

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 4: Innocence

"Another donut! Extra sprinkles!"

Stable Overmare's log 11-#231: There is a threat to my stable and my ponies. A threat within that must be dealt with. Numerous problems plague the stable, and I am certain of the cause: her name is Rivets. When I assumed the Overmare position, as per my right, she resisted me from the very beginning. Patronizing. Insulting. Countermanding and fighting me at every turn. I am the Overmare! Stable-Tec created my position, gave ME authority, but she believes the stable is hers. Worse, she has a significant following among the security ponies. The head of security herself dared countermand my arrest order! Oh, she claimed there was no law, but I am the law! Something will have to be done about the nag. I won't let her do it to me again.

"Ugh," I muttered as we walked through the constant drizzle. I'd hoped it would have stopped by now, but it seemed like this rain stuff was going to be going on for a while. "You know, I knew that the Overmare was a neurotic little trotter, but I never realized she thought of herself as the Princesses reborn."

"Nopony knew the Overmare," P-21 muttered. He'd been in a snit all morning, grumbling to himself and giving me sullen looks. Really, was shooting a bunch of radigators so bad? He scowled at every lump of dead grass beside the road. What was he worried about? My E.F.S. would pick up any threats.

Except buried ghouls... I started looking a little more closely at those lumps, too. When they continued to not be zombie ponies in hiding, boredom crept back and I hit play for the next audio log. Maybe it'd give me a hint. At least they'd help pass the time.

Stable Overmare's log 11-#233: If help cannot be found within the stable, then it must be found without. To do that, I'll need to make contact with the outside, and I think I've found a pony to help me with that. Duct Tape from the night shift. She's quiet, well trained, and obedient. Above all, she's lonely and naïve. I just need to find the correct leverage to use against her. Perhaps her foal? Or maybe I won't even need that; I had her move some stable broadcast equipment to Maintenance One, and she did so without question or speculation. Best of all, it infuriated Rivets.

Through her foal? What the hell, would she actually hold a filly hostage to get Duct Tape to cooperate?

I snorted softly. "I don't get it. I mean, she always seemed to have it good. The best food and fanciest clothes... why the hell did she turn so crazy psycho like that?" All my memories of the Overmare were of her trotting around next to her mom like a little white shadow dressed all in frou-frou girly dresses and fancy makeup. She was the only filly who got to do that.

P-21 looked at me and then gave a disinterested shrug. "Don't ask me. There's nothing in 99 I want to remember."

The next few recordings were little more than rants against... well... just about everypony. Rivets featured extensively, but my mom was referred to in unflattering terms more than once. Surprisingly, I heard myself mentioned, too. 'Put on C shift to keep an eye on me for her mother.' I could have told her that Mom put me on C shift because that was when I'd be least likely to embarrass her.

Stable Overmare's log 11-#238: Duct Tape has successfully unsealed the stable. I've placated her by giving her unrestricted access to P-20. I will miss my trick pony. He always knew exactly how to relax me.

My companion froze in his tracks. I glanced over, but his blue eyes stared straight ahead like he was in shock or something.

I need somepony to go out and find assistance, but who? Her absence would be noticed immediately when she failed to report to her duty station. Oh, of course. A male. He wouldn't have to do anything hard, merely find somepony and help them make contact. I've set up the radio for communications. Oh, I can't wait to see the look on Rivets's stupid face when I retake my stable!

He didn't move a muscle, and I cleared my throat. "Um... so... since you were in the stable, I'm guessing she didn't send you?" He blinked, then scowled at my PipBuck. "Hey, you're the one that copied the files!" I said defensively. He huffed, glowering at the city barely visible far down the road. I reached out a hoof to nudge his flank. "P-21? Are you okay?"

He actually jumped away from me, shaking. His leg almost collapsed under him, making him yelp in pain, but he waved me off. "Just! Just listen to your stupid recordings and leave me out of it, Blackjack. I don't want to remember her or that place. Leave me out of it." He dug out a syringe of Med-X and injected it in his leg with a sigh. That always improved his mood.

