

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 17: Identity

"It's all secrets and lies with those ponies!!"

I'm starting to wonder: am I still Blackjack? Sure. My cutie mark is the same queen and ace. I have the same security barding, modified and very patched up though it is. I'm still not the smartest pony and I have a terrifying habit of stringing together half-baked ideas on the fly and calling them a plan. I'm still as mule-headed as ever; that will never change.

But since I've left the stable, I've killed ponies. I did that before, too, only I painted it with colorful euphemisms like 'taking out of service' and 'defending myself to their death'. Now, I just killed, plain and simple, with shotgun and carbine and fire axe and my bare hooves if I needed to. I was also more concerned with survival. In Stable 99, everypony knew that the stable was one hard sneeze from failure. Now I had ponies that would kill me for bottlecaps. Heck, even the very land itself would kill me. There was already a time bomb inside me that might finish me, or maybe mutate me and *then* kill me.

Still, at least spending most of my time almost dead made the few poor bits I had left feel a lot better. Relatively.

There have been changes in me, too. I think a little more. I know that I'm still not a smart pony, though. I just don't know things. I don't pick up on them as I should. I can shoot things and hit things and that's about it.

I find that I care a little more. It's funny to think of myself as less callous outside the stable than inside it, but it's true. I feel bad for ponies who are trying to kill me; how crazy is that? They're trying to kill me, and I feel bad for them about it.

...Maybe it's not that I'm changing. Maybe I'm just realizing that the pony who lived in that stable wasn't who I thought she was. But if she wasn't... then just who is she?

* * *

It would take us a while to get down from the top of the Exchange. Walking wasn't the problem; my legs were strong enough, and Deus's final moments had knocked down so much of the walls that we had plenty of slopes we could scramble down. The problem was simply summoning up the will to stand and make our way to the streets below. While I kept staring out at the rain P-21, ever practical, went to dig out Taurus and check his belongings. I couldn't fault him for that; some scavenger would come by sooner or later for them. The duffel bag carried a few missiles and a few dozen rounds for his hunting rifle.

I had to admit, that rifle was a beautiful weapon. The stock was made of well-worn and oiled tan wood with a brand of a bull on the stock. The action slid like silk, with only the softest rasp, and the scope was cleaner and truer than my assault carbine. I ejected the clip, looking at the armor piercing rounds that had tried to bring down the technomagical monster and failed. I'd done no better. In the end, it was P-21's bomb and Gem's sacrifice that had mortally crippled Deus, and his own weapons that had finished him.

I had so many reasons to be happy for his death, so why wasn't I? I doubted that any bounty hunters would be after me now that he'd been finished off. Heck, technically this made me a Reaper. No pony would mess with me now, right? He'd violated my stable and made my life a living hell with the

price he'd placed on my head. He'd threatened my friends and mocked a mortally wounded Mini. So why wasn't I dancing in the street right now and singing 'ding, dong, the Deus is dead!'

"I dunno," answered the old pale horse sitting beside me on the ledge, slowly working the cards between his hooves as he looked at me with his sad, milky old eyes.

"Shut up. I'm in no mood for crazy right now," I said softly as I closed my eyes.

"I reckon not, but here I am," he chuckled.

I rubbed my eyes, then glanced over at him again. The cards hissed softly between his hooves. "What is this supposed to accomplish? I get it. Taint is driving me nuts. So what's with all the spooky little card metaphors?"

He just smiled and shook his head. "Oh, well, us hallucinations need to do something to keep things interesting. Otherwise, some ponies just don't think," he said as he dealt five cards to me and five to himself. "*You* know why you're not happy, don't you? Deus wasn't exactly the brains of the operation, was he?"

Don't look... don't look. "No. Sanguine, and whoever is employing him." I sighed. He'd told me to listen to the recordings and I had.

The cards were right in front of me; I couldn't help myself. I slowly picked them up, looking at the spread. I didn't have any idea what game we were playing now. A pink mare with a curly mane was balancing on a ball on the edge of a cliff, a cupcake on one hoof and a present on the other. A white alicorn grasping a pair of scales with a sad expression. A pair of red eyes peeking out of a cage of nine swords. An empty bottle of Wild Pegasus with eight upside-down shot glasses on a bar with a mare silhouetted in a doorway. A purple mare hanging by her rear hoof from a rusted street light.

"I think I got a flush," I muttered, glancing at him. "Why can't my fucking broken brain just play things straight for once?"

"You tell me. It's your brain," the old buck chuckled as he put down his spread next to mine. A moon overlooked by a sad young black alicorn. A handsome unicorn buck smiling, his mane and horn bright yellow. The black towers of Hoofington wreathed in green light. Six swords piercing the clouds with upturned blades. A yellow pegasus with long, beautiful pink hair sitting before a pool and hugging a strange little blue and green ball in her hooves. I couldn't tell if the card was upside down or not.

"I'm sure that this is all fascinating and chock-full of meaning and mystery, but you should know that I'm not a smart pony. I don't get stuff like this." I sighed, closing my eyes. "I don't understand anything anymore. Why can't I do anything? I can't protect Glory. I can't make everything right with P-21. I can't understand Rampage. I can't even be happy that one of my enemies is dead." I slowly lay back, rubbing my face with my hooves. "And to top it all off, I'm having conversations with crazy hallucinations that give me mysterious, creepy cards."

"Blackjack?" Glory asked softly, "Who are you talking to?"

"Just myself, Glory." I sighed, looking over and seeing that he was gone. I sat up and looked at her again. Her eyes were dull and lost. What could I ask? 'Are you okay?' Of course she wasn't. 'How are you feeling?' She was miserable. Finally, I sighed, stood, and walked to her. "What can I do to help, Glory?"

"You can't call me that anymore," she replied softly.

I closed my eyes, wishing that I could turn her elder sibling into a feather duster. "You don't have to listen to her, Glory."

"I have four sisters, Blackjack," she said. "Dusk is the oldest. Then Moonshadow. Then me. Lucent and Lambent are younger. My father lives on his pension through the Enclave. Dusk is an Enclave security officer. Moonshadow is in research. Lu and Lamb are in Enclave schools. Do you know what a family member turning Dashite will do to them?" she asked. I shook my head dumbly. "My father will be forced to disown me publicly. Maybe he already has. Otherwise, he loses his home, his income, everything. My family would be forced to live on some feral cloud near the Everfree Forest, or worse, come down here to survive! Moonshadow might have been bumped from whatever project she's working on. And I know the kind of trouble Lu and Lamb are getting from their classmates."

"How can they do that? How can the Enclave betray you but be so hard on pegasi strong enough to walk away from that?"

"Walking away isn't strong!" she snapped back at me. "Sticking it out, backing your fellow pegasi, doing what must be done... that's strength," she said firmly. "The Enclave didn't betray me; Lighthooves did. And every single time some pegasus goes Dashite they completely destroy everything Rainbow Dash wanted to do. Like they decided to drop her loyalty and courage and become the greatest egotists of the pegasi."

"There was one a few years back, a real high profile case. Deadshot Calamity. A legend in the security forces, the kind of pony who could have really forced the council to engage with the surface. He gets an audience in front of the pegasus council. Does he call for opening contact with the surface? No. Does he say we should trade food and medicine to the surface? No. Instead, he spends half an hour calling the entire council cowards, featherbrains, and negligent murderers. Then, when his wing went looking for him to beg him to reconsider, he killed them!" she shouted and stamped her hooves. "That featherbrained idiot almost singlehoofedly destroyed ten years of work getting the Volunteer Corps established!"

"So I know just how damaging what Lighthooves did was. And every time there's a report mentioning 'the Dashite Morning Glory', Dusk's career falls a little more behind. Every time a news release talks about Dashites, Lambent and Lucent will suffer the mutters and glares of their classmates. The only way my family gets to have any real peace is if I'm dead. Dusk gave me a choice: die for pretend or die for real."

"Your own sister would kill you?" The idea chilled me; it was like me killing Mom.

"She was going to before you stopped her," Morning Glory replied softly. "But she gave me a choice instead, and that was generous of her."

"So you're giving up?"

"Of course I'm not giving up. I have to find some way to stop Lighthooves and expose him and what he's doing. Not because he wronged me, but because he wronged the Enclave! I can't believe that he's operating with the blessing of the pegasus council. And if I can prove my loyalty and clear my name, then maybe I can be Morning Glory again." She sat up and sighed. "Till then, I'll have to be somepony else," she said as she stood, looking out at the drizzling rain.

"Morning Glory..." I said softly, looking at her. At her burned-away cutie mark and that pale brand on her flank. Did losing your cutie mark change you? Had it changed P-21, or was there a unique mark underneath the spell 99 had put on his flanks?

"Fallen Glory," she corrected quietly. Then she looked at me with a sad smile as the rain dripped

off her purple mane. "I think it's a Dashite-esque enough name. And besides, you can still call me Glory. You and P-21 are the only ones that really do."

"Glory... you don't have to do this," I whispered, looking into her hurt eyes. Just like Mini's. I couldn't shake the thought that this was some kind of suicide, bloodless but no less wrong.

Her lips trembled as she closed her eyes. "It's better this way. What did I have left that was Morning Glory's, anyway? My career and reputation are gone, my family is ruined, my sister wants to kill me, and I don't even have my..." She clenched her eyes and teeth in a hiss of pain. I couldn't tell what was rain and what was tears anymore. She drew a shaky breath. "All I have are my friends. That's more important to me than any name." Her round, wet eyes stared up at me, begging me to accept it. Accept her.

What could I do? Everything about this felt wrong... but... I put my hooves around her and murmured, "If this is what you really want, Fallen..." She gave a little sob; it wasn't, but it was what she thought she had to do.

When she stopped crying, I took a deep breath and gave her a look of stoic determination. "I also have to confess something. A grave and dark secret from my past. Something I've not told anypony..." I said, watching her eyes get round as she braced herself. I took a deep breath. "My name... the secret, true name of the Security Mare... is... Go Fish."

She blinked at me in confusion, and then I let out a snirk and curled my lips in a smile. She let out a hiccupping little giggle. Then another one. Finally we both broke out in laughter. "I guess you had a really big aquarium in 99, huh?" she said as she gasped for air.

I just smiled and nuzzled her forehead. She didn't get the joke; she was still my Glory, no matter her name.

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When Stable 89 opened its doors, they found me in the tub. Despite being battered and banged and bloody, the cast iron tub in the middle of the street proved surprisingly comfortable as I lay back and occasionally refilled it with water from a nearby down spout. The cute little security mares poked their heads out of the parking garage and stared at the bodies filling the street and the rubble of the top floors of the Exchange. I raised my almost empty bottle of Wild Pegasus at them. "Hey," I called out with a nice, inebriated smile. They disappeared back inside.

"I say something wrong?" I asked P-21 as he came limping up with his duffel bag. With a pull I emptied the bottle.

"Eh. Probably didn't expect us to hang around," P-21 said as he set the bag down and unzipped it. "No honor in the Wasteland, it seems. Anypony who wasn't killed stripped most of the good gear before running. Still, I found a few with some useful things." He scooped up two hooffuls of bullets.

"Ugh... nine millimeter and twenty gauge shells," I muttered as I pawed my hoof through the collection of ammo. Still, maybe we could sell or exchange them for something more substantial. I wanted some more clips for the hunting rifle. "Automatic pistols. Revolvers. Oooh!" I said, sitting up. "An IF-33 Applebuck!" I picked out the weapon and immediately drew back the slide. "Twelve point seven millimeter rounds. Semi-automatic firing. Seven round clip." I pointed it away from anypony and gave a small frown. "Been through the wash a few times, though. Let me guess. No more twelve point seven?"

"Ask your PipBuck. I just collect the bullets. Those are short. Those are long. Those are round

and plastic. That's about all I can do," he said with a smirk.

"Right, sorry," I said.

"And a dozen sticks of dynamite. Some frag grenades. A few landmines. This," he said as he pulled out a half-full bottle of whiskey.

"Ooooo, gimmie!" I said with a grin, holding out my hooves. "You are a gentlecolt and a scholar," I said as I swirled the contents and took a pull. Letting out a sigh, I sang in whatever key I stumbled into, "Oh rain may fall and the wind might blow, the earth could quake or clouds bury us in snow, but as bad as they are there's one thing I know... with friends and whiskey is how I plan to goooooo!"

He winced. "Blackjack, that was terrible!"

"You're just jealous that I am a mare of many hidden talents," I said primly.

"I also found this," he said as he pulled out the dark, wickedly curved claw.

"My dragon claw!" I said gleefully, giving him a hug and licking his cheek. I have to admit, I have never seen a buck that stiff before. I could have used him as a baseball bat!

He shoved me off, looking confused. "*Your* dragon claw?" he asked, scrubbing where I'd licked.

I lifted it with my magic and inspected it. Still harder and sharper than anything else I'd ever encountered. "I picked it up in a museum and dropped it on the way here. I thought it was gone forever." I lay back in the tub and took a pull off the bottle. "I might actually get laid if my luck keeps going this way."

He coughed and flushed a little as he looked away. "And to firmly change the subject off your reproductive organs... why did Glory burst into tears when I called her Morning Glory?"

I sighed and slumped, my muzzle dipping underwater to blow bubbles a moment before I rose and explained, "Glory wants us to call her Fallen Glory now. I don't get it. It's like... she's willing to die just so she doesn't inconvenience others. Just don't get it." Then I looked at him sharply and took a slow pull of the amber fluid. "What about you?"

"What about me?" he asked in confusion.

"Ever think about changing your name? P-21... you could name yourself... ummm... Boomer. The Blue Bomb! Maybe see if Scalpel can remove that... whatever it is on your butt so we can see your real cutie mark under it," I said as I gave him a smile.

He sighed and shook his head. "No."

"All my friends keep sighing and telling me that," I grumbled as I narrowed my eyes with a pout, "Why can't they ever say 'Oh yes, Blackjack, you're so right. Brilliant, in fact!'" I tilted my head back, looking up at the sky and too drunk to care about my stomach falling up. The rain had actually let up a bit. "It'd be so refreshing."

"I've thought about it," he replied and then quickly added, "The name thing, not the brilliant thing." Oh, thanks, P-21. Just crush my hopes. Crush them like a tiny crushable thing that is easily crushed... like... meh. I blew a raspberry at him.

