn't have imagined: these ponies had no more choice of whether to live or die than the ones who'd been trapped outside the stable door. ...No, they'd had a choice: how to die. Priest had tried to explain that to me, that how we choose to meet our end was a choice he couldn't take away. Buttercup had chosen to delay her death and bear witness to the end of a stable.

Glory was looking at me funny. "Blackjack, when was the last time you ate something?"

"Huh? I'm not hungry." Especially not here and now. Actually, even after walking all day, I still wasn't hungry. My appetite was just gone. "Why don't you eat and rest?" I suggested with a grin. "I can take first watch. If that sniper finds this place, they won't be able to hide from my E.F.S." Then I looked at her burns and my smile became even more forced. "You need to take care of yourself, Glory. You don't want to get an infection on top of everything else." She looked at me in worry and then walked over to a small heap of Buttercup's clothes: a meager bed, but the best in this stable.

"Wake me in two hours, alright?" She asked quietly.

“Sure,” I lied with an easy smile. She could use the rest. I knew I wasn’t going to be sleeping. Not without some severe assistance from alcohol.

She gave me one last lingering look, “Alright, but eat something, please. You look terrible.”

“Yes, mom,” I said sarcastically, but the concern in her eyes didn’t fade like I’d hoped. She lowered her head and in a few minutes drifted off. She must have been exhausted.

I wasn’t much better off. I sat down next to Buttercup as the time crawled by. The shaking had returned. My heart still hadn’t slowed down, though at least it wasn’t beating so loudly that I couldn’t hear. A Sparkle-Cola was enough for me; I really didn’t need much more than that right now. Sugar to keep me awake, water to keep me from getting thirsty, and I was good. Well, good enough.

I looked around the room for something to stop my mind from wandering. An old newspaper talking about a scandal at the Ministry of Peace; apparently some strings had gotten pulled and some ponies were still sore about it. There was even an investigation underway. The world falling apart with half-finished stables, and they were worried about mares calling in favors to be the first in a rocket ship. Small wonder everything blew to hell and stayed there.

“You look terrible,” rasped the old buck beside me as he fanned out the cards between his hooves.

“I feel terrible, so it’s appropriate,” I muttered softly, not looking at somepony who wasn’t there. “Actually, I am terrible. Why beat around the bush?” I glanced out the window into the atrium, seeing the heaped-up bones in the far corner of the room. “Do you like doing all this?”

“Asking questions of your hallucinations is a bad sign,” he warned softly.

“I’ve got to talk to somepony,” I whispered.

“I didn’t do this,” he said with a leathery sigh. “I didn’t make ponies and zebra go to war. I didn’t make them lose their senses. I didn’t make them blow the world to hell. You folks did that all on your own. You created me. And now, for whatever reason, you folks just insist on perpetuating me. I can count the number of ponies really trying to end me on one set of hooves. The others fighting me are just being pulled along, and there aren’t even many of them.” He stopped shuffling and looked up at me from under his hat. “Oh, and in case you were wondering, I didn’t make those bastards burn her, or made you lie to your friend.”

Glory shifted in her sleep, hiding her face in her hooves as she gave a soft whimper. Then, with tiny little sobs, she started to weep. She shook, and quietly I forced myself to my hooves and walked to her. As carefully as I could, I tried to hold her without shaking her awake. Fortunately, my limbs decided to listen to my damaged brain as I held her. “No...” she whimpered softly, “Mommy... no... please...”

The old buck looked at me with tired eyes as she slowly stilled and her breathing slowed and she relaxed. I sighed softly, stroking her mane as he muttered gruffly, “I didn’t do that either.”

“No. But somepony did,” I whispered. “They should pay for it.”

“So you’re saying now you’d push the button? Damn, if you’d done that back at the mine you might have gotten a chance to sleep in a nice bed tonight.” He reached over and picked up a beer (with his hoof, somehow, but of course it was all a hallucination anyway), taking a sip as he watched me move away from the now quiet Glory. “So is this it then? Are you a killer?” He waved his hoof slowly in front of him. “Blackjack, executioner of the wastelands?”

“No. I’m not an executioner,” I replied quietly.

“Well then, I’d suggest you figure out what you really are while you can hold on to it,” he said as he held the beer out to me, “While there’s still something to save.”

“There’s nothing in me worth saving. I’ve just got to take care of her and talk to P-21,” I muttered, bringing the...empty Sparkle-Cola bottle to my lips. I looked at the little cartoon purple unicorn and sighed softly before walking towards the door. “I really could have used a beer, too.”

I made my way to the fallen stable door. I might have been in a body that was falling apart with a brain that was having conversations with hallucinations while my psychology frayed like a cheap saddle blanket, but I didn’t need to spend my night breathing stinky air. I looked at the remains of the desperate ponies trying to get in and those of the ponies who’d been desperate to get out. I reached out with my magic and levitated a little stuffed unicorn from inside the stable and set it on the door with me. I’d had a unicorn like this when I was a foal. Like everything in 99, it’d been passed down from my mother and grandmother, only mine was purple and this one was purple and white.

The old bastard was right, though: I had a lot of hate in me. I wanted someone to blame for this. Something that I could direct all my hate at so that it wasn’t eating me up inside. Something I could point at and go ‘There! There is the motherfucker

responsible! Deal with him and everything will be fine!’ But the ponies who had been the cause of this were long gone. I rolled onto my back, feeling my spine straighten and groaning as I hugged the little stuffed unicorn.

“I can count the number of ponies trying to stop me on four hooves,” I muttered, wondering if my mind wasn’t trying to send me a hint. The Stable Dweller was clearly one. That pony was fighting with every inch of her hooves to save the Wastelands. She’d never lay around and mope like this. I bet she’d get on her hooves and kick her way through all this mess! Maybe DJ Pon3 too, in his own weird way. I’d listened to his broadcast earlier on radiation and taint; I supposed enervation was a Hoofington problem. He might not have a shotgun like the Stable Dweller, but he was at least trying to help.

That made me think of Bottlecap and what she had said. I hadn’t really thought about it, given that I wasn’t a smart pony, but I think she was also trying to end the wastelands too. She saw a way for trade to curb the impulses that tore down society. She might have been a businessmare with an eye for profit, but business was a means to an end, and that end was everypony getting what they needed.

Priest had to be the last. Not me. He was trying to end the wasteland one soul at a time. He gave young ponies a home and a place to belong with the Crusaders; he cared. He genuinely cared for ponies whether he knew them or not. How could he go on caring day after day for ponies who he knew would eventually be gone? What kind of pony did that? While a dark and cynical part of my mind snickered ‘Masochist’, I had to admit I couldn’t do it. I was lucky enough to care about Glory.

Slowly, I sat up again and looked at the stuffed unicorn. “The Stable Dweller wouldn’t be afraid to listen to a recording,” I muttered to the toy– and if it started talking back to me, that was it! Get me a straightjacket. Talking toys is where I draw the line! I sighed and selected the recording ‘BJ #2’ on my PipBuck. I closed my eyes, getting ready for a kick to the gut.

I heard the sound of unsteady footsteps and ragged breathing. From the echoes and the whirr and gurgle of ventilation and pipes he had to be in the maintenance halls. Suddenly there was a rapid tap of hooves, and oomph, and a sound of two ponies sprawling. “Hey! What... wait, what’s a male doing down here?” I heard my voice say. I couldn’t remember this one, either. I was stationed down in the maintenance level due to my frequent slips in discipline. “P... 13?”

“Please... please...” he begged me softly.

“Sweet Celestia, what happened to you?” I heard myself mutter.

There came a distant shouting. "Hey! Where the fuck are you, you blue cock." Daisy's voice; I'd know it anywhere. "I still got an hour! Get the fuck out here!" Her yells echoed off the concrete tunnels.

"Shit. Come on... hurry. She's tracking your PipBuck." my low voice was followed by the sounds of hooves on the concrete. I knew the maintenance tunnels. Daisy didn't. I knew where the generators futzed up tracking, all the good hiding places. "Okay. Here's the plan. We wait here for her to go, wait for the hour, and then I'll get you up to medical."

"Why are you helping me?" he whispered.

"Huh?"

"Why are you helping me? You're a mare."

"So what? I'd help anypony get away from Daisy. Besides, it looks like she tried to kick your head off. What did you do?"

"She didn't. . . climax," he muttered.

"What a cunt," I muttered. "No excuse to go damaging stable property just because she can't get off." As I listened to myself I clenched my teeth and squeezed my eyes shut. Damaging property, because I couldn't figure out then that he wasn't property, he was a person! A person getting beaten because he didn't push Daisy's buttons right.

There was a soft pause, "No. No excuse for that."

"It's not like bucks don't try to make it nice..." I said in annoyance. Was I always this fucking chatty when hiding?

"We have to. . ."

"What?"

"We have to. . . if we don't. . . in medical. . . they give us the shock."

"The what?"

"A shock. Till we can. Or drugs. Or they beat us. Or just retire us. . ."

An awkward silence. "Oh. . . well. . . I get double shifts if I slack off. We all have to do our job, right?" I bit the stuffed unicorn to keep from screaming at myself. I had to work a double shift if I was bad. He was electrocuted or beaten or killed if he didn't please his rapists!

“... right...” I could barely hear him over Daisy’s shouting.

“Shit. She’s coming this way. Look, I’ll lead her off. Have her talk to Rivets if she’s seen you. Just stay out of sight.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t worry. It’s the least I can do.”

There was the noise of me greeting Daisy and receiving a slew of profanity in return. Then the noise of our voices retreating as we commiserated on ‘fucking males’.

“Yeah... it is...”

The least I could do. More because I was interested in pissing off Daisy than in actually helping the ‘damaged property’. Because once he’d gotten back to medical they would have patched him up and then punished him for skipping out on his duties. I never got shocked no matter how much I screwed up. Mom never beat me with a stick... although she should have. And while some ponies threatened to kill me, I never really took it seriously.

But now that I was thinking about it, males were retired all the time. Not just for becoming the newest 21. You’d hear about some mare flipping out and damaging ‘breeding equipment’. You’d be mad, not because some poor buck had been smashed, but because you might be pushed back in the breeding rotation. If a female died, everypony knew. When a male died, it was barely even mentioned.

The least I could do. What could I have done? I could have put the beat down on Daisy; she was bigger and stronger than me, but I could have at least tried. I could have talked to medical; the ponies there freaked me out, but they might listen to me. Fuck, I could have talked to Mom. She was head of security! Certainly something about that fucked-up stable could be fixed. Or I could have gotten a gun, killed the Overmare, and ended the whole sick game.

I’m not an executioner.

I slowly opened my eyes, looked at the stuffed unicorn with her fabulous purple mane. Right now, honestly, I wouldn’t mind some advice, even from a toy. Still, I doubted it would be of much help. Crazy hallucinations or not, they came from my crazy brain.

I awoke to the unfamiliar sensation of clothes draped over me. My eyes popped

open to the furious beating in my chest. I flopped spastically, then rolled to my feet. "I'm up! I'm up!" I quickly looked around the entrance to the stable. "Glory? Glory!" I shouted as adrenaline rushed through me. I took another step and my legs buckled, sending me sprawling on my face. "Ow. . ." I muttered, lying there.

"I'm over here, Blackjack," She said, waving from the stack of clothes and suitcases. An old spark lantern flickered besides her. "I'm glad you got some sleep," she said as she opened a suitcase and rifled through it. I fumbled with my pack for the tin of Fixers and chewed one down before the shakes began.

"Sorry I fell asleep," I muttered, finally able to sit up and trot over to her.

"You needed it," she replied with a smile, then looked at me critically. "Come to think of it, you look like you still need it."

"It's not that bad," I insisted and rifled through my saddlebags for a bottle of Sparkle-Cola.

"You need food. Not sugar."

"I'm fine," I insisted. "I'm just having trouble sleeping." Not last night though. I think I must have passed out. I sat down and watched her dig through the suitcases with a small smile. "Find anything good?"

"Mmmm. . . yes, actually," she said as she hopped down off the stack and nudged some magazines towards me. "There's an excellent Scientifica Equestria here. A big book of Arcane Science. Even a Canterlot Journal of Medicine!" I couldn't. . . and really didn't bother. . . hiding my yawn. She sighed and then smiled, "I also found an Ironshod Firearms catalogue."

"Oooh, Gimme!" I said with a grin.

"Only if you eat," she said firmly, pressing both forehooves down on the magazine. "I don't care what, but eat something. Then you can read up on your guns."

"Ugh. . . fine." My ears drooped as I rifled through my bags and came up with a Fancy Buck Cake. I could imagine the old bastard laughing. Instead I settled for Carrot Crunchies. She gave me the magazine and I couldn't help but grin as I buried my muzzle in the box while reading over the top.

"Lots of photographs and letters, too. I don't think they had a fire; good thing or they would have smothered." I gave a general grunt as I looked over the spectacular firearms in the catalogue. And they were all new! "Look, here's a photo of Fluttershy," Glory's comment made me pause.

I swallowed and lifted my eyes from the page. She'd found one of the few things that could have broken my attention from the shiny bang sticks. With orange crumbly bits stuck to my mouth, I trotted over and looked at the photograph.

She's beautiful. Maybe that was a strange thought to have; but at least the cynical part of my brain silently agreed. She had a strange, wholesome appearance that simply made me feel good. She wasn't like the white unicorn beside her with the purple mane. She reminded me more of Midnight, so I guessed that the unicorn kept her appearance through painstaking effort. Beyond them was the familiar image of my orange figurine. Applejack. I tapped a hoof at the unicorn. "That's... Rarity?"

"Mhmmm."

"She looked different in my textbooks," I said as I glanced at them. The Ministry of Wartime Technology was pretty cut and dry: they made guns. I had to admit though, Applejack didn't look nearly as thrilled to be in front of the audience. It looked like Rarity was practically thrusting both of them into the spotlight. "What did her Ministry do again?"

Glory reached over and bit the corner of my box of Carrot Crunchies, passing them to me before answering, "The Ministry of Image was... well, actually, I'm really not sure. They just did stuff for the other ministries. Printed books. Arranged events." I continued eating as I flipped through some more pictures in the stack Glory had found; they were obviously professionally done. I saw the cavernous atrium of the Fluttershy Medical Center in all its beauty, so I guessed that whoever took these had to be a photographer. One picture showed Applejack next to a green earth pony buck, her large hat blocked my view of his face. Still, he was standing awfully close in most of these pictures.

Then I saw a picture that just... confused me. It was of Rarity standing in a niche off to one side, talking to some buck. He faced away from the camera, and all I could see of him was a white coat and a golden mane. What confused me was the look on her face, like it was midway between shifting expressions from anger to something else. Fear... and she did not strike me as a pony that showed fear lightly. Unfortunately, I didn't see any other pictures of the buck Rarity'd been talking with.

As interesting as the pictures were, I didn't see them as being particularly valuable. All they really seemed to do for me was remind me that once upon a time life had been better. I gave Glory one more hour to pick through the contents of the suitcases as I finished browsing the articles in the front of the Ironshod catalogue,

watching her from the corner of my eye. I took another Buck and Steady while she had her head in the pile, and then finished it off with another Fixer tablet. I felt like I was almost approaching normal.

With her bags full we carefully picked our way back up to the surface. No long-range beams of death; good. Instead of going straight towards Flank, we moved overland along the edge of the badlands. The broken terrain was a pain to navigate, but offered much more cover in the long run. Unfortunately, we'd barely been travelling for an hour when the Fixer wore off. It'd been growing more and more abrupt each time it stopped working.

My legs gave out beneath me and my hooves scrambled for purchase on the slope. Grit and gravel popped under my feet as I went over the edge and tumbled down the rocks. I crashed at the bottom and lay there. My PipBuck flashed warnings of a little unicorn with her limbs and chest bright red. I clenched my eyes shut as I first took a Med-X for the pain, and then another Hydra. I felt the fractures in my crippled limbs slowly healing, and I could see the bars slowly fill. I was finally able to choke down a tablet of Fixer to calm my beating heart.

"Blackjack!" Glory called from above. For once I was glad she wasn't flying. Limping on broken legs, I picked my way along the base of the slope till we met. "Are you okay?"

"Sure," I smiled. "You've seen me. It'd take more than just a tumble like that to slow me down." I couldn't be weak. I couldn't. "I got a peek over the edge and... well... got dizzy, I guess."

"We should head back to the road," Glory said as she looked at the next ridge. It was even higher and steeper than the one I'd rolled down. I couldn't argue. Right now I was feeling delightfully numb as I was spared the discomfort of two broken legs and a busted set of ribs. If I'd had some Hydra on me when fleeing Stable 99, P-21 wouldn't have his limp.

If I just had a steady supply of Fixer, this wouldn't be a problem.

Making our way north towards the highway, we were lucky enough to come across some rusty mineral-encrusted piece of equipment that hissed steam and dripped hot water. 'Well #33,' my Pipbuck said. Pipes from the equipment ran up and over the ridge to the east. I was more interested in the two dead Steel Rangers; well, actually, I was more interested in their weapons and ammunition. If the value listed on my Pipbuck was any indication, it'd help our profits immensely. Still...something had to have killed them.

“What the heck is it?” I asked. Glory knew more about machines than I did, unless it was a machine that went bang.

“A geothermal wellhead. Um... a hotspring?” Glory quickly amended. “It pipes hot groundwater to a town or building.” She smiled up at it. “I was reading about them in ‘Scientifica Equestria’. Hoofington experimented with all kinds of alternative power sources. Geothermal, hydroelectric, arcane spark reactors... things that might have ended Equestria’s need for zebra coal.”

“Huh...” I said as I looked at all the pipes and valves, pretending that I understood half of what she said. It had more than a healthy amount of rust and minerals, but it still seemed intact. Pretty impressive for—

The green energy beam punched right through my barding... my chest... and my barding. Again.

‘Ohshitshitohshitshit...’ was all that went through my mind as my chest filled with fire. Falling behind the remains of the Steel Rangers, I was surprised at how little the injury hurt. Maybe it was the Med-X, the regeneration from the Hydra, or the fortifying effects of Buck, but I wasn’t quite dead. However, I certainly wasn’t going to be moving for a bit...quite a bit, probably, since I now had a pencil-thick hole lined with cooked meat running all the way through my body.

Glory darted beside me, crouching behind the armor as she turned me on my side and started pouring every healing potion me had into the hole. “Don’t move. Don’t die. Don’t move. Don’t die.” She repeated over and over as I felt my body drag itself back from the edge. She looked at the hole and muttered, “Shit... I don’t want to use this, but...” and pulled out an ampule of Hydra. Why she wouldn’t use it first, I had no idea. I nodded and she pumped the wonderful regenerative chem into my chest. My heart and head started to pound as the magic repaired the most critical damage. But I couldn’t slow my breathing as adrenaline coursed through me.

“Okay. I’m good,” I groaned. I was a long way from good, but I had just crossed into ‘shooting this fucker many many times’ territory.

“You are not good. I just injected you with Hydra. When it wears off, your heart could stop.” Excuse me? Cardiac arrest was not listed on the list of possible side effects! Actually, I wasn’t sure. Had there been a warning? She dug in her uniform’s pockets for a Buck tablet, “I hate to do this but... eat this.”

“Yeah. Good idea,” I muttered. “And then let me have a tablet of Fixer... slow my heart down before I pass out.”

“Slow your heart rate? Fixer wouldn’t do that. It’d make a heart attack more likely. Put you in shock.”

I saw the red bars appearing one after another. “That’s all mights and maybes. They’re coming, and that sniper will kill me, and maybe you, if they get another shot.” I said as I dug out my own tablets from the infirmary and swallowed one down. I fumbled for some Steady, and then kicked myself when I realized I was out of the chem. “Now I need some Steady. . . and a plan.”

“Blackjack! You’ve taken Hydra, Buck, Fixer, and you want to take Steady too? Why not add some Rage and Dash and complete the set? Are you trying to kill yourself with a pharmacological reaction?”

“Big words later, Steady now,” I said as my limbs spasmed. She looked more scared than me as she dug out her own supply of the chem and injected it. Fortunately, it had the effect I needed. I lay back behind the fallen armor. “Okay. Better now. Much better.” Enervation or not, enough magic and chems had been pumped into me to bring about my recovery. “Now for a. . .”

There was a sharp ping as a round ricocheted off the dead ranger armor inches from my head.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” I muttered, imagining the gunponies advancing on our cover while the beam sniper readied a killing blow. But if we moved, odds were that one of us was going to get hit. I doubted I could survive a second hit from that gun. There were rocks further up the valley that might offer some cover...but we had no way to reach those. Then I looked back at the wellhead behind us. The hissing little streams of white. . .

“Glory?”

“Yeah?” She asked, peeking to the side.

“This hot spring thingy. . . it’s got steam, right?”

She looked back behind us. “Yeah. . .”

“A lot of steam?”

“Maybe. I think so. Enough to cook us, yeah.”

“Enough to hide us?”

She buried her face in her hooves and groaned. “Oh no.”

I pulled out my carbine, looked at the mass of tubes and valves, and slapped in

a clip of armor piercing bullets. "Ante up!" I shouted as I looked at the pipes and sprayed my clips back and forth. Scalding water and jets of steam burst out with a cry like a possessed tea kettle. Great plumes of steam erupted in white, sulfur-scented clouds that washed over us. My hide immediately began to scald as the white mist boiled past. It was now or never. I took the Pecos twelve gauge and raced out to the side, towards the first red bar on my E.F.S.

Maybe it was the chems or the hole that'd just gone through me, or maybe my brain had finally cracked, but as I charged the bounty hunter who backed away from the swirling wall of steam rising before him, time seemed to slow. I heard a saxophone start to play, and Sapphire Shores was singing a sad, lonely tune. . .

Toooooo-night, I feel your love has gone I feel this same sad song When I'm without you. . .

I slid towards him as his rifle shots went high, my knees churning up the dirt as hot condensation at sweat dripped off my grinning lips as I pressed the barrel beneath his chin and removed his head. Grabbing his falling body with my hooves, I jerked it into the rain of fire that had followed me out of the swirling steam.

You saaaaaaay our time has finally past You think this love can't last But I'll prove you wrong. . .

Coming around the rear of my shield, every thundering beat of my heart marked quarter seconds; each beat took an eternity as if I was swimming through S.A.T.S. The next two ponies turned, trying to bring their battle saddles around as I ran behind the pair, my floating pump action swinging to unload twelve gauge buckshot to the backs of their heads. One rolled, leaping wildly as the other fell in a more bloody fashion.