I almost stopped... but fuck it. He was going to be in a bad mood either way. Why'd I have to leave Stable 99 with the pony carrying a whole stable's worth of issues? Why not U-14? Least then I'd be in the Wasteland with some fine flank. Sighing at the injustices in my life, I listened to the next few entries.

Stable Overmare's log 11-#240: Success! U-21 made contact with Stable-Tec almost immediately. He has put me in touch with Stable-Tec's director Sanguine... a male, apparently. He verified his position by accurately identifying several Stable-Tec passwords from when the stable was first sealed. He was quite sympathetic to my needs and assured me that, once the stable was back in my hooves, Stable-Tec had no interest in interfering. His only price for assistance was a file in my databases. I suspect deception, but I have no alternatives. I will put Duct Tape on extracting this file.

I wondered why the Overmare made these recordings in the first place. Each of them was damning... but maybe she'd been so power-mad that she didn't care. The next ten were all boring rants about just how the Overmare planned to punish us for our disobedience. Even I got mentioned once for failing to lower my eyes respectfully.

Stable Overmare's log 11-#250: Duct Tape's progress has been infuriatingly slow. I've filled her head with all kinds of ideas about her life outside the stable, as if she'd ever have such a thing. What would be the point of such a life? Who would do her duties here? Still, the foal is besotted with ideas that

may be distracting her from progress. Perhaps I should allow her a step outside to refocus her efforts.

Stable Overmare's log 11-#251: What a difference five minutes can make to a pony's focus. I truly believe Duct Tape will extract this EC-1101 for Sanguine now. She's determined to get her reward: a life on the surface with my trick pony. Good. Sanguine is becoming impatient about the delays. I don't want Stable-Tec to do something premature... The less shock to my stable, the better. I've already approached Daisy and the other C shift security ponies and made sure that they'll aid me... except Blackjack, of course. Fortunately, Gin Rummy's daughter remains as oblivious as ever to the stable around her.

I snorted. "I am not oblivious!" Then I tripped on a chunk of asphalt and went sprawling on my face. Okay, maybe a little oblivious. I glanced at P-21 again, but he was doing his best to ignore me now. I remembered Duct Tape being so perky and focused. I'd never have guessed the reason why she was so glad to spend hours in Maintenance One.

Stable Overmare's log 11-#259: Finally... success. Everything is ready. Duct Tape has completely extracted the files from the Stable-Tec system into one terminal. She nattered on for hours about the size, complexity, and difficulty of extracting the files. I've notified Sanguine that everything is ready. He's sending a representative, Deus, along with his own security ponies. So nice to see another Over... stallion... extending me proper courtesy.

As I recalled, Deus's courtesy involved a few pints of semen. Likely not what she had expected. After listening to this, though, my sympathies were pretty played out.

Stable Overmare's log 11-#260: The traitor! The little traitor! I select her, let her go outside, and she dares insist that I give her her reward? How dare she? How DARE she! She's placed some sort of encryption on EC-1101 and refuses to lift it. Even when I threatened to throw her and her little filly into the recycler! Silence may stay her for now, but Deus is on his way! He'll be arriving any day now! What to do?

"Sounds like Duct Tape took your little 'don't trust her' speech to heart," I said with a chuckle.

"Yep..." P-21 said mirthlessly as the next recording played.

Stable Overmare's log 11-#261: Duct Tape has been disposed of. The sabotaged terminal worked far better than I anticipated. I had to finish her off with my own hooves, but I doubt anypony will check the body. She'll be in the recycler by morning. I've now tasked the entire data management team of the stable with breaking the encryption. I have no time to waste. Deus is outside the stable!

P-21 sighed softly. "And my advice cost her her life."

I watched him, his odd mask-like expression. What was he thinking? "Did you... like her?"

He glanced at me with a cool look. "She liked me. That was all that mattered."

"That's not what I meant. I mean..." Goddesses, could I slog through an awkward conversation or what?