"Some bucks think about names in 99... who we'd be if we could be somepony else. Our names.

Our cutie marks.” He hooked his hooves on the edge of the tub and rested his chin upon them. “Fact is, I like being P-21. I like that I’m the buck they were supposed to kill but couldn’t. I can’t forget 99. It’s a part of me. So I might as well take some strength from it.”

I pursed my lips and tapped his forehead. “You think too much. How abouts you take some of my fun, and I take some of your smarts, and then we’ll be... like... unstoppable!” I said with a laugh.

The stable security mares peeked out at us. I gave them a sardonic grin and they disappeared once again. “Ugh... why do they keep doing that?”

“No idea,” he said with a chuckle. “But one little piece of advice: when most ponies take a bath, they take their barding off first.” He trotted off to check for more salvage.

I blinked and then leaned over the edge of the tub, shouting after him, “Most ponies haven’t been shot at as much as I have! I’ve got a bounty on my head, you know! My head is worth thousands of caps!” I leaned further and further out as I waved my hoof at him. “How much is your head worth, huh?” And with that I was refamiliarized with the concept of balance as the legless bathtub overturned and sent me sloshing across the crumbling asphalt. The mares by the parking garage just stared in shock.

“I have a very very valuable head,” I muttered to the sky.

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A few hours later, after a soggy nap in the street, I was dry and miserable as my treacherous body metabolized the alcohol, dehydrated my tissues, and gave me the sensation of having been kicked upside my dumb head. I knew this because Glory had told me in clinical detail what my body was doing to make me feel so miserable. Of course, my head throbbed far too badly to care. Hah! Take that, smart ponies! The fact that I was still feeling shaky after the chems I’d taken to fight Deus didn’t help much.

We were gathered in the lounge of Stable 89, alone save for the barpony who was mixing up something she called ‘The Price’. She trotted over with a tray carrying a shot glass and a large bottle of orange fluid. “Here you go. Fix you right up.”

“Are you sure we can’t go back to Scalpel’s clinic?” I muttered, looking at the glass. It was filled with some kind of red fluid with a raw egg on top and some sort of reddish-brown... stuff sprinkled all over it. “It smells like butt. It’s gonna taste like butt, too.”

When I’d visited the clinic, Scalpel had just given me a look that said ‘This isn’t chem withdrawal, this is taint eating your heart. STOP HELPING IT,’ and tossed me out on the street. She was very good at giving looks like that.

“She has a standing policy of not treating hangovers,” Barpony said brightly. She had the most bizarre cutie mark I’d ever seen or imagined: a hodgepodge of a balloon, streamers, glitter, a shot glass, a tiny wrapped present, and a mare’s outline, all crammed onto her butt. “You drink this one first,” she said, pointing to the shot. “Then you drink from the bottle before you throw up. It helps if you pinch your nose shut.”

I rose to my hooves with a lurch. “I’m going to Scalpel’s. I’ll pay her double.” Glory and P-21 pushed me back down, ignoring my whining.

“She’s dealing with injured ponies now,” P-21 said firmly. “You’re not injured. Drink.”

I sighed and lifted the shot glass. “When I throw up, I’m aiming for you,” I warned him, then downed the spicy, slimy, egg-y, salty, tomato-y concoction in one go. There was definitely a greasy sense

of something trying to crawl back up my throat. Then I blinked as P-21 started to shy away. I held the shot glass out to Barpony. "Not bad. Can I have another?"

"And thus her legend grows," Rampage said with a snicker. I'd no idea what she'd done to improve her mood, but I hoped it hadn't involved maiming. The barkeep with the peach coat looked at me with a surprised smile, then went to mix me another while I drank the orangey-tasting liquid. I had to admit, when I finished it off, I was feeling a bit better.

"What I want to know is where Caprice is after all this! Because I got to tell her that her security stinks. This place might be a lot more fun than Megamart, but I can't believe her only defense was two gates and a bunch of mares who were completely outgunned!" I gave a scornful sniff, then noticed that everypony was looking at me funny; what, were my eyes glowing again?

"Blackjack, I'm pretty sure that that fight last night involved five to ten percent of the entire population of the Hoof. Deus rounded up dozens of ponies hunting you and the Pecos called in favors to get three other gangs to join in. I don't think even Bottlecap's turrets or Gun could have stopped it," P-21 pointed out.

I snorted and shook my head. "Don't use your fancy mathematics to muddle the issue! If Flank had some decent defenses, neither Deus nor the Pecos would have tried storming it. It wouldn't matter if they could. They'd have gone 'Nuh-uh. I don't want turret death beams turning me inside out. We'll hide and ambush Security when she comes running for the hills!' and last night would never have happened."

"You wouldn't believe how often I hear that one," Barpony replied as she brought me three more 'Prices'. I gulped down the first. Glory gave one of the glasses a sniff and immediately looked like she was about to be sick. "So what do you suggest? What would make Flank safer?" She'd also brought me some more of the orange-flavored water; it was kinda like RadAway but not as tasty.

I lifted the empty shot glass with my magic and spun it as I tried to think. "First off, one of the best things Bottlecap has are those turrets. Just knowing that they're there probably cuts off a lot of problems. You've got six buildings that would give you an excellent field of fire on the ground. You'd just have to get the turrets, install them, and make sure that every guest knows that doing something stupid gets them shot."

Glory rubbed her nose as I sipped the water. "It shouldn't be that hard. A turret is basically a gun, a frame, a spark battery, and a targeting talisman. If there's any place around here with robots or military weapons, we should find most of what we need."

"The second thing is this place's defenses. One gate is hard enough to defend, but two is a real nightmare. Stables have one door for a reason," I said with a frown as I stirred the contents of the second shot glass with my magic. "Also, that chain link fence might keep some ponies in and out, but the Pecos just blew a nice big hole in the wall and Deus walked right through it. You need something sturdier. Stacked rubble at least. Wagon frames. And then something to keep ponies away except for where you want them. Landmines, maybe."

"Landmines aren't hard to set up," P-21 said, looking a touch green as I gulped down the second shot and swished it in my mouth, "But you'd need a lot of them. You'd also want to secure them so that a unicorn can't just disarm them with their magic." The slimy consistency was a little bit seminal, but not that bad. Had to admit, I loved the spicy bite! I gulped it down and watched him shiver.

"How do you do that?" I asked, curious.

"Drill a hole in the bottom and attach a wire to the detonator. Unicorn sees the mine, disarms its detonation tab, picks it up, wire rearms the mine and boom." Okay. I'd be letting P-21 handle any mines I

happened to come across. "The real problem is moving rubble around to make a decent barrier."

"Pffft," Rampage snorted. "It's not like any of those slabs off the Exchange are heavy. Pass out some Buck and some booze and get working. Be cleared away by supertime." She reached over and grabbed the third shot, sniffing it skeptically.

Barpony looked at the four of us oddly as she said, "Yes, that would be very helpful but..."

"But," I finished for her, "It won't mean a thing if Caprice can't get some decent security ponies in place. I don't blame them for not being able to stop both those bunches, but I do blame them for running. *You* were braver than they were." Barpony closed her mouth, just blinking in shock. "They need some adequate weapons training. They need to be confident that they can handle risks and deal with problems. I saw the security ponies when we were leaving Rooms; they were just standing around and didn't know what to do."

The peach-coated mare just looked from one of us to the next. "Yes, that would all be wonderful, but... don't you three have something more important to do?"

I blinked. To be honest, the last couple of days had involved running, fighting, running some more, and fighting some more with interspersed breaks of gloom and depression. Still, she had a point. I had to find this Caprice... assuming she hadn't just abandoned Flank, in which case I was going to hand everything over to Barpony and get my caps to pay for decoding EC-1101 from *her*. But for the first time in almost a week, I had something I wanted to do instead of something I had to do.

"You know what?" I slapped my hooves on the tabletop before me. "No, I don't. Call it a working vacation. This is the first big slice of civilization I've seen in a while, and if I can make it secure, then I will."

"But... you haven't even discussed payment..." the peach mare stammered as Rampage downed the shot. I wasn't exactly sure what I saw in Barpony's eyes.

I just shrugged. "I don't care about that. I just want to do something for a change that doesn't involve me running for my life or killing somepony. Caprice can pay me whatever is fair when she decides to show herself," I said with a scowl as I looked around the brothel. "Honestly, where is she? I can't believe she's still hiding! Or did she run?" The peach mare just blinked at me as if she thought I was joking or something.

Glory looked at me with a worried little smile as she said, "Blackjack, Caprice is--"

Unfortunately, that was the moment that Rampage's stomach decided that it didn't like The Price and that the drink should be returned. The rest of the stomach's contents, in a show of solidarity, decided to follow it out. Vast quantities of semi-digested meat splashed over P-21's back and he froze in place, twitching. The striped pony scrubbed her mouth with the back of her hoof. "That's disgusting! How the hell did you swallow three of those?!" she said as she pushed a hoofful of Mint-als into her mouth and chewed vigorously.

P-21's bright blue glare cut back over his shoulder at Rampage, promising explosive retribution.

I staggered back and then rose to my hooves, waving a forehoof at the stench. "Well... I guess that's that. Why don't I meet with her security in an hour or two in the parking garage? See if Caprice will spring for the parts Glory needs in the Exchange. And... um... get a mop?" I suggested.

"Good idea," Barpony said, still finding something about the conversation funny. "Why don't you use room B-10 in the living quarters while I show P-21 to the shower? Eat something and finish

freshening up. I know Caprice won't mind. I'll pass on the message to the security ponies to get ready."

"Good," I replied with a nod. My head still wasn't quite over my last bout of inebriation. "And let Caprice know that I really want to meet with her, okay? For one thing, I still need to get paid for these contracts." I looked around in concern; everypony was looking at me oddly again. Well, except P-21; he was looking at vomit.

"What?" I insisted.

Glory just sighed, shaking her head with a smile. "Just... never mind..."

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I had to admit, Stable 89's layout was a lot different than 99's. For one, it was cleaner, with brighter light and no faint tang of mold and leaking sewage. Since Stable 89 was apparently designed for eggheads, there was lab equipment in every room. I passed numerous storage rooms with shelves holding all kinds of chemicals and arcane science materials in jars and containers. In contrast, their security station was barely larger than a closet, and I couldn't even see a sign for an armory.

I could only guess that when Stable 89 had been taken over, the lack of facilities translated to a lack of security. In 99, Security had an entire *floor* to ourselves. A room for baton training and target practice, a jail for detention and interrogation. Either Stable-Tec had assumed that a bunch of scientists wouldn't need law enforcement, or it was a pretty severe oversight.

The living quarters were divided into sectors A, B, and C; I supposed it was an egghead thing. A was dedicated to sexing, but it seemed like the other two were for the ponies living and working here. I found B-10 and stepped in, wondering if all the living quarters were unlocked, if Caprice had already set it aside, or if the security clearance in my PipBuck opened it up even though it was for another stable. It didn't really matter. Aside from an alcove with a work table in one corner, I might as well have been home.

Home. After everything with P-21, I'd thought that Stable 99 would be branded a horrible nightmare, and it was. Yet seeing this neat little steel can, I had to admit that I felt a pang of longing for that hole in the ground. I wanted to play cards with Rivets. I wanted to try and tease Midnight into my bed... oh Goddesses, how I needed somepony in my bed! I missed Mom telling me what to do. It was dull and thoughtless and monstrous, but it had been my life.

I flopped down on the bed, feeling odd little twinges in my horn and head. Hangover? Taint? Both? "Ugh... I can just imagine what Mom would say: 'Blackjack, you're neglecting your duties and yourself.'" I sighed as I rolled onto my back, loving that wonderful familiar mass-produced Stable-Tec mattress. You sleep on one and you've slept on them all.

Funny thing was that the idea of helping Flank be safer just seemed good to me. I might have first thought of it as some kind of drug den, but having been here and experienced the joy of eating new food, or the music in Mixers, or even the thought of sex in 'Stable 69', I felt that the Wasteland needed Flank. Something to look forward to. Something to want that was more than mere survival. I just hoped Caprice wasn't a complete tool when I finished setting up security; ugh, I was helping this mare, and she couldn't even shake my hoof with a thank you?

...Crap, now I was starting to get bored. In fact, technically I was waiting, which was worse than just boredom.

I still had that other memory orb from Miramare...

"No! Fuck no!" I said as I sat up and smacked my temples with both forehooves. "No more orbs, brain. They are *not* healthy for you. They make you sad, or make me wake up all alone, or wearing a bomb! So no orbs!" Then I blinked and rubbed my face as I realized that the idea hadn't gone away. "If I use one I'll wake up... I dunno... with a tattoo, or two centuries from now, or pregnant, or something!"

I looked over at my saddlebags. Tick... tick... tick... I let out a long sigh of disgust. "This is going to end badly, brain. Very badly." I floated my bags over and set them next to me. "Okay... just warning myself... this is a bad idea. Last chance to do something sensible like... sleep... masturbate... something?" Nope... still wanting to check the orb... I sighed and touched my horn to it.

oooOOOooo

Wow... no password or anything? Refreshing... My body was... okay... those were wings... that was a... uh huh... pegasus stallion. He was wearing some kind of armor from head to hoof; not armored barding, but actual plate armor. He had the taste of chocolate in his mouth and his nose itched terribly.

The place seemed to be some kind of fancy tent. A large display showed two train tracks and some sort of rail yard. There were dozens, maybe even hundreds of train cars all lined up on the model. There were all kinds of ponies standing around looking grave and talking in low voices. My host carefully snuck out something from under his wing and, under the pretense of adjusting a strap of armor, popped an entire cupcake in his mouth.

"You keep doing that and you're not going to fit in your armor," a mare said in a soft, teasing tone. He looked over, and both our hearts stopped as we looked into the bright teal eyes of a beautiful dark alicorn. I was stunned by her beauty, and terribly embarrassed. My host choked down the cupcake in one gulp, fighting the urge to cough as he returned to attention. Then a dark wing stretched out. "Oh look. Crumbs." The softest feathers imaginable flicked them from his lips.

I'm fairly sure both my host and I could have died right at that moment.

I was used to Princess Luna being a painting on a wall or a picture in a book. The concept of Luna being sent to the moon for a millennium, only to be returned for a few years and then assuming control of Equestria, was some dry chapters in a book for me. Respectable and tragic, certainly, but she wasn't real.