Some ponies think. . . I'm a fool standing here Expecting you to walk through that door. Moonlight is shining. . . through the darkness of night And I know what's in stooooore...

There were more coming out of the rocks and shrubs. My barding took a pounding, the steel plates deflecting some of the fire, but not all. I kept moving, leaping at a unicorn floating an SMG towards me far more quickly than the others with their heavier saddles could turn. My magic reached out and precisely ejected the clip as he fired. I wrapped my hooves around his neck, stared into his eyes, and unloaded two telekinetic bullets into his face.

I knooooooooow one day that you'll be back One day you'll take the track Back to my

heaaaaaart...

Blood spurted past my eyes as I pulled him around, throwing his body with all the force I could muster into the face of the next enemy. Steam and guns and so many red bars. Flashes of light told me that Glory still wasn't out of the fight. The saxophone and piano played on in my head as my vision started to darken. As the hunter tried to deflect the tossed cadaver, my shotgun tore great bleeding chunks in his leather armor.

Toooooonight you might be long gone But as I sing this song I feel my love is strong
As I wait for... you.....

As I listened to the last chords of the piano, my body slowly crumpled beneath me and slammed into the dirt. Foam coated my lips as I gasped for air, my heart no longer individual beats but now almost a constant purr. Blood poured from my mouth and my eyes as I lay there choking, looking up at the gunners as they slowly moved in to finish me off. The final notes trailed off in my mind, finished by Sapphire Shore's saucy little 'oh yeah'.

The half-dozen or so remaining fighters slowly moved around me as I lay there, unable to even raise my head as my heart crashed inside my chest. I heard Glory struggle against two earth ponies who were practically atop her, holding her down. I heard one of them mutter about Paradise.

I'm so sorry, Glory.

From the middle of the hunters stepped an orange earth pony with a red mane and a lion cutie mark. He was dressed in one of the most elaborate battle saddles I'd ever seen. He wore a helmet with a pair of targeting goggles attached to the brim. His beam rifle showed heavy modifications that I could only guess were what'd allowed him to shoot through me. "Well now. Looks like old Leo Zodiac finally brought down Security, eh folks?" he said as he turned to the other hunters. "Told ya, didn't I, that I'd be the one to take her down?" He pointed with a hoof at my PipBuck. "Get that off her lickety split."

One voice rose above the babbled praise, dripping with contempt. "Oh yeah, Leo. You're such a badass," the mare said, and the cocky smirk vanished. Through the dust and smokey haze approached a pony shape that seemed made of jagged steel.

"We're done here, freak. We don't need your help after all," he said sharply as he turned to point that gun as the newcomer slowly advanced. Something was definitely amiss, though; she didn't seem at all worried, despite being outnumbered

with a beam gun pointed at her. In fact, she looked as happy as me with a full bottle of Wild Pegasus.

As I saw more, I decided that that was the least odd thing about this mare. At first, I thought she wore magical power armor like the Steel Rangers. Instead, the polished steel plate formed a shining armor that covered not just her torso but the exterior of all her limbs, chest, and belly. Along her back rose a ridge of blades that slowly scissored with each step she took. The helmet that covered her face was topped with a wide, horn-like blade. Each hoof ended in curving metal claws attached to her horseshoes, and something woven into her red braided tail gleamed. A number of blades were strapped to the outside of her armor.

This had to be a Reaper.

“Oh, Leo. I’m sorry I didn’t make myself clearer earlier. When I said I was coming with you to find Security, I wasn’t after the bounty. I don’t do bounties.” She said casually, walking in front of the ponies with a sure little smile. She stopped, standing right in front of me as she looked at the hunters.

“Right. Sorry. My mistake.” And with those words the buck gestured with his head. Leo’s beam rifle fired, striking her right in the side as all of the other guns roared, spraying the pale mare with a barrage that plinked and popped off her polished armor. She looked down at me gasping for air, and winked.

Then the gunfire stopped and she grinned at the hunters. “My turn!”

I could only imagine how much all that steel weighed. So when she crouched, I anticipated a charge. Instead, the pale mare jumped into the air in a glittering steel arc. Leo turned to run without another word, but the everypony else just watched her. A second later, four bladed hoof claws crushed one of the hunters like a baby radscorpion.

Things rapidly went downhill from there. I admit, I can get brutal in a fight, but I was as tame as a newborn foal. The pony in metal didn’t fight. She annihilated all that came within reach of her hooves. I watched as a hit from one of her hindhooves stove in the side of a mare. She reared and utterly pulverized the face of a buck with devastating rakes of those blades attached to her forelegs. When the rest got the clue to run, she didn’t let them get far.

When she returned, she even carried Leo’s twisted and broken beam rifle in her mouth. Spitting it aside, she sat on her rump, looking at me as she dripped gore. Correction, dripped gore happily. A small but important and disturbing difference.

“Hi. You really look a mess.” She walked to one of the corpses and ripped open its saddlebag. After rooting for a bit, she pulled out a bottle of water, twisted, and removed the top. She spat the plastic cap into the brush. “Stampede and Hydra?” she asked in a strange, slightly slurring voice as her pink eyes looked down at me.

“Buck... s... Steady... Hydra...” I coughed.

“Wuss,” she said with a snort as she held the water to my lips and carefully trickled it down my throat. Glory came limping out of the brush, her uniform glistening with blood. I started to try and rise, but she put a bloody hoof atop my head. “Stay down. She’ll live. Zodiac wasn’t trying to hit anything major on your friend.”

“Who are you?” Glory asked as she approached the armored mare.

“Someone helping,” she replied. “But most folks call me Rampage. It’s that certain something that makes me special,” she grinned at the pair of us. “Now, barring your heart exploding in the next fifteen minutes, you’re going to lie there and breathe. If you try and get up, I’ll sit on you.”

“You know a lot about chems?” Glory asked, looking a little more sure.

“Through trial and error.” She replied as she looked down at me. “Give her water if you’ve got it.” Glory immediately started to dig through her bags as the armored mare grinned and looked down at me, “Could be worse, though. She could be strung out on Dash. That shit’s fucking obnoxious. Or Mint-als: even worse than Dash.”

“So. What’s the plan? Help me recover and then trot me to Deus?” I rasped, not even bothering to try and stand. My nose bled from the thundering blood pressure.

“Oh, you think I’m after Deus’ bounty?” She asked with a sneer and stood. She turned sideways, dragging her hoof claws through the dirt as she grinned at me like some horrid hybrid of dragon and pony. Her tail glistened from the razor wire woven into it. “Do I really look like a pony that gives a fuck about bottle caps?” I really couldn’t say she did.

I carefully sipped the water for a second. “Why help us, then?”

“The kindness of my heart?” she suggested, pressing a hoof to her chest. I kept my look as level as I could manage. She snorted, “Well maybe not. Just be glad I want to help you.”

“Not good enough,” I said as I forced myself to sit up, even with my legs shaking so hard they threatened to buckle beneath me. “Last pony I trusted without finding out

what they wanted ended up killing a whole lot of folks who didn't deserve it. Why?"

"I'm more curious what you think you're going to do if I don't answer. You can barely sit up," she said with a little smirk. I levitated the shotgun under her chin. To my consternation, she grinned. "Go ahead, do it." I almost did.

"I've had bad experiences with one Reaper already. And last time I trusted some pony to 'help' me a lot of innocent zebra died. So, again. . . why?" I tried my best to keep my voice level. It took every bit of my focus to prevent the gun from shaking.

She looked sour a moment and then shrugged, her pink eyes staring into my red ones. "Big Daddy Reaper asked me to. Happy? If you want to know why, ask him." The Reaper gave me a grin I'd seen plenty of times before. All she needed was a deck of cards to shuffle.

Footnote: Level Up!

New Perk Added: Chemist – Chems you take now last twice as long.

Skill note: Guns (100)

15. Flank

“That wasn’t the doozy? How could that not be the doozy?!”

Once upon a time, when I was just a filly, my flank was blank, and then one day it wasn’t anymore. Rivets had inherited a deck of cards from her mother, and we were playing blackjack, the only card game my feeble math skills could handle. Rivets, Daisy, Marmalade, Hatches, and myself were sitting around a table in a storeroom, drinking synthetic apple juice and betting impossible sums with nuts, bolts, screws, and the occasional actual old bit. We were having a great time.

Then Hatches had to go pee. The door of the storeroom was like most: a pair of metal plates slid up and down by an electric motor connected to a button. She’d pressed that and started through. There’d been a short, and the door had closed on her, the large, heavy slab falling from above and the smaller sheet being pushed up from below, with her body in the middle. A horrible snapping sound, then the mechanism had caught and the door opened again. Over in a second. We’d just watched, stunned, as she kept walking on shaking limbs. She’d reached the stairs before she crumpled and died two minutes later. We still just watched, too shocked to even move.

Did I mention that we only started calling her Hatches after she was crushed?

I couldn’t even remember her real name. I wished I could remember her name, because I now knew exactly how she felt walking down that long metal tunnel. My heart continued its rapid staccato as every step made my organs feel as if they were sloshing around inside me. Only the Buck kept me walking; we’d run out of Steady, and I was forced to walk between Glory and the curious Reaper that had saved our lives.

“I need a Fixer. Why can’t I have a Fixer again?” I asked as I slumped against Rampage’s polished metal armor. The articulated plates shifted under my thrashed barding.

“Fixer is not a cure. Fixer is an even worse drug than most of what you’ve been swallowing while my back was turned.” Glory was decidedly snippy and had retracted her previous statement about my intelligence. Instead of lecturing me about how I’d screwed up so badly, she had decided to try and fix the problem by educating me about it. “Fixer’s a psychoactive like Dash and Mint-als. It doesn’t do

anything for your actual symptoms but make them ignorable. You have been trotting around with your heartrate at over a hundred beats a minute when you should have been lying down, trying to metabolize the chemicals and recover.”

“Besides, you ate the last tablet an hour ago,” Rampage added with an amused snicker. In the few hours we’d been travelling together, I’d learned little from the strange pony with shining armor smeared with darkening gore and hoof claws that tapped the asphalt with a persistent metallic beat. I had, though, been able to see that her armor wasn’t part of her body or something, like Deus’s; it was just really good metal armor, and the pony under its bulk seemed not much larger than me. I’d also noticed that the few bits of coat the armor left exposed bore strange bright red markings in a pattern that looked almost like zebra stripes.

She also ate Mint-als like clockwork, taking out the white tablets and popping them in her mouth one by one. But did Glory give her a fifteen-minute lecture on the properties and perils of Mint-als? Nooo. Instead, I learned more about pharmacology than I ever cared to.

Steady, I discovered, caused nerve damage if used too frequently. Med-X could cause the mind to experience phantom pains. Buck was damaging my joints and muscles and doing a number on my reproductive system. But the real monster, apparently, was Hydra.

“Only unicorns can perform magical healing, and there are few who can perform the service. As a result, pegasi and earth ponies found a way to regenerate injuries using a hormonal extract of certain glands from hydras, hence the name. The harvesting is difficult enough, but the real peril is that the chemical suppresses normal recovery long after it wears off. Your body’s natural healing processes fail and you die cell by cell.” Glory had looked scared and not elaborated. “One Hydra is bad enough, but two or three. . . you can drop dead on your hooves.”

“And that’s not counting taking a stroll through some nice quiet e-fields,” interjected Rampage. “I’ve seen ponies liquefy from a combination of Hydra and a strong enough Enervation field. Kinda cool to watch, actually,” she said brightly, grinning at the sick look Glory and I shared. “Oh, what? You think that’s the worst way to die?”

“No.” I muttered, “I’ve seen worse.”

“Like what?” she asked with a taunting little smirk.

I really wasn’t in the mood for Reaper taunting. I looked at her flatly. “I fed a pony through a rock crusher once.” She blinked, looking speculative. “Tail first,” I added,

and was rewarded with a small look of shock on her face. Now her pink eyes looked skeptical. "It's true. It was the only way I could kill a pony monster named Gorgon."

Rampage stopped in her tracks, and I slid off her side and fell flat on my face. "You really killed Gorgon?"

"At Brimstone's Fall," I answered as I tried to get my hooves to support me. "He was trying to kill me. He'd taken over the mine and I had to take him out." Her wording hit me. "How did you. . ." I nervously started to ask.

Rampage looked at me flatly. "Gorgon is. . . was. . . I knew him." I felt dread creep up my spine. If she decided to attack and avenge him, what could I do to stop it? My only chance was three magic bullets to the face, and even then I wasn't sure I could pull it off. "And he was a friend," she added, and I almost switched to S.A.T.S. right then. But instead of looking angry or upset. . . I couldn't tell what that expression was. Was it happiness? "Lucky bastard."

She bit the neck of my barding and hauled me to my hooves. "You aren't mad?" I asked.

"Should I be?" she asked in return once I was standing.

Glory looked at her, as confused and wary as me. "He was your friend."

She sighed, "There are worse things you could have done to him."

"But. . . who was he? What was he?" Glory asked.

"My friend the monster," was all she answered, and after a look at the scowl that accompanied it I nudged Glory and shook my head. Rampage was not a safe pony to press right now. Not till we knew more about her. She certainly wasn't quite the psychopath I'd envisioned...but that didn't mean that she couldn't be a psychopath I hadn't envisioned.

We walked along together for a bit in welcome silence. We were entering a small valley where the Sunset Highway crossed over another road from Hoofington before heading off to the southwest towards Fillydelphia. We'd been hit by raiders twice. Fortunately, I simply sat my butt down, floated the carbine over my head, and played gun turret while Rampage eagerly dismembered them. The white and red pony's serrated armor tore our attackers in half, and each kick of her hoofblades shredded hide and armor alike. Watching her moves, I realized two things: I did not want to fight her, and I appreciated just how tough Reapers had to be.

Reapers... just like Deus.

"Have you ever heard of somepony named Sanguine?" I asked as we finished looting the second band of raiders. I wasn't finding any links to the Enclave on them, but paranoia was nibbling at my mane.

"Sure," Rampage replied. "He's a unicorn ghoul. Real nutcase too: drinks blood. Lots of business deals and a surprisingly snappy dresser. Used to be a doctor before the war, or so I heard." She looked down at me with a smirk. "And no, personally I don't do much business with him. He works out of Paradise, though; he's hoof in frigging hoof with Usury."

"Is there a way I can get in contact with him?"

"Why would you want to?"

I lifted my PipBuck. "He wants a file on this. He sent Deus to my stable, and I'm pretty sure he's why Deus is after me."

"Uh. . . no. Having a vagina and having shot at him with artillery is why Deus's after you. But yeah, he works a lot with Sanguine." She took a deep breath, "If you really want to hand the file over, he'd probably pay you and smooth things over with Deus and Usury. Maybe get you out of the Hoof. But if he wants that file, it's because someone else wants it. Someone with a lot of pull in the Hoof. I can only think of two or three with that kind of swing. . . four, if you throw in the Enclave," she added with a glance at Glory. "Big Daddy Reaper, Elder Crunchy Carrots, and King Awesome."

I couldn't have heard that right. "King. . . Awesome?" And here I thought calling myself Security was pretentious.

"He's the head of the Society," Rampage said and then snorted, "Hey, don't look at me. I didn't name him."

"And is he?" I asked with a wan grin. "Awesome, I mean?"

Rampage shrugged, "The Society is the biggest source of real food in the Hoof. King Awesome managed to clear out the plantations and build the greenhouses, screwing over the Eggheads in the process. He brought the Oranges on board and convinced Roseluck Agrifarms to join the Society. They charge a premium, but food is food." She glanced at me. "Of course, they use slaves to farm it."

Any affinity I had for Prince Splendid withered on the vine. "They what?" Rampage seemed amused by my anger.

"Sure. You don't expect aristocrats to get their hooves dirty, do you? Until Red Eye

came along, they were the premier slaveholders in the Hoof. . . heck, maybe in all of Equestria.” She frowned and rubbed her chin, “You know. . . I always wondered where Red Eye got the caps to pay for all those slaves he’s been funneling into Fillydelphia. Hmm.” She shrugged and looked at me again. “Anyway, the Society prefers to call them ‘serfs’ and ‘servants’, but it’s one pony wearing an explosive collar and another pony with their hoof on the trigger. So it sounds like slaves to me.”

Even feeling as lousy as I did and with everything churning in my brain, I somehow managed some fresh, smoldering anger. It was refreshing to have something wrong to focus against. I might not be able to do anything right now, but it was something to think about. I added it to my mental ‘things to do’ list somewhere underneath ‘Survive’ and above ‘Save Equestria’.

We arrived. The town filling most of the valley had evidently once been a major suburb of Hoofington. Several five and six-story buildings hunched sullenly together in the center of the ruins like brooding mares. We passed by a sign that read “Welcome to Flankfurt. Hope you like your stay.” That warm greeting was marred by less charming messages like ‘DASH: 20% more fucked!’, ‘STELLA!’, ‘Fuck Caprice: 50 caps’, ‘Fried in ten seconds flat’, and ‘DIE ZEBRA DIE!’ There was a balefire crater to the north, but most of Flank appeared burned rather than blasted. A morass of ponds and muck lingered in and around the roofless remains of the houses, but I didn’t see one strand of swamp grass. Nothing grew in Flank.

Then I felt it. My heartbeat was becoming irregular and I staggered, my hooves falling out from under me. Blood was trickling down my nose and out of my ears. Tears much too thick to be simple salt water ran down my cheeks. I couldn’t seem to breathe as I feel flat on my face.

“Blackjack? Blackjack! What’s wrong?” Glory yelled as she turned me on my side.

“Enervation, probably. Flank is full of E-fields,” Rampage said in mild irritation. “Guess the Hydra weakened her body enough that she’s crashing.”

“Do something!” Glory said as she looked up at the Reaper, “Please!”

Rampage rolled her eyes and gave a dismissive snort, grabbed me, and dragged me several feet back. My heartbeat steadied as I lay there. Now, more than ever, I suddenly realized just how fucked up I was. I could have died! I could have liquefied. . . I. . .

It finally happened: I was afraid of dying. Not of dying personally; that was sort of a

'well, it would suck if I did' kind of concern. No, it was thinking about not resolving things with P-21. It was wondering what would happen to Glory if I died. Thinking of that, for the first time ever, I realized I was scared shitless that I'd kick it and leave them to go on without me.

I am such a stupid pony that I had to bleed from my tear ducts before I could see that.

I don't know what Glory was doing; injecting me with the very chems that had deteriorated my body, I supposed. She gave me a healing potion that tasted like ass, but I couldn't even throw it up. "We have to get her to Flank's doctor now," Glory said desperately as she looked down the highway at the distant gates. It was at least a mile or two. Maybe more.

"Give her some Dash," Rampage said as she eyed the ruins around us.

"Oh, pop another Mint-all!" Glory snapped back.

"She's this close to dying anyway," Rampage said as she took out the tin and licked up one of the tablets, chewing. "If she can make the run, maybe Scalpel can get her in the auto-doc fast enough to do something. Otherwise, she's a corpse." She frowned, "And in case you missed it. . . we got scavengers coming."

I saw them creeping out of the burned-out ruins. Naked and emaciated or wearing the thinnest rags. Bloodshot and yellowed eyes, slat-sided ponies, poor and desperate, crept slowly closer and closer. They all looked just as wrecked as I was, but there were a lot more of them than of me. "Give it to me," I wheezed.

"Oh dear Luna, I can't believe I'm doing this," Glory groaned and took out a red cartridge with a mouth tube attached. She put it to my lips. "Breathe in as deeply as you can. . ." she muttered as her hooves compressed the cartridge and I felt a hot, stinging gas fill my lungs.

Funny. I didn't notice much difference. What was the big deal? I stood up and shook myself off as I grinned at all the gaunt ponies starting to surround us. Heh. They were all staring at me, which made sense. I'm Security. The bad ass. The mare with the hundred thousand cap bounty! In one puff I'd gone from dying to amazing in ten seconds flat. Glory just looked at me like she was going to cry; why? I felt great! I was great! I think I just felt an orgasm, yeah!

"Hey, Blackjack, bet you can't beat me to the gate!" Rampage taunted as she started to run. Oh, miss Reaper thought she could beat me? Nothing could beat me! I could fly right now. And I was going to prove it as I started to run. I was so badass I was

drooling! Yeah! Badass! As we ran I felt all sickly, but freaky freaky magical fields can't touch Blackjack!

Everypony at the gates of Flank was staring and stepping aside. You bet they would. 'Cause Blackjack was in town! Look out Flank, I'm bringing the gun and the fun and the funktastica! I didn't even know what that word meant, but I was bringing it, because I'm Blackjack! The Security Mare. Awwwww yeah!"

"We're walking!" Rampage said as she walked ahead of me. Oh, miss armored pony thought she was going to win? No way! Cause I am Blackjack, made of awesome. Bleeding awesome! Yeah! I couldn't really pay much attention because my eyes weren't working. That's cause I got freaky freaky mutant eyes. 'Cause I'm cool... and stuff...

It was getting kinda hard to walk. Rampage bit me by the neck of my barding and dragged me the last few feet into a building that smelled of blood. And piss. And shit. And blood. Oh, that must be me. Because I smell awesome. Once inside, she dropped me to the floor.

"Mom!" Rampage roared. "Warm up the autodoc, now!" It looked like some sort of doctor's office, like medical back in 99. A long counter ran across the middle of the room and four armored guards were rising to their hooves.

"Rampage?" An older lavender unicorn poked her head into the foyer and looked at me through thick, black-framed glasses. She looked at me with a profound expression of disappointment. Her white labcoat was smeared with numerous stains. "Not another one, Rampage. I can't keep treating every poor thing you bring in. Just give it some Dash and let it die in peace."

"It's Security, Mom." Rampage said. Everything began to tumble away, "And I think her heart's stopped..."

"So, who can name the six ministries established by Princess Luna to combat zebra aggression and save Equestria?" our teacher, Textbook, asked as she looked over all the attentive mares and colts as we sat together in Stable 99's classroom. The projector showed cartoony pictures of six mares arranged around princess Luna. A gray circle looped around them. The red mare lowered her glasses, "Blue?"

The young blue colt sitting ahead of me cleared his voice as he stood. "The six Ministries were Awesome, Arcane Sciences, Wartime Technology, Image, Morale,

and. . . . Peace!”

“Very good, Blue,” she praised the young colt.

“Wasn’t there a seventh ministry?” Daisy asked, the shy little earth pony jumping when a colt glanced her way.