He looked at me and sighed. "She helped me. That's something only one other mare's done. So I'm thankful for that and sorry she died, but no. I didn't like her. Not like you're asking."

The next few recordings became more and more hysterical. Screaming, crying, and desperate rants. Half of them involved the Overmare begging somepony not to hurt her. The other half about how killing 'her' was the only thing she could do. Finally, the last log.

My log... it's time. Sanguine can worry about the encryption himself. Blackjack is meeting with Rivets as I record this; I have no doubt that the coup is imminent. Deus has several dozen ponies ready, and now I must take back what is mine. If I don't act now, then I'm certain that tomorrow I'll not have a stable. I will not be the final Overmare of Stable 99. This is my stable. And no pony shall ever hurt me here again. Not her. Not anypony.

"Hurt her? Who hurt the Overmare? She's the Overmare! No pony could ever touch her!" I sighed and shook my head. P-21 walked pensively beside me, hanging his head a little. "You're blaming yourself for Duct Tape?"

He looked at me sharply, then sighed. "If I hadn't prompted her to act, I wonder if she might have survived the attack."

"From Deus and the others' actions, I don't think any of us were supposed to survive." I sighed as I closed the Overmare's logs. I'd hoped that they'd... I dunno. Give me some kind of hint about what I was supposed to do next. "Well, that sure was worthless."

"Worthless?" P-21 sounded surprised. "That told us a good deal."

Huh? "Well, it just confirmed to me that the Overmare was crazy. What did all that tell you?"

P-21 sighed. "First, that this 'Sanguine' was probably watching the stable before U-21 left it. You know how dangerous this place is. A lone stable unicorn wouldn't have lasted long. Second, Sanguine has some links to Stable-Tec; the Overmare confirmed that with his codes. Third, he clearly had a grasp of the Overmare's psychology. I suspect we're looking for somepony who's spent time in a stable themselves. Fourth, he's got established contacts with Reapers and raiders. Deus might have been brutal, but he also showed restraint rather than charging through and killing everything."

"So we find and kill Sanguine and we win? Sweet. I love a simple plan," I said with a smile, hoping to get one in return. Even a little one?

He gave me a flat look. Was he born with that face?

"Okay. So, probably not simple. What about Deus? What if we find him?"

"Did you forget those guns he's carrying? Not to mention that he might have another small army of raiders and Reapers with him. I'm happy never seeing him again," P-21 said firmly. "I think our best bet is to try and find out what the heck EC-1101 is. If we learn that, it might tell us who Sanguine is."

"Well, you're better at the thinking thing," I admitted. There was one other goal on my list, but I really didn't want to talk about it just yet. If I could, I'd make it a surprise. "For the moment, we need

guns, bullets, and caps.”

“Yeah, but it’s not like we’re just going to happen across some place we can just...” He trailed off as he saw my grin. His blue ears drooped. “Red bars?”

“That way,” I said, pointing off the side of the road with my security baton. I gave the baton a swing with my magic. The metal was definitely dinged up, but still serviceable. I definitely would have preferred a firearm of some sort, but this would do.

He sighed and shook his head as he followed me. “Seeking out death and danger for fun and profit. What a life.”

“It’s a life,” I replied, “and that’s what you wanted, as I recall.” That drew a small smile. Keeping a tight grip on the end of the baton, I prowled through the woods and underbrush. “But just in case this is something nasty, be ready to run!”

“Again with the running plan. Always a running plan. Never a sneaking and avoiding a fight plan,” P-21 whispered as he limped along behind me.

Then I heard the sound of something moving through the brush. Not a bloatsprite buzz or a radhog snuffling or a ghoul’s scream. It was... clicking with strange beeps. Step by step I advanced through the dead trees.

Suddenly a metallic equine head emerged into a gap between the trees. Then it swiveled and looked at both of us. Its eyes flared like a pair of angry rubies, and from a port atop its head flashed a bright red beam that left a smoking black line on the leafless trees around us. I remembered Scoodle mentioning roboponies. Well now I had a real killer robot in front of me.