Not until now. I never could have imagined Princess Luna appearing as a mare a bit older than me. That intelligent, even calculating, look in her teal eyes that seemed to take a measure of everything they looked upon. Her easy smile, friendly yet also mysterious, as if you couldn't quite be sure what she was smiling about. No pony could have told me of the silvery luster of her dusky blue mane, like a beam of moonlight in the middle of the drab tent, nor of the delicate taper of her horn that caught the light just so and made it appear as though a star alighted on the tip when she moved. Suddenly, I was in the presence of something more, so very much more, than a worthless pony like myself. I wanted to rage at the nobles chatting softly with one another and say 'Look! Look at her! If you do what you do, then you are going to lose *this*!'

The flap of the tent opened and Princess Celestia entered. I'd heard her described as a 'ruler'; I admit, I always imagined her as an 'Overmare'. I expected something small, petty, fussy, and ruling because the law said so.

With Celestia before me, I mentally bowed along with my host. It was reflexive; had she made a request I would have carried it out that instant. An aura of maternal kindness seemed to wash from her and touch every pony in her presence. Her rainbow mane constantly shifted in an ethereal breeze that I felt only in my imagination. In her sad gaze was a love absolute and unconditional. No pony had ever possessed eyes like that, and none ever would again; of that I was certain.

You lost this? YOU LOST THIS?! For coal and pride and fear you sacrificed this? I wanted to scream at these ponies, and the Princesses themselves. I wanted to show them this empty world that would follow them. No price, none, was worth the loss of these Princesses. The world was less without them.

My host, however, did not move a feather. I swore his lips still tingled from Luna's playful brush, but all his attention and every sense were focused on Celestia. Celestia's own features were worried, like the sun hidden behind a wall of clouds. Luna immediately approached her. "They said no?"

Celestia took a deep breath and shook her head.

"Your Majesty, this goes beyond insult! That coal was paid for nearly two years ago. It is illegal for the zebras to halt shipments due to a... political disagreement!" a fancily dressed mare snorted in disdain.

"The Caesar remains adamant. The coal will not be released until his government can verify the legality of our claims," Celestia said softly as she looked at the models. "His representative also hinted that we should re-evaluate our own gemstone embargo."

"It's a ploy, Your Majesty. The Caesar is just using this as an excuse to extort more beneficial contractual terms in exchange for our gemstones," a unicorn buck harrumphed. "They are simply being stubborn. We can't just bend neck."

A pony wearing more businesslike attire coughed politely. "It may be moot, Your Majesty. Zebras do not need gemstones to survive. Hippocampus Energy estimates that, even after cutting back power supply to forty percent, we can only keep power going for another month. After that, Equestria will go dark."

"Somepony remind me whose great idea it was to build an infrastructure on an energy source Equestria doesn't have?" Princess Luna asked in a faintly sarcastic tone. Only Princess Celestia smiled at the attempted humor. The rest of the ponies in the tent looked nervous.

A pegasus in fancy formal dress tapped her hooves. "Well, we have the guard here. We're in the right. Just take the coal and let the Caesar choke on it. If their king can't govern, why should we suffer?" Murmurs of agreement grew. Celestia simply looked sad.

Then a young voice said from the corner of the tent, "That would be a terrible idea."

Every eye in the tent turned to a unicorn buck who seemed to realize that this was not his place to make a comment of any sort. He was the same age as me! Pale of hide and with a straw yellow mane and oddly yellow horn, his cutie mark was a yellow teardrop. I hoped it didn't signify him wetting himself; he certainly looked like he wanted to. Yet Celestia smiled to him. "And you are?"

A handsome unicorn stallion with a compass rose on his flank glared down at the young buck and then quickly chuckled, "Oh don't mind him, Your Majesty. He's still learning his place." And clearly his place was to shut the fuck up; I'd gotten plenty of looks like that from Mom.

The white unicorn with the yellow drop then pressed his lips together and stepped past the larger. "The Caesar is the protector of the zebra people. He's not a king. He's a protector. When the Wonderbolts extracted the hostages from the Barberry Coast, it was an insult to his ability to protect people in his lands. He has to restore his respectability."

"Quiet, you," the handsome buck muttered with a glare before giving a suave smile at the

Princesses. “Don’t mind him, Your Majesties. He spends a few years in their land and thinks himself an expert.”

“Perhaps. But I want to hear all options. Continue.” The elder unicorn looked like he’d just downed a shot of Barpony’s ‘Price’.

The yellow-maned young buck swallowed. “This Caesar... since he rose to power, he’s suffered many setbacks: monster attacks, drought, and now the hostage crisis. He needs a win, Your Majesty. Give him the gemstone concessions he wants, and when things calm down they can be renegotiated.”

The pegasus mare gave an outraged little snort. “That’s treasonous talk, putting zebra interests ahead of our own! We can simply take the coal.”

“And the Caesar will fight back. He has to. That’s his sacred duty.” He looked around at all the assembled ponies. “I know it’ll take longer and be more difficult, but I’m sure it’ll be better than violence.” More disdainful and dismissive talk. ‘*Listen to him*,’ I wanted to scream! Then he blurted loudly, “Please, listen to me!” Apparently this broke so many rules of protocol that everyone did. “The zebras have a word for this. It’s not a fight. It’s not a battle. It’s war. They use it when their entire country faces terrible threats. Flights of dragons. Swarms of manticores. They’ve done wars before, where every zebra is drawn into the fight. And they are terrible things. Please, don’t resort to war to try and solve this problem when there are other means.”

There was a fragile, momentary pause. Then the unicorn with the compass rose on his flank gave a disdainful snort. “War. Hardly sounds serious. Let the Caesar bring his war.”

“Let him. I doubt the zebras have the stomach for a real, drawn-out battle. I give them six months before they beg us to take their dirty rocks,” a buck harrumphed.

A mare laughed. “Three months! And they’ll give us their mines too.”

“Please, they’re only striped mules. Once they face our magic and flyers they’ll cower and beg for peace. One month, at the most,” the unicorn buck with the compass rose said with a cocky little grin, earning cheers from the onlookers.

Only the business ponies, the guards, and the Princesses weren’t laughing. The business ponies looked at their clipboards. “Your Majesty, I can’t talk about fighting or politics. I can only tell you that without coal our economy will come to a crashing halt. Half of Fillydelphia’s work force is on furlough. Manehattan is dark for most of the night. That’s *right now*. If we can’t get coal we won’t be able to ship food to the large cities. It’ll be more than an inconvenience. It will be a famine.” The cheers and talking died out.

Princess Celestia smiled at the assembled ponies. “If you gentleponies would please give us a moment alone?” There were mutters and talks as the aristocrats and businessponies were funneled out of the tent, leaving only the guard. Celestia looked as if she was going to cry once they’d left. “How has it come down to this? Taking what we want? Fighting? War?” Celestia rubbed her eyes. “I’d forgotten that word; it’s been so long.”

“That young buck was mistaken. It’s not a zebra word. We invented it. When you fought me,” Luna replied softly. “*Wyrre*... wasn’t that how it was said back then?”

“Something like that. I also remember how much I hated it.” She took a deep breath, looking at her sister. “What do you think, Luna?” Princess Celestia asked gently.

Luna sighed as well. “I don’t really see us having much choice. We’ve been at this for months

now. It's not a question of if we want to fight. We have to have the coal. We could agree to all the Caesar's demands, and it could take months to resume shipments." She looked towards the tent flaps. "I wish we'd had that young buck when this started. Who is he?"

"One of my nephew's children," Celestia replied with a disgruntled sigh. "Blueblood saddled him with some horrid name. Brandyblood?"

"Another one? And Blueblood actually brought one of his... offspring... with him to court?" Luna looked disdainfully at the tent flap. "It amazes me that any mare would let him into their bed, yet his bastards clearly show some success in that regard."

"You almost did," Celestia said with a half smile, making Luna flush before Celestia continued, "His mother was a friend and died last month. He returned for her funeral. I suggested to Blueblood that the boy might enjoy court. Bring him back from his virtual exile in the zebra lands." Celestia frowned. "Another good intention gone horribly wrong."

Luna looked sympathetic. "You couldn't have known the Caesar would take our rescue so personally."

"I should have, Luna. I've ruled for a thousand years. His father was flexible. And his grandfather. He's more in his great great grandfather's demeanor." Celestia sighed, shaking her head. "Sometimes it's so hard keeping them all straight over the centuries. I thought the rescue a simple, elegant solution. I feared delay would kill the hostages. And now... having lost the Wonderbolts..."

"The Wonderbolts saved lives at the loss of their own. No pony can do more than that," Luna said as she put her wing around her sister. "No hope with diplomacy?"

"Negotiations have danced around in circles since then. The solution should be obvious, but for some reason we simply can't agree. They need the gems desperately; they're needed for the most potent weapons against the monsters in their lands, but we can't give in on our gemstone embargo; it's the only leverage we have." She rubbed her eyes again. "I miss the days when my biggest concern was a snoring dragon's smog problem or parasprites in Fillydelphia." She gave her sister a sad smile. "Want to take over? I could do with a nice long vacation."

Luna laughed. "Not for all the sugar cubes in Equestria. Besides, I know you're not serious. It'll take a lot more than this to make you quit, Tia."

"True," Princess Celestia said with a soft sigh. "So then, this is how it starts. I only hope the Caesar realizes how dire our need is and reconsiders." She levitated a scroll of parchment and pen, deftly writing with the practiced ease of a thousand years. Then she coiled it up and approached my host and a unicorn guard beside him. "Take this executive command to Captain Lighthorn. He is to take custody of the coal shipments. Take care to keep casualties to an absolute minimum. Understood?"

"Yes ma'am," the guards said in unison, the unicorn hovering the instructions as they saluted and trotted out of the tent.

"Can you believe that?" my host muttered, "Intense."

"We don't talk about the Princesses' business, Cupcake," the unicorn muttered beside my host. Then she looked a touch worried. "But, yes... that was... intense."

Outside the tents, the nobles had gathered in little herds, while off to the side Blueblood was administering a rather physical education of his own as he smacked the straw-maned young buck over and over again. "How dare you, you little embarrassment? You inconvenient little... squirt!"

The young buck cried and protected his head. "Please, Father! I only wanted to help her!"

"Don't you dare call me that, you hear me? You have no father," Blueblood growled.

"Cover for me," Cupcake said as he made a swift detour. The brown pegasus thrust himself hard between Blueblood and the young buck. "Excuse me, sir, but you are distressing the gentlefolk."

Blueblood scowled down at his son and then glared at the guard before raising his snout into the air and trotting away to make his apologies. Cupcake just sighed and shook his head before looking down at the buck. "Say, are you all right? What's your name, kid?"

He looked up at Cupcake then and I felt myself start. His eyes weren't yellow, but a brilliant gold. Blood trickled down between them from a small gash on his brow beside his odd, metallic-gold-colored horn. Despite his tears, his gaze was steady and held a confidence that shook me. "Thank you, I'm fine," he said as his intense golden eyes stared into mine, "And my name is Goldenblood."

oooOOOooo

Coming out of the memory, I immediately jumped to my hooves! Okay, more accurately, I fell flat on my face intending to jump to my hooves! Still, I looked around for the bounty hunter monster pony cyborg ghosts that surely had sprung upon me while in the orb. All I saw and heard was the glow of the lights and the whirr of the vent fans. And then I slowly lifted the small glowing orb. Tears trickled down my cheeks as I stared at the little cloud of light within.

Priest had tried to explain it to me; that memory orbs were more than just experiences. They were testaments, proof of the existence of ponies centuries ago that had shaped the world today. They were more than just curiosities or battles or relationships that played out in better times. They were lessons of just what we had lost and how very far we had to go to reclaim it.

I pressed the orb to my chest, holding as tightly as possible the most precious object I could imagine in all of Equestria.

* * *

Four hours later, I collapsed against the concrete rail on the top floor of the parking garage. My training session with the security mares, and I use the term because there wasn't a single buck among them, had been an unmitigated disaster. They could shoot and they could swing a baton, but they didn't have the attitude. "That was terrible. Just terrible. Teaching is hard."

Below me, the cleanup of last night's wreckage was just getting started. Slabs of the Exchange were being cut free by Morn-- by Fallen Glory's disintegration bolts or small blasts of dynamite. Rampage and a few hardy bucks would slip into straps and start pulling. Unicorns levitated lengths of pipe under the slabs to roll them along. Smaller pieces were heaped up along the fence perimeter. It'd take a while, but with everypony working together, at least the foundations would be laid. Apparently, Caprice had told all the visiting bucks that nopony was getting laid till it was cleaned up. I'd never seen such hard work in all my life.

"Oh, I don't think it was so bad," Barpony said as she pulled out two Sunrise Sarsaparillas from her saddlebags. She'd stopped by to listen and stayed for the whole lecture and even tried to shoot; she was hopeless with a gun, though. I'd given up on finding her name; she seemed too amused by the question to give me a straight answer.

Below us came the sounds of shots and the occasional crash of an empty bottle shattering. I

hadn't anticipated that many of them didn't know how to use a gun and swung their batons like they were afraid of hurting themselves. "They were scared of me," I muttered, glancing at her. "Worse, I think I sounded like Mom and made them feel like they were worthless at the same time."

"You just have to realize that most of the ponies here aren't exactly brave warrior folk. They're prostitutes that rotate their security duties, mares who are trying to kick Dash and Dust addiction, and fillies desperate not to fall into either trap. And bucks who sign up just try to use it to get free drugs and sex."

"Which were you?" I asked, and then winced. "Um... don't answer that."

"Prostitute, but I have a lot of side jobs now," she said without hesitation or shame. "And you are so cute when you get two hooves in your mouth." I blushed, and I wasn't sure if it was at her highlighting my awkwardness or her flirting. It definitely made me chuckle, though.

"What I wonder is how Flank's lasted so long without falling before."

"The fact is that Flank's always been vulnerable. We keep everything nice and happy, and we hope that if somepony gets out of line, somepony like you will step in. And it's worked for years; the Pecos were our unofficial security contractors, paid in booze, Dash, and sex. Sidewinder could have taken us over if he'd had a little more sense and a little less whiskey." I caught a momentary haunted look on her face, but then she caught me looking and smiled.

"Well, not anymore," I muttered as I looked at the street. Even the rain hadn't washed away all the blood. The bodies were still being dragged out into the swampy ruins of the town. "So sooner or later, somepony else is going to try something." Again, that... strange expression.