“That’s a good question,” Textbook said as she changed to the next slide, a flow chart. “There certainly was more to Equestria than just the ministries, though the ministries did revolutionize Equestria in a very short time. There was Luna’s government, which was responsible for enforcing Luna’s decrees and laws with the common pony. There was the military, which operated independently of the ministries, but worked with all of them. There were also private businesses, many of which worked with the ministries.”

I kept dozing off, and my eyes were drawn to the gaps between the bubbles on the flow chart.

“So can you tell me the responsibilities of the OIA, Go Fish?” Text asked.

I shot upright in my seat and shouted, “Blackjack! My name is Blackjack!”

Giggles filled the classroom. Blue looked back at me with a warm smile. He was my best friend and. . .

The sound of cards being shuffled filled the room like static. Everything turned gray and fuzzy. When focus returned, the colts were gone, as were all the bright colors. Everything was now mixed with gray. Daisy smirked back at me; she was my best friend. . . if that was what a friend was. Duct Tape cringed from the snide smirk of Marmalade. Only Rivets didn’t put up with our shit. Textbook no longer smiled, instead talking with the rote boredom that came with instruction. “Go Fish. Blackjack. Whatever.”

“The OIA. . . I don’t think this was in the book, teacher,” I protested.

“Nevertheless, it’s something you should know,” she said with a bored, disinterested sigh. “So can you answer or. . . ugh. . . nevermind.”

I snorted as I folded my hooves on the desk and rested my chin atop them. Who cared who some dumb OIA was, anyway? The ministries were the ones who ran Equestria. And Luna. They were all blown up centuries ago. I raised my hoof, “Teacher, I need to take a leak.”

“Uh-huh. . .” she waved her hoof at me and I stepped out of my desk and trotted to the door. I was in Security. It didn’t matter if I knew history, just so long as I could

shoot a gun or swing a baton.

Outside the classroom, the colors were bright and cheery. Bucks and mares talked as they strolled along, discussing their jobs and what was needed in the stable. Blue sat outside the classroom, the young colt listening in. "Oh hey, Go-" he began when he caught my look and gave me a sheepish grin. "Blackjack! Much better name."

"Hey Blue. I had to get out of there." I smiled brightly at him, "Say, wanna sneak down to maintenance? I can help you with your reading and we can. . ."

The purr of cards plunged the world into gray hues. Mares walked along in isolation, talked in low soft voices. The colt cowered behind metal crates, listening in. ". . . take you back to medical. You're not supposed to be out here. You're a colt."

"Please," he stammered. "I was just listening."

"You're a colt. That means you have to stay with the colts till a filly wants you." Why a filly would want a colt for anything was beyond me. Colts didn't actually do anything in the stable. They didn't work. They didn't study. They just ate food and did. . . whatever they did.

"I don't want to go back. . ." he said quietly as he peeked through the crack at the teacher droning on and on about how wonderful the ministries were. "Can't I listen? I want to find out about all this stuff."

"No. You're a boy. You should go to boy school. This is a school for fillies," I said and stomped my hoof. "Anyway I'm in security. So I gots to take you back. That's what momma would want." I kicked his flank, "Now march."

A flicker of color. Maybe I was going to kiss his booboo. Maybe I was going to ask him his name. But the purr of the shuffling cards kept all the colors dull.

We got to medical and instantly the colors returned. The nurses and doctor were very thankful to me for finding Blue and gave us both a peppermint stick. I watched as he was escorted through to the colts' school, where two dozen foals and colts sat in desks listening to a much better lesson on rainbows and why rainbows were awesome. I wanted to ask if I could be allowed to stay, even if I was a filly.

A sigh. A shuffle of the cards. The colors drained away. There was no school. No rainbows. No lesson. Just rows and rows of bunk beds on which curled the colts of Stable 99. Their toys were broken things, things that fillies didn't want any more. They were all so. . . small. Such a little space to live in. The nurses kicked him back into the room, demanding to know how he'd gotten out. The head doctor scowled at me and suggested I go back to class.

Then Big Macintosh strode in through the doors with all the Marauders in a burst of pure awesome! "Alright. We're shutting you down. This has gone on long enough."

"May Celestia forgive you for what you have done here," Psalm intoned gravely.

Fluttershy flew in and guided the colts out, with Pinkie Pie giving them all a cake and Rainbow Dash making them grin just by being Rainbow Dash.

A sigh. A shuffle. Macintosh's Marauders were long gone; Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie, and Rainbow Dash too. Everything that had once been glorious and good and bright was just a dream. No pony stopped the screams coming from the colt as he was shocked again and again as they demanded he tell them how he'd escaped.

So, still not dead. I was lying on a bed next to a machine full of strange glowing tubes, jars of fluid, and glowing magical gems. I felt... better. Not like I had after Priest had finished with me, but definitely better. My legs were only a little twitchy. My heartbeat had dropped to rates below 'running for my life'. I had a brand new pair of puckered scars, one to the left of the middle of my chest and the other halfway down my left side; entry and exit wounds for a beam of energy.

The dingy room had a glass-fronted cabinet full of chems. I looked at the red inhaler with surprising longing, remembering just how great I'd felt. Still, if it wouldn't help me help Glory, I didn't care. The injectors of Stampede were a much larger draw.

"Don't even think about it," the middle-aged lavender pony said gruffly as she walked in, her tired purple eyes watching me sharply. "I've developed a sixth sense for when a patient is up and eying my stocks." Her mane had gone prematurely white; I could still see hints of purple. A pair of crossed scalpels decorated her flank. "You're lucky. If it hadn't been for that friend of yours, I wouldn't have even bothered. She knows how to use an auto-doc as well as I do. In case introductions weren't made while you were choking on your own bloody froth, I'm Scalpel."

"Blackjack," I replied, trying not to eye the chems. "Sorry about that... nearly dying thing. Thanks for patching me up."

"Oh, you're not out of the woods yet," she replied as she walked over to the auto-doc. "This is a machine that, with enough time, skill, and healing magic, can restore almost any injury. It can analyze, diagnose, repair, and regenerate just short of a megaspell-level super restoration. There's only two things it can't cure or heal. One's death, the other's taint." She said as she worked the controls and a cartoon

image of a frowning pony appeared on the machine's screen. There were all kinds of cute icons showing bloody lungs, a leaking heart, black guts, and broken bones.

"And since I'm not dead," I said, closing my eyes. "Let me guess. . ."

"Mhmmm," Scalpel said with a little sigh. "Sometime in the last few days, you were exposed to it. I already checked your friend; she's clean." She added at once as I opened my mouth and closed it again. "If it hadn't been for the taint, I think you probably would have pulled through on your own, at least well enough to reach here without your heart exploding. That taint interacted with the chems, making for a doozy of a mess. You're going to need at least two more treatments to reverse most of the damage."

"Radiation, Enervation, and now taint. Is there any other mysterious and lethal aspect of Hoofington I should know about? Ghosts, maybe? Death beams from the clouds?" I said as I rubbed my head between my hooves. I'd read the entry on taint in the Wasteland Survival guide. No pony knew what it was or what caused it, but if it got inside you then it would slowly mutate and corrupt your mind and body. A lot of the wildlife had been horribly mutated by just a little of it. Knowing my luck, I'd gotten a lot more than a little. "So, am I going to grow tentacles? A third eye? A penis? Eye tentacle penises?"

"Probably not. There's no surefire way to measure just how much you were exposed to." She pointed at the display with her hoof. "Major trauma to the heart. Some damage to your lungs. Your brain. . . eh, who knows?" She looked at me with a little tilt of her head. "You seem to be taking this pretty well, all things considered."

I laughed; I couldn't help it. "I've got a doozy of a bounty on my head. I've got the Reaper Deus after me. My one friend thinks I'm a drug fiend, my other. . ." I felt the shakes starting and took a deep breath. "I don't suppose you moonlight as a therapist, do you?"

She sighed and lifted her scratched glasses off the end of her muzzle. "Well, I am charging you thirty times my normal price, so I'm probably in the therapist ballpark. What's on your mind?"

I took a deep breath, wondering how I could admit it. . . "I raped somepony." There. I said it. Just like that. I'd expected I'd have to fight it. Choke it out. Dance around the confession. Instead it slipped out of me as easily as bleeding. "I raped a buck in my stable."

She looked at me oddly, "Okay. And?"

‘And?’ What the fuck did she mean, ‘and?’ “And it was fucking wrong!”

She just sat on her haunches, looking at me as if mildly baffled. “Huh. . . well that’s novel.”

“What is?”

“Guilt,” she replied as she walked over to the locker and lifted a key from her pocket. She brought out a bottle of Wild Pegasus and two shot glasses. Locking the door again, she trotted to a little table beside the auto-doc. “It’s a pretty rare condition in the wastelands. Results from either an overabundance of morality or getting kicked in the head too often.” She said quietly as she poured two shots.

I looked at the shot skeptically, licking my lips. “You’re treating me for chem damage; are you really supposed to be giving me alcohol?”

“I can drink both if you’d prefer?” She asked with a lazy smile as she lifted a shot.

“Well, I don’t want my doctor too drunk,” I rationalized and took my shot with glee.

She chuckled, “Oh trust me, it’d take far more than two little shots to get me drunk,” smiling mirthlessly as she looked at me. “In the great hierarchy of the shit messed up in your life, the booze is pretty low.” She downed her own drink, gave a shiver and smiled, “If you’re feeling guilty about this rape you did, then there’s a reason for it.”

“Because it was wrong,” I muttered.

“Why?” She asked, and she was still smiling!

“What do you mean why? Are you telling me rape is okay?!”

“Considering the number of mares I’ve treated over the years, apparently,” she said with a small shrug. “I’ve heard males brag about raping mares, mares brag about ‘seducing’ bucks, bucks crowin’ about bugging colts and fillies laughing about breaking fillies. You say it’s wrong and I’m not disagreeing with you. I’m asking you why.”

I closed my eyes shut. “Because I wouldn’t want that to happen to me. If our places had been swapped then I would have. . . I don’t think I would have survived.”

“Oh, well, that’s the easy bullshit answer,” she said as she poured two more shots. “Do unto others as I’d have them do unto me. Till you have to kill. Till you kill someone who deserves it. Till you fuck somepony that doesn’t want it. Take what isn’t yours. If I accept that other people will rape me, does that make it okay and

right for me to rape others?" She put the cap on the bottle.

Was that true? It was, but only up to a point. If I was okay with somepony putting me down, was it right for me to kill everypony I wanted? No.

"He... he's my friend. Though I can't be sure of that anymore."

"So, when he wasn't your friend it was sex, but when you cared about him suddenly it was rape? Simple solution. Shoot him in the leg and it'll be sex again," Scalpel said with a chuckle as she took off her glasses and rubbed a hoof across her bloodshot eyes. "That's an even lamer excuse than the previous one. Why is this problem for you, Blackjack?"

"Because I want to be good, all right?" I yelled at her, glad I had recovered enough to shout. "I don't want to be fucked up! Everything is fucked up. You're fucked up! Everything I see is one pile of shit after the other and it's looking more and more like the only way to be good is to die!" I shouted at her, knocking the shot glasses and bottle of whiskey away with a sweep of my hoof. "I'm sick of seeing everything fucked up and wrong. I was happy when I didn't have a clue how fucked up the world is. That I was making it more fucked up! That I am still fucking it up, even after the shit I've gone through," I said as I sat back down. "I raped P-21 and didn't even realize it was wrong. I couldn't save Glory from fuckers I knew were bad news. And it seems like the only way for anypony to survive is to become like Deus and kill everypony and anypony that they want."

Shit. Here I was, crying again. My stupid tainted brain and wicked tainted heart throbbed as I lay down on the ground, hiding my face under my hooves. There. I'd finally thought about it. The wastelands were fucked up, and so was I. Strip away my good intentions and I was just as sick as the Raiders and Slavers I'd killed. Was it too much to simply want to be good?

"I want to be good too," Scalpels said quietly. I peeked up at her tired smile and sad eyes. "Some days more than others. Month after month I see ponies chewed up by addiction, injury, and hopelessness. More than any other part of Equestria. I deliver stillborn foals because their mothers can't get out of the Enervation fields. I try to keep Dash addicts from huffing brahmin dung because the act of living hurts. I sew them up, heal their hurts, numb their pain, and send them back out into this fucked up world. And I'm usually the last one who sees them before they kick it. And damn me, I still care, even knowing that they're destroying their lives. Because I can. Because I don't want to be another heartless doctor handing out healing like I'm an auto-doc. Because that's the only difference between me and the fuckers

that cause the hurt. I care. And caring hurts, no matter how you fucking slice it.”

“Blackjack?” Glory said from the doorway. I stared at her in horror and saw the expression mirrored back at me. I clenched my eyes shut, feeling the shakes start. “Did... is what you said... did you really...” she asked in a tiny voice. I’d been so focused on Scalpel that I hadn’t heard the door open.

“Yes!” I said, eyes clenched shut. “Stable 99 is nothing more than just one great big rape factory. And I was a part of it. I didn’t know better... I should have... I’m sorry, Glory.” And now she knew who I really was. I wasn’t strong. I wasn’t good. I certainly wasn’t smart. And if she had sense at all, she’d leave me before I did the same or worse to her. Trying and wanting to be good wasn’t enough.

“Blackjack,” she started as I shook more and more. “How...”

“Because I’m not a good pony. So just leave, Glory. Staying with me cost you your cutie mark. It’s just going to cost you more and more.” And now I was tainted, too. Contaminated. Would it drive me crazy, like the raider sickness? Twist my body till I was grotesque and mutated beyond recognition? I suddenly had an image of Gorgon. Would that be me, eventually? Would Glory someday smile when she heard I’d been fed through a rock crusher? “So just go and find somepony better than...”

Then I felt her hooves gently reach around me and hold me as she pressed her face underneath my jaw. I couldn’t move. I could only shake as I returned the gesture. “I’ve spent my whole life working for ponies that betrayed me and branded me a traitor. For all I know, I could have helped them with their plans against the surface and not had a clue.” She whispered softly, “I think about every raider we’ve run across and wonder ‘did I have a part in that?’ No matter how remote that possibility may be, I still can’t help but feel like I am to blame. You’re a good pony, Blackjack. You keep trying and you never give up, no matter what you have to do.”

I fell apart at that point, and Glory did too. I think we both needed to just give in a little and hurt.

Because caring hurts, no matter how you slice it.

Two hours later, I was back in the auto-doc frame. Scalpel’s horn glowed as the machine whirred and chirped and did whatever it did to put me back together again. There were tubes of nasty gray, maroon, and yellow feeding into collection jars as

she tried to remove as much damaged tissue, and hopefully the taint along with it, as possible. I spent most of the time explaining to Glory the fine nuances of Stable 99's fucked up society.

Glory listened as she fiddled with Leo's broken beam rifle. I personally thought it was a lost cause, but right now I wasn't going to begrudge her. Still, just standing here was boring, and I certainly didn't want to pay attention to what was being removed from me by the auto-doc. "Glory. Could you come here and play an audio file on my PipBuck?"

I glanced at Scalpel, who returned the look with an indifferent shrug. Glory trotted over and sat down. With my limb restrained by the auto-doc, she had to operate my PipBuck for me. "Which one?"

"P-21's auto-files. You need BJ#3." I sighed as I looked at her, "I may as well. It's not like it can get worse than raping him and neglecting him, right?" Glory gave me a troubled look. Yes, I was going to keep beating myself up with that till we resolved things with P-21. She worked the controls deftly and then there was a crackle.

"We're safe here, U-20. They can't track us down here. A security mare told me so." P-21's voice was soft and rushed. Panting desperately.

"P-17... we can't stay down here forever. This is a stable. There's nowhere we can go. Eventually they'll come down here and check all the places they can't track." Soft noises of nuzzlings and quiet little sobs.

"You stay here, then. I'll find whoever's going to be the next U-1 and kill them. I just need a little more time!" P-21 said desperately. "I've got a mare teaching me how to access the overmare's terminals and get her override commands. We can sneak out together."

"No, P-17. No. You're not going to kill a colt for me."

"I've done it before," P-21 whispered. "You've done it before."

"And you'll never do it again. Even if I have to turn myself in right now." The soft voice of U-20 said firmly, bringing more tears from P-21. "Us killing our own is what the mares want. Takes the blood off their hooves and puts it on ours."

"I love you. I don't want to lose you," P-21 whispered.

"You knew you would," U-20 said quietly. Soft noises of kisses and quiet strangled sobs.

Then I heard my voice echoing in the tunnels. “They’ve got to be down here. Somewhere near the spark generators, I think.”

“See? That didn’t take them long.” U-20’s voice was quiet and resigned. “You stay here. Keep out of sight. They just want me.”

“No! Please, no!” P-21 sobbed.

“I think I hear them,” I said. Then a pause, “There you are. U-20, as per Stable 99’s bylaws, you are required to come with me to security for your removal from the unicorn breeding population.” I’d never realized how bored I sounded when telling a pony they were about to die.

“I understand. I’m ready.” U-20 said.

“No!” Yelled P-21. A thump, and then the sharp crack of a baton striking skull.

“What the heck has gotten into you, P-17?” A thump. Another thump. I could hear my heart rate increase on the auto-doc monitor.

“Please, stop!” yelled U20. And there was the sound of a shove. Another sharp crack. Deeper. Wetter. A yell from me and another crack. And another. And another. Another. And then the thud of a body hitting the floor of the concrete tunnel. Another. Another... then silence, broken by P-21 sobbing brokenly as I cursed about stupid crazy males.

“Don’t cry,” I heard U-20’s softest whisper. It could have only been caught if P-21’s microphone had been at his mouth by cradling his head.

“I love you. I love you.”

More hooves echoing in the tunnel. “Whoa, Blackjack? Is he dead?” Daisy’s voice, sounding impressed. I wanted to puke.

“Yeah. I think so. Fuck, I’m going to get in so much trouble for breaking procedure.”

“You okay? Going to off the blue one too? Can I watch?”

“I already fucked up once today. I’m not going to make it twice. Can you girls haul the body up to security? Go through the motions?”

“Yeah, sure. Come on Marmalade, lift your end.” The sound of a dead unicorn being hefted on to Daisy’s back sounded, and then footsteps receding.

P-21 wept horrified little sobs.

"So. Here's the plan, P-17. We're going up to medical and they can give you a shot to calm the fuck down or something. Okay? Okay."

"Kill me," P-21 said between shaky, gasping breaths.

"What was that?"

"Kill me right the fuck now. Or I swear by Celestia and Luna, I will end you."

"Right. You're upset. I can see that. Males are always so overemotional. But these are the rules. Take it up with the Overmare if you want, but I'm not your executioner."

"Why?" He broke down sobbing again. "Why kill him and not me?"

"That was an accident. . ." Yeah. My baton accidentally beat him to death.

"Not that! You're going to kill me anyway in a few months. A year at the most. So get it over with!"

"I can't. It'd be wrong." The sounds of me making him stand. "Come on... don't think about it."

The tape cut out.

'I mean that if I have a weapon I might kill you.'

Not because I was a mare, but because I murdered the buck he'd loved.

'Do you know what fucking justice is? It's giving to others as is given to you.'

I'd remembered that, tracking down U-20. He was a good male. Give you a rutting and then you could talk and he'd listen and nod like he really cared. I'd been honestly bummed that he was being taken out of rotation. Only he'd disappeared from tracking. That'd been unusual because most males never went down to maintenance, so how could he know where tracking was scrambled? But I knew. I knew all the spots. And I'd found him together with a blue earth pony that was only barely familiar.

He'd been upset and I'd assumed it was 'normal' male hysteria. He'd attacked me with my guard down and I'd used my baton. I admit, I was a little panicked. I'd never been attacked by a male pony before. U-20 had come to his rescue, shoving me away with his magic. I'd thought they were both going to attack me.

I beat him to death.

At the time, I thought I'd caught hell. Double work shifts. My breeding queue was revoked. I was even under lockdown for a month. But the rule of 99 was 'don't think

about it', and eventually everything went back to normal.

I felt strangely calm. My limbs weren't shaking. My heart was beating steadily.

"Blackjack," Glory asked as she looked up at me. "Are you. . . are you okay?"

"Yeah. Sure. Don't worry about it." I wasn't. Because I knew exactly what I needed to do.

I needed to give P-21 a gun.

Three hours later, Scalpel had restored me as much as the taint allowed. The old lavender pony simply scowled at a display that refused to change any further for the better. When I would get worse and how I would get worse, remained to be seen. Scalpel had been surprisingly mute on the subject of magical chems. "Some folks handle them just fine. Some folks don't. If I were you, I'd avoid em, but I'm not you." That was much better than Glory, who seemed ready to bludgeon me into senselessness with big egghead words.

My barding was far less effective since the sniper beam had punched a hole clear through the front and left side. The thought of the cost of repairs made my withers quake. That was after the fifteen hundred cap fee paid out to Scalpel. I didn't even try and haggle with her. I could see just how badly she needed the caps. With my barding rolled up, I felt decidedly exposed stepping out into Flank.

I needn't have been concerned. Flank was the first true pony town I'd seen in the wasteland. Little villages like Chapel and Stockyard, and, I hated to admit, Megamart, had nothing on Flank. Six large buildings filled a block of four-lane street. While the top floors were uninhabitable, light still glowed in the bottom floors. Strings of lights stretched back and forth across the street, and flashing neon signs constantly bathed the visitors in their colorful glow. The bland sign of "Helpinghoof Qwik-Kare" was hardly helped by the addicts lingering about outside the doors.

Across from the clinic was the Exchange, a bank partially converted into a market. Quality vendors had booths set up, and while I saw lots of weapons and chems for sale, there wasn't a lot of the extra material stacked on pallets like in Megamart. After selling our salvage, I'd inquired about getting my barding repaired. The price the vendor quoted made a liar of Bottlecap: the simple patching of holes in armor was apparently infinitely more expensive than data analysis. I bought a Stable 89 utility harness; hopefully Glory would work some of her repair magic.

Outside the Exchange, we saw Mixers and The Trough. Mixers was a shop, one that peddled chems exclusively. It was also a club of sorts, but the music was certainly nothing like I'd heard on DJ Pon3. It was all beat and so fast that I supposed you'd have to be high on Dash to really enjoy it. Mixers seemed to take chems to a whole new level; Stampede was one thing, but what was Ultra-Dash? Or Filly Flash?