“Keep back,” I said quietly, having no clue how well it could hear us or understand us. Then I hustled to the side, trying to move close enough to bring my baton to bear while avoiding the flashing lines of fire. The rad sickness wasn’t helping, but the machine was slow and its magical energy beam had a few seconds’ recharge time between shots.

The baton made a resounding clang of metal on metal as I ran around it as quickly as I could. Despite being made out of metal I could definitely hear the sounds of more brittle interior parts crackling with each strike. Finally my telekinetic backswing crushed the firing port over its head. Something inside whined, and then there was a small internal explosion. It popped and crackled, and then slowly fell over as acrid smoke rose.

“Huh... I think I prefer raiders. They at least carry loot,” I said sourly as I looked at the plate on its chest that read ‘Robronco’.

“Well, there might be something worthwhile,” P-21 said as he drew his screwdriver and carefully removed a smoking plate. He carefully withdrew several components: small containers of crushed crystals that were apparently ammo of some sort, something called a ‘spark battery’, and quite a bit of ‘scrap electronics’. Still, it was better than a poke in the eye.

Argh, why’d I have to think that? My eyes were itching like mad!

While he finished, I continued forward towards more red dots. The dead wood ended abruptly at a crumbling concrete wall. At least four more red bars crawled around in my E.F.S. I could hear their dull metallic footsteps on cracked concrete. Slowly I made my way around the wall till I spotted a rusty gate hanging open. Keeping the E.F.S. on the robot I heard on the far side of the wall, I waited till it was passing before stepping into sight. Its eyes flashed red as its head rotated to face me.

I hit S.A.T.S. at once and, as before, unleashed three blows on the machine's head. Fast as I was as I made the attack, the beam proved faster and scorched a line across my neck. The third blow snapped something vital, and the entire head peeled off. One down, three to go. I carefully peeked around the gate. The three remaining robot ponies were walking much closer together. I swallowed, rubbing the burn along the side of my neck. I'd just gotten my head together. I didn't want to lose it entirely.

I pulled out the last grenade and swallowed. I could see their bars on the E.F.S., and soon I heard the slow plodding steps. I pulled the stem and telekinetically dropped it on the far side of the wall. There was a muffled 'crump' and two of the hostile marks disappeared. Stepping around the gate in the wall, I wasted no time finishing the last one off.

As P-21 emerged from the yellow underbrush, he looked at the wreckage. "These have been outside for a while," he commented as he nudged the rusted plate with his hoof. All the ponies had dented plates from bullet impacts. "I guess they weren't made to resist being attacked by some pony with a heavy metal stick."

"Design oversight," I agreed as I looked at the large concrete building on the far side of the wall. Two stories and apparently reinforced. Then I noticed the bodies at the door. Not decades or centuries old, these were fresh, pungent, and swollen. I approached the two corpses while fighting the urge to retch, but even that was suppressed at the sight of the wings sprouting from their sides. "Pegasi..." I murmured, having seen them only in books.

They wore simple utility harnesses that seemed pretty pathetic armor. Carefully I searched their bodies, and was rewarded with some tools and a strange boxy object shaped like a pistol. They even had some bottle caps on them and some strange flimsy paper money I'd never seen before. There were also more of those powdered magic gem cartridges.

"Any idea what this is?" I asked, pointing the boxy pistol at the wall. My telekinesis pressed a small button on the handle. With a sharp pop of expanding air, a red bolt of energy shot out and left a singe on the concrete wall. A glance at my PipBuck confirmed: magic beam pistol. I also noted our location: Weather Monitoring Station 4.

"A beam pistol or an overpowered flashlight," he said as he checked it with a soft sigh. "It's been through the wringer too. Starting to rust." He handed it back to me. "Well, you wanted a gun."

"A gun comes with some recoil, sights, magazines, and rounds. This is just weird," I said as I levitated it in front of me. "How am I supposed to aim it?" I sniffed the tip, wrinkling my nose at the tang of ozone instead of the stink of cordite. "It doesn't even smell like a gun."