"I think you did better than you realize," Barpony said firmly. "I was surprised, to be honest. I didn't expect you to talk about restraint so much."

"Why, 'cause I'm so bad at it?" I asked with a grin and got a nod in return. I sighed. "Well, guess I'm a hypocrite on top of everything else. Still, Mom always taught me that if you can get someone to do what you want by asking nicely, ask nicely. Then escalate. A security officer that goes for their baton or gun first is a thug with a uniform."

"And is that what you do?" Barpony asked.

"Most ponies I've run into are either nice or pre-escalated. Those bounties go a long way towards that," I commented ruefully, listening to the pop of small arms fire. "When they're able to put themselves in harm's way, they should be much better at security work. I can tell they're tough mares. It's just a step from looking out for yourself to looking out for others."

And just like that, I was being kissed; sweet Goddesses was I getting kissed! My eyes went so wide that I felt like they would just roll out of their sockets! My rear legs gave out as I fell soundly onto my haunches and felt her tongue doing things inside my mouth I could barely imagine. When she finally gave me a breath I felt myself blushing from horn to hooves. "Habazawah..." Then I shook myself hard. "What was that for?"

"I didn't want to have not done that," she said as she turned and curled her silky tail around my throat. "Now come on."

"Huh... where are we going?" I asked as I trotted after her. Then she gave me a look and I quivered down to my hooves. "Oh..."

* * *

When we finally took a break, I felt good. No. Screw that. I felt great! Truly and honestly great. For once, I didn't have any regrets about leaving my nice, safe, ugly life in Stable 99. From my rear emanated a buttery goodness that spiked through my entire body. Our limbs were tangled together in the middle of my bed. I still had fluttery contractions twitching in my hindquarters.

She was watching me with her amused pink eyes, reflecting the colors like stars. "I felt like I was a virgin there for a bit," I said, getting my breath back.

"You mean you weren't?" she asked with a teasing smile. I winced and she gave a soft murr as her hoof stroked my cheek. "I'm teasing. You were actually very sweet."

"Why is it that you make 'sweet' sound like 'virgin'?" I asked as I knit my brows together in worry.

"Because virgins are sweet too," she said archly.

I sighed, closing my eyes with a deep breath. "You're taking advantage of my afterglow. No fair."

"Fairness doesn't exist in the Wasteland," she said as she licked my cheek, making me shiver. "Another?"

"I think I'll melt if you do."

"Then I'll just bottle you."

"Liquid Security?"

"Security-Cola."

"I'm not sweet enough for that."

"I beg to differ," she said as she nibbled my ear. "You are very sweet." Okay, blushing now!

Unfortunately, I also had some work to do. "Why don't we take a little break? You can go ask your boss when she plans to meet with me, and I can go make sure things are working out above?" I gave a little chuckle. "You know, the longer I'm here, the more I like this place."

She paused as if considering me, almost measuring me, and then grinned. "Well that's good. That's the point of Flank. Fun for everyone," she said as she stood and gave herself a shake. "You go ahead. Save up some energy for round two. Three... four... five..."

I nearly danced down the hall of the stable, not caring who saw me or what they thought. Maybe it was because I was helping ponies because I wanted to, or maybe it was the fact that Miss Barpony could tickle my nethers like I'd never imagined, but I was feeling really good! I know I got all kinds of looks, but I didn't care. Didn't care! Didn't care. Did. Not. Care!

Outside, I found Glory working her magic with the machinery, getting the frames together. Given all that she'd been through, she seemed to be throwing herself into her work. When she spotted me she pressed her lips together and scowled. "Oh look, she emerges."

Okay, sad Glory I could handle, ridiculously loyal Glory I could deal with, but where did pissed off and snippy Glory come from? "Are you all right?"

"Of course I'm all right. I've just been working my tail off while you've been getting your labia lubed," she said as she grabbed a wrench and firmly tightened a nut. She spat the tool back into a toolbox beside the frame. "I sure hope she was spectacular. She apparently costs a hoof and a half an hour."

"Hey! You don't have to talk about her like that," I said sharply with a scowl. Her angry eyes started to tear up, but she scrubbed them away before I sighed and put a hoof on her shoulder. "What's wrong with what we're doing? I thought you were okay with making these turrets."

"I am..." she said with a sigh. "It's just... why couldn't you have asked us about this first? I don't like helping Caprice."

"I'm not that thrilled about helping her either, but there are good ponies here that deserve our help. Why shouldn't we help them?"

"Because she's a drug dealer who now has a monopoly on the addicts of the Hoof?" Glory said sourly.

I sighed. "Glory, it's not like that. She can keep the price high and..."

"And she can keep the price low too," Glory responded. "I don't buy the argument that all those scavengers in the ruins got their drugs from these outside suppliers. I don't believe she'd undercut her profits through ethics. They're lingering here, Blackjack. And I know Scalpel's trying to treat more addicts, but I think she'd be happy with even one additional patient."

I had my doubts, too. Barpony seemed to know what was going on. Perhaps she could let me know if Glory was right, or convince her that this was okay. I just felt creepiness itching along my spine. "I'm sorry I sprang this on you. Is there anything I can do to help?"

She sighed, looking at me as she seemed to shuffle through her list of things she needed. "Targeting talismans. Without them, these are just weapon display stands." She looked out over the ruins of Flankfurt. "There's a Robronco retailer somewhere south of here. It might have working talismans." I checked my PipBuck, and sure enough, a little navigation icon popped up along with the note 'Objective: recover targeting talismans.'

Underneath it was another. 'Objective: deliver Flank's mail.' I blinked and started. "What? I'd completely forgotten about that one!" I frowned and looked at the note. "Can't I just give the mail to somepony here and let them hand it out?" Of course it didn't answer. There were a dozen arrows on my map around the town. Most of them were in Flank itself, but not all of them; wondering how it knew the locations was driving me crazy!

"Okay, well it looks like I've got two reasons to go out now. Want to come with me when I do?" I asked, and her mood brightened before my eyes.

"I suppose I have to. Do you even know what a targeting talisman looks like?" she said with a small smile, returning to the Glory I knew.

"It's a talisman with a target on it?" I offered.

She laughed, shaking her head softly. "Okay. Come get me when you're ready to go." Victory!

I wandered around, looking for the ponies the letters were addressed to. One to the butcher in the Trough. Another to the robot-masked ponies in Mixers, who apparently never left their armored booth and required me to feed them through a slot. I wondered how they got food in there, or went to the

bathroom... okay, not wondering anymore! Two were to Scalpel from former patients. One to Caprice; I'd deliver it when I finally met her.

One was to Octavia. What, I was delivering mail to dead ponies now? At least I knew where her room was, and once the letter was inside, my PipBuck dutifully informed me that this letter was officially 'delivered'. I looked at the yellowed paper envelope nestled between the bones on the bed. It was two hundred years old; it really wasn't wrong to read, right?

The old pale buck chuckled softly in my ear. "Tisk tisk... tampering with the mail. That's a serious offense."

I ignored the amused hallucination as I tore open the envelope. I wasn't prying, I was reading it to Octavia... or rather her bones... okay, getting away from creepy thoughts now!

"Dearest Octavia, I am so glad to hear that you've found someplace to rest your hooves. I'm very sorry that Pinkie Pie was so upset about your charity concert. I tried to talk to her about it, but she treats it like a personal snub. She's so odd these days. I can't tell what the matter is with her, but she's changed. I suppose we all have, to some extent, but some days it's like I don't even know her anymore.

"Regardless, I'm sure that with time she'll come around. She still fondly remembers the pony pokey your quartet played for her all those years ago. However, I was not simply writing to offer my sympathies. I wanted to follow up on you after your procedure. Are you noticing any ill effects or differences? I recall how unpleasant the experience was for you, and I don't want you to feel abandoned." I glanced at the terminal. Considering her recorded message to Pon3, it was clear that she had been. She'd never gotten this letter. She'd died alone with her instrument.

"I hope that sometime in the future we can get together. I rarely have time to get away from Canterlot, but I'd like to speak with you more in person. Oh! And there's a certain mare named Glass who may poke about asking about what happened. I hope that you can keep everything in the strictest confidences. She's such a nosy little thing!

Sincerely, Rarity."

That made me blink. The Ministry Mare of the Ministry of Image checking up on Octavia? Did she have a career resurrection spell or something?

From the taped-up cabinet came a soft thunk, making me jump to my hooves. I frowned, looking at the tape on the rusty doors. Carefully, I pulled the tape away and opened the doors. Everything was exactly as I had left--no, wait. The pin that had held the bow had fallen out of the back of the cabinet.

I honestly had no idea how to play an instrument. Music was something other ponies did and I enjoyed. The only magic my horn could master was used to kill things. It wasn't my place as security to try and make something... beautiful. I looked at the black hairs in the bow and then at the strings. I sighed softly; this was stupid. I should be doing things... helping... not staring at a musical instrument I had no hope of playing.

Still...

"Ugh, I hope I don't break it or something..." I slowly levitated out the surprisingly heavy instrument and set it on its peg. I looked at the pictures taped inside the doors and carefully stood on my rear hooves. I rested my left forehoof on the strings at the top, right forehoof pinching the bow behind my right fetlock. I pressed the black bowstring to the wires and dragged it slowly across.

The slow, deep note filled the dirty little apartment with a single mournful tone. Carefully I

reversed the motion, and played another note. And another. I couldn't call the sounds of me sawing back and forth music, but I wanted to continue. Slowly, the instrument seemed to say. Slowly. No need to rush. I carefully ran the bow across other strings, my ears picking out the different tones as they rose and fell with each of the four strings. I had no idea what I was playing, if I was playing at all. I simply couldn't stop, not right now as I dragged the bow back and forth. This was noise, not specific notes or music, but even then it was beautiful noise.

It took the sight of P-21 watching me with his wide eyed stare before I stopped, flushing. "Ah... oh. Sorry. I got distracted."

"Blackjack, you can play?" he demanded in shock.

"I can't. I didn't!" I blurted as I looked at the pictures inside the cabinet. "I was just copying her."

He looked incredulous as he stared at me. "Well, you fooled me. I mean, I couldn't say what you were playing exactly, but it sounded good."

I extended the bow to him. "Why don't you try?" He looked skeptical, but copied my stance. He held the instrument awkwardly and dragged the bow across the strings with an anemic little noise that made me wince. Yeah, no wonder he had been staring. If I sounded like that playing, I'd stare too, wondering if I should put the bullet in me or him. "That was... nice..." I said, forcing a grin and letting out a mental sigh, glad he'd finished.

"If you say so. Still, I'm impressed you got it in tune and everything," he said as he carefully put it back in the cabinet. "Glory told me you were going to go out looking for targeting talismans?" When I nodded he continued, "I want to go with you and see if we can't pick up some landmines from Deus's camp."

"Are you sure that's safe? I'm pretty sure Rampage didn't kill all the ponies he sent into Flank."

"Maybe, but I know he kept a lot of things locked up, and I just don't have the mines to really make this place secure. I need a few crates of the things," he said, glancing to the window. "Besides, I think folks here might be glad for the break. I think we're freaking them out a little."

"What do you mean?" I frowned, worried. "We haven't done anything."

"Haven't done anything?" He arched a brow. "You apparently ran in here dripping bloody foam. You then blew up a factory. That was followed by blowing up the number two Reaper in the entire Hoof. And today we're fortifying the place. It probably looks to them like we're taking over."

"That's ridiculous!" I snorted. "Four ponies couldn't take over a town."

He didn't laugh. "Blackjack, one of us could if she wanted to. Have you seen Rampage today? She's hauling around rocks with the strength of ten ponies. Heck, with the way things are now, Glory could if she could fly. And with you in the mix... Blackjack, I'm thinking leaving sooner is better than later."

I sighed with a scowl. What was the point of saving this place if somepony else came along and just took over? I wanted Flank secure. "When I'm sure that everything will be okay, then we can go. Maybe even tomorrow, if we're lucky." Or the day after that. What's the rush?

"If that's the plan," he said with a sigh. "Still, if we're going out, we should leave soon. I'd rather explore the ruins with daylight rather than at night."

"Yeah, and I have mail to deliver out there," I said as I lifted my remaining letters.

He looked a little concerned. "You know, you can probably just leave them with Caprice and let her handle them."

"Tell that to this thing!" I snorted, waving my PipBuck at him. He just smiled, rolling his eyes and shaking his head as he stepped out. I sighed and returned to the opened cabinet, looking at the picture of the gray pony with such poise and confidence. How sad for her to end in this lonely room. I reached out and plucked each string with a hoof, smiling at the clear tones before closing the doors.

* * *

With a shot, Taurus's rifle tore out the guts of the sentry robot mindlessly patrolling around the Robronco retail store. Sighting with the scope was immensely more effective than using the lighter assault carbine, and the heavy hunting rounds punched through their armor soundly. It was a bit more challenging than just running and shooting, but infinitely safer.

"You know, I could just run in and stomp them all into scrap metal," Rampage said in a bored tone as she drew a picture of a filly in the mud with her hoofclaws.

"And you'd stomp the talismans with them," Glory pointed out. "That's why I'm not zapping them either." Well, and because her AER wasn't working yet and I had the longest ranged weapon.

"And..." I fired off the last shot. My aim was just a little bit off and the head of the robot exploded in a spray of shrapnel. "Awww, horseapples," I muttered, glancing at the small pegasus. "Sorry about that."

"Well, we might find more inside. Remember, no smashing the heads if you can help it. Talismans are usually pretty brittle," she reminded us. "Unless they're made out of diamonds, but still." She trotted ahead to examine the robotic remains.

"She still isn't flying?" P-21 asked me softly.

I shook my head, wondering about that. "I dunno why either..." Had removing her cutie mark somehow damaged her ability to fly? Was it psychological? Or maybe something else? "Ugh, I am not a smart pony. I don't even know how pegasi fly, period."

"Maaaaagic," Rampage taunted as she trotted past us towards the store.

"Ah, of course," P-21 muttered with a smile, rolling his eyes and limping after her while I picked up my spent casings before catching up. I watched his leg with a sigh. Scalpel could have healed it after a day or two, but the injury had set; it would take a fully operational health restoration matrix to repair it; basically, a medical megaspell. He would still have to wear that damned leg brace. I silently wished the Wasteland could be a little more fair for once. Bust my leg and let him walk. But the Wasteland didn't work like that. He got to limp and I got to guilt.