The Trough surprised me; I hadn't ever seen a place devoted solely to food. In the first floor of an office building were a half-dozen little shops and restaurants catering to the inhabitants and visitors of Flank. I had to admit, I choked up a little at the sight a store named '200 Years Fresh' that seemed devoted to salvaged food. The sight of box after box of Sugar Apple Bombs made my mouth water. There was a butcher shop that definitely had me a bit nervous; all meat looked the same chopped up.

And there was an Enclave shop in the Trough. It was called 'Cloud Fresh'; outside were two pegasus mares in less severe looking uniforms than what I was familiar with. In fact, with the amount of flank they showed, it was hard to determine if they were wearing clothes or lingerie. There were bright, colorful banners showing apple trees growing amidst the clouds. 'Volunteer Corps: Let Us Help!' Their produce was certainly fresh, packed on ice or in trays, and cheaper than the produce being offered by the Society ponies.

'Wonder how much of it will turn you into a raider?' I could still see Tumbleweed's head coming apart from my telekinetic bullet spell.

The two mares took one look at Glory and immediately closed for cleaning. They didn't even bother to hide their expressions of contempt for her fresh pink Dashite brands. Scalpel had healed the injury, but the scars from the chemicals used to burn away her cutie mark were permanent, even with magic. I supposed it would take a megaspell to restore her cutie mark.

Gee; slave-grown produce from the Society, or Enclave produce that could turn you into a cannibalistic psychopath? I chewed my two-century-old apple cereal with a bit more satisfaction.

'Rooms' was simply that: a hotel with rooms ranging from a mattress in the lobby to private suites.

That left Stable 69.

The parking garage was certainly nothing impressive on its own, but it had been draped in neon lights that proclaimed 'Finest Flank in Equestria.' A two-story-high pink neon mare winked suggestively out at the street next to a ridiculously endowed

blue stallion. "Oh my. . ." I muttered, going a touch pink myself.

"Eh, I've seen bigger," Rampage snorted as she squinted up at the stallion, chewing another Mint-al.

"Aren't you eating a lot of those?" Glory asked, tapping her hooves together nervously. Rampage's pink eyes glared at her and she gave a little squeak, jumping behind me.

"They calm me down and keep me from killing ponies that criticize my choice of mood improving chemicals," she growled softly. "So aren't you glad I've got a lot of them?"

"So aren't you eating a lot of those?" I asked now, coolly. I wasn't going to jump, no matter how she glared. "Don't threaten her, Rampage. She's just concerned."

"She doesn't have to bother," she said with a little snort. "I've survived a lot worse than Mint-als."

I took a deep breath. "All right. Well we need to keep an eye open for P-21 or U-21. It took us two days to get here, so we might have gotten here first. I also need to cash in these contracts for the Finders." I looked at the entrance to Stable 69, "Which means I need to go in there."

"I need to find parts for this beam rifle," Glory said as she twisted and pulled out Leo's magical beam weapon, setting it between her hooves. The internal workings tinkled ominously as she turned it upright. The barrel had an obvious bend in the middle.

"You're seriously going to try and fix that piece of junk?" Rampage asked as she tapped her hoofclaws against the metal housing. Was it just me, or did something new break just from that contact?

"Junk?" Glory bristled. "Do you have any idea what this is?"

"Do you have any idea how little I care?" Rampage replied dully as she leaned back.

"This was an AER-14 prototype, one of a limited run that was developed to replace the Novasurge rifle! Only twenty were produced before research was cancelled due to. . . well. . . the balefire megaspells." She lifted it in her hooves. "And look! It has an emerald refocusing crystal instead of the standard ruby. And a type D spark capacitor! A type D! I've only seen them in books." She glared at Rampage. "And you broke it. . ."

Rampage just sat there a moment and then smacked the wrecked weapon once

more with her hoof, denting the casing. Glory hugged the barrel to her chest with a whimper. "You... you... barbarian!" she gasped as the striped Reaper grinned at her.

"Why, thank you!" she replied with a grin. "Well since you two have your plans, I'm gonna go get ploughed. Mmmm... see you later," she said as she trotted away eagerly, swaying her hips and making her metal plates rattle as she danced her way into Stable 69.

"She's terrible. Why don't we just leave her once we have P-21?" Glory asked with a little frown.

"We owe her," I said with a shrug. "She's also one of the few ponies I can think of that really doesn't care about the bounty on my head. Plus, I'd rather not have her prowling around behind me."

"She's still terrible. And she's always eating those Mint-als. I have to wonder how bad she is when she's off them," she said as she stowed the ruined rifle between her wings. "I'll head over to the Exchange and see if I can find anything out about P-21."

"Are you sure you'll be okay?"

"Are you sure you'll be?" Glory countered, looking at the brothel behind me. "I know you're not in uniform and that Flank has a neutral ground policy, but what if somepony tries something?"

"Well, then I'll do something stupid," I replied with a smile. "I'm good at that." Glory winced.

The wrecked wagons inside the parking garage were stacked up in a corridor that funneled down towards an open service hatch. Pink lights gave the service tunnel a vaguely organic feel that made my limbs creep. Posters with mares on one side and bucks on the other advertised the selection to the clientele. Had I not been preoccupied by P-21 and what I'd done to him, I might have been in the mood for some enjoyment as well.

I reached the round door to the stable, surprised to see that instead of rolling, it was mounted on a swing arm. A huge pink 69 seemed to greet us, as did the handsome buck and cute mare standing in the entryway. I looked a little closer at the numbers, and saw the actual number of the stable had been 89, with part of the 8 painted over to resemble a 6.

After seeing Stable 90, I'd expected to walk into an atrium like in 99. Instead, we

were threaded past a utility storage area. The doors were all locked, and it'd be a little conspicuous to fiddle with them with patrons passing me by. Finally, the hallway split with three arrows: 'Finders,' 'Fun,' and 'Future Employment.' As tempting as the second was, caps came first. The Finders office was also the overmare's. I had to admit, I wasn't too happy about that.

Something else I found unnerving: no guards. No turrets. I couldn't believe that nothing was protecting the stable. I walked to the overmare's door with a sigh and a frown. I guessed it was time to do business with Bottlecap's sister. . .

'Out to Lunch. Be back whenever.'

. . . or not. Great. I hate waiting.

Since 'Future Employment' was not interesting to me, I followed the majority of the ponies in the direction of 'Fun.' Finally, we reached the atrium, and I found myself surrounded by a pinkgasm. The color was everywhere! Couches and pillows were arranged around little tables as bucks and mares circulated with suggestive smiles and strange elaborate and kinky outfits. Given that ponies have no problem trotting around naked, covering up in feathers, lace, furs, or in strange outfits was one of the kinkier things I'd seen. In fact, I couldn't see the goods of a single mare or buck.

Rampage was nowhere in sight, so I figured she'd already snagged her victim. I had visions of orgiastic excess, which showed just how off my mind was. There were a number of bucks who seemed drugged out of their skulls as they sat around smiling pleasantly at everyone. Dash inhalers were everywhere. Me, I stuck with Wild Pegasus.

"You don't look like you're having fun," a peach-colored mare observed from behind the bar as she poured my second shot. Purple hair fell across her eyes a little as she gave me a friendly little smile. "Is it the drinks? The company? Do you need a hit?"

"I'm just waiting for Caprice to get back to her office," the little earth pony gave me a worried little frown. "It's not you or this place. The whiskey's good, and I don't mind the decoration. It's just that there's a lot on my mind right now."

"Oooh, a lot on the mind. Yeah, I hear that a lot." The barpony said with a sympathetic nod, "Still, if you can have fun, you should. Sitting there all sour doesn't do you any good." She immediately perked up. "I know. Let me make you something special."

"You don't have to. . ." I started, but she was already diving into the refrigerator and

pulling out various bottles. I wasn't sure if she was doing chemistry or cooking with what was going in that shaker. She sat up, shaking the metal cups briskly, and then poured something yellow into a glass.

"Here. This should make you smile," she said as she pushed the glass to me. I glanced at it skeptically, but she seemed too earnest for me not to try it. 'Well, here's hoping it's not drugged or something,' I thought, and took a drink. Instantly, sweet tartness splashed across my tongue, and I swallowed in surprise. The sour tang lingered for just a bit, and then it was replaced by a slight alcoholic burn that made quick friends with the whiskey I'd drunk before. I smiled, despite my mood, and drank the other half.

"That's... really good. Thank you," I said as I looked her up and down. "I'm Blackjack."

"I figured. That one's on the house. You looked like you needed it," she said as she looked at my cutie mark. "You know there's gambling over at 'Rooms'. Cards. Dice. Roulette. You might have some fun there."

"You seem to be a bit fixated on my entertainment," I observed with a smile.

"Is that so bad?" she said as she took off her apron and handed it to one of the other mares behind the bar. "I mean, everything in the Hoof is so terrible, so why not a place you can enjoy yourself? We have ponies from all over come here to unwind. Dance. Get high. Have sex. Pay for the pleasure and go home with a smile," she said as she trotted out from behind the counter.

"Yeah. Sounds great in theory. But then you look at all the blasted ponies hanging out around the Quik-Kare and the price gets a little steep. Caprice makes money off misery."

She cocked her head as she looked at me sadly, "You really think so?"

"I don't know. I don't understand it. How does she live with making money off selling chems to addicts?"

"Believe it or not, Flank isn't in the policy of stringing ponies out till they're falling apart. The original stable was a chemist's dream come true. There were chemicals stored here that had names so long you'd have to take a breath, or two, to name them. Unfortunately, the place was also lacking in entertainment, so some enterprising pony mixed up something fun. Then another did. Then another." The peach mare sighed, rolling her eyes a little, "Eventually, the party ran out because somepony mixed up a nerve gas and released it into the ventilation systems."

“Whoops,” I muttered. Had the stables been designed to self destruct? Had Stable-Tec been some sick experimental dream?

“Pretty much. The survivors got out and fortunately ran into Keeper. The original Flank was a mess of drug dens and brothels. It’s only been cleaned up in the last couple years. Still, there’s all kinds of secondary dealers who couldn’t care less who they sell to. They keep the scavengers picking over for anything valuable in the ruins. The secondary dealers sell that in the exchange, buy more Dash, and the cycle continues.”

“So why doesn’t Caprice stop it?”

“How? Dash is easy to make and there’re caches of materials all across Flank. If it were banned, then the buyers with real money would just go straight to the dealers and all control would be lost. It’s better for some wealthy Society aristopony to get high than a starving addict looking for a fix.”

“So if somepony took out these dealers, what would happen?”

“Well, I know Flank would be grateful. Since Mixers doesn’t sell samples, the addicts would have more incentive to go to Qwik-Care. It would raise prices, making treatment easier than another high. Of course, Scalpel would probably complain about all the extra work. . .”

I frowned. I knew I should be looking for Caprice and P-21. I knew I shouldn’t be looking for trouble. But I also remembered how I had felt, my body dying, craving more Buck, more Steady, more Hydra. How much it’d hurt. Maybe it was the drinks, or maybe it was thinking about what I’d said to Scalpel. I looked at the peach pony and then smiled, “And where would a pony find these dealers?”

“Are you sure about this idea?” Glory whispered as we looked at the factory and storage tanks a mile north or so of Flank. Once I’d found her and explained my plan, she’d been skeptical, but she came with me after using the 89 barding to patch up my security gear. It might not be much right now, but I just felt better with it on.

“Of course. It’s my idea. I’m sure all my ideas are bad,” I replied, as we looked over the warehouse.

“Well then why—” she began and then she saw my smile and flushed, “Blackjack humor. Sorry.”

The first dealer had been a simple affair: one mare working out of the back of a wagon with two bucks guarding her. All it'd taken was the look and a suggestion that she sell me her entire stock of Dash and get out of the Flank now. I suggested Brimstone's Fall. I only hoped that she'd make the trip.

The second dealer had been a larger operation: a half-dozen ponies working out of a gas station. That fight had been messy but not particularly difficult. I'd used the pump action shotgun loaded with flechette rounds; only one pony had enough armor to require the heavy revolver from the airbase. Not only did we secure their drug stash, we also greatly improved our own goods with their weapons and stockpiled wares.

This dealer was different. I wasn't looking forward to fighting off two dozen guards. On top of the two-story building was a large sign that read 'BOOM Inc' in letters surrounded by fireworks. From all the empty barrels outside, I suspected they weren't just reselling drugs from flank; they were manufacturing their own, too. There were wagons just waiting to be loaded; this wasn't just some little side operation. This was a full on competitor.

Rampage gave a great yawn as shook herself. "So you want me to just go over there and kill them all?" she asked as she narrowed her eyes at the building.

"No," I replied with a frown. My mane was itching like mad as I watched them roll a barrel of magical waste into the building. What the hell were they putting in these drugs? "First, because I don't know if you can." She looked vaguely insulted. "Secondly, I don't want to kill the guards and let whoever's running the show slip out the back."

"Ugh. Fine. So if we're not going to just charge in all nice and sensible, then what?"

I admitted I wasn't entirely sure. We circled around to the side, but the back of the warehouse was completely sealed up. A large, round water tank rose up behind the building with a bridge of pipes connecting one to the other. I couldn't exactly see how we could get up on the water tank. I looked at Glory, "Are you sure you can't fly?"

The gray pegasus looked pained as she looked back at her wings. She bit her lip and started to flap, clenching her eyes shut. Her hooves rose from the ground, but then she jerked and flopped over on her back. She sniffed and rubbed her eyes. "Sorry, Blackjack."

"Don't worry about." It looked like we were going to have to go in shooting. Then I

noticed the metal stairs going up to a second story door. They looked pretty rickety, but it was them or go in guns blazing and hope for the best. After getting a hole punched through me by Leo, I wanted to save that for a plan B. Ugh, I must be getting old.

We picked our way around to the side of the warehouse and then made our way up step after step. I made sure Rampage waited till we were up. The door was locked, but I thought I might get lucky. I screwed my face up, sticking my tongue to the side as I lamented yet again P-21's absence. Two pins later, I found the sweet spot and twisted. There had to be an easier way to open locks...

Moving inside the second floor of the BOOM fireworks factory, I was struck by the cobwebs and debris strewn across the floor. Clearly, this wasn't a part of the factory that was in use. I made my way through a few offices, but aside from a dozen or so caps in a drawer, there wasn't much of interest. Faded pictures decorated the halls, many showing elaborate fireworks over a shining white palace. Pinkie Pie danced with a sparkler in each hoof under a sky filled with fireworks, underneath a caption that read 'Explosions are fun... in the sky! Safety first!' We found one room loaded with boxes and boxes of fireworks and rockets.

Yes, Pinkie Pie. Explosions are fun...

We found another office with a large poster of Pinkie Pie shaking hooves with a black pegasus with, of course, a firework explosion cutie mark. Carefully nudging aside the rag-wearing bones behind the desk, I noticed his terminal was still on and logged in. I wiped away the dust on the screen.

Memo #34: Hey, Sparkler! I couldn't help but notice that the latest batch of fireworks was a lot less fwoosh and woosh and a lot more fizzle and pizzle. It's just not a party if folks see a little pop and then nothing. So could you please do me an itsy bitzy teeny weenie favor and up the bang a little? Pretty please with sprinkles on top? P.P.

Memo #35: Howdy Sparkler. Got to say I'm a might distressed. I got folks wondering where our whole shipment of ammonium perchlorate went and I'm a might curious myself. So I'd be one grateful pony if you could make sure your next batch of the stuff gets to my munitions plants. Can't fight zebras without the stuff what goes boom! Braeburn.

Memo #38: Ugh, Sparkler! Where did that AP go? I got MoM and MWT up in my mane and I don't know what to tell them. I'm sending you some more materials so try and catch up. Who's our liaison with the OIA? Onyx? Or is it Emerald? Do THEY know where it went? Prez Boomer.

Unfortunately, the rest of the terminal was corrupted gibberish. I looked at the indolent expression on Rampage's face as she asked sardonically, "Find anything useful?"

"Nope, but you never know," I replied as we returned back into the hall. A few more

bobby pins later and the door at the end of the hall was unlocked as well. Pulling open the door, I saw a long catwalk stretching out over a production floor. Hundreds of barrels were stacked on pallets, and many of them had fallen over and spilled heaps of white powder. In the middle were a dozen chemistry sets and a trio of cooks busy making... something. Dash? Yes, I saw the empty inhalers in a bin next to one workstation, but they were also making something else. Those ampules were familiar.

What was glaringly out of place was a pen near a hatch on the second story; it was full of filthy and destitute scavengers. Were these dealers accepting slaves as payment? There were also a lot of guards... and automatic turrets watching the doors. I looked at Rampage and all that noisy, clanky metal. Even with the radio blaring Redbeard's bluster down by the cooks, I couldn't imagine that the ponies below would miss that racket.

The radio host's rusty voice boomed in the cavernous production space over the hiss of hotplates and bubbling equipment. "Now, I like to keep my ears open. Like to be a pony of the people. So eventually I'm going to hear some kind of brahmin shit about Security. Well guess what, folks. Looks like Security is a tried and true devotee of the Slut of Flank after all. I heard it on very good authority that Security charged into Flank this afternoon foaming at the mouth and grinning like a Dash-head in heat. So you heard it here first, folks. Security: big tweaker."

Rampage snickered softly and I gave her a look. "What?" she asked defensively. Then my lips curled as I glanced at her hoofclaws. "What..." she muttered, now worried. A minute later she sulked out of the office with strips of Sparkler's rags wrapped around each hoof like booties. "This is humiliating."

"Shhhh..." I warned her, and Glory, bringing up the rear, struggled to not laugh at the sight.

"Hey! We need more juice! Crowbar!" one of the cooks shouted up to the balcony.

"Yeah! On it!" A unicorn buck in leather barding yelled back as he walked to a crate and lifted some Dash inhalers. Another guard opened the doors of the pen and let out a slow stream of ponies. "Come on, folks. We promised you Dash, and you're gonna get Dash..." There was something decidedly creepy in his tone and grin as he bobbed the inhalers above their heads, leading them out the door. When fourteen or fifteen were out, the doors were closed in the face of the next pony and the other guard brought up the rear of the addicts.

I raised a hoof to my lips as we followed the catwalk towards the balcony. There

were still two guards remaining, and right now I found myself really wishing that I had Minty Fresh's silenced pistol. Fortunately, Luna does provide the occasional blessing, such as a wooden hoofball bat laying on a table next to some very dated copies of Playbuck and Ponylife.

"Dash. . . ya gonna gimme Dash?" One of the prisoners mumbled.

The guard turned, spotted me and my barding, and took a deep breath. That was as far as his shout got as I swung with all my horn's strength and crushed his windpipe with a meaty thud. His mouth worked, hooves scrabbling at the indentation in his throat. The bat came around and knocked his feet out from under him. As his face blackened and I kept him pinned, I heard a crack and thump from the direction of where the other guard wa—had been.

Apparently cloth booties were little protection against a mare that could kick your head so hard that it'd flop around like a horn puppet.

"Come on," I whispered as we moved along the balcony towards the open door. A few of the ponies in the cage looked at me dully. One called out if I had any Dash, but the ponies below ignored the noise. The door led to the bridge connecting to the large, cracked concrete water tank outside. From above, we could see that the dome atop the tank was busted and four large cages were bolted to the top of the tank around the rim. Yellow hazardous waste containers were strewn around the edges. For the moment, though, I was focused on the ponies loading the cages with addicts.

"What are they doing?" Glory asked softly.

"Can we just kill them all and not care?" Rampage replied, munching down another Mint-al.

"Not yet." I glanced at the box of Dash inhalers and lifted it to us. "I want you two to get those prisoners out through the offices. Get them clear and make sure they're quiet."

"You're saving Dash-heads?"

"I'm saving ponies, Rampage. You can leave if you don't like it."

She looked at me levelly, then sighed and shook her head with a smile. "Fine. I can play white hat. Best have her do the talking, though." I was surprised by that.

"When the rest are clear, I'm going to start lighting up crates. I dunno if they'll explode, but there's got to be enough fireworks around here for something to go up.

If not... well... do something smarter than what I'd do. Now get them out of here quietly." I said as I nodded to the cage. Glory approached with soothing words as Rampage brought the box of Dash inhalers.

That left me with the other prisoners. Carefully I stepped out on to the bridge that ran atop pipes stretching from the water storage tank to the fireworks factory. Fortunately my luck seemed to be changing. Everypony with a gun was loading the addicts into the heavy-duty cages running around the edge of the collapsed roof of the water tank. I moved as nonchalantly as possible, carbine loaded with standard rounds. Of course, one look at me and the party would start. There were lots of crates and empty waste barrels stacked along the bridge that I hung close to as I approached.

"It's getting too big, Domino. Too damn big!" I caught the voice of the unicorn buck that had lead the addicts out on to the water tank. Crowbar watched as the addled unicorns were loaded up. "We keep putting the barrels down there like he said but it's not working."

"Bigger is better. We're making caps horn over hoof. All we need is a few dozen more lab rats and we'll have product better than anything Mixers can offer," said a unicorn with the strangest mottled black and white coat. She had an odd white mask for her cutie mark. "Ring the bell."

Crowbar levitated a crowbar from his belt and rapped it hard against an empty barrel. The guards shoved one pony into the tank with a yell that cut off with a splash. Then a deep growl filled the air.

A serpentine head raised slowly above the edge of the hole and opened its mouth to let out a shriek. Even in severe Dash withdrawal, the prisoners began to scream. A chain opened a door on the far side of one of the cages, and the head slipped into the hole and started to munch. The chain dropped and the heavy door closed, trapping it inside with its meal. A unicorn plunged a sharpened pipe into a pink, pulsating knot of flesh on the neck, and brownish-red sludge poured out into a barrel.

Suddenly I knew exactly where Hydra came from. Just as suddenly, I knew I never, ever, wanted to take Hydra again.

"Show is fucking over! Let them out!" I yelled as I stepped around a stack of pipes. The trapped hydra head began to jerk at its bonds now that there were no pony treats within to savor.

"You!" the dapple coated mare exclaimed as she backed away. "Kill her quickly!"

Before the others arrive!”

Ante up. Crowbar wasted no time swinging his length of steel at my head, and I had little time to waste as I danced back and hit S.A.T.S. just as he jammed something into his thigh. Then, to my amazement, he started to actually move! The potion he'd injected accelerated him to the point that he crept closer in my vision. I toggled for four shots to his head, and released the spell.