"Isn't there a firearms rule about not putting the barrel up your nose?" P-21 said as he examined

the tools, his muzzle breaking out in a smile.

"It doesn't have a barrel!" I countered, but I took his point to heart. "Well, better than nothing. Ready to go in?" I asked, nodding to the doors.

He looked at the dead pegasi in their black utility barding. "I'm pretty sure these two died trying to get out."

"Well since they didn't have anything expensive on them, we can assume that anything valuable is still inside."

"As well as whatever they were running from," he added. When he saw my grin he gave a soft groan. "Try to be careful, Blackjack."

"Sure. Be back in five minutes," I replied, grabbed the door handle with my magic, and pulled. It barely squeaked open enough for me to squeeze through, and when the door slammed shut I found myself enveloped in pitch black-- no, not pitch black. There was some light, despite there being no windows. Everything was outlined in a strange dim amber glow. Emergency lighting? Maybe the pegasi had done something? Thin, delicate bones crunched underhoof, making me wince at their loud snaps.

I didn't take much time to explore the reasons as red bars began to move ahead of me. The robotic ponies clanked in my direction with more haste than I expected. Nothing for it, I'd have to use the strange energy weapon before they turned the hall into a shooting gallery. I ran towards the first as it stepped into the hallway, hoping to close the distance as much as possible before jumping into S.A.T.S. Unlike the robots outside, these hadn't been softened up by time and previous attacks.

I was amazed to get four shots programmed with the S.A.T.S., and, while the blasts were definitely not as tightly placed as with a normal gun, my luck didn't seem to care what weapon I shot. A round went through the beam gun atop the robot and made the machine's head explode in a flash of sparks. As I came out of the accelerated state, another robot walked up behind the remains of the first one. I kept moving, not letting its head lock on as its weapon flashed back and forth across the hall. Blast after blast of my gun's crimson beam melted small glowing holes in the robot's chest. Finally, it too popped and went still, smoking with an acrid reek.

A third was clanking closer from a nearby room. The little dial on the back of the pistol was hovering on 'E'. I backed away, using my telekinesis to try and figure out how to reload the damned thing! Finally I must have pressed something right as the rear of the boxy weapon opened and ejected a smoking cartridge. I levitated out a fresh cartridge of glittering crystals, slammed it into the space, and fumbled to get it closed up and zapping again.

I'd been still for too long. The robot's red searing beam struck me in the chest, scorching my barding and reminding me to move my ass! I zigzagged, my hooves slipping and sliding on bones scattered across the hall, but I succeeded in getting closer and jumped into S.A.T.S. a second time. Four shots transformed the robot into a smoldering ugly statue. Wincing, I took a healing potion to alleviate the burn on my chest. Damn thing hurt. I carefully watched the remaining red tags, but their wanderings were slow and predictable. Not coming to attack, I supposed.

There were more pegasus corpses in the hallway; I found a second energy pistol and more of the

magic powder cartridges. I carefully made my way through the ruins of the bottom floor, the magical beam box pointed ahead of me at all times. I found a safe, two ammo boxes, and a locked medical box that I made sure to remember for P-21. I also lucked into a cafeteria and found some delicious Big Mac 'n' Cheese and a working vending machine. Sitting at a desk, I had myself a snack and pocketed the rest. Soon as we ran out of recycled wafers, my cohort would be getting hungry.

Why are there so many bones in here? We'd come across so many remains that it was hard for me to think of them as ponies. With the exception of Hoss, Granny Smith, and Scoodle, the remains of the dead were so numerous and so prevalent that I just couldn't feel for them as I should. Yet even I felt something off with this concrete building. There were enough bones for a hundred ponies, and lots of them were quite small.