I loaded Cupcake's revolver and carefully moved into the Robronco retail store. Brown tiles, cracked and water-stained, crunched underhoof as I moved in. Row after row of rusting models stood at attention on their display pedestals. I took three steps before a buzz filled the room and a few lights flickered to life. "Welcome, visitors to the Flankfurt Robronco Outlet Center!" the speakers crackled, and wispy music began to play as we moved through the store. There were red bars on my E.F.S.; clearly not all of these robots were just on display.

As we walked, occasionally an automatic message would spout off as we moved through the display floor. "Here at Robronco, 'Quality is Key' is our motto and the motto of our founder, Mr. Horse.

Every Robronco unit comes installed with a spark generator capable of months of sustained operation, and with your own handy recharging station, your Robronco robot can operate indefinitely. It's not just a purchase for you, but for your grandfoals too! Talk to our automated sales rep today."

"You have to admit, machines working two centuries without supervision is pretty impressive," Glory said quietly as she looked at the spritebots floating around the store and playing the bland music.

"Why are you whispering?" Rampage asked as she pointed at the machines. "They're playing music, so I'm pretty sure that if something here can hear us, it doesn't really care."

As she returned her attention to the store around us, I noticed that P-21 was *looking* at her, his eyes roaming over her more closely than I'd ever seen him regard a mare. "Hey, Rampage..." She looked over her shoulder at him, arching a brow. "Those stripes..."

She just smiled like he was a tasty little Mint-al, her pink eyes locking with his. "Yes?" she asked in a tone that did not invite further questioning.

"Well... I..." he began, then swallowed. "Nevermind. I just..." I really wondered if he'd dare trot through this minefield. "Why do you look like a red zebra?"

She blinked, then laughed. "Oh! Is that all? Wow. I thought you were going to ask me something... you know... personal." She smiled warmly at him as she approached. "Well the reason is pretty simple..."

"Yes?" he asked as she walked towards him languidly.

She grinned as she stretched her face towards his, making him lean back nervously as she replied, "It's 'cause I want to." Then she turned and continued picking through the store. He gave a smoldering glare at her and then glanced at me, daring me to comment. I just smiled as I looked at some of the interesting robots.

I passed by the standard 'Protectapony' sentry model and two spidery 'Mr. Handy' and 'Mr. Gutsy' models, levitation talismans long ago given out. I noted a larger metallic pony balanced on two wheels between its hooves. A flat screen stared out of where a face would normally go. "The PDQ-88p Securipony is our newest upgrade for home and municipal security. With its automated repair and restoration upgrades, the system will be able to continue performing indefinitely against all threats." There was a momentary pause, and then the voice said, softly and quickly, "Automated repair and restoration options are not yet available at this time. Please contact a Robronco customer service representative for further details."

In the corner hulked a massive four-wheeled robot that looked more like an enormous crab than a pony. Four heavy tires supported each of its splayed legs, and its vaguely equine head was nestled between armored shoulders. A minigun poked from one shoulder and a missile launcher from the other. "The SP 'Workhorse' series of sentry ponies combines maximum firepower with a reinforced and magically shielded chassis capable of withstanding shock spells. When in place, you know the Workhorse is going to be keeping you nice and safe." I looked at the looming mechanical monster, scratching my mane absent-mindedly as the speaker added softly, "Robronco not liable for collateral damage, injury, or death thirty days after placement. Please contact a Robronco customer service representative for further details."

"I didn't know Robronco was in the business of supplying tanks," Glory said solemnly.

"Tanks?" Rampage looked up at the machine and snorted. "That's not a tank. A US... that's a tank." Then she stopped and scowled, but I couldn't tell at what.

“A what?”

“Robronco Ultra-Sentinel. And if you find one, you’ll know. Then you’ll be dead,” Rampage said as she focused and suddenly struck out with her hoof. The impact left an inch-deep impression in its armor.

P-21 looked at the indentation and then asked with a smirk, “Then how do you know about them and yet still live?”

But for some reason the question really seemed to piss her off. “‘Cause I’m really tough to kill,” she replied, her scowl darkening.

I rolled my eyes, keeping the revolver floating beside me. The door to the back was marked ‘Maintenance Garage: authorized Robronco employees only.’ From the red bars, it was fairly clear that whatever was in there was unfriendly.

I guardedly pushed my way through into a mess. Neat stacks of robot parts had tumbled down and lay rusting in iron-reeking pools. An unwholesome rainbow hue spread around the racks of spoiled electronics and scrap metal piles. A broken pipe near the ceiling sprinkled foul water down into the mechanics pits. Despite the corrosion on every surface, however, the beam turrets near the roof slowly rotated this way and that, searching for intruders, and I heard the odd hum of a levitation talisman somewhere on the second floor.

My PipBuck began to crackle as I walked past a bank of spoiled spark batteries. The burst containers oozed purple and orange glowy fluids into the water around my hooves, and my radiation meter responded accordingly. Without a word, Glory passed out tablets of Rad-X. Rampage looked at it scornfully. “What, you’re immune to radiation too?”

“Nope. But it can’t kill me,” she said as she then trotted ahead of us out into the open. “Enough sneaking around!” she yelled brightly, “This is getting boring!”

“Warning! Warning! You are not authorized to be here! Warning! Surrender immediately!” Unfortunately, neither the robots nor the turrets seemed likely to recognize ‘surrender’, and Rampage certainly wasn’t in the mood as Protectapony robots shambled forward like metal zombies and the turrets began to spray beams of crimson death at her. Her metal armor blackened as it deflected some of the energy, and she launched herself across the room to rip the robots to pieces.

“Mind the heads -- yipe!” Glory called out as the turrets detected us and let out a rapid-fire stream of magical energy that scorched holes in my barding and hide. I narrowed my eyes and brought up S.A.T.S., putting four heavy revolver rounds into the casing. Glory finished it off with two pink bolts of disintegrating magic. Unfortunately, our fire seemed to be waking up more of the machines. They stepped out of their waterlogged recharging stations, dripping rust. In fact, I wasn’t exactly sure how much of a threat they were till their unrusted heads started to fire.

I put the last two rounds into the chest of a shambling metal pony. Then, with an electric shock, the pony exploded! Hot, sharp metal showered down over me as a jolt shocked my hooves. “C...careful! They’re really... unstable.”

“They’re not the only thing!” Glory shouted, Rampage laughing like a maniac as she bucked the sparking remains into a turret. A door slid open, and out rolled a Workhorse sentry.

“Rampage! Big one! Sic it!” I shouted as I dumped the shell casings into the water and loaded six more of the large-caliber pistol bullets. The robot’s left shoulder popped open and sent a missile

through the air, blasting into the striped pony and sending her flying into a heap of robotic scrap. It rolled slowly around, bringing that gatling gun to bear. "Nevermind! Scatter!" I shouted as I ran across the loading bay, away from P-21 and Glory. Cupcake's gun barked in rather pathetic fashion, even with S.A.T.S. guiding the shots to the eerie whine of the minigun strafing after me.

The sensation of being hit by a minigun was entirely different from anything I'd felt before. I felt as though I'd been slipped underneath a sewing machine without thread. From ass to rib, a line of small deadly rounds tried to perforate anywhere not covered by armor, and managed to punch through a few places regardless. I collapsed into the mucky water, falling behind an overturned desk.

"Stay down!" P-21 shouted, drawing a shock grenade as the Workhorse sentry rolled through the water. He tossed it right in front of the robot, and it detonated with an oddly anticlimactic beep and crackle. The robot, however, jerked spasmodically as its spell matrices were assaulted. It didn't stop, though.

Suddenly, the pile of scrap was tossed aside as Rampage rose with a hysterical laugh. The left side of her face had melted to the bone, yet I could see the flesh crawling back into place. Her lips dripped foam from Stampede and, laughing madly, she charged through the muck towards the robot. It turned its minigun on her, and I watched in horror as the stream of rounds ripped face from flesh and flesh from bone. Yet she didn't fall! She ran against the stream of fire even as it tore into her chest, as if it were just a light shower of rain! Churned organs fell into the water as she closed the distance. Suddenly the gun clicked, its ammo expended.

Rampage lacked face, throat, and apparently lungs. None of that stopped her from launching herself through the air and slamming into the robot with such force that one of its front legs was torn from its socket. Her head turned and gripped the handle of one of the blades she carried, pulling out something resembling a cross between a chainsaw and a knife. Her bloody jaws clenched and the weapon began to whirr. Hooves locked on, the Reaper began to tear into the body with the sparking saw blade.

The robot responded by simply collapsing against Rampage. I heard bones shatter as even *her* strength wasn't enough to stop its incredible mass... or was it? Slowly, she rose on broken limbs and tore her way deeper into the machine with savage sweeps of her head. A panel finally gave way, and with an electric shock it exploded and went silent. Rampage stood there, shaking, a strange pink light seeming to stitch her slowly together as we watched. Glory approached with a restoration potion in her mouth, but Rampage just looked her in the eye and shook her head firmly. Glory brought the potion to me instead.

The strange pink glow faded, her flesh restored. Suddenly, she hunched over and puked a deluge of bloody minigun rounds over and over again. As the magic potion restored my flesh, she screamed and began to claw at herself, tearing open gruesome knots that bulged under her skin. As each tore open, blood and more minigun rounds tumbled into the water. With a scream of rage she went through the shop like an earthquake, ripping and tearing at everything around her in blind fury. We simply retreated upstairs, unsure if she could recognize friend from foe.

Finally she collapsed, shaking as she hung her head and wept. Slowly I approached her. "Rampage? Are you okay?" It was right at the top of my list of stupid questions I shouldn't ask.

She stared right at me with her wet pink eyes and spat a bullet in my face. "What the fuck do you think?" Without another word she turned and walked back out front.

I returned to the others upstairs. "What did that? Stampede?"

"I..." Glory opened and closed her mouth in shock. "Nothing could do that! Nothing. Did you see that trauma? She was missing her face! Multiple compound fractures in her limbs and ribs and she

still stood.”

“Right...” I looked the way Rampage had gone and then looked at Glory. “Right. You find your talismans...” I looked at P-21. “You see if you can find anything else valuable. I’m going to make sure she’s... stable.” Clearly they didn’t envy me my job.

I made my way out in front of the retail store and was met by the sight of Rampage picking her nose with a hoofclaw. I balked a moment as she snorted, and then blew three bloody rounds from her sinuses. “This is a real bad time, Blackjack.”

“What are you?” I asked as I walked to her.

“Good question,” she muttered.

I stepped in front of her. “I need to know. How did you just do that?”

“Piss off, Blackjack. I don’t owe you or anypony else answers.”

I sighed. “Rampage... I want to help you if I can.”

“You... you want to help... heh...” She began to laugh, sitting down hard. “Well of course you do. That’s what you do, after all.” She grinned at me and I suddenly appreciated how shiny recently regenerated teeth were. “So why don’t you go ahead and tell me? What am I?”

“Don’t fuck around with--” I began, but she rose and thrust her face into mine.

“What the fuck am I?” she screamed in my face, and it took everything I had not to shoot her with a magic bullet in reflex. “How the fuck do I do what I do? How did I just do that? How do I know what an Ultra-Sentinel is? I’ve never even seen one before! Why is it I can speak Zebra? How come I can drink radioactive waste till I’m shitting rainbows and still not fucking die? Why do I come back again and again and again?” She gripped my shoulders with her hooves, claws digging in as she screamed, “Who the fuck am I, Blackjack?”

“Rampage!” I shouted through gritted teeth as her hoofclaws shoved in deeper and deeper.

“Who!? What? Why can’t I fucking die? Why!” she yelled hysterically.

Okay. There was ‘not okay’, and then there was an entire world of fucked-upness that transcended all boundaries of normalcy. I’d visited there for a couple of days while travelling with Glory. Rampage apparently lived there full time. Unfortunately, Rampage was also about to rip my forelegs off. I hit S.A.T.S. and toggled four magic shots at both her knees. My horn flashed over and over again as the magical bullets tore through flesh and bone. With two small explosions her forehooves came off and we fell away from each other.

She hissed in pain as I panted, drawing the pump action shotgun. I doubted it would actually do anything, but I wasn’t going to fuck around. Those claws hurt. Before my eyes the pink light returned and she shook as bone extended from the stumps. Flesh and muscle wrapped around it, and finally skin and hoof materialized.

For a moment I was afraid she was going to charge me, but instead she just took a deep breath and walked over to her own dismembered legs, removing the claws and tossing her limbs aside.

“You don’t know who you are or what you are?” I asked softly.

She looked pissed, but finally slumped as she said softly, "My earliest memory was a while ago. Some ghouls found me in the Miramare crater with half a tank lodged in my skull. They must have thought I was a ghoul like them because they pulled me out. Surprise surprise when I had a pulse. I was completely clueless. They used me, then sold me to some pieces of shit that eventually founded Paradise. After a few years I was sick of getting fucked and broke free.

"I drifted a little bit and found Scalpel when she was still a wandering medic with old Bonesaw. Tried to figure me out. Scalpel eventually found that heap of a healing booth, rigged the auto-doc and put down roots in Flank. Bonesaw settled down in Megamart. Me? I ended up in Chapel when it was just me and a dumb colt wanting to fix up that stupid church of his."

"You knew Priest?" Something about my question made her smirk.

"Knew him? I fucked him." That sent a slap through me, before she added with a chuckle, "Or I wanted to anyway. We hung out together and found more kids; usually the young of ponies making the walk..."

"Pilgrims," I muttered.

"Yeah, that's what he called them. Young colts and fillies, though... they're tougher, haven't been worn down as bad. They stuck around rather than following their parents, and we formed the Crusaders together." She sighed softly. "I always wished I could be one of them." I remembered what Scoodle had mentioned so many days back.

"Arlosté..." I murmured, getting a sharp look. "That's your name."

"It was a name Scalpel made up for me. Before that I was 'the fuckmare'," she said sharply, then sighed and rolled her eyes. "Arlosté. Are Lost." She shook her head. "Eventually I got sick of it. I wasn't like him. It... hurt... to be around him. So I left. Wandered around. Crossed paths with a Reaper named Rampage. She swore she could kill me twenty different ways. I was only looking for one. Turns out she was a lot squishier than me. Big Daddy Reaper let me join. Took her name and her armor... I was tired of Arlosté. Too many regrets."