This time, S.A.T.S. wasn't fast enough. Crowbar moved inside the range of my carbine barrel and slammed into me as the guards left their positions near the cages and ran around the edge of the water tank. As I came out of the S.A.T.S. spell I found myself on my back with the rust-colored pony atop me. Then his horn glowed as the crowbar smashed across my face with such force that my next shots with the carbine went wide. I just needed a few seconds to focus. Just a few seconds.

“Pity to smash such a pretty face,” he taunted as he brought the bar down again right at my face as I struggled to control the gun. Then I opened my mouth wide, and the steel bar slammed right in my mouth. I felt enamel crack under the impact, but living in a stable had given me an unexpected advantage: healthy teeth. My jaws clenched down, and I grinned around the bar as he tried to yank it free. The carbine steadied and unloaded six rounds into his back. Screaming in pain, he rolled off me to get away.

Then I realized why there were four cages as a second head rose above the edge of the tank, dripping rainbow-tinted water. And a third. And a fourth. Smaller vestigial heads snapped at the air like hungry pustules. Clearly, it had risen in the anticipation of a meal and was not happy to find the cages closed. Brown and twisted teeth snapped at the heavy metal bars ironically now protecting the addicts inside. The practical beast began to strike at the guards instead.

“Kill her! Kill it! Kill something!” Domino shrieked as she levitated a sleek black automatic from her holster and began to fire. I rolled to my feet, feeling the impact on my plates. I ran for the nearest cage, narrowing my eyes to cut down the nearest guard with some well-placed headshots. I slid behind the heavy metal just as one head snapped at me, moments too late. My horn flipped the carbine and emptied the remainder of the clip into the head. Annoying to the mutated behemoth, no doubt, but satisfying.

Domino and the guards were for the moment occupied with the other angry heads. The trapped head was now jerking with such force that I could hear the metal groaning and twisting. I looked at the lock. No time for bobby pins! I grabbed it with my

magic and twisted. Slowly, the tumbler rotated bit by bit. Almost... almost...

Snap, and the lock broke. Really, Celestia? I mean, really? I looked at the old padlock. Well, I may not be able to open a lock, but I had a crowbar. I jammed the prybar in and put all my weight upon it. I even tried to bounce a little. Then the lock snapped open and I fell flat on my face. Oh, that was a tooth missing, all right.

Getting to my feet, I swapped out for the twelve gauge pump action. "Get ready to run!" I shouted at them. "Follow the catwalk through the offices! You'll find Dash outside!" Okay, drug craving plus survival instinct trumped their brain addled wits. "Go!" I shouted as I jumped out from behind the cover of the cage, firing as fast as I could and screaming like a maniac.

One hydra head looked over at a portion of its buffet out in the open; three of the ponies were sickly and easy targets, but I was the one dancing around like an idiot with a shotgun. It snapped as I dove to the side. My shotgun blasted three solid hits to its skull as its deformed jaws snapped where I'd stood a second ago. Scrambling, I kept running as Domino backed around behind the cage with the trapped head.

A guard charged towards me... or maybe he was running for his life, I dunno which. I hooked my front hooves into the bars and swung my entire body around, slamming him back. He staggered, staring at me in fury as he drew a machete from his belt. Then a hydra mouth grabbed him and yanked him upwards. The mouth released him, flinging him screaming into the air. Another mouth grabbed his head, a third his haunches, and together they tore him in two.

Don't start! I warned my brain, smacking my forehead against the steel. For once my subconscious seemed to be cutting me some slack. I looked at the lock. Focused. Twisted... and... snap!

"Luna piss on you and all locks, you rusty piece of shit!" I screamed at the indifferent inanimate object. I jammed the crowbar in and put my weight on it again. I even tried to use my horn to add the last little bits of force. The crowbar bent... then the lock broke. "Through the..." I started, but the three ponies inside bolted as soon as the door opened. One hydra head snapped out, catching the leg of a mare.

I screamed, running towards the head before it could get a better bite. I blew out one of the five eyes with one shot, and then jammed the barrel into the oozing cavity for a second shot. Gore splattered me. For all I knew I was adding to my taint total, but that didn't matter right now. My shots worked; I managed to get its attention in a big way. The mare limped for her life as the wounded head reared back.

The trapped head twisted and thrashed, pulling and pulling and the whole wall of the water tank began to crumple. I ran around towards where the last cage perched, and suddenly the ledge gave way. The cage fell into the scummy rainbow-slicked water along with a the cage holding the hydra head. Water began to pour out of the breach as the trapped head worked itself free. The edge of the water tank crumbled under the dapple-hided unicorn, and with a scream Domino tumbled into the water and disappeared from sight. Small favors...

That was it, then. No more reason for me to stay here. I stood and started back for the bridge when Crowbar slammed into me like a rabid dragon. We went rolling, my shotgun skittering out of range. He laughed hysterically as he kicked and stomped like a maniac. The bullet holes weren't slowing him down at all, and I could see why. From all the empty ampules and needles scattered about, he'd dosed himself with the entire medicine cabinet.

The hydra began to pull itself free, but Crowbar had only eyes for me as he grabbed my ear in his teeth and pulled me over off my hooves. "Gonna smash you! Gonna smash you good!" He screamed. I struggled to push him off, but it was no good. I raised my rear hoof and slammed his nuts with all my might. He didn't even feel it. I hit S.A.T.S and toggled three telekinetic blasts to his face. The first smashed his eye like a hammer, but he jerked his head and the last two did far less damage. In fact, as I watched, his eye was regenerating!

"Gonna kill you! 'Cause I'm stronger! I'm stronger!" He screamed as he pressed his hooves to my skull and started to squeeze. I felt ominous noises. The chems had made him stronger... tougher... regenerating... but then I looked at the oozing gray flesh. It was time to raise or fold.

"Yeah! But you're not... heavier!" I shouted as I braced my limbs and lifted for all I was worth.

The hydra's head came down, bit into his back, and lifted him into the air. His death grip on my head was so tight that it yanked me into the air after him. Another head lunged for me, a tasty helpless snack, when I slipped free and fell to the metal planking. Two bites and Crowbar was gone. I prayed it was just my imagination that I was hearing him scream as he slid down the monster's gullet.

I got on my hooves and ran for my life. The entire bridge shook and suddenly slanted up as it crumpled under the hydra's weight. My hooves scrambled for purchase on the metal as the monster crawled out of its tank after the next morsel in sight; me. For once, I'd gotten lucky; the garbage stacked on the leaning bridge thumped into

the hydra more than it did me, and I pulled myself up, firing blindly behind me. When the shotgun was empty, I swapped to the carbine again.

Inside the factory, Glory stood on the catwalk strafing enemies while Rampage engaged half a dozen as a screaming, thrashing madmare. The turrets were smoking wrecks, but there were more than a dozen cooks and guards firing at the pair. I ran to the rail and screamed at the top of my lungs, "Run!"

Glory stopped raining magical beams on the enemy. The guards stared up at me in shock. Rampage clutched a pony in her hooves, mindlessly chewing on one ear. For a second I was sure that they would all flee. . .

Then, "Kill her!" And now they were firing at me and Glory and had resumed dogpiling on Rampage. I screamed in frustration as I ducked for cover.

Then four hydra heads roared with hunger and once more the shooting stopped. The four heads slammed through the open door behind me, snapping at me as the monster's incredible bulk tore the wall apart. The balcony collapsed with the wall behind me, slumping down into the floor below as the catwalks collapsed. Glory yelped as she scrambled back into the offices. Rampage snapped the neck of her pony, then looked at the hydra with a whoop.

"All right! Now that's something to fight!" She said as she tossed the body aside and leaped to her hooves.

"Run, you idiot!" I said as I picked myself up, facing the monster as it crawled through the hole after its lunch.

"Run?" She looked positively incensed, "Run?! I'm a Reaper. We don't do run!" She said as she charged at the hydra. One mouth bit down on her steel-plated ass, the other grabbed her head and lifted her into the air, pulling and twisting. Rampage laughed in glee, twisting and kicking whatever she could as her bladed armor cut into the monster's mouths. "Yeah! You like that?! I'll tear you apart from the inside out!"

She might be psychotic, but she did give everypony a chance to get out of there. Unfortunately, I couldn't imagine that even she'd be enough to stop the thing! For not the first time, I lamented my lack of heavy weaponry. Even a grenade would be. . . wait. Boxes of strange and hazardous chemicals? Drums of older strange and hazardous chemicals? More boxes thrown off to the sides and full of fireworks? And me with lots of incendiary bullets.

Stupid, crazy, and liable to get me killed. What was I waiting for? My telekinesis

loaded the carbine with red incendiary rifle rounds and I raced across the factory, shooting anything that looked remotely flammable. The beakers and chemistry sets in the middle of the room started burning quite readily, but they didn't have the force I needed. The two free heads of the hydra continued snapping after me as the other pair continued to break their teeth on Rampage's armor.

I focused on any crate marked "BOOM", guessing the fireworks were my best bet. One crate started to smoke. . . fizzle. . . and then there was a pop. That was it. "Oh come on! What kind of fireworks don't explode?"

The hydra had had enough of the Reaper. With a snap of its heads, it threw her with such force that she shattered the reinforced glass in a window and went flying out. Now there was just one edible morsel and four hungry heads. And after it ate me, would it eventually wander to Flank? I backed towards the door behind me and took aim at the metal barrels across the room marked Ammonium something or other. Three burning rounds punched through the metal.

There was a hiss. A pop. Then a flame so bright it nearly blinded me jetted out from the metal drum and sprayed across the back of the hydra. The fire spread to the rest of the stack. . .

I really wished I had one of Crowbar's acceleration potions as I ran for the door.

There wasn't a boom so much as a roar that built and built. A great wind lifted me up and threw me through the door like a bullet as a chemical sun dawned in the Wasteland. I rolled across the parking lot and landed sitting in a heap.

Then the factory exploded.

The BOOM Inc factory lived up to its namesake as the walls disintegrated in a detonation that slammed me flat on my back. Any Hydra that might have remained inside was vaporized, and the shockwave drained what remained in the water tank. The deluge put out most of the fire; though not much remained after that explosion.

I picked myself up, slung the carbine around my neck, and walked to where the remaining guards and freed ponies watched in amazement. I looked at them, grinned at the lot—minus one tooth, damn it—and said, "Pinkie Pie was right. Explosions are fun." Then my eyes rolled up in my sockets as I crashed face first into the ground.

Apparently me blowing up a factory and monster in one go was enough of a spectacle that none of the survivors thought to cut my head off while I was out. Glory,

who'd had the common sense to flee, and Rampage, who'd been ejected for being indigestible, had reinforced how that would be a bad idea, and so I came to once again in the auto-doc. Apparently shockwaves are bad for the brain, particularly when you just recovered from a near death experience less than a day prior.

"You stay here another week and I'll be able to retire to Tenpony Tower," Scalpel said with a dry chuckle as I emerged from the machine a fourth time. Then she shook her head a bit sadly. "Never seen a pony so set on getting herself blown up." Her eyes peered up at me, searching for something, "So, you did good?"

I stretched and shook myself, then brushed my black and red hair out of my face. "You tell me."

The mature lavender mare shrugged, "I got thirty or so ponies lining up to start detox. It's a lot harder for scavengers to get cheap Dash. And I heard that Caprice is plenty happy somepony finally took care of that operation over in the fireworks factory. So yeah, I'd say you done good."

I sighed as I sat, "Still not enough, though."

Scalpel shook her head. "You've done more in a night for folks than anypony ever did. How can you not be square after that?"

I sighed as I closed my eyes, "You do everything you can to make up for it, knowing that you'll never succeed in getting rid of the guilt. You devote yourself to spending every second trying to do better despite the fact that it will never be enough. And you pray with every single good act you do that somehow, when your life is over, that your lifetime will come close to making up for the wrongs you committed."

Scalpel stared in shock. "What was all that?"

"Something somepony told me to make up for a wrong I did. I thought it was my first. It wasn't. It wasn't even my worst wrong," I said quietly, still smiling. "It's why it'll never be square. It's why I've always got to keep trying to make it square. And I'll always lose." I sighed, "There were three ponies who died in a cage... maybe I could have saved them if I could have tried harder. I don't know..."

Scalpel looked at me for one more moment then grumbled, "You're an idiot." Then she put her hooves around me in a brief, tight hug before releasing me. "Bravest, boldest damn idiot in the wasteland, but still an idiot," she muttered as she stood and walked to the door. "Now if you don't mind, I've got a whole waiting room of Dash-heads wanting to try and kick their fix. So if you'll excuse me, I'm pretty sure Caprice got you a place to stay at Rooms."

To be honest, I was pretty tired. Glory was looking for P-21 again. Rampage was... doing whatever it was she did. I just wanted to buy something to eat at the Trough and sleep 'till I woke naturally. No explosions. No horrors. Nothing. I passed on some fresh apples from the Society, even if they were offered at a discount. I'd take two-century-old food over the product of slave labor. Then I trotted to the hotel to find that a room had been booked for me. Very nice. Quiet. Third floor.

I had to admit, of all the places in Equestria, the suite sure fit the bill. The room smelled only a little bit of mold and the water stains on the ceiling weren't super huge. I locked the door and sat back to read the hoof to hoof book that I'd found in Miramare's locker room. Thank Celestia for the big pictures. I read about a style of fighting called 'Fallen Kaiser' that reminded me of the zebras in Nopony's Land charging the Marauders. It looked... terrifying, to be honest. Doombunny technique sounded even worse; martial arts with Stampede could not be pretty. The entry marked 'Fool's Gambit' made me chuckle. Who ever heard of a fighting style based entirely on moment to moment improvisation?

Unfortunately, while I could really use a nap, my brain still wasn't making it any easier for me to get one. I kept playing back the fight with the hydra. I kept looking at that cage full of ponies falling into the rainbow water. Could I have jumped in and saved them? Had that been an option I missed?

Ugh, why did my stupid brain never make anything easy?

Not being able to sleep bordered on boredom for me, and boredom was intolerable. I considered reading one of Glory's Equestria Scientifcias, but half a paragraph about magical crystal reactors had me feeling stupid, not sleepy. I needed something else to do.

Well, I still had those two memory orbs from Miramare, the ones I'd found in Colonel Cupcake's office...

"No! No no no! The last time I was inside one of those things, I was captured by the Enclave. Before that, a magical trap in one shut my brain down," I muttered, but I dug out the orbs anyway. The door was locked; I was perfectly safe, right? It wasn't like I needed a guard while I was out. I looked skeptically at the two orbs and lifted one with my magic.

I felt the magical connection form. Then... nothing. Clearly this orb had been locked as well. Maybe it was some classified secret of Colonel Cupcake's? Maybe it was about the Marauders, or Vanity's little memory extraction of Jetstream? I wished that I could have another peek at Macintosh's Mari pony and the stars—

Okay. Warning next time please! This memory seemed to have little to do with stars, however, as I found myself surrounded by a cacophony of noise and activity. Dust and smoke filled my lungs as I walked... no, not walked. I loomed. I rose above the milling crowd with slow, sure steps. Careful steps. A sprig of wheat dangled out my mouth. Big. Chewing on grass. Glimpses of red hide and brown mane? I had an inkling who's memory this was!

All around me I saw the reconstruction of Hoofington. A massive open pit in the north end of the island connected to train tunnels. As the train cars pulled through, teams of pegasi would fly down and attach hooks to the I-beams or sacks of concrete or whatever else they were unloading and lift them with cranes out of the pit and onto railcars that ran along the city streets. Teams of earth ponies stood by, hauling their loads out into the city in a constant stream of activity. Everywhere I looked, ponies worked. Everywhere I looked, Hoofington rose.

Unfortunately, all the construction around the pit made it more than a little bit hazardous. Big Macintosh kept his eyes open, but the same could not be said about a light blue unicorn trotting along with her face in a map! "Now if this is north and that is east then I think I need to head this way..." she muttered as she peered at the map in her face.

"Miss?" Big Macintosh warned as she approached one of the rails. Six tough earth ponies were hauling a stack of metal rods along the rails down the middle of the street. The locals stopped well back of the supply line, but the blue unicorn didn't seem aware of how close she was to the rails.

"But I already went that way. Oh, confound it! Why can't anypony label anything in this city! It's crazy!"

"Miss!" Big Macintosh rose his voice a touch higher in concern as more ponies started to shove in behind her.

"Ugh, why can't this place be more like Manehattan? I can at least see the Statue of Friendship in the harbor and..." There was a hard shove as three arguing ponies rammed into the blue unicorn, knocking her onto the rails.

"Get outta the way!" Shouted the pony leading the cart in alarm. "We can't stop!"

Big Macintosh didn't hesitate. He dove towards the fallen unicorn as the lead ponies almost stomped her. "Don't worry, miss! I got—"

She disappeared in a flash of purple magic.

“You?” Macintosh staggered forward on to the tracks. He looked at the oncoming train and jumped clear just in time. The pulling team shouted for him to go back to Ponyville. He sat down hard as the supply train passed, looking around. “Miss? Miss! You all right?”

“Over here,” the light blue unicorn said as she adjusted her thick glasses and then blinked. “Big Macintosh?” Her mane was a darker navy with a streak of electric blue in her tail and mane. I couldn’t make out her cutie mark; her saddlebags covered it up too well.

“Ayep. You know me, miss?” He said as he stood and walked towards her. As the supply train passed the crowd resumed their motions around the city.

“Ah. . .” her blue eyes widened behind her glasses. “Um. . . Applejack! The Ministry mare mentioned you. You’re her older brother.”

“Oh. You work for AJ, huh?” She smiled nervously and gave a hesitant little nod.

“Kind of. I’m actually with the Ministry of Arcane Sciences though.”

“New to the Hoof?” He asked, his very presence making the crowd break around him like a river. I wondered if she appreciated it; she was kinda puny.

“Does it show that much?”

He chuckled softly, “Ayep. What’s your name, Miss?” He asked with an easygoing smile. More impressive, he wasn’t checking her out. She had the cute librarian look down perfectly but his eyes stayed off her butt and on her face.

“Ah. . . my name? Is. . . ah. . . Mari. . . pony,” she stammered as she blushed and forced a grin. Oooh. . . somepony definitely liked Big Red. “Maripony. And actually I have an appointment at the Ministry of Arcane Sciences hub. Only. . .” she looked around. “I’m not really sure where that is. I have a map. . . had a. . . oh dear.” She found her map, ground and mangled to pulp between the tracks.

“Ministries are around the Plaza pit. Gotta go towards Mt. Hoof,” he said, pointing up the street at the knot of granite rising from the south end of the island. “I’ll walk you,” he offered with a casual smile.

“Oh no, you don’t have to do that,” she said with a blush.

“Ayup, don’t have to, but I will anyway.” Take him on his offer, Maripony! You won’t regret it! Of course I guessed she probably accepted, given what I’d seen before. Though. . . maybe she did regret it. . . arrgh! Why did I have to think that? It was like I’d come across a juicy novel but had already read the last chapter! Such a spoiler...

Still, she finally accepted his offer and seemed to relax a bit. “So what’s your business in the Hoof, if I may ask, Miss Maripony?” He asked as they walked along the busy streets. Many of the buildings were already ten stories tall and growing.

“Organizing this mess. Since the ministries were established, we’ve been running our tails off trying to get things organized. Pinkie Pie has it easy; it really doesn’t matter if ponies are arranged in a department of amusement parks or the birthday cake corp. And Fluttershy’s ministry I think is organizing itself for her. But the MAS and MWT are a lot more complicated. The Office of Interministry Affairs is trying to sort it all out, but with the reconstruction and all, things in Hoofington are a little fuzzy.”

“I see. So you’re here for Twilight Sparkle trying to get this hub situated?”

She glanced at him and then gave a little nod. “Mhmm. Something like that. The Manehattan and Canterlot... and other hubs... are already well organized, but since Hoofington is all about interministry cooperation, this hub needs to be established from the ground up. So here I am.”

“Surprised Twilight Sparkle didn’t come herself,” Big Macintosh said as they stepped aside for a wagon loaded with crates and boxes.

“Oh, she wanted to,” Maripony replied with a grunt. “But one of the things about being a ministry mare is that you can’t take two steps without everypony falling all over themselves trying to either suck up to you or trying to be genuinely helpful and doing everything for you.”

They reached the edge of an enormous pit in the earth. Here the rails didn’t just enter the bottom of the pit; they were actually on bridges spanning the gulf. More infrastructure was being built even further down in the pit. Maripony’s eyes popped wide, “How in Equestria did something like this get dug out?”

Big Macintosh chuckled, “Sand dogs.”

“Sand Dogs?” Big Macintosh walked to the fence surrounding the pit and pointed a hoof down towards where several teams of canines were working. Their claws seemed to magically tear away the rock before them.

“Well, they used to call themselves Diamond Dogs. Then the war got started and their home was mined for gems for the war effort. Threw em out on their tails. So when reconstruction started, Gold went out and offered them all a job to dig out the tunnels under the city. They get paid in gems, have a place to live, and Hoofington rises. Most of em hope to return home some day.”

“Oh. Well, I hope that’ll be possible, one day.” Maripony said softly. “Still, I’m glad somepony found a place for them.”

“Hoof has a place for everypony, long as you’re willing to work and you’re not striped. Folks around here have a particularly powerful dislike of the zebra folks.”

Maripony sighed, “But there’s not any evidence that the zebras even caused the fire!” The comment drew a lot of angry glances. If it hadn’t been for Big Macintosh, I suspected somepony might have tried something.

“Maybe. Maybe not. Hoofington rises all the same,” he replied, eyeing the crowd. “Anywho, this is Ministry Plaza. You want the purple one.”

Maripony seemed to balk at the sight of the buildings. “It’s. . . purple? Why purple?”

“Matches Twilight Sparkle.” Maripony gaped at him and he chuckled. “What? All the buildings are standardized. Gotta do something to make em stand out. Blue for Awesome. White for Image. Pink for Morale. Orange for Tech. Yellow for Peace. Purple for Arcane Sciences.”

“I guess it does make sense,” she said with a sigh, looking over at the rising skyscraper covered in purple-colored stone. Even half finished, it was clear that it was already quite busy. Each ministry building filled up an entire face of the six-sided block around the pit, and they were built with bridges connecting each ministry to the ministry next to it. “That’s still a lot of purple. . .”

“Well, Miss Maripony. There’s your stop. I guess I’d best leave you to it.”

“I. . . yes. Thank you, Big Macintosh,” she stammered. He looked back at her with that easy, confident smile.