As I reached the stairs at the end of the hall I heard the scrape of P-21 entering. No doubt he'd start on the robots in the hall. Trying to be stealthy, I climbed up the stairs and round the corner at the top. A robot pony immediately turned and started blasting away with its beam of light. I leaped to the side, held down the trigger, and washed my beam over its head and chest till it popped and collapsed.

Another dead pegasus lay nearby. I pocketed his weapon cartridges, a gun that looked better as a blunt weight, and another strange apple grenade with a bright blue band around the middle. The last two red bars were close together, and as I watched them separate I saw a tiny yellow line almost directly between them. What the heck did that mean?

Slowly, I advanced down the hall with the energy weapon floating before me. I couldn't hear anything but an odd humming noise, like a vent fan. Reaching the door at the end of the hall, I bit the handle of the pistol, gently gripped the doorhandle with my magic, and slowly turned it, wincing at the grinding noise. I heard the whirr of a robot's magic weapon charging on the far side. I didn't know where the yellow non-hostile was in the room, and I'd be damned if I tossed a grenade around a non-hostile.

"Fuck it," I muttered and ducked down, kicking the door open. Instantly a fusillade of crimson beams swung back and forth across the hallway as I backpedaled and ducked as fast as I could to the next doorway. Two robots stood shoulder to shoulder as they filled the hall with sweeping flickers of death. I fired wildly back at them, hitting but not doing anything critical. By the time I reached the open doorway behind me, I had angry red burns all across my chest and forelegs. I hissed in pain as I took a healing potion and waited in the small closet.

Clicking and clanking, the robot ponies approached towards the doorway. My sole saving grace was that this door was too narrow for them to pass through in unison. When the first came into view, my magic beam weapon was at point blank range. S.A.T.S. assisted in four energy shots decapitating the machine. As it fell, the last came into view. I screamed as I moved back and forth as much as the closet allowed and held the trigger down with my magic. It didn't help much as more lines burned my limbs and shoulders.

The red bolts of energy chewed through the metal plating of the Robronco sentry, and a white glow spread along its frame. It collapsed into a pile of warm ashes and smoldering metal. Letting out a sigh, I collapsed onto my haunches, looking at the energy pistol with a new appreciation. "Well, that's new."

I holstered the energy pistol and trotted into the room the robot ponies were guarding. There

were a few more ash piles lying about the interior of the room; I guessed they had to have been either more pegasi or bots. In the room were a half dozen little bays large enough to hold the sentries, so I doubted they were the latter. One wall was dominated by a massive terminal that had clearly seen better days, while a corner held shelves with an automatic pistol and two ammo boxes. I couldn't help but smile as I lifted the far more familiar weapon and checked the slide. Fair condition.

Then I looked at my PipBuck and at the non-hostile reading. It pointed right at the terminal. "What the heck?" I muttered, looking it over with the strange amber glow that filled my vision. That's when I noticed the grate the terminal sat on. Slowly I looked down through the grate at a crawlspace just barely large enough for a pony to fit. "Hey? Hello?"

"Are you okay, Blackjack?" P-21 shouted from the hall behind me.

I walked along the grate to the corner of the room where a little hatch lay open. "I think somepony's in here," I said as I carefully lowered my head and peeked into the space.

My amber gaze saw the many cables of the terminal, but hiding behind them was a small pony shape. She peeked out around the corner at me, and I gave her my most comforting smile. "Hey. There you are."

Her eyes widened in terror and she moved her head completely out from behind the cable. My smile vanished as I looked at the boxy business end of a magic beam pistol. The yellow mark turned red as she screamed around the clenched handle and my world became filled with red light.

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"She shot me," I groaned, my face sporting an ugly black burn that ran from jaw to ear. It looked like my luck was enough to preserve my eye; was not getting shot in the first place too much to ask? I looked at the pegasus, scowling. "You shot me! In my face!" I pointed at the burn, making her wince. My already messed up vision was even more out of whack as I waited for the healing potion to take away some of the pain and injury. "What is it with people shooting me when my guard is down, huh? That's twice in two days."

"Blackjack," P-21 said softly. "She was alone, starving, dehydrated... and to be honest I probably would have done the same."