"And then Big Daddy sent you to me," I said in conclusion.

She gave a mirthless smile and shrug. "I want to fucking die, Blackjack. You've been out in the Wasteland for a couple of weeks. I've been staring it in the face for years, and it's not getting better. The Hoof is a meat grinder. Ponies keep coming and they keep dying. It's getting worse. The poison spreads a little more every day and one day, if I don't die, I think I'm going to be the last living thing in the stinking corpse of Equestria."

"So just go to the Core. They'll vaporize you instantly and..." And our eyes met. Her face was a mask of horror. "You've been there, haven't you?"

"I'm not going to talk about it," she whispered softly.

"But..."

Like that she was on top of me. "Not! Talking! About! It!" And looking into her eyes I knew she'd kill me right now rather than say another word.

"Okay. Okay..." I grunted in pain; she was heavy in that armor. Slowly she climbed off me. "I just wish there was something I could do..."

“Join the club. But that’s the great thing about the Wasteland: it will throw shit at you time and time again, letting you stare at it in frustration like a glass of nice cool water on the other side of some bars while you’re dying of thirst,” she said as she looked at me, “And you want to know the really fucked up part? You’ll go crazy and bash your skull to paste before you die of thirst.”

* * *

Inside, I found P-21 in the upstairs offices as Glory examined the glyph-marked talismans glowing calmly on their shelves in a storeroom. He was working on a terminal, scowling at the screen as he struggled with password after password. He looked up at me. “I can’t believe I’m asking this, but how is she?”

“Messed up, so she’s in perfect company,” I replied with a wan smile. “It’s weird. I’m so used to being the nexus of messed-upness in the universe. I don’t know how to handle other ponies’ pain.”

“How did Glory and I help you?” he asked with a smile.

“Lots of hugs, and not killing me,” I added with a chuckle.

“Yeah, that last bits helps a lot,” he said, then closed out the screen again. “Ugh, somepony was a paranoid bastard!” He looked at me with a sigh. “This is taking forever. All I can say is, it better be worth it, or I’m going to invent time travel just to kick her ass!”

I thought back to the memory orb of the Princesses. I’d try and do... better... if I had such a spell.

“Anyway, present for the horn head club,” he said as he reached into his pouch and pulled out another memory orb. “Found it hidden in a drawer. Not sure if you’d want it...” he added. “Your track record with orbs is a little spotty.”

“Yeah but...” I swept it up in my magic and looked at him. “Like you said. I may as well since I’ll be waiting either way.”

“Sure. We have to do the actual looting while you take a stroll through other ponies’ memories.” From the nervous look in his eyes I could tell he wasn’t serious; he clearly remembered the last time I went into an orb and didn’t come out of it.

“It’s a dirty job, but some mare’s got to do it!” I chuckled and raised the orb in a salute before touching it to my horn, hoping I didn’t come out of this dead, mutilated, or crying. The world whirled away.

oooOOOooo

I was standing in a factory of some sort. A laboratory? Lots of ponies standing around a table looking serious and frowning at a heap of scrap metal. Lots of nervous ponies in lab coats. I was in a mare; no wings, but she had a horn. Somehow things were just clearer when I was in a unicorn mare.

“Three Ministry Mares for a test demonstration? Is Horse mad?” a mustard-colored mare whispered softly in my ear. Then I noticed the three sets of cutie marks directly in front of my host: three apples, a group of white stars around a large purple one, and a cloud and thunderbolt.

Rainbow Dash gave a very vocal yawn. “Boring. When’s this thing supposed to start?”

“Shhhh,” Applejack shushed, “He may be a cocky jackass, but Mr. Horse knows robots like no other.”

"I wish he'd start," Twilight Sparkle said with her own impatient little huff.

"Tarnation, girl, you in that much of a hurry to get ta the lunch reception?"

Twilight Sparkle bowed her head a little. "Actually, I had some other things to take care of, since I'm in Hoofington anyway."

"You actually want to do things here?" Rainbow Dash asked with a small frown. "If Shadowbolt Tower weren't here, I'd never come. Hoofington's like the fug-ugliest city I've ever seen." A number of bucks and mares looked at her with poorly concealed frowns and she added, unabashed, "Well, it is."

"Still, it's churning out discoveries by the week. If things weren't so busy in Canterlot, I'd relocate some projects here. It's nice to be able to coordinate things with the M.o.P. or M.o.M.," Twilight Sparkle said brightly.

"Speaking of Morale, have you talked to Pinkie Pie, Twilight?" Rainbow Dash asked. "Like, recently?"

"No. Not for almost a month, with everything so busy. Is she alright?"

Rainbow Dash looked hesitant as she rubbed her mane. "She's... just being way more random than usual. I haven't seen her like this since--"

"Fillies and gentlecolts, thank you for coming," a pale gold earth pony buck said as he trotted up to the table with a cloth-covered round drum on his back. He had the strangest little pencil-thin mustache and sparse, narrow brown mane. His cutie mark, perhaps appropriately enough, was three gears. He bucked his hips, caught the round cylinder neatly on his head, and then bounced it off to hold it in his hooves before the crowd. "What I have inside this container is going to revolutionize manufacturing as we know it." Even Rainbow Dash looked interested now, as he set the container beside the pile of scrap metal. "I give you, the mechasprite!"

And he whisked the cloth away to reveal... a glass jar full of ball bearings?

"Uhhh... that's it?" Twilight asked in confusion.

"The normal ones are annoying enough! Now we're making our own out of metal?" Rainbow Dash complained.

"I beg you to be patient," he said with a broad grin, his eyes sweeping the ground and silencing the murmuring. "Think of all the steps involved in manufacturing! Ore must be extracted, refined, and shipped; parts must be fabricated, then assembled. If only there was a way to shape the raw material directly into the end product!" He stroked the glass jar lovingly. "Well, today there is! With the simple application of a magic field..." He flipped a switch at the base of the jar, and suddenly every ball bearing's eyes lit up. Two tiny wings appeared on each, and the little metal orbs fluttered out of the jar and into the air.

"Well, at least they're not as cute. Can't see Fluttershy adoptin' 'em..." Applejack muttered.

Mr. Horse continued with his broad, confident smile, "Any design can be programmed into the mechasprites, and they will proceed to seek out raw material, ingest, process, and produce the design. Watch!" And he pushed another button on the base. The mechasprites began to bob in the air with the strangest chirring noise. Then they suddenly descended on the scrap metal and began to take little bites out of the twisted lengths. They chewed up the bits of metal and spat out wads of shiny liquid metal on the table, forming the globs into solid steel. They smoothed the metal with licks of their tongues and in a

minute an automatic pistol lay on the table. “Voila! From scrap to weapon in ten seconds flat.”

Mr. Horse clearly had a strange sense of time, but I saw his point. Wait? Were there more mechasprites? As I watched, one opened its mouth and belched out another mechasprite that was rust red. “As you can see, the mechasprites will use surplus materials to manufacture more production units. They can even specialize to improve efficiency.”

Twilight Sparkle raised a hoof. “Not to be an alarmist, but what’s to stop them from eating... say... Hoofington?”

“Excellent question, Miss Sparkle.” His grin clearly said he’d hoped somepony would ask that. “Get them outside the magical field and...” He caught one in his mouth and pulled it from the others. Its eyes went wide, and then the wings wrapped around it and it retracted back into a round ball. My host started to fidget with something in her bags.

“Uh... are they supposed to be doing that?” Rainbow Dash asked as she pointed at the table. The scrap metal was all gone, and now a veritable swarm of mechasprites devoured the metal table... and began to gnaw on the metal bleachers the audience sat upon.

Mr. Horse’s smile turned a touch more nervous. “Aha... eager little things aren’t they?” He stepped up to the case and flicked the switch off. The mechasprites, however, continued to eat and multiply in greater and greater abundance. “What... this isn’t possible!” he gasped as he stared at the device.

“Well they’re doing a whole lot of eatin’ for impossible!” Applejack cried out. “Look out, everypony!” she yelled as one of the beams holding the roof groaned and bent.

Mr. Horse gave a frustrated sigh and nodded to ponies watching on nervously. They immediately tossed dozens of apple grenades into the swarm; bright blue bands flashed brilliantly as the shock grenades scrambled the magic animating the machines. As one, they folded their wings and clattered to the concrete floor.

The yellow buck ran his hoof through his mane. “Well. That was an unforeseen glitch we haven’t encountered before, but certainly you can see the potential...”

“I sure can. Potential for disaster,” Rainbow Dash scoffed. “I don’t think the M.o.A. will need your mechasprites, Mr. Horse.”

“Ain’t nothing good that can come from something based on those critters,” Applejack agreed as ponies started filing out. “Come on, Twilight.”

The purple mare approached Mr. Horse with a sympathetic smile. “I’m sorry, Mr. Horse. It really did have amazing potential.”

“They shouldn’t have done that,” he replied firmly.

“Well, something caused them to. I’m sorry. If you like, perhaps we could take a second look at them? Find out where they went wrong?” she asked politely.

He looked at her sharply a moment, but then relaxed. “Thank you, but that won’t be necessary. I suspect this is... an internal matter...”

Twilight looked concerned, but finally just shrugged. My host rose and left with the other ponies filing out after the three Ministry Mares.

"Can you believe that? Mechasprites? I thought this guy was supposed to be some sort of mechanical genius," Rainbow Dash scoffed, "Instead he nearly turned Flankfurt into mechasprite munchies."

"Well, in every harvest you're gonna get a few rotten apples. He'll do better next time," Applejack said with a sigh, "Looks like I'm gonna have to skip lunch. Gotta head over to Aegis next and see how they're working on the latest combat armor."

"Applejack, I haven't seen you in weeks. You promised!" Rainbow Dash said irritably.

"I know, I know, but this is important too. My brother's signed up, and if he's going fighting, I want somethin' protecting him other than his thick skull!"

"Ugh... all right. You and me then, Twilight!" Rainbow Dash said brightly, then frowned and looked over at the purple mare. "Um... Twilight? Equestria to Egghead... come in Egghead..."

She immediately started. "Oh... ah... I actually can't. I have a... um... meeting."

Rainbow Dash hung her head with a groan, muttering, "Worst day ever..."

My host turned down a side hall and went up some stairs to a window overlooking the demonstration floor. Mr. Horse and a number of research mares were gathering the mechasprites into baskets. Then my host took off her saddlebags and pulled out a small arcane device. "It worked," she said softly, passing it to an open door. A hoof took the device and slipped it inside.

A moment later a heavy bag of bits was tossed out at her hooves. "Thank you."

My host nickered happily as she stroked her hooves through the gold coins. "I could do more. I have access. I could completely screw his research," my host said as she tucked the bits into her saddlebag.

"That won't be necessary," the hidden mare said softly. "We only wanted to discredit, not disrupt."

My host frowned sharply at the cracked door. "Well you might want to pay to keep me around and handy."

The air filled with a tense pause. "And if I don't?"

My host smirked. "I might feel chatty..."

"I see." Then I felt something tickle her ear. She looked over and saw the silenced barrel of a pistol floating beside her head. "I would rather Mr. Horse waste his time with this setback, but an equicide or suicide investigation would do, Ms. Fairhoof. And it would be cheaper." My host's guts immediately loosened as she started to shake.

"P...please..."

"Don't play games with us and we won't play games with you, Ms. Fairhoof. Trust me, you won't like our games." The hidden mare chuckled as the gun disappeared through the door. "They're killers."

oooOOOooo

I emerged from the memory with a chill. First, of course, I checked for inevitable zebra ninja

assassins or Enclave agents; damn, it was odd not to worry about waking to find Deus sodomizing me. Okay, disturbing image, please go away. Still, I rose and gave myself a vigorous shake. "Everything okay? Nopony dead?"

"No, but somepony should be." P-21 scowled at the terminal. "Twelve key password... all to hide the dirty notes the manager here was passing to the secretary at Robronco HQ. Looks like they were arranging a little party of their own in her office," he said with a little chuckle, "Has her password and everything. Was sex always this complicated before the bombs fell?"

"Probably," I said as I lifted the orb. "Where'd you find this?"

P-21 snorted and rolled his eyes. "Taped to the back of her drawer, actually. Guess she didn't want somepony to find it."

"Was her name Fairhoof?" I asked as I looked at him. He frowned in confusion. "The manager?"

"No," he said, "it was Merry Penny. Why?" But I could see why.

There was a grainy newspaper clip on the wall behind him. 'Robronco retail manager dies to runaway robot.' Most of the rest of the article was illegible, but I could at least make out that the manager had been an unicorn mare.

'You won't like our games. They're killers.' Ponies sabotaging other ponies' work? Bribes? Murder? "What the hell was going on in this town?" A lot of secrets in the Hoof. Like a country within a country. Why was my mane creeping at the thought of that?

* * *

I left first. Our sacks were bulging with nummy looted goods. I was sure that once we converted them into caps, I'd have everything I needed to pay for EC-1101's decoding. Unfortunately, the pensive look of Rampage doused my excitement, but one look from her pink eyes as she slowly chewed on a Mint-al made it clear that pity would be hazardous to my health. P-21 and Glory exchanged a glance but kept their comments to themselves. I chuckled softly to myself, wondering if we were the most dysfunctional band of friends in all the Wasteland.

Probably.

"So why are we delivering a two-hundred-year-old letter?" Glory asked as we trudged along a flooded street, clammy cold mud squelching under my hooves as I moved in the lead. My rifle swung slowly back and forth at the red bars that inhabited the ruins. Bloatsprites for the most part, and I didn't waste rifle ammo on them. Since I was already running low on ammo for the carbine, I picked them off with that and swapped back to the scope to check for trouble.

Another two bobbing sprites ahead; a swap-out and five shots later, the carbine was dry and the street ahead clear.

"Because the PipBuck says so," I replied grandly as the clouds overhead threatened more rain. "Who knows? Maybe it's going to a ghoul who will be touched that we delivered mail to it and give us a super sweet silver bullet so I can vaporize whatever monster Sanguine sends next."

"Or, you know, eat our brains," Glory added with a chuckle.

"Always with the brains. Honestly. It's not like ghouls can chew through skulls," Rampage said with a scornful little snort. "Actually, most ghouls favor the softer organs. Liver. Lungs. Entrails."