“No worries, Miss. If you’re ever in Hoofington, let me know. I’m stationed over at Miramare. We can meet in a little town I know named Withers if you’d rather get away from all the noise. Got some kin that live up that way too.”

“I’d like that. Very much,” she said with a happy bob of her head. She was reluctant to turn away, but did with notable awkwardness as she trotted towards the ministry building.

Big Macintosh chuckled as he turned as well. “Hmmm. . . Maripony huh. . . ?”

oooOOOooo

Coming out of the memory, I felt that familiar sense of disorientation; though really not as bad as leaving Stonewing’s memory.

So that was Macintosh's first memory of Maripony. I wonder why he'd saved it. Maybe he'd planned to give it to her as a present, entrusting it to Colonel Cupcake. . . no. I sat up in the bed, looking at the little glowing orb with a small frown. "No. . . not for when he got back. He saved it in case he didn't come home from Shattered Hoof Ridge."

Maybe Maripony hadn't wanted it. Maybe Colonel Cupcake hadn't been able to find the blue unicorn.

Maybe I was wearing an explosive slave collar.

I rolled to my hooves, seeing the gray band tight against my throat in the cracked mirror. U-21 sat next to the door, a floated detonator beside him. "Ah ah ah. . . none of that now."

"Told you. Takes her forever to snap out of those things." A buck at the table said as he flipped through Glory's copy of Equestria Scientifica. P-21 set the magazine aside, his blue eyes hard and dark as the deepest holes of Stable 99 as he smiled at me. "Evening, Blackjack. Miss me?"

Footnotes: Level up!

New Perk Added: Hit the Deck – You've been hit by one too many explosions. Perhaps it's time to consider a new career? +25 Damage Threshold against explosives.

16. Walk the Hard Road

“What are we gonna do?”

“We’re... gonna... Run!”

P-21 was alive? P-21 was alive! He was pissed, but he was alive. No bomb around his neck. No bruises or bloody marks. No burns or bullet holes. He was alive, okay, and pissed off at little old me! I laughed as I scrambled off the bed, startling the pair of them as I hugged him happily. “You’re alive! Oh thank Celestia!”

“Get... get off me! Blackjack!” He scowled as he kicked at me. I licked his cheek and his scowling face snapped to an expression of shock! “Ew! Blackjack. Stop it!” I fell back on the ground, laughing like I hadn’t laughed... well... ever. He frowned down at me, wiping his cheek as I lay back on the carpeting. “You are so... random.” For some reason that made me laugh even harder. I had tears in my eyes from laughing so hard!

U-21, the scrawny brown unicorn buck— scrawny from years of being locked up in a room by mares, I reminded myself— watched the display with utter bafflement. “Now, if you’ll be a good little mare...” I wasn’t paying much attention. He was alive. P-21 was probably going to kill me, but at least I’d be able to do what was right. To do better! “Ahem! We’re going to step outside and...” His tan eyes twitched and he stomped his hooves, “Will you stop laughing! I have a detonator, you know.”

I stopped laughing, but not smiling, as I looked up at U-21. The brown unicorn resumed his nasty smile. “Now, you’re going to walk nice and easy along the Sunset Highway till we meet up with Deus. If you try anything... anything at all... I’ll blow your head off. And this detonator’s a deadpony’s trigger. I let go for any reason and you’re a headless horse.” He rose and started for the door. Distantly, I heard the rain start to pour again; good old soggy Hoofington.

And just like that I thought about his demand, his collar, and his detonator and just cackled. “Oh don’t be stupid. I’m not going anywhere with you,” I said as I wiped my tears, still hiccupping with the occasional laugh.

U-21 stared at me, “Cunt! You’ve got a bomb around your neck and I’ve got my hoof on the trigger. You’re going to do exactly what I say or—“

Maybe it was the word. Maybe it was the rush I was feeling from seeing P-21 again. Could have been that a few hours ago I was inches away from being eaten by a

giant tainted abomination, that a few hours before that my heart had stopped, or than a few hours before THAT I'd been shot through the left side of my chest by a beam weapon. Regardless, I felt a dangerous little lucidity that brought U-21 and his detonator into my complete attention.

"Or fucking what? You're going to kill me?" I rolled to my hooves, laughing at this as well. "Maybe you didn't get the memo, but I'm dead already. All you'd be doing is saving me from the discomfort of mutating into some freak before dying of taint."

P-21's eyes widened as U-21's jaw dropped open. "You suicidal m- moron," the unicorn started to stammer as I grinned at him.

"And now that I think of it, blowing my head off might kill me, but it would completely fuck you. You work for Deus, right? Deus, the Reaper I shot with artillery? Deus, the Reaper that wants to invent whole new methods of mayhem to try out on me? I would just love to see what he does to you when you tell him that you cheated him out of his revenge!" I said with glee.

"I... that's not... he wouldn't..." U-21 muttered as he stared from me to P-21 and back again. "You're insane!"

I laughed again, "I'm insane? Trust me, you have no idea." I snickered and rubbed my chin with my hoof before pointing it at him, "Come to think of it, Deus wouldn't be the only pony pissed to not kill me. I got an entire family of bounty hunters after me. Ever hear of them? The Zodiac family? And I just know that there'd be hordes of bounty hunters all over the Hoof who'd be mighty put out with a brown unicorn cheating them of their hopes and dreams." I stomped a hoof, making him jump. "Especially if you actually collected on the bounties and had thousands and thousands of caps in your pockets!"

P-21 looked on in worry as the brown unicorn waved the detonator in my face like it was some kind of magic charm to drive me off. I pushed it aside, moving my grinning face even closer to his. "You're wearing a bomb! That's... that's... crazy. You're crazy." He sat down on his rump, his own focus making the detonator shake.

"Crazy?" I threw back my head, cackling, "I've been passed beer by frigging hallucinations, don't you tell me what crazy is!" I laughed, definitely feeling past the edge. "The Enclave might be okay with you killing me, but after what I did to their Vertibuck, I'm pretty sure they'd be pissed at you for cheating them of their chance to interrogate me with their newest death plague, or the chance to feed me limb by limb to a bunch of raiders," I said as I stepped even closer to him, my eyes wide and staring. Oh, if only I had some rad poisoning right now! Though I imagined my

natural red eyes were bright enough.

U-21 was shaking head to hoof and was apparently so unsure of his telekinesis that he'd transferred the detonator to his hooves to keep the trigger down. "I... you..."

"And that's not mentioning what my friends would do to you. I have helped a few ponies in the Hoof, and I'm pretty sure that some of them wouldn't mind getting some payback on my behalf. Dusty Trails, Bottlecap, and potentially every foal and filly you pass might want to put a bullet in you. Then there's Rampage. Has Deus mentioned Rampage? Fellow Reaper? Actually wants me alive for her own plot or scheme or amusement? And if she doesn't, you can spend every second of the rest of your life wondering when Morning Glory is going to vaporize you from above at the speed of light. Have you ever been sniped with a beam rifle? Have you?" I shouted as I yanked open my barding to show the puckered scar. "Cause I have!

"Blackjack..." P-21 said in a warning tone as U-21 shrank back against the wall.

"But what's really funny to me... Really really funny... is that P-21 would put a bomb on me and hand you the button. Cause if there's going to be any pony in all of Equestria –in all the bloody fucked-up world!– that has a goddess-given right to blow my head off, it would be him!" And I magically seized the detonator and yanked it into the air, shaking it at him. "See this? This does nothing! P-21's too smart to give you the real trigger!"

"Blackjack, that IS the detonator," P-21 shouted in alarm.

I blinked, looking at him and the hovering trigger before me. "It is?" That brought me back down to earth... well, closer anyway. "Well, I hadn't expected that." I sat down hard, looking at the mechanism that could take my head off with the release of the trigger. I scratched my mane vigorously as I looked at him, "Um... oopsy on that last one."

"We only had one detonator," P-21 said with a sigh, rubbing the back of his head. U-21 had decayed into a hiccupping fit, and by the smell coming from him I knew that housekeeping wouldn't be happy with me. "And it's hard to read a magazine and keep that little tab held down all the time."

"Huh," I said as I trotted over to my bags, dug out my roll of duct tape, and taped the trigger down. Then I tossed it to the blue pony. "There you go. You can pull the tape off later, if you want." I said.

"You are crazy," U-21 muttered in shock.

"Probably," I chuckled. Still smiling, I rummaged a bit more and pulled out a bottle

of Wild Pegasus. I looked around the suite and found three coffee cups. Okay, they weren't shot glasses, but they were better than nothing. I poured two, and then looked at P-21 as he watched me, a touch wary. "Want one?"

He put the detonator on the table beside him, shaking his head. He looked... conflicted. Could I blame him? I levitated one cup over to U-21. "Here. Have a drink, then go in the bathroom and clean yourself up. Then we'll talk." The cup shook between his hooves as he gaped up at me. I took a drink as I looked at him with a smile. Now that he wasn't making stupid demands, I felt a little bad for the brown unicorn. I was responsible for some shit in his life one way or another.

He took his cup into the bathroom and closed the door behind him. I glanced at the stain and wrinkled my nose a little, "Was I that scary?"

"A little bit. Yeah. Didn't help that he was so sure the collar threat would work," P-21 said evenly as he looked at me. "You seem..." I twitched my ear, wondering if I was better or worse. "Different," he concluded, looking at my chest wound. "You've been through a lot while we were separated."

I sighed and took another drink. I couldn't stop smiling. I should be sobbing and hugging his hooves, begging him for forgiveness. "Not just me. Glory too. The Enclave betrayed her. Branded her a Dashite to discredit her when we found out they were making some plague weapon."

"Goddesses..." P-21 shook his head, "When you went rolling away after that little speech at the mine... I wasn't sure you'd come looking for me."

"You're my friend," I replied with a smile. A friend who had every right to kill me. "I think it's a rule: if you get separated from a friend, you have to move hell and high water to get back to them."

"I wasn't sure I still was after what I pulled," he replied. "At the mine, I mean."

"I know why you did," I said softly as I looked into the cup and felt some tears start to creep. "Justice. I just didn't think about what that meant." I finished off my cupful with a sad smile so I wouldn't have to see that look on my face. "I've been doing a lot of that lately. Thinking, I mean."

"Must have hurt," he said with a snort, but his hard look softened as I smiled at him. I hoped it reached my eyes.

"It did. A lot. If you'd tried this a few hours ago I probably would have cut off my own head to save you the trouble." I told him about going to Chapel, waiting for them to arrive, then Sekashi's arrival and the encounter with Virgo. "I got to where you two

were attacked and knew I needed Glory. I can't figure out a rescue to save my life. . . or save a cutie mark."

He looked at me in confusion when the bathroom door opened and U-21 stepped out. He looked at me as if fearing I'd bite him or something. A few minutes ago I might have. "Hey. Want some more?" I asked, lifting the bottle of whiskey and swirling it.

His eyes flickered from him to me, "What is the matter with her? Why is she being nice? What kind of sick game is this?" He demanded as he pointed a hoof at me.

I chuckled, and made him wince. "Let's just say you caught me in a really good mood. If you want to go, though, I won't stop you." I poured a little more whiskey into my cup, and after a moment of hesitation U-21 nodded for a refill as well. "If you don't mind my asking, what happened after you were taken?" I asked P-21.

"Don't tell her. It's a sneaky trick," U-21 muttered as he flushed.

But P-21 just shook his head, "She's not capable of sneaky tricks." He sighed and looked out the window. "When the Enclave attacked, we ran. They didn't pursue. There was some talk of trying to find Sekashi, following the rail lines, or trying to intercept you between the tracks and Flank." He gave a crooked grin as he looked at the brown unicorn, "I might have mentioned that it'd be a very bad idea to follow you, given you'd be in a bad mood when we found you."

"You're right," I replied as my maudlin feelings spread. "And I never would have had the time to think about things if you had." I would have continued on like an idiot, ignorant of my crimes against him.

"Finally, we made our way here to meet up with Deus and the rest of the hunting parties. Since there were ten of us, it took a lot longer than I'd expected. He's been rounding up bounty hunters for his band. Meanwhile, U-21 here," he said with an even stare at the brown unicorn, "spent every free minute trying to remind me of everything I wanted to forget. We arrived just after you torched that factory, then we followed you up here. I heard you mention an orb, and we waited a bit, knocked, and picked the lock when you were out of it. It was a pretty good lock, but not good enough," he added with a little smirk.

"I gotta know, what was the plan if I didn't have an orb?"

"We were gonna all ponypile in and tackle you," U-21 muttered into his coffee cup. "Use my rope trick to tie you up and throw on the collar."

I winced. "Do you have any idea how bad I'd have hurt you?" I suspected they didn't

know about my 'look at you and explode your unarmored face' trick.

"It doesn't matter any more!" He slurred, "Deus is done with me. When he thought I might be able to lead him to you, then I had a little protection... but I'm done now! This was my last chance!" He fell on his face, burying it in his hooves. "I am so fucked. I am so sick of getting fucked over by everypony."

"Join the club," I said softly, feeling that warm buzz slowly cooking my brain. "For what it's worth, U-21, I'm sorry."

"Huh?" He sniffed, rubbing his eyes.

"For what happened in Stable 99. I used you, and I did you a wrong. I'm sorry for that." I sighed softly, closing my eyes as I leaned backwards on my rump and pressed myself against the mattress, head tilted back. "I am so tired of feeling guilty all the time. Most of it I can live with, but every time I think back to Stable 99 I just... hate myself. Worse than Deus or the Overmare or anypony. And it doesn't matter that the rules said it was okay. A part of me knew it was wrong. Always did. I guess I forgot to remember to not think about it."

U-21 looked at me in amazement. He probably never expected to hear those words. He looked down at his hooves. "I... sorry. Ever since I left 99..."

I rocked forward with a curious frown. "What did happen when you left 99?" I asked, feeling giddy thoughts churning around with simple curiosity and the knowledge that soon I'd have to talk with P-21 about what I'd done. "How'd you run into Deus? Did you meet Sanguine?" I asked as I scratched my itchy mane.

"I..." he began when there was a knock on the door. We looked cluelessly at each other.

"Yes? Who is it?" I shouted at the door.

"Room service. We have a gift for Security from Caprice," a young mare said brightly from the other side of the door.

I sighed and shook my head, scratching my mane vigorously in annoyance. "Probably a fruit basket full of Dash," I muttered as I walked to the door.

"Wait," it might be Deus' ponies. We left them outside town," U-21 said as he walked to the door. I stepped aside, levitating out the twelve gauge and loading it as I stepped back. Why hadn't I picked up more ammo at the Exchange, or fresh healing potions from Scalpel? The brown unicorn glanced at me and then slowly pulled the door open, peeking through. He relaxed and opened the door fully. Two young white

unicorns stood behind a food cart loaded with fresh, delectable treats. It must have cost a few hundred caps at least. "Wow, that looks good," U-21 muttered.

The unicorns were identical twins, brilliant white with deep red eyes; they had the absolute cutest smiles and wore the faded hotel uniform I'd seen below. Their horns glowed as they pushed the cart in. "Courtesy of Caprice," they said.

U-21 was looking at the fresh apples. I was looking at the mares' eyes. Those weren't the eyes of innocents, and the cart wasn't glowing.

"Get down!" I shouted as two SMGs floated up from behind the food cart and strafed the room in a full storm of automatic fire. I jumped forward, sliding across the carpet and slamming my hooves into the food cart. It hurtled towards the twins... as their uniforms dropped through them? What? I watched in amazement as the cart passed right through the unicorns and back into the hallway, slamming against a green buck who was readying a large rifle. He carried a large dufflebag draped across his back.

"Surprise," said one of the ghostly mares as the two brought their guns back to bear. Guns I couldn't see through. The frayed uniforms had been caught by the cart and dragged part of the way into the hall.

I slammed the door closed, knocking the twins' SMGs into the hallway. The mares might be intangible, but their weapons weren't! "No fair." They said, stepping—literally—back through the door.

"Is everypony alright?" I asked, looking at P-21 getting out from behind the bed. U-21... oh no...

He slumped, a line of red holes running between his neck and chest. "You... do have... a lot... of enemies..." he hiccupped and choked, blood dripping out of his mouth as I knelt and held him upright.

"Yeah, I do..." I said lamely, wishing that I could trade my bullet spell for something actually worth a damn.

His eyes stared at me as his chest bubbled with horrible sucking sounds. "Not... me... right?"

"No. Not you. I'm sorry, U-21."

"Not... your..." he began to say, then gritted his teeth as a spasm rocked his body. He looked sad, then his eyes went wide with panic. He opened his mouth, coughed a great deluge of blood, and drew a raspy breath. "Pro...ject... Chi...mer...a..."

And with that his body began to relax.

Project Chimera?

“What did he say?” P-21 asked as looked over at the unicorn’s limp form.

“Something mysterious that will probably nag at me for days.” I said with a sigh. Then I looked at P-21 with a smile, “Assuming I live that long.” I added.

A white mare’s face poked through the wall! Her bright red eyes narrowed in glee as she grinned at me like a ghost. “Hi. Don’t suppose you could hold still a second?” I raised the shotgun and blasted her smirking features. The wall behind her peppered with holes. She looked at me indolently, “Thanks.”

P-21 charged at me and knocked me to the side as a hoof-sized hole appeared in the wall and a thunderous detonation came from the far side of the door. The little ghost head started trying to find a better firing position. “Ugh, stop moving around, please! It’s actually very hard to aim through walls!”

“Who are these ponies?” P-21 asked as I tried shooting her in the face again. I hoped that I was at least distracting her, a hope that grew a bit when the next blast was not accompanied by me or P-21 exploding.

“Who are you? Are you with Deus? Enclave? Is there somepony else after my head?!” I shouted as another round cut through the wall, missing me by inches.

“Gemini Zodiac, at your service. I’m Gem. That’s my sister Mini.” There was another shot through the wall, another near miss. She rolled her eyes, “And that is our brother Taurus. Pleased to meet you.” She gave me an apologetic look, “I’m very sorry about all this, but please stop moving around. This’ll be much more pleasant for everypony involved if you stop.”

The other unicorn stepped halfway through the wall as well. “Will you hurry up? Flank’s security is already on its way.” She looked at me, wearing an expression identical to that on her sister’s face, “Sorry about killing you, but really, you should have just given your PipBuck to Leo.”

“Should have... he ambushed me! And shot through me! And set a small army on me!” I shouted as the second intangible pony proved as bullet-immune as the first. Two more high-powered rounds punched through the faces of the ponies as they kept following my movements with their heads.

“This is taking way too long.” The second stepped back through the wall. “Taurus. Plan Boom.” The other sister’s eyes opened wide, and she too disappeared.

“Did she say Plan B or plan Boom?” I asked P-21. His look confirmed my fears. We grabbed our bags. We ran to the bathroom. The cast iron tub was half full of tepid water. We jumped in the large basin and pulled our bags atop us.

Plan Boom went boom as a missile punched through the hole that one of the shots had blasted through the door. The boarded-over windows blew out as shrapnel and debris tore through the small suite. The shockwave made the tub break free of its fittings, and the busted pipes began to spray water. I looked down at P-21 and muttered, “You know, when I imagined this reunion, there were a lot more tears and a lot fewer explosions.”

“I’ll bet. Is there a plan?”

“I’m not sure,” I muttered, then rocked the tub, “You got grenades, right?”

“U-21 and the others didn’t exactly trust me enough to let me walk around with a lot of high explosives,” he replied. Then he reached under his brushy tail and pulled out a metal apple with a bright green stripe around it.

“I don’t want to know how you hide stuff back there,” I said, but at this point I wasn’t complaining.

A mare poked her head through the door. “Oh. Shoot. Sorry about that. Thought we’d get you with one shot. Hold on a second.” And she disappeared again. “Taurus, hit the bathroom,” she called out. I grabbed the edge of the tub and flipped it over, pulling P-21 underneath and pulling down with as much magic as I could manage. The entire tub rang like a bell, a dent bending the middle of it. I had no idea what green meant. “Think we got em? I sure hope the PipBuck’s intact.” One mare said from outside.

“Yeah. Those things are indestructible...” the other replied, her voice trailing off. “Are they hiding under the tub?”

P-21 lifted the edge as I looked out at two pairs of ghostly hooves and tossed out the grenade.

“She doesn’t learn-“ one began to comment before both screamed. There was a bright green flash, and then nothing.

“What’d I do?” I asked as I lifted the tub to see the smoldering room. Suddenly the entire floor began to groan and tilt. As stout as its construction had been, clearly it had drawn the line. With a groan and pop the side of the floor facing the door gave way. As it collapsed, the tub tilted upright again, thanks to having lost its legs, and started to slide along its curved bottom as it picked up speed. We went speeding

down the slope as the large green buck standing near the door just watched, the missile launcher in his jaw. The tub rocketed through the door of the floor below, sliding along the hallway and then down another flight of stairs as we held on for dear life!

The cast iron squealed across the cracked foyer tile as scrambling security ponies froze in their tracks, watching as we slid past and out the front door of Rooms. We juddered down the stairs and into the rainy street before the tub came to a rest.

I panted in time with my blue friend, our eyes staring into each others before he swallowed and demanded, "How did you just do that?"

"I'm pretty sure if I knew how I did it, it couldn't be done," I said with a chuckle. As he tried to stand, the cast iron tub tipped over, spilling us on to the cracked asphalt. I couldn't help myself; I knew I had three Zodiac killers after me, but for a moment I just lay there and laughed.

Then somepony started shooting at us. Make that someponies. A lot of someponies! The rounds pinged off the bottom of the tub, dimpling it as we ducked down behind the cover. I felt a sinking in my gut as I looked towards the north gate through the rain. At least three dozen bandits were filing through, shouting and hollering as they overran the few guards watching that end. Most important to me, however, was the one in the rear. No pony else in Hoofington had guns quite like that!

Either seeing me or sensing me, Deus shouted out across the Flank, his voice seeming to echo off the rain, "CUNNNT!" Yup. No other psychopath could holler vulgar terms for mare genitalia with that kind of eloquence!

"Running now!" I shouted, keeping my head low as we wove around the various rusting wagons and crates left in the middle of the four lane street towards the exit to the south.

We ran into the barpony from 69 crouching behind some wagons with two more security mares. I had to admit, I never thought body armor could be stylish and effective. She holstered a delicate looking needle pistol as she looked at me, "What the heck is going on?!"

"Deus the Reaper is after me," I said, looking over my shoulder. "He's pushing through the north gate and as soon as I'm out the south gate. . ."

Wait, why were the security mares pointing their guns south?

"Find her! Find that varmint now!" hollered Sidewinder as an even larger horde of Pecos ponies pushed through the southern gate, shooting wildly and randomly. I

saw a flood of local ponies rushing for Stable 69.

“We need to get to the stable, right now!” the barpony said as she looked to the north. Fortunately, it looked like Deus was more interested in checking the hotel than the occupants of projectile bathtubs, but that wouldn’t last. He’d tear Flank apart looking for me.

Glory ran from the Exchange, ducking and yipping as bullets pinged around her. “Blackjack, I...” she stared at P-21. “You! You’re...” then she looked at the collar around my neck, “Blackjack... what...” she sat down hard, looking on the verge of tears, “What’s going on here?”

“We’ll get to that in a second, Glory.” Like when I didn’t have two small armies and three Zodiacs after me! “I want you and P-21 to get in the stable,” I said briskly.

“No,” P-21 said firmly.

“I’m not leaving, either,” Glory replied firmly. I grit my teeth and smacked my head against the side of the rusted wagon frame. Of course. I didn’t listen to sense or sanity. Why should they? “Not unless you come too,” Glory added quickly.

For a moment the thought of being in a stable, especially one that wasn’t a formalized rape factory, was immediately appealing. There was just one problem: I’d be trapped there. And given that the Zodiacs had unicorns who could walk through walls, I wondered just how long Stable 69 would stay sealed. “I can’t. Deus managed to get into one stable. I doubt he won’t sit out here and wait. If we’re lucky, Deus and the Pecos will just kill each other. I need to keep moving till we can get out and run.”

“Always with the running,” P-21 muttered softly.

“Or hide,” I amended quickly. “Either way, not trapped where Deus knows where I am.”

“Right,” the barpony said with a nod as she chewed her lip. “If you can get to the top floor of the Exchange, there’s a group of pipes that lead over the wall. You might get out that way. I’m sorry I can’t be of more help.”

“Thanks. And tell Caprice I’m sorry for bringing her this trouble,” I said as I looked at all the Pecos and the broken rooftops of the Exchange. The doors had been sealed up tight and, it being a former bank, I doubted I could just knock on them to get them to open.

The barpony just blinked at me, then smiled, “Sure. No problem.” And with that the

three of them ran quickly towards the parking garage.

“So, where to now?” Glory asked as she suddenly scowled, “And where is that psychopath when we need her?”

I wondered that myself, but it wasn't as if I could do anything about it. I could only really see one direction to take, and nodded to Mixers. “In there!” We raced into the building adjacent to the Exchange. I could only hope there'd be a way upstairs. We just had to get clear of this mob!

Mixers had evidently been a club even before the war. Despite the cracks in the walls and floor and an occasional busted light, the place was in somewhat decent repair. A long bar ran along one wall, a hovering spiderbot patrolling back and forth overhead. It turned and focused its camera on me. “Good evening, madam. What is your chem potion of choice? We have the house special, Ultra-Dash, for a mere 100 caps.”

I glanced at Glory, but she just pressed her lips together, pretending not to be paying attention. I could really use the edge at this point, but the thought of the drugs reacting with the taint in my body and the memory of crashing on the Quik-Kare floor won out in the end. For now, at least.

“P-21, find us a way upstairs.” He frowned, but nodded once as I turned to the light gray Pegasus. “Glory, get your beam guns ready.” She nodded as well. I noticed P-21 hadn't moved yet, his eyes lingering on Glory's brands; I gave him a nudge. Looking a little abashed, he trotted off to check the rest of the club. I scanned for something else that might help, then noted two yellow bars on the display.

There was a strange glass booth near the ceiling, and I was stunned to see two earth ponies sitting behind a counter of controls and looking down at us through their thick shades and strange metallic helmets studded with rainbow LEDs. I heard the shouts approaching the club doors and looked up at the pair. “Can you help us get to the roof?” I yelled up at them. They looked at each other. “Hello? Can you help?”

They looked back down at me and then nodded in unison as Pecos started to flood into Mixers. Suddenly, the speakers began to blast a blaring beat that stunned both the Pecos and me. The bizarre, rapid-fire music pumped into the club like some sort of sonic weapon; it sure wasn't Sweetie Belle! Neon bars of light rose and fell in rainbow cascades behind their plastic casings, and beam talismans began to fill the space with flickering bars of dancing light. I looked up at the box, giving it a withering glare. This was help? The pair just grinned from ear to ear.

Then it was fighting time. Out came my favorite weapon as I charged the milling Pecos balking at the sudden display. The twelve gauge shot fanned into the crowd in a deadly spray as the music beat in tune with my heart. I had no idea which beams were Glory's and which were decoration, but neither did the Pecos. And I had to admit, despite myself, that Mixers was starting to grow on me. Then my gun clicked on an empty shell just as a bloody Pecos charged me with a rusty axe clenched in his jaws.

I blocked the swing with my PipBuck, looking him in the eyes as my horn flashed and sent two glowing magical bullets into his face. As he went down, I took his fire axe in my magic's grip and swung it at the next closest Pecos just as he brought a sawed-off shotgun to bear. My barding took the slugs with a crackling that probably heralded another trip to Scalpel's, but I didn't lose my focus on the axe. One low swing and the blade of the axe knocked his legs completely out from under him, then the axe whirled, reversed, and drove the spiked end through his cowboy hat and into his skull.

A mare screamed around the automatic pistol in her mouth as she charged, firing. I pulled the axe free as her rounds started to chew through my barding, then jumped into S.A.T.S. and queued up my attack. Time resumed, and the head of my fire axe flashed out to ram into the weapon jammed between her teeth and shove the gun's handle all the way into the back of her throat. She gagged, struggling to pull it out. The fire axe came around and its spike punched a hole through her temple.

There were more Pecos coming in, but now they were hanging back near the door, keeping their distance from me as they brought automatic rifles in battle saddles to bear. I started to switch to my automatic carbine, but I still had ponies pressing in on all sides. From the look of it, the ponies at the door were just waiting for their fellows to fall before opening up on me.

From the balcony overhead fell glittering death. Plunging twenty feet, Rampage landed on two of the Pecos standing by the doorway. Her heavy armor crushed both bucks beneath her hoofclaws as she drove them into the dance floor. A mare stepping in had one moment to regret her mistake before Rampage's tail lashed around her throat, the razor wire digging in as the Reaper charged two ponies pressing Glory, who had taken cover behind an overturned table and been darting out with shots of her disintegration and beam pistols. The mare was dragged along behind the Reaper till the razor wire tore through her neck and sent her head bouncing across the floor.

The first buck she ducked right beneath, letting the serrated blades along her back

saw him almost in half. The other buck shot her in the head at point blank with a shotgun. I stared as I watched her eyes liquefy at the impact. Still, blind or not, she reared up and slammed her hooves down so hard that he didn't just crumple from the impact; he bounced. She reared a second time, dropping her hooves to slam him for a second and final time. Still, with a head wound like that. . .

I used S.A.T.S. to help guide my last axe swing into the head of the pony I was fighting and was rewarded with a lucky hit that took his head almost completely off. Unfortunately, the luck ended when the edge of the fire axe caught in his spine and I couldn't pull it free. No time for that now. I didn't even wait for his body to drop as I rushed to where Rampage stood, head bowed as she breathed deeply. Her face looked as if it'd been covered with synthetic strawberry jam, only red. "Rampage?"

Then I saw one ruined eye pop free of its socket, and then the other. Two pale pink eyes focused on me, blinking before she wiped the bloody gore away with her hoof. "Ugh, I hate regrowing eyes," she muttered and blinked, looking around. "Aw, none left?"

The pumping music had covered the noise of our fight, and for the moment we were clear. The ponies in the booth bobbed their heads to the music, but also thankfully turned it down a bit. "There's lots more. How did you. . . ugh. . . no time right now." I groaned as I looked at her. "Are you going to be okay?"

For whatever reason my question made her look sad, "Trust me. I'm really hard to kill," she said in a slurred voice before spitting out a mouthful of buckshot. "How are you?"

"Battered, but intact." I said as I looked at Glory. The small Pegasus didn't look too much the worse for wear as she drank a healing potion and passed me one. Figures that she would think to buy fresh potions from Scalpel while I just took a nap! She was starting to get good in a fight, too...and why did that make me feel bad? "P-21?" I asked, looking around and spotting him looting the dead, picking out bullets and shells and the occasional chem potion. Or weak healing potion. Better yet, most of the Pecos had a few sticks of dynamite! "Did you find a way out of here?"

"Stairs behind the robot. They only go to the third floor, though," he replied coolly.

"Good. Now can you take that collar off and—" Glory began.

"No," he said just as calmly as before, his blue eyes hard as glass as he looked at me.

"You can't. . ." Glory started to say in disappointment.

"I won't."

The gray pegasus just stared at him, her lavender eyes wide. "You... won't? What... P-21! What are you talking about? Stop messing around."

"I'm not messing around," he replied without the slightest raise of his voice.

Glory's jaw dropped as she looked at him before she shouted. "You bastard! How could you do this? How? Do you know what she's gone through for you? To help you! You... I'll blow your head off right now if you don't take it off!" She shouted as she started to cry.

"Glory!" I said as I stepped between them. She started to shake as I put my hoof on her shoulder. "You heard the recording. You know what I did to him."

She gave a tiny hiccup as her mouth worked, "But... Blackjack..." she whimpered.

"I wronged him, Glory. You know that." She shook even more as she clenched her eyes shut and I gave her a hug. "I'm sorry, Glory."

Rampage let out a long sigh, "Oh, what kind of party is this when you're being all dramatic? I mean, duh, bo-ring!" She said as she flicked a hoofful of blood at Glory's feet, making her jump aside and scowl at the striped mare. "You three get out of here and take the angst with you, and I'll hang around and slaughter anyone that comes in!"

"But what about Deus?"

"Pffft. Who's afraid of that doofus?" she said with a snort, looking over her shoulder as she walked to the spider robot. "Now you crazy kids get going. I'm pretty sure there's more on the way and I'm in a mood to do something... Reaperish."

"Hello, madam. What is your chem potion of choice?" The spider robot asked as Rampage put both hooves on the bar top. Her grin definitely made my mane crawl.

"Everything," she said with chilling eagerness.

Okay. This little revelation into the nature of one of my... companions... certainly upped the creepiness factor, but I had to admit that she'd cut off Glory and P-21's argument. Even if they were pissed with each other, nopony wanted to hang around Rampage as the robot pushed its needles into her limbs and she started giggling wildly. P-21 lead the way up the stairs as her giggles became hysterical laughter.

The stairs led up to the third floor, which was apparently a flophouse for ponies looking to sleep off the after-effects of their benders. A few of the rooms were

still occupied by ponies too unconscious or uncomprehending to be aware of the danger; I couldn't see them as being a risk to anything but themselves as we moved along the hall. Unfortunately, rubble blocked any further progress up.

"How are we supposed to get to the fourth floor?" I asked, more to save off the fight brewing between the two over my bomb collar.

"Hey," a blue mare asked in a long, strung out voice as she stepped into the hall. Her pupils were huge, and she blinked in the meager light of the hall like it startled her. "Hey... are you moon ponies?"

"Excuse me?" Glory asked nervously as the mare reached out a hoof to touch something that wasn't there. "Are you all right?"

"Ponies from the moon are coming to take me away. I'll be with Luuuuunaaaa," she crooned as she swayed. "Are you moon ponies?"

"Er... yes. Yes I am." I said quickly with a smile. "But I need to get to the roof so I can use my... um... moon communicator!" I raised my PipBuck and grinned as sincerely as I could. "Do you know the way up?"

"Oh sure. Princess Celestia will send you. Straight to the moon. And we'll all be with Luna." She had, I noted with a pang, a crescent moon cutie mark. No wonder she was strung out on drugs.

I wanted to shake her, but doubted it would do much good. "Ah, no. The roof. We need to get up."

"Up to Luuuuunaaaaaaa..." she crooned as she walked back into the room where another mare waved a hoof at the air above her. Then the blue mare looked at us with her dreamy smile, "Are you coming?"

Hesitantly, we walked in and saw a portion of the ceiling had caved in. A treacherous ramp of debris lead up to the hole. "I... thanks..." I said as I smiled with a little guilt for misleading the high mare.

"Give my love to Luna and come and get me soon. I really don't like being here," she said as she fell back on a mattress, waving her hooves in the air above her. "Luuuunaaa... I'm gonna go see Luuuunaaa... and live on the moon with the moon poooo-nieeeeees."

"Yeah. We'd all love to go live on the moon," I muttered as we carefully pulled ourselves up the slope, leaving the mare to her visions.

"What was that all about?" P-21 asked softly once we were all up on the fourth floor.

“Moon Dust,” Glory replied in a far more snippy tone. “Scalpel was telling me about it. It’s a hallucinogen. It’s also very addictive.” She added, giving me a sharp look as well. She glanced back down at the mares lying on their backs, waving their hooves aimlessly in the air. “Who doesn’t want to escape the Wasteland whenever they can?”

I couldn’t blame the mares at all. Still... “I hope Rampage didn’t include that when she asked the robot to give her ‘everything’.” Glory couldn’t hide her smile at that one as she started to crawl up through the hole.

The fourth floor had been neglected for some time. The rooms were filled with heaps of junk, rusting boxes, barrels, littered Dash inhalers and empty bottles of booze. The shag carpet under our hooves squished with every step as a tangy, coppery smell clung to everything. So much debris filled the hall that I could barely navigate through the narrow space. In many places, the plaster had all but liquefied from the moisture, showing the rusting steel and crumbling cinderblock underneath.

The hallway came to an abrupt end at two heavy cabinets and desks jammed between the walls. I frowned as I pushed and shoved but, aside from squealing with a terrible racket, they weren’t budging. “Maybe we can get through one of these doors?” Glory suggested as she looked behind us. Unfortunately, the first door was locked. Fortunately, P-21 was back. In, twist, and click. I could have screamed with how effortlessly he did it!

The room inside hadn’t been filled with unwanted junk and was still relatively intact, if you could ignore a section of collapsed wall that had been half covered with junk. A terminal on the table cast a sickly green glow over the interior of the room. A few decayed posters still covered the surviving wall, their surfaces warped and faded by the constant exposure to moisture and spotty, hardy mold. They showed four ponies standing before an large audience on a magnificent stage.

P-21 had gravitated to the terminal while I tried to shift the steel crates choking the hole in the wall. Water splashed and dripped through the hole, so I hoped we’d be able to get up another floor. Glory searched the rest of the room. She pointedly avoided disturbing a pile of bones piled before a large, rust-pitted cabinet.

From the terminal came a buzz and crackle, followed by a mare’s voice. “...made it to Flankfurt. It’s a big step down from Canterlot... and Manehattan... and Hoofington.” The speaker gave a frustrated sigh I knew only too well. “Nopony seems willing to promote us after that charity concert last year. You were right; I should have just played nice with the Ministry of Morale, but I can’t shake that what

they're doing is wrong. The proceeds of that concert were supposed to go to victims of the war, both pony families and zebra refugees. It wasn't as if we were trying to help the enemy!"

"I've found a place over a club. You should come see it; I'd really like it if you could see it. I'd like it if anypony would see it. I know I've never been... sociable..., but I would dearly like it if somepony would visit me. Even write to me. It feels like I've been exiled in Equestria without a formal decree. All four of us have been blacklisted. They don't even need me at the Mol any more."

"I can only hope that I can land a job with one of the aristoponies out here. They've got estates all over and are fans of our music. It's like they're either running for the hills or circling the wagons in Canterlot. I don't know which is a safer bet. I can't see the zebras wasting a balefire bomb on Flankfurt. There've got to be better things to bomb." Through the cracked window I could make out the glowing red crater to the north. Apparently not.

"Anyway. I know it's not your kind of music, but I've got some recordings of our last concert together. I hope you'll accept them with my apologies. Your once, and hopefully future..." but the recording fuzzed out at the end.

We shared a glance, and I looked at the cabinet. Carefully shifting the bones to lie on the bed, I opened the doors of the cabinet. The passage of the years had not marred the finish of the burnished brown wood nor rusted the strings of the beautiful instrument. The cello –or maybe it was a double bass, I couldn't tell– rested comfortably in its frame while the interior of the doors were covered with pictures of a somber gray mare performing before a crowd of thousands. Pictures showed her cool and aloof, a bit like P-21, I had to admit. But there was one large photograph that stood out from the rest.

The charcoal maned pony sat besides a white unicorn mare with electric blue hair and opaque glasses. She was licking the gray pony's cheek, and, from the shocked and blushing expression on the gray mare's face, it was a gesture that hadn't been anticipated. A note was written at the bottom: Hey Octavia. Lighten up, chill out, and have some fun, girl! Take care of yourself. Pon3.

"Were there music files still on the terminal?" I asked P-21 quietly. He nodded, and I trotted over to the device. There wasn't a way to take the instrument with us, but I could at least take the music. He transferred the files to my PipBuck. I looked at the cabinet and bones, hoping that I would remember to return and move the instrument someplace safe rather than leaving it to eventually rot. There were a few books of

sheet music as well, but I couldn't see much reason for bringing them. Tragically, my PipBuck couldn't even assign a value beyond one cap for a 'pre-war book'.

It didn't take long for me to clear out the rest of the hole. Water sloshed across the rusty, debris-littered floor as rain poured through a large hole overhead. We were barely able to scramble up the slippery slope to reach the fifth floor, and only then with me shoving P-21's rump up towards the top. We emerged into a twisted tangle of broken concrete, rebar, and shattered glass. Whatever floors had once stood above the fifth were long gone now. And worse, from the shouts coming from the wagon parking garage next door, we hadn't found the only way up here.

Lightning flashed overhead. Okay, now it was officially worse. Thank you, Luna, but this is as exciting as I need it to get right now. Thank you. A white bolt snapped across the sky.

"We need to move. Now!" I urged as we picked our way through the tangle towards the Exchange. Bullets began to zing and whiz though the pouring rain to plink off concrete. I couldn't tell if they were Pecos or Deus' ponies; I supposed it didn't matter. Fortunately, their night vision was as crap as ours in this rain, but they were making up for lack in accuracy with quantity of bullets. When possible, we crawled behind cover as the Pecos tried to catch up to us.

The Exchange rose six stories, and the gap between the two was bridged by a narrow slab of concrete. Worse, it had no cover from the Pecos. Even worse (again), the slippery uphill climb would be dangerous all on its own. "Get up there, Glory," I shouted as I swapped out for the carbine. There weren't many bullets left for it, so I switched to antipersonnel flechettes and picked my shots carefully. The miniature darts punched right through the flesh of our pursuers and fragmented into dozens of razor-sharp lengths inside the body. I could only assume that, aside from being highly injurious, it was painful as hell too. Right now, I'd take all I could get.

Once Glory was up, P-21 was next. Once he'd ascended the slippery slab, I turned and ran as quickly as I could, hooves slipping and scraping as I kicked my way up to the top of the exchange building. A missile hissed past my head, blowing a chunk out of the concrete wall past me. I stared across the street at the large green pony standing atop the Trough and calmly lining up another shot with his missile launcher. Worse (I was really starting to hate that word), he'd gotten to the highest corner piece of the crumbling building and could fire down at us with ease.

I froze on the slope, wincing at the rounds that bit into my flank as I swapped clips and aimed my carbine as carefully as possible. We fired almost as one, but the

missile detonated only twenty feet away, knocking him from his perch and sending the launcher flying down into the street. I could only hope it was a really long fall inside the building... now all I needed was...

Sweet Celestia, why is it never easy? The top of the Exchange was a hollowed-out disaster. A drop of two to three stories plunged down beneath us into a jagged mess filling the shell of the building. While floors were missing, parts of the walls were still intact and created fragile and thin bridges like a jigsaw puzzle. Debris and beams also bridged the voids. Looking down, though... oh fuck, why did I look down? I quickly closed my eyes and focused on the horizontal plane. I didn't see how anypony could survive that fall. Bullets pinged off some rusty barrels stacked near the ramp; from the sound of it, trying to roll the barrels down the ramp would at best be only a temporary distraction, and it would probably just let somepony shoot us while we were trying to shift them.

Fortunately, I could see the pipe bridge coming in the side of the building... three stories down. A nearby concrete stairwell looked almost intact enough for us to get down, though, and, better yet, it'd protect us from Taurus'... damn, why had he stopped shooting? My eyes scanned the blown-out windows of the Trough, but I could see neither hide nor hoof of him. Or the two ghosts. My mane felt like it was trying to crawl clear off my neck!

Though Glory might not have been able to fly, she was still by far the most agile of us. She hopped nimbly from beam to beam and reached the stairs before us. "Come on. It's clear all the way—"

Two bolts of energy lanced out from the underside of a beam below me. One struck her in the chest, a shocked expression crossing her face as she tumbled slowly down the stair, landing limply at the first landing. I looked straight down at the black armored carapace of enclave power armor sitting on the underside of the beam. It looked back up at me.

And that's about the point I lost it. With a scream, I launched myself over the edge, grabbing the armor mid plummet and wrapping my hooves around its neck. Whatever spells allowed it to fly and stick to things weren't strong enough for two ponies. Gray armored wings tried to fly as we tumbled end over end down towards the debris below. I jumped into S.A.T.S. in mid fall and sent two telekinetic bullets into the pegasus' head, but the magic was ineffective against its helmet.

Apparently some goddess was looking out for me still, because when we hit the ground, I was on top. Even shaken to my hooves, I didn't waste any time. I felt

like I'd just injected a dose of Stampede. "Me!" I screamed as my magic pulled over a chunk of rebar-studded concrete and, with my forehooves helping, brought it smashing down on the power armor's helmet. "Me! You kill me first! You got it? Not Glory. Not P-21. Not anypony till you kill me!" I screamed as I brought it down again and again on her. . . yeah, I was pretty sure it was a her... head. I paid little heed to the pain in my back and haunches as I smashed in her visor.

"Blackjack! Stop!" Glory begged from the stairs.

I wanted to ignore her. The stupid tail kept beating at me, so I pinned it beneath some rubble. Here was one of the Enclave that had taken her cutie mark and disgraced her. I wanted to send my magic bullet right down the pony's throat! One thing alone stopped me: Glory's plea. She was wrong. I should kill this soldier. It was like in Miramare. I was right. I knew better.