My stomach lurched a little. "Yeah, that's more than I needed to know."

Glory frowned in thought and then looked at me. "Is that true?"

"Why are you asking me?" I wondered with a nervous laugh. "I'm creeped out enough by raider cannibalism. Don't even make me wonder about ghoulish diets. You can ask one when we meet one."

"I know. I know," she huffed as she fluttered her wings. "It's just the scientist in me. I mean, if they're immortal and healed by radiation, why the drive to eat at all? Is it a reflex? Instinctive? Is there an actual need to eat or do ponies simply taste good?"

"So... Fallen Glory is a scientist?" P-21 asked with a small smile, making her almost trip. I frowned at him, but of course he didn't care.

The light gray pegasus gave a little frown. "I... I don't know... but Glory at least is a curious pony."

I smiled at that. Morning Glory had been a shy, scared, and blindly loyal pegasus. Glory was curious, but wary. What would Fallen be like? I hoped that she'd just be a mask Glory wore when she was around Enclave ponies.

"So who are we delivering this piece of junk to?" Rampage asked as she punted a half-submerged skull aside.

I looked at the faded lettering on the envelope. "A Mister and Missus Cake at..." I glanced up and my voice trailed away. "Sugarcube Corner..."

The rotting structure leaned precariously out over the alley where it slouched against the burned-out shell of its neighbor. The colorful pink paint had decayed into a fleshy grayish tone, the white trim darkened and peeling with the constant moisture. The roof had warped in the rain till it resembled mummified leather. A tower once resembling stacked cupcakes now creaked as it leaned over to the side like a vengeful hoof about to fall. One wall had blackened, but not burned, a testament to the sturdy building materials. Leaning plastic candy decorations poked out of the muddy ground before the store. Broken colorful glass stood in twisted window frames like squinting eye sockets. Over the front door dangled a sign hanging from one corner. 'Sugarcube Corner', it read, and beneath that, 'Cakes and Confectionery'.

And there were yellow bars inside.

I put a hoof on the front step, and the structure gave a great groan. I clenched my eyes closed at the thought of being buried delivering mail to ponies probably long dead; Deus would laugh his ass off. "Okay. I don't think we should all go inside. Just me and maybe Glory."

"Sure. Somepony'll have to dig your butts out after it falls on your head," Rampage muttered as she looked at the tottery structure.

Slowly, we made our way up the steps and past a mold-spotted poster reading 'Official Ministry of Morale Confectionary Center'. The sight of Pinkie Pie popping out of a cake with that grin on her face made me shiver. The waterlogged floor sagged a little with each step. I looked at the walls tilted at crazy angles, the splintered paneling showing the soaked, crumbling bones of the building. I kept glancing at my PipBuck. The second it said this job was completed, I was out of here! There was a little arrowhead on my E.F.S., but still the note wouldn't clear.

Clearly, 'Sugarcube Corner' wasn't good enough. One look in the kitchen was enough to convince me not to go inside. It looked like the brick ovens were the only things holding up that half of the building. That left the stairs. I put my weight on the leaning steps, glad they leaned with the slouch of the building rather than against it. My hooves fought for purchase on the uneven surface as the structure groaned and swayed around me. The door at the top of the stairs wasn't flimsy wood but rusting steel covered by a splintered wooden veneer. Stepping onto the second floor, I noticed that that wasn't all that was wrong here.

Why would a bakery need a room full of rusted terminals and monitors? A large chalkboard slumped against a leaning wall. On it were drawn three columns: 'Good Ponies', 'Bad Ponies', and 'Really Super Naughty Wicked Bad Ponies'. Only the second and third columns had names in them. There were posters up here too, but of a decidedly different bent. 'Remember, we keep Equestria fun and SAFE,' the poster read as Pinkie Pie twitched her tail. 'Only you can prevent trouble,' read another.

There were also a lot of bones in here. Now I had a problem. Left was where my PipBuck was telling me to go, right were three yellow bars. Non-hostiles. Well, if I didn't have to bother whoever was that way, then best to not bother them.

I walked to the left towards an actual bedroom. Two skeletons greeted me, one splayed across a terminal and the other curled up in the corner of the room. I looked at my PipBuck. This was definitely the place. "So, are we done here?" Glory asked.

No. I sighed and remembered what I had done with Octavia. Slowly I tore open the paper and withdrew the letter inside.

"HEY!!!" a giant pink head screamed in glee.

I fell to my rump as I dropped the paper and the tiny pink talisman in the middle of the page shot glitter and streamers all over me. A deep groan rolled through the building. The huge ghostly head of Pinkie Pie flickered as she grinned down at me. "Hiyas Mr. Cake! Hiyas Mrs. Cake! I wanted to try out this super terrific invitation spell and thought that it'd be just perfect for you." She gave a sympathetic little frown. "I know you two aren't happy being away from Ponyville, but you're the only two good ponies who are so super good terrific that you'd never turn your back on me... or say I have a problem... or call me... what *she* called me..." The smile was now a rictus, her cheek twitching as she stared at me.

It was scary how the friendly smile seemed to melt off her face, her curly mane slowly straightening before my eyes as she quivered. "You two have always been the nicest nice ponies I've ever known. You're like... like my mom and dad..." she said as her head started to shake and she gave a hiccup. "I think... I think there's something wrong... very very wrong... super terrible bad wrong... and I have to stop it. I'm the only one who can. Then... then maybe... maybe we can have a real party. In Ponyville... like we used to."

She suddenly stiffened. "But first we have to find the bad ponies in Hoofington. I know Quartz is a no good terrible bad pony. And those Four Star ponies too... but I think there are others. I think... I think the ponies in my hub there are bad. I think they know what the bad ponies are up to. It's all secrets and lies in that place. Nopony is who they say they are. Nopony is..."

"Except you two! Right? Right... Right! So... please... find something. Anything. Please?" Hooves covered her face. "You're the only ones I could give a piece of myself to. You're my real parents. Please... Mom... Dad... help me..."

With that, the tiny engraved sliver of rose quartz snapped in two, and the glowing ghostly head disappeared, leaving us covered in magical pink glitter and streamers.

Pinkie Pie needing help? I thought she was supposed to be the happy one, yet that was almost begging. Terminals. Lists of ponies? I thought the Ministry of Morale was supposed to be about fun? How in the Wasteland had she gone from fun time Pinkie Pie to that?

"Can we go now?" Glory asked softly as the building groaned around us. There were faint popping noises in the floor. "Please... Blackjack," Glory begged as she backed out the door.

"I... wait," I muttered as I looked to the skeleton in the corner. Slowly I crawled closer. I could feel the floor quivering under my hooves. There! A flash of pink under the bones. Gently, I reached out with my magic and tugged the tiny pink figurine free. Slowly I pulled it close and turned it with my magic, my eyes widening as I stared at the tiny plaque. *'Awareness: It was under 'E'!* it read. I looked at her mischievous grin, her bright and shining eyes... not that desperate and sobbing pony I'd seen just a minute earlier.

Why were the walls around the Cakes full of bullet holes?

I could see them as clear as day through the layer of filth and peeling candy cane wallpaper. The holes were evenly spaced; an automatic sweeping from left to right. This was a murder. Another two-hundred-year-old murder. My mane crawled on my neck as I remembered the ponies in the museum. And then I spotted the writing on the wall. The sort of thing that you might try to write as you bled out while cradling the statue of your surrogate daughter.

Project Eternity.

Then my senses picked up something else: clouds through gaps in the roof and Glory screaming as the room slowly peeled away from the rest of the structure. I gripped the statuette in my mouth and scrabbled for the door as rotten carpet sloughed away underhoof. The rotting turret leaning out over me was starting to collapse as well.

Then hooves wrapped around me as Glory leapt through the door and squeezed me tightly as she flapped her wings for all she was worth. Out we went, over the broken side of the building as the turret crashed down. The wind nearly knocked me from her hooves as it passed. "Glory! You're flying!" I cheered and then looked back. "Glory, we need to go back! There's three more in there and it's about to come down!" Indeed, the entire building seemed to be disintegrating before my eyes. In a minute or two it would pancake flat.

She just looked and then nodded, swinging me through the air back towards the second floor hall.

I ran smack into a buck scrambling for the stairs. Then I noticed something unusual... *It was under 'E'!* For one, he was mostly clean. Two, he smelled of semen and musk. Three, there was blood on his rear legs. Fourth, I knew him. I saw the bow tie on his gray flanks.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, ignoring the shaking building as joists popped and creaked.

"Run! It's collapsing!" he shouted; he hadn't tried to run until I'd fallen out.

My eyes narrowed. "What the fuck are you doing here?" He stared into my gaze and then looked over his shoulder at the back room. I grabbed his ear in my teeth and with a pull threw him over my shoulders and tossed him out over the edge. Fortunately, I was aiming for beyond the wreckage and he landed, thrashing and sputtering, the muck having broken his fall. "P-21, sit on him! Rampage! Prop this building up!" I turned and rushed towards the room with the other two non-hostiles. I could hear the bricks of the stove below collapsing.

Inside were a number of metal bed frames and a unicorn mare and a filly who were bound to one

with a particularly bloody mattress. The filly was just tied with rope, but the mare had been chained and hoofcuffed. I made one swipe with my dragon claw and freed the filly. "Get her out of here," I shouted at Glory as I looked back at the mare.

At the lavender unicorn mare with a broken horn.

'I just gotta survive, I have a kid.'

A chill ran down my spine as I looked at the tight cuffs locked around her hooves. They were cutting into her hide. Hopelessness bloomed in her eyes. "Please, take care of Thorn," she shouted.

"Not happening!" I said as I looked at the locks. I had no clue if I could pick them. "You're going to get out of here..." I focused my horn on the locks. I didn't even have a bobby pin on hand! Instead I just forced the lock to turn, my eyes watering.

Snap! With that clear, crisp breaking noise, I knew that that the lock connecting the chain to the beds wasn't coming off. I glared at the two cuffs. Carefully... carefully... my eyes watered as I fought to maintain focus.

Snap!

"Sweet mother fucking Celestia, cut me some slack here!" I screamed as I bit down on the chain, wrapped it in my forehooves, braced my hindhooves against the metal headboard, and started to pull. "Come onnnn!" I screamed as I strained, my heart thudding in my chest as if I were riding a high of Buck. Buck! The way my heart was beating now... could I take some more? *Be strong.* I had to be strong. I had to be better. I levitated the tablet of Buck and chewed. The energy surged to my limbs as I screamed and pulled with all my might. My heart beat so loud that I couldn't hear the collapsing building around me.

Then the chain gave way with a loud ping. I didn't hesitate a second as I shoved my head through her cuffed hooves and lifted her onto my back. Ducking my head, I ran from the collapsing building. The floor dropped out from under us as I leapt for the doorway to the missing room. A great gust of wind picked us up and shot us into the debris as the building collapsed behind us.

We were together in a tangle of limbs, chains, and broken wood. Rampage pulled herself from the wreckage, gripping a jagged spar that impaled her torso and pulling it free as if she were removing a splinter. I knew exactly how she felt. My heart beat so hard it felt like there was a spear of wood in my chest! I really wished I could yank it out, too. I struggled to breathe, but each pant didn't bring in any air! Glory flew to my side. "Oh, you idiot! What did you take? Buck? Hydra? It was Buck, wasn't it?" she cried as she fought to keep my head above the foul water. "Your heart is going to explode, you jackass!" she shouted, and then pulled out a Med-X and jabbed it home. The pain lessened and I liked to imagine that my heart rate was slowing down.

"Is she going to be okay?" the unicorn with the broken horn murmured. I was struck by the ironic sight of flowers for her cutie mark. I'd only seen them in pictures.

"No. She is not," Glory said firmly. "She is going to kill herself at this rate. Because she is not a smart pony!"

"She... saved me..." the lavender unicorn said as she sat down.

Glory looked at her broken horn and her eyes widened. "You're that slaver." She winced and her foal ran to her side. Glory looked at the young filly and then at the slaver. "You... She... Urrrrgh!" The pegasus walked to one side and began stomping plastic candy lawn ornaments. "I preferred Deus. At

least it was easy to hate him..." she fumed.

"No offense, but what are we going to do with him?" P-21 asked as he nodded down to the buck he sat on; P-21 had shoved an apple grenade in the buck's mouth. I wasn't exactly sure if that was the smartest thing to do, but the buck wasn't trying anything.

Slowly I sat up, the Med-X calming me down enough to catch my breath. "What?"

"He's a rapist. Are we going to let him go to do it again?" P-21 asked as he tapped the stem of the apple.

"Take it out of his mouth, P-21." I felt oddly numb. "You're... Frisk, right?" I asked as P-21 removed the explosive. "What the fuck do you think you were doing?"

"Getting even," he muttered as he glared up at me. "When she had the guns she tied me up and was happy to sell me to Paradise."

"And she got her horn smashed for it. Are you saying she tried it a second time?" He just glared up at me. I looked at the unicorn as my heart thudded in my chest.

I heard a whisper in my ears. "So... what's the proper punishment for a rapist?" the old pale buck murmured in a voice like shuffling cards.

"I'm not an executioner," I muttered.

"Blackjack!" P-21 hissed in outrage. "How is this fucker different from 99?"

"He's different in that I have to pull the trigger," I said firmly as I stared down at him. "I won't make you or Glory murderers."

"It's not murder," P-21 argued.

I looked at him. "He's unarmed."

"He's not Mini. He's not dying slowly and tragically. This buck is scum," P-21 retorted.

Glory just swallowed. "I know what he did was wrong. And I don't want him to ever do it again, but killing him isn't the answer."

We glanced at Rampage. She cocked a brow and snickered. "What, you want my opinion?" She then turned to the foal who watched us all warily. "Did he hurt you, sweetie?" she asked with a surprisingly gentle smile. The filly returned a scared but slow shake of her head. Rampage shrugged. "Eh, I'm good either way."

I looked at the mare then; the mare that I had maimed in my own battle rage. "Do you want me to kill him?" I asked, hearing those cards shuffle over and over again. I'm not an executioner. I'm not. This is justice. This is what's fair!

She met my gaze and gave the tiniest of nods.