"Blackjack, stop." P-21 said calmly beside me. "Trust me. Please."

I stopped my attack and looked down at. . . Glory? Yes, the gray coat was a little darker, the lavender eyes a more purplish shade, and the face a touch more mature, but it was the spitting image of Glory staring up at me. Glory limped down, drinking a fresh healing potion to close some of the burns on her chest. It was then that I realized my barding was soaked in blood. The bladed stinger had been ripping into me and I hadn't even noticed.

Glory passed me a restoration potion, and I noted with distaste that it was already turning a paler shade of purple. Still, it closed most of my injuries well enough. Glory was looking down at the Enclave soldier with an expression of sadness. "Hello, Dusk. How are you, sister?"

Oh shit. Why, Celestia? Just. . . why? Deus, Pecos, Zodiac, rain and lightning, and NOW you're throwing a family reunion at me?

"You don't have any sisters, Morning. You left your family; just like her. You've destroyed father. My career! Everything!" Dusk hissed up at her. "We'll be lucky if we're not exiled from Thunderhead for this, you dodo!" She glared at me.

"I didn't fall, sister. I'm not a Dashite. I'm still Enclave. There are things going on. . ."

Glory began in a brittle, heartbroken voice.

"I know all about it, Morning. You've taken up with this surfacer terrorist." With a great mechanical heave she threw me off and rolled to her hooves. That impact had really done a number on her shiny black armor. I really hoped I'd taken those lethal energy guns out of commission. "Off on your own selfish crusade to save the

surface. Just like her!”

“No!” Glory shouted back. “Operative Lighthooves! He’s making a disease! A bioweapon.”

“Lighthooves was studying the surfacer plague, you featherbrain!” Dusk roared. “He was sent to determine if it was a threat! And you two killed nine Enclave soldiers for that!”

“What?” Glory sat hard, her eyes wide.

“You two destroyed an operations base. Why? Because we weren’t clearing away the clouds fast enough? Because we weren’t showering the surfacers with enough food? They don’t deserve the sun!” Dusk shouted, pointing a hoof at P-21 and myself. “And neither do you.” Those energy rifles pointed right at both of us.

“I met a pony, vegetarian, who contracted the raider disease,” I said sharply as I stepped between her and Glory. “And I’m pretty sure she got it after eating your food. And I was sent with Enclave soldiers to an isolated farm that had turned raider. Again, your food was given to them. So unless the Enclave is fine with using innocent ponies to test a plague, there’s more going on here.” While fury still burned in her eyes, there was a moment of hesitation. “They manipulated her speech magically and branded her. Don’t believe me if you want, but that’s what happened.” Still, I doubted that my word would sway her.

Her dark purple eyes glared at me, “The Enclave doesn’t turn against it’s own. Ever.”

I chuckled, “Yeah. You are definitely her sister.” Now she was about to shoot me. Good. Bad as it might be for Glory, I could live with defending myself to her death, “I’m also going to say... you try and shoot me or my friends again and I’m going to make it ten Enclave soldiers dead.” Red eyes stared into purple, neither of us blinking as we waited for the other to twitch.

“Mare pissing matches aside,” P-21 said dryly as he stepped between us, looking at the older pegasus, “you’ve got something to say?” I fought the urge to snort; only P-21 could come up with that.

“What... do you want... sister?” Glory begged the question between her tears.

Dusk’s eyes now showed some doubt, but that doubt didn’t stop what came next. “You’re dead now, Morning Glory. That’s the only way any of our family will survive. Father’s ruined, but he’s not totally shamed. I am going to report you as dead. Maybe they won’t believe it, but that’s what I’ll report. Lose your name and the uniform and stop pretending to be one of us. Because if so much as a rumor gets

out that you're still alive, I will bring my entire wing down on you." Her eyes swapped to me and she added in a hiss, "And I'll be sure to kill you first."

Only the fact that it would devastate Glory if I killed her sister stopped me from putting a magic bullet through her eye.

With that she leaped into the air, past the broken crossbeams, and hesitated only long enough to blow the ponies who had made it up the ramp into ash. She scooped some into a pocket on her armor and then without a second look back flew up into the stormy sky. Glory slowly curled up and collapsed into a sobbing heap.

"We'll have to carry her. We can't stay here," I muttered as I knelt down to scoop her over my back.

A chunk of concrete whirled around and smacked me upside the head, sending me staggering to the side. A length of rusty rebar followed it and was barely deflected by my PipBuck. Both levitating up anything heavy or jagged, the two ghostly unicorns had the audacity to look sad. "Sorry about this," the first said softly with an apologetic smile as she stabbed at me with another piece of rebar.

"But Deus is already up here and on his way, and we really need to finish you off quickly," the second said as she floated towards me. I pulled out my shotgun, but the shot was just as ineffective now as it had been earlier.

"If it's any consolation, we're sorry about your friend," the first said as she moved around to the side. "I can't imagine how bad it'd hurt to lose family."

"Wait! Didn't Rampage kill Leo?" I asked as I watched one float above me with her rebar weapon.

They glanced at each other and giggled. "Oh, she did worse than kill him," said one as she flew at me and solidified just fast enough to kick me upside my head with her full weight. I tried to blast her, but she went ghost too fast. Then the rusted steel hit the side of my head. She wasn't very strong, but grabbing the weapon with my magic just made her pick out something new to hit me with.

The second came flying out of the floor, solidified, and gave my chin a rear leg buck that knocked me to the ground. "She broke his gun!"

"And his legs, Mini," Gem giggled as she resumed beating on me with her rebar while her sister kept flanking me. "And his face."

"His poor poor face," Mini said as she kicked out at my rear legs; it didn't knock me down, but every hit was wearing at me. I kept trying to shoot them, but they kept

using that damned intangibility spell! The cheaters!

Then I looked over at P-21 next to Glory. They'd screamed at the grenade he'd thrown. Why? "P-21! What was that grenade you used?"

He looked at me, his eyes widening in comprehension. "Magic!"

I dropped the shotgun and raced towards Glory. "No!" shouted the one with the rebar as she speared it into Glory's beam pistol. The casing cracked open with a sparkle of rainbow light. I rolled her over, yanking the disintegration pistol from her battle saddle with my teeth. I had no clue how to use it. I just had to get them. If I couldn't, then they'd bludgeon me to death.

I wasn't exactly a good shot with the disintegration pistol, but I could at least point it in the right general direction and fire. The deadly pink bolts raced through the air, forcing the translucent mares to keep dodging. A bolt struck finally struck one of them and she screamed, solidifying in midair and dropping toward the jagged debris. At the last second, she ghosted again and disappeared through the floor.

So, a hit from the disintegration pistol would disrupt whatever it was that let them fly and pass through things. If I could disrupt them with one shot, I could take them out with a second. Of course, that would mean I'd have to hit them twice...but it was the only thing I could do. I kept my focus as I fired pink bolt after pink bolt.

Then the gun died. I stared at the cartridge and tried to figure out how to eject it. For that matter, what was I going to reload it with? And at that moment, one of the mares launched herself at me through a collapsed wall. "Now, Gem! Finish—"

My telekinetic, magical bullet fired, striking Mini in the torso. And just like that she stopped, staring at me with a horrified look on her face. Her very solid face. She hung there like a decoration, half her body on one side of the wall. Half her body on the other side. "Oh," she whispered softly. "That's... not good."

"Mini!" screamed Gem, hovering in front of her sister. "Go ghosty! Do it!"

"I... can't. I don't think the spell works inside something." She said softly. "I can't feel my legs."

Gem solidified before my eyes, the three of us forgotten as she held her sister. "No, do it. Do it!" She begged as she changed ghostly and passed her hooves through her sister. "Mini! Go ghosty. Please!" Again and again she solidified and desolidified, trying to get her sister to do the same. I looked on, wishing that Mini could somehow free herself.

Gem finally threw her forelegs around her twin sister, sobbing brokenly.

"I'm sorry. . . I mean. . ." I said lamely. I'd meant to kill her, but I hadn't meant for. . . this.

Mini looked at me with a small smile. "It's okay. We were trying to kill you. I mean, it's only fair." Somehow that made me feel even worse as the trapped mare gently stroked her sibling's mane. "It's okay, Gem. It doesn't hurt at all."

"Gem? Mini?" A male said from behind us. Standing on the pipes leading to safety was the green buck. He must have started moving the second we were out of sight. If Gemini hadn't slowed us down he wouldn't have had the time to head us off. I whirled, looking at the stallion as he panted for breath, his sides gleaming with sweat. His gun was slung across his neck, though. Something about him reminded me of Big Macintosh. His dying sister seemed worth infinitely more to him than caps. "Ah no. . . Mini. . ." he whispered as he walked past us without a second glance.

"We should go. Now," P-21 said softly as he gestured to the now-vacant pipe bridge that passed over the fence and into another ruin just outside the south gate. Looking around and venturing a cautious check of the street, I couldn't see a lot of Pecos. In fact, I couldn't see much of anything moving except us, the three Zodiacs, and the rain. Then I heard a soft mechanical click overhead.

The pipe bridge exploded. Of course it exploded. . . not from a bomb, of course, but from the two massive cannons that sent a heavy boom thumping through the building. With a rusty squeal and a spray of fetid, stinking water, the remains of the old pipes tore free of the building and tumbled down into the gap below. Standing at the top of the ramp, the rain sheeting off him as his cannons smoked, loomed Deus. The pony who had made my life a living hell for the last two weeks or so. "Done. This running is finished," he growled as he looked down at the three of us, then over at the three Zodiacs. His red eyes widened and he chuckled, "Is that little cunt stuck in the wall?"

I started to move, but P-21 got in my way. "Hold the fuck still, I need this." He growled as he reached up with his hooves and did something to the front of my collar. To my amazement, it fell right off. I blinked at him, feeling overwhelmed. Too much shit was happening right now, and it felt like my brain had gotten whiplash trying to determine what to feel. He looked right into my eyes, though, and said softly, "We still need a talk. So live long enough for that." Then he smiled at me, "Plan Boom."

So, there was a plan? "Um, yeah," I muttered, looking up at Deus, wondering how the hell I was going to beat him.

“Well this is just too pathetic for words, so. . .” he swung the barrels down towards the two pale unicorns. “First, the distractions!”

“Stay away from my sisters, you metal son of a bitch!” Taurus shouted as he backed away, then gritted his teeth around his rifle’s handle and, kicking through the rubble, expertly fired shot after shot at the massive Reaper above me. Our eyes met, both of us mirroring the other’s apology. This was his way to make it up to me. This was my chance to make it up to him; I’d killed his sister, the least I could do was see to it that she wasn’t blasted for the sadist’s amusement. The rifle was loaded with some kind of armor piercing rounds, and, as I scrambled up the concrete steps, I was glad to see them punching holes in his side.

What I hated was how those holes didn’t seem like more than annoyances to him. He shifted his stance and swung the two cannons over to point down at the green pony. The shots echoed like thunder pouring into the remains of the building. The structure began to groan and sway as his cannons blasted Taurus with explosive shells. The large green pony couldn’t run in the debris. He couldn’t hide from the blasting explosions. So, he died.

“One done,” he said as I reached the level he was on, my shotgun loaded with slugs. I had no clue how I was going to stop him. I just knew I’d either do it or die trying. His eyes narrowed as he smirked. “Are you finally done running, cunt?”

“Yeah,” I muttered as I looked back at him across the beams and walls that crossed the void beneath us. “You’re not afraid you’re going to blow this up?” I asked, lifting my PipBuck as I glanced down at P-21 working on something. Glad one of us had a plan.

“Nah. See, when you have guns like these, I don’t have to hit you. I just have to hit near you.” And triggered by a thought, the firing mechanism gave a loud metal click before the guns roared, and I was running as the blast took off the top of the steps in a shower of rubble. I am not the nimblest of ponies, but right now I kept my focus on blasting him with slugs and moving ahead of the clockwork explosions ripping the ruin apart behind me. I could only hope that nopony below was buried in falling rubble.

I didn’t aim, I simply shot as fast as my shotgun allowed. He didn’t run or dodge. The lead pancaked and fractured off his armored hide and all I could do was keep moving and keep firing and keep praying that whatever P-21 was doing would work. When I tried to sprint to point blank range, he blew the beams out ahead of me, grinning and saying something that was lost in the ringing in my ears. Worse, my

legs were starting to go numb from the constant battering concussion. One misstep and he wouldn't have to shoot me.

I wasn't fast enough. I wasn't strong enough. I had to be more. I slipped into S.A.T.S. and tried to think of something. Nothing around me would be very useful, so... my inventory. I lacked explosives (and knowledge of how to use them). My shotgun was my strongest weapon, and it wasn't doing anything to Deus except amusing him. I needed... what I shouldn't take. I had it; Glory hadn't taken them from me. I could use it. I knew it was wrong and stupid. It was going to get me killed... but then, so was Mr. Cyberpony's shooting spree. I had to do better. I had to talk to P-21. I had to make this better for Glory. I had to give Mini some peace before she died. I had to.

Buck. Rage. Med-X . Flash. I dropped S.A.T.S., then pulled open my pack as I kept dodging. I chewed and injected like a fiend, trying to close the distance at the same time. Damn me...it felt good. When the Flash hit my system, the world crawled to a halt. It was almost like I was back in S.A.T.S., but I could still move. When the drug wore off, Deus found me in his face. Or rather, my shotgun in his face. I fired four S.A.T.S. guided rounds at point blank range... and a little shield popped up on my E.F.S. with each. Even now, he was too tough for my weapons to touch.

I didn't give a shit. For all his pistons and steel, he was still a pony and I forced my way underneath him. "Gonna give me a blow job?" He laughed as he smashed my shotgun with one hoof. It would be his last laugh.

Then he screamed. I had a feeling that he had never screamed like that before. I prayed to the goddesses that this was one injury, no matter how superficial, that he couldn't regenerate or heal. With my final, extremely satisfying magic shot, I gelded God.

All sadistic banter went away as he stomped and kicked wildly. To stay underneath him was to be rendered into bloody paste. I hooked my hooves around the ammo feed to one of his guns and was jerked out from under him, flipping onto his back. All I could do was hang on for dear life, biting into his mane to keep from slipping off as he reared and kicked in a frenzy of his own. One swing would have tossed me out over the edge if not for my hoof being caught in his ammo feed. Finally, he managed to get his teeth on my mane and pull. I felt my flesh tear, but more terrifying was that I was yanked off his back and thrown into the interior of the groaning building.

By pure luck I slammed into a metal pipe and wrapped my hooves around it desperately, dangling over the jagged floor two stories down. I looked up at Deus, my

neck throbbing despite the painkillers, as he stared at me with maddened eyes. He wasn't going to shoot near me. He was going to render me into bloody vapor and fuck EC-1101. Looking at the ruin between his hindquarters, I couldn't blame him.

Then a white unicorn ghost floated in front of him with a slave collar stuffed with dynamite on her left and a detonator on her right. "Gem! No!" I screamed as she went solid, bit the end of the duct tape, and pulled it off the glowing detonator as she began to fall.

The explosion blew me right off the pipe. I hit a landing on the concrete stairs, then flopped down the steps limply like a doll.

I had thought that I'd heard Deus scream before. I was wrong. Rearing up on his hind legs, the flayed Reaper's mechanical mouth gaped, forcing a shattered jaw to stretch impossibly wide. An articulated metal windpipe released that horrible noise as flaps of skin dangled from him. Broken pieces of skull clung to an armored sphere that was still horribly attached to his mechanical spine. The bilious fluids pouring from the tubes along his throat and chest oozed and steamed in the rain. And he still wasn't dead.

One red eye-camera focused right on me, and he pointed his canons at my prostrate form. "Cunnnntzzzzzz..." an electronic speaker crackled. The cannons' firing mechanism clicked...the cannons, the barrels of which were now fouled from the blast and his mad thrashing, backfired.

The explosion of the shells tore his cybernetic body in two. The magazines went off a second later, and with that the exterior corner of the wall gave way, tumbling outward as the ruined stone collapsed like a house of cards. Sections of the other walls followed it down, and it was only by luck that we weren't crushed.

Good and bad luck.

I looked to P-21 and the still trembling Glory. Both all right... No. Not all right. None of us were all right. But we were alive.

And so was Mini.

Slowly, I made my way towards where she was still breathing shallow little gulps. I floated out Cupcake's revolver. "Mini..." I said quietly, though with the ringing in my ears everything felt quiet. I was numb from horn to hoof.

"Hey," she gave a shaky smile. "It's the Security pony..." she said quietly as she hung there. "Where're Gem and Taurus? She had to go..."

I looked over at one of the rubble heaps and the motionless green head poking out of it. "They... they left. They got away." Please, if there is any goddess in all of Equestria, let her believe me. "They're both... just fine..."

"That's good. Gem does silly things without me," she said quietly as she looked at me, red eyes just like my own, crying just like my own, as her lips trembled. I wasn't that good a liar. Were it not for the mane, I might have been looking into a mirror as she asked, "Are... are you going to finish it?"

I couldn't say it. I could only nod as my eyes blurred with tears.

Her lips smiled as she whispered, "Thank you."

I wrapped my hooves around her, hugging her as I levitated the gun up under her chin.

Pull the trigger. Pull the trigger. Pull the goddesses-damned trigger. Damn it, you bony son of a bitch, let me be able to do this! I sobbed as I held her, shaking as I poured everything I could into this. Five pounds of pressure was all I needed. Pull the motherfucking trigger, Blackjack. Do it! Do it! Please, for the love of Celestia, do it! I begged myself.

"I'm sorry." I sobbed, gritting my teeth together. Clenching my eyes closed. Wishing it was my head that the gun was pressed against.

Mini just laughed softly. "You're a good pony, Miss Blackjack." I felt a second unicorn's magic on the gun.

One last gunshot sounded out across Flank.

The mournful tones of a cello came from my PipBuck and filled the rainy night alongside the slow, heavy notes of a piano. The hushing sigh of rain pattering over the rubble around us complemented the sorrowful music. Looking at the clouds, I was too dead within to care about that sensation of being swallowed by the sky. I wanted it to swallow me. Send me to the stars.

It was over. If there was anypony still after me, they were dead or had fled. I couldn't care which. I felt hollow inside, and the only hint that I wasn't just another corpse littering the Wasteland was my Buck-withdrawn heart thudding in my chest. I sat under an overhang on the edge of the Exchange, looking out at the pouring rain. I was alive. Deus was dead. Another fucking win...

Yay.

Glory only pulled herself together enough to take off the black Enclave uniform and toss it over the edge. She looked like she wanted to follow it. Instead, she just curled up out of the rain beside me, staring into the gray downpour.

Rampage had jumped up to us. I was so numb, I didn't care how she did it. "Congratulations. You're a Reaper now. If you want it." Even with the rain, the striped pony looked like she'd been put through a meat grinder. I couldn't think of how many she'd killed below. I didn't want to care about ponies trying to kill me any more. I just wanted to burn that part out of me.

It'd be easier to rip out my own heart. "Is it worth it?" I asked as the cold water dripped into my eyes.

She didn't answer right away. "Not really, but it's better than being alone," she said as she gazed out at the rain with distant, sad eyes. Finally she sighed and muttered, "Fuck, I hate this maudlin shit." She stood. "I'm going to go wait for 69 to open. I need... something... bad." She hopped down from three stories, then walked down a road strewn with dismembered corpses.

P-21 slowly trotted over and lay down beside me. I floated Cupcake's revolver to him and laid it at his hooves. "Here. You deserve this," I muttered quietly as the rain poured over me.

"What's this for?" He asked softly, nudging it with his hoof.

"Justice," was all I said. He looked at me and then nodded once. He reached down and took it into his mouth, teeth tightening on the handle. Slowly, he pointed it at me. Smears of Mini's blood still glistened on the end. I wondered if it would hurt. I hoped so. I deserved for it to hurt.

Then he tossed the gun out into the street below.

I looked down after it, seeing the dull metal flickering in the remaining neon lights. "Why?" was all I could ask. "After what I did to you. . ."

"I don't blame you for Stable 99." He said softly. "Not anymore. For a while I did. . . but. . . if we were there right now, would you put yourself on the breeding queue?" I shook my head dumbly. "Would you blow away the Overmare and anypony that tried to keep that sick place going?" I nodded and he let out a breath.

"Then for Stable 99, I can forgive you," he said simply.

I closed my eyes. “And for U-20?” I felt him stiffen beside me, sucking in a breath. “You loved him. You loved him and I beat him to death in front of you.”

The longest silence yet was followed by a soft, “No. Not for that.” I closed my eyes, imagining that the dead weight in my chest was whatever was left of my heart.

“Then why not kill me? Why didn’t you kill me when we first escaped? Or after I killed Scoodle? Or... or any of the other times?” I asked at I stared at him.

“I wanted to. I still want to... a little. And I don’t think that will ever go away. I still see it. Still feel it. And no matter what, that murder and Stable 99 is a part of me,” he said as he bowed his head. Then he looked at me, “But for as long as I’ve known you, I’ve known you’re something special. You could have killed both of us out of spite. Out of sadistic glee; I know Daisy would have. You could have let Daisy take me. You could have left me for Deus when we fled 99. You could have killed Scoodle and blamed her for her death. You could have left the killing of forty psychotic foals up to me or Glory. You just fought the scariest fucking monster in the Wasteland while trying to defend three ponies that were out to kill you, Blackjack!

“Time and time again the Wasteland gives you the easier path and you refuse to take it. You could have just given EC-1101 over. You could have not cared about 99. You could have just left me to die. Or the Crusaders. Or Glory. You take the hard road no matter how damn much it hurts you, and I can only watch in awe that you keep walking it. And every time I think you’re going to do what’s wrong and easy, you surprise me. I couldn’t do it. I would have cut a deal the second I was alone outside 99. I’d planned to do that if I had my PipBuck. But you’re sticking it out, trying to find out what makes the damned thing so important.

“You walk the hard road, Blackjack. And sorry, but you deserve this.” I clenched my eyes shut.

He hugged me. He actually hugged me. At that point, everything fell apart in broken sobbing as the assorted fucked up emotions filled up that great big hollowness within me and poured forth. And I felt Glory silently lay down beside me as well, holding me in her hooves. I pressed my face into the wet concrete. I may not have been forgiven, but I was at least cared for.

I wasn’t alone on this hard road...

Footnote: Level up

New perk added: Action Mare (rank 1) – +15 Action Points

Skill Note: Melee (100)