Out came the hunting rifle. Funny how I couldn't hear my heart anymore. It was as if everything inside me had gone still and quiet. "Let him up," I muttered, and with a frown P-21 agreed. My eyes met Frisk's. "You have till the count of ten to run." P-21 pressed his lips together as the buck scrambled to his hooves. "One," I said softly.

Frisk backed away slowly. "Two," I counted as I lifted the barrel with my magic. He immediately turned and ran. I grit my teeth. "Three."

"Are you going to be able to do it, Blackjack?" P-21 asked with a scowl. Would I?

"Four," I intoned, watching him run through the ankle deep water. With rubble to either side of him, he could only go in one direction. "Five." The water sprayed up around him as I leveled the crosshairs on the back of his neck. "Six."

"You can't do this, Blackjack. Please. You're not a murderer!" Glory begged. Was I? I'd always been a killer. Was I ready to becoming an executioner, killing coolly and deliberately?

"Seven." I'd thought he'd be further along, but he was slowed by the water and junk hidden under the surface. "Eight." I saw the crosshairs tremble on the back of his head.

Rampage didn't say a word. *You'll bash your skull to paste long before you die of thirst.* "Nine."

Is this how it begins?

"Ten."

Be kind.

I clenched my eyes shut and collapsed in the water, tears running down my face as I fell to my knees, hugging the rifle to keep from losing the weapon in the muck. I let out a sob as I bowed my head. I could imagine P-21's disappointed expression as I failed him again.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. Then I looked at the maimed mare. She stared at me in shock. "I couldn't... I wanted to, but I couldn't. I'm sorry."

The mare just held her wide-eyed foal. Then she said softly, "I really don't mind... you didn't kill me either."

* * *

"You are one strange pony," Scalpel said as I stood in her auto-doc, letting the machine probe and restore me through her magic. "Most ponies don't bust a horn one day and pay to replace it the next." Roses, the mare I'd rescued... and almost killed... was resting upstairs with Thorn.

"She quit being a slaver," I replied softly. "That has to count for something."

"She lost her gun and her crew. That doesn't mean she quit."

"Frisk raped her. She deserves something," I muttered.

"If it wasn't in Flank, doesn't matter," she replied as she took another drink.

"It matters."

"To you, sure. To me, a bit. But to most ponies, it was her own fault getting caught. Hell, most ponies would think it fair payback to a former slaver."

"She has a foal."

is?" "Well, that's a first in the Wasteland," Scalpel said with a chuckle. "You know what your problem

"Brain damage?"

"You think all ponies are good people, and you want to help them."

"That's a problem?"

"It is if you think you can help all of them on your own."

"Don't you help everypony you can?"

"Sure do, but I've narrowed down my 'can' a bit to what I can manage. I recognize that some ponies can't be helped. Too addicted. Too burned out. Too eaten up. They'll take every bit of help I can offer and still mess themselves up. So I have to make the rotten call and write them off. And they die, sure enough as if I'd shot 'em dead. But if I didn't, I'd be just as dead."

"So it's you or them, is that it?"

"They don't have a chance without me," she replied with a shrug.

I sighed and closed my eyes. "I could have killed her, but I didn't want to be an executioner. I wanted to kill him, but I couldn't do it. Why?"

She tapped my head. "Because you want to save 'em. You want them to be good ponies again. But ponies ain't good or bad. Ponies is ponies, and the sooner you realize that, the easier it'll be."

"Yeah, but I'm too stupid for easy."

"Well, I'll say something nice at your funeral."

"I get one? Sweet. Will there be cake?"

She laughed as she deactivated the machine. "You are one twiggid mare."

"I'll take that as a good thing," I replied with a grin.

Her expression turned more serious as she adjusted her glasses. "Are you looking to take over Flank?"

"I dunno. Should I?"

"Not if you believe in good ponies."

"The ponies here aren't?"

"No pony is. Some try, but Flank isn't about helping. Here, everypony is looking out for themselves and doing what they have to do."

I closed my eyes, imagining Barpony. "I know two that are looking out for others."

"Well, that's two more than I know," she replied.

I smiled and gave a shake before slipping my barding back on. "I need to find Caprice. Is she back in her office yet?"

"Ask your friend at the bar," Scalpel said with a little snicker. "You do know who she is, don't you?"

"I keep trying to find out," I muttered.

"Oh, well, I won't ruin the surprise for you."

I huffed softly. "And that keeps happening."

Something was wrong, and once again I couldn't put my hoof on it. Did Scalpel always look so... tired? "Well, speaking of Caprice, I should probably go and tell her that we'll have finished fortifying this place soon. And if she doesn't like it then I'm handing it all to that barpony. Or you. Or somepony. Hell, I can run this place better than she can." Great. Now Scalpel looked worried.

"Well... I'm sure she'll be glad to hear that. Why don't you get a bite at the Trough first, though? Magic is no substitute for food," she said with her frayed smile.

"Good idea. See you later," I replied. Walking out, I noticed something else; these were the same addicts as I'd seen before. In fact, they were the same as when I'd first been brought in. I supposed treatment took more than a single day; look at how many times I'd been back to deal with the damage I caused myself.

Still...

Things weren't much better in the Trough. For some reason, I was noticing how off things were. The bountiful food really wasn't all that great in amount; they just spread it out more. The 'fresh' produce from the Society was withered and pale. The apples on top were decent enough, but most of the remainder were soft and overripe. Even 200 Years Fresh had empty cardboard boxes behind the packages. The only food that actually looked appetizing, I'm sorry to say, was the food in the Enclave shop, and that was closed and locked up.

Something was definitely off. I supposed that, having been around Flank for a while, I'd finally started to notice things. Still, had the security mares always followed me around like that? They didn't look like they were after more pointers. P-21 and Rampage had gone to raid Deus's camp of everything not nailed down while Glory and I returned to Flank. She was now in the Exchange, trying to convert our salvage to caps.

And me? It was time to see Caprice.

I strode into Stable 89, my eyes starting to flicker amber as I'd finally sucked up enough radiation to trigger my mutation. I was resolved to see Caprice and get this done.

Then I saw Barpony chatting with Scalpel. The former seemed to be waiting for me, and my nethers gave me other options as Scalpel trotted further in. I guess even doctors needed to scratch that itch from time to time. "Hey," I said, with an easy grin. She looked good... tired... tense... worried... but good. Really good...

"Hey yourself," she said as she bumped my rump and passed me a bottle of Sparkle-Cola. "Heard you had a busy day helping the town."

"Yeah, something like that." I took a pull off the bottle. It tasted... odd. Sweet, but also bitter. It must have been an old bottle... "But I need to see Caprice. I have business with her." Her eyes twitched to my barding, my guns.

"Oh? Well, she's still out, but how about we go back to my quarters till she gets back?" she asked, and only the thought of her offer kept me from going through the roof.

"Sure," I said with a chuckle, groaning as she nuzzled my mane. I had to admit, watching this filly's flank was even more appealing now. It was like a moon... like a beautiful peach moon...

* * *

I had to admit that there was something nice about her room. Maybe it was the light. Everything in the room had a whitish silvery glow to it. I was glowing. She was glowing. It was like we were making love in the stars.

I just gave such a wide grin my cheeks hurt. "Okay. I'm ready for another."

"Unfortunately, I need to check on a few things, and then I'll be back," she said as she slipped from my hooves.

I closed my eyes again with a soft groan. "So not fair..."

"Don't whine, Blackjack," she told me with a little wink. "It makes you sound virginal." With that she slipped out the door and I groaned.

I lay on my back, trying to touch that soft shimmery light. "Blackjack," the old buck rasped.

"Go away. I've orgasmed. I don't need to talk to crazy."

"Blackjack. You need to take a Fixer," he said softly.

"Fixer doesn't fix nothing. That's what Glory said," I muttered as I looked up at the colors. "I feel good. Why do I need to fix that? Everything's so... ugly. She's pretty. She's nice. Let me feel good. Please?"

"Maybe. But this isn't real. You need to take a Fixer. She has some in her drawer."

"How do you know that?"

"You know it," he replied simply.

I started to cry. "Just let me stay here. Please. I don't want to go out there where it's horrible. I am so sick of horrible. I liked it better when I didn't notice how... bad... things are."

"That's a price you pay for noticing. Look at Pinkie Pie. Look at what she saw. See how it destroyed her? You can't lie here, Blackjack. Get on your hooves." I slowly rolled out of bed and staggered over to her desk. I lifted the package of Fixer, wincing at the way the red colors of the packaging bled into the silver glow.

I pressed the bitter tablet to my tongue and chewed.

The glow disappeared and I gave myself a brisk shake. Everything from the hallway to the bed was a blur. My barding and stuff were nowhere to be seen. "Please..." I whispered to the memory of long

dead goddesses, "Please please don't let this be a setup..."

Her room was decorated with strands of colored lights. Every inch of the room had strange little trinkets and nick-knacks. I looked at some of her treasures. A spent magic cartridge? A foal hoof bootie? A kazoo? They were all teasing me, making me wonder about this mare.

I noticed a lot of papers in a waste basket. I probably wouldn't have paused if I hadn't noticed the writing was all fancy and looping, like how I'd seen Princess Celestia write. I floated one out, narrowing my eyes. "My dearest Peach Pie. I look forward to munching on your apricot of love. No words can adequately express how full and throbbing my rhubarb is for your delectable flower. I long to nuzzle your sweet grass and look forward to your lips full of celery. Your sweetest cherry, Lord Orange. Ooooookay..." Then I glanced down. "PS: I am including an incentive of ten thousand caps to sway you to my garden of love."

Ten thousand caps for sex? I couldn't imagine. I looked at her desk and the colorful bottles; not just soda. Perfume bottles. And there were foal stickers all over her terminal. And glitter. And...

It was under 'E'!

Then I noticed it: a little spot of something drab on the bookshelf. Something plain. It wasn't hidden so much as simply placed behind layers and layers of junk; that's what all this was. Not trophies or important mementos but simply stuff. Stuff to deceive and mislead. A veil. Slowly I walked to the bookshelf and my horn carefully moved aside the bottles and levitated out a picture in a dusty frame.

Softly I swept it aside and looked down at the grainy, black and white photograph of a grizzly buck standing over three fillies, hugging them all in his hooves. The one on the left, with the disdainful look at the other two, I didn't know. The one on the right, grinning gleefully up at the old buck, was the barpony who'd given me all kinds of wonderful feelings minutes ago. But in the middle...

Bottlecap.

The door hissed open right then and in walked Caprice. Suddenly I could see around her edges. The apprehension underlying her smooth demeanor. The wariness in her eyes. The *fear*. She was afraid of me. Why? I wasn't her enemy, was I?

Yes... I was.

"You're... you're up..." she said, trying to keep her voice smooth. She may have pulled it off before too, but now I heard the strain in her voice.

"Yeah. I think I took something," I said calmly as I put the picture back and then I levitated the package of Fixer. "So I took something else," I said, frowning. "Why didn't you tell me you were Caprice?"

"I was just playing..." she began, sliding into an easily prepared line. My lips pressed together. That was true, but it wasn't the whole truth. Not even most of the truth. "Blackjack, please... why don't we continue our fun, hmm?"

I looked at her, not smiling now. I just stared and watched her slowly unravel. The tense smile. The pleading eyes. The nervous shake. A little pressure and they were impossible to hide. "No. I think we're done with that, Caprice."

"Please don't kill me," she whispered as she shook.

"What? What are you talking about?" I frowned as I looked at her, feeling my mane crawl. "Gemini and Taurus... they knew exactly where to find me. And U-21. And Deus. You sold me out!" I shouted at her as my eyes narrowed. "You fucked me!" She started to back out the door, but my stare locked her in place. "You told the security mares to step aside, didn't you? You wanted me to come into the stable. Make me nice and comfortable. Drug me up and hand me over to Deus? And Taurus knew exactly where that bridge was to cut me off. He could have sniped me easily if I hadn't trapped Mini."

"I had no choice!" she cried out. "It was hand you over or Deus would have leveled Flank and buried us alive inside the stable! This town is everything. It's all I have," she said as she finally backed away. "Now you're taking over. Just like Usury did at Paradise and Bottlecap did at Megamart. You're going to take Flank away from me!" she yelled as she backed towards the door.

"I wanted to protect it. I wanted to protect you. You could have told me! You could have just asked me to go. I wanted to help you, Caprice. Not Flank, you!" I snarled as the white glow of my magic sheathed my horn. It was like back at the mine; I was looking right at a softer, sweeter Lancer. A snake. If I didn't kill her now, she'd just bite me again later.

A dry shuffling of cards and an expectant silence.

"But I am NOT a fucking executioner," I snapped as she backed away through the door into the overmare's office. I walked over to my saddlebags and pulled out her letter from Bottlecap and threw it in her face. "There! Message delivered. The Finders owe me for three contracts. Pay up."

She looked at the letter at her hooves, shaking. Without opening it she tossed it into the trash and then walked to her safe. She pulled out five bags marked '1000c' and set them on the table. I swept them into my saddlebags. She stiffed me 10%... but I didn't care at this point. I just wanted to get the hell out of Flank.

"I'm sorry..." she muttered softly. "I just... liked not being me."

"Yeah," I muttered back, chewing down another bitter tablet. "I liked you not being you too."

* * *

I'm the security pony. I'm the one that shows up to kill all the fun. Flank was glad to see me go. They had their turrets; the rest was up to them. I'd wrangled a few concessions for our hard work: a working wagon, the contents of Octavia's closet, a few recordings from Mixers. Those two had been the only ones genuinely sad to see me leave. Even Scalpel had just looked at me with her tired, burned out eyes and just given me a shrug.

Roses and Thorn would be coming with us to Megamart or just someplace that wasn't here. When Rampage and P-21 returned, we simply loaded it all in the cart and left.

"So. You figure out who Caprice is yet?" the Reaper asked.

"Shut up, Rampage..." I muttered.

Ponies is ponies, Scalpel had said. They're not good or evil. Maybe that was true; maybe we were all somewhere on a slope of gray. But I knew there were ponies who struggled every day to stay as high on that slope as they could, and others that just apathetically slid further and further down.

Footnote: Level Up.

Perk added: Action Mare (rank 2): +15 additional AP in S.A.T.S.

Skill note: Lockpicking (50)

(huge thanks to Kkat for creating and inspiring me to get through this chapter, and to Hinds and Bronode for making it worth reading, and to everyone kind enough to give me feedback about it!)