"Is this more of that 'I can't trust myself with guns around you?'" I asked as I sipped the Sparkle-Cola. Given how much radiation I'd sucked up recently, the trace amounts didn't worry me.

"There's a bathroom down the hall. Go look in the mirror," he said as he took out my last bottle of purified water and rolled it to the pegasus curled up in the corner of the room next to the hatch. I had no clue how P-21 got her to surrender her weapon, but she did. It was all she'd done since P-21 had patched me up.

I walked down the dimly lit hallway and into the bathroom. Most of the mirror had been broken out, but there was enough left for me to see... what the fuck?

Since when did my eyes fucking *glow*? Now that I was paying attention to the amber light, it

wasn't the result of light slipping through boarded over windows or emergency lighting. The light came from my eye sockets as if I had a little PipBuck lamp glowing in the back of each. "Well... fuck..." I said lamely as I finished the bottle of lukewarm soda. After everything that had happened in the last three days, I'd finally reached the point of numb acceptance. My eyes were glowing. What could I do about it?

I returned to the terminal room, looking at the pegasus in the corner. "Given that my eyes are glowing, I'd say shooting me was no harm, no foul. This time," I said as I looked at her while she sipped the water slowly. She looked pretty ragged. Her black coveralls were torn and stained with waste. She didn't look like a wastelander. In fact, she looked more rattled than the Crusaders. "I'm Blackjack. He's P-21." She didn't say anything as she stared at me with wary, bloodshot eyes. I glanced at P-21 as he struggled with the locks on the cases he'd found downstairs before looking back at her.

She didn't say a word. Even with my PipBuck lamp lit, my eyes must've still been glowing. "Look. I'm not going to hurt you. If you want to go, then go." I stood and carefully stepped aside. The silver-gray pegasus slowly started to crawl for the exit as I walked to P-21 on the far side of the room. I waved my hoof as if coaxing her to go if she really wanted to. I didn't envy her odds alone but...

She disappeared down the hall. I let out my held breath. Well, good luck, I silently wished. P-21 glanced up at me and shook his head. "What? Do you think I should have shot her or something?"

"You spared that raider and got shot in the back," he said softly.

"Yeah, and I tried to help her and got shot in the face." In my fucking face! "Still not going to tie her up and keep her as a prisoner. She wants to go, then she should go." I rubbed the burn, feeling the magic healing the damage quickly. I tallied up how much I owed him just on healing potions he'd found stashed away or locked up. I looked at the massive terminal. "So... any clue what that thing is for?"

"No idea," he said as I started on my last Sparkle-Cola. Darn things were addictive! Enjoying the warm carrot taste, I glanced back down the hall. Our pegasus hadn't run far. I guessed she had probably encountered those pegasi in the hallway. "It's on a security lockout." He glanced at the piles of ash and the robot recharge bay. "I guess they failed to enter the right password. That activated the sentries."

And that meant there was no chance to hack the terminal without ending the lock-out. "Great..." I muttered as I spotted another pegasus skeleton in the corner... It wasn't the species, though, that made me curious: it was the sight of the weathered recording cartridge under the bones. Carefully, I levitated it and connected it to my PipBuck. "Maybe somepony happened to mention a security override," I said as I started the playback.

The recording was clearly old, but I heard a dull chuckle. *"Yeah dude. Rainbow may be hot but, like, you got no chance man. Dude, isn't she like the spokespony for mare riders? Heh... yeah I hear that. So you check out my score on the last basketball match with monitor one? Shyeah, we kicked tail thanks to yours truly. Hey, what happened...?"* Suddenly I could hear a noise with a deep reverberation and a sucking sound that transformed into a roar.

The recording crackled and snapped with static and buzzing voices. Suddenly a male spoke out in a tense, thick voice, *"... this is crazy. The Hoof is fucking gone, man! It's fucking gone! There's green... fire shit... like... everywhere! No pony knows what's going on. Fuck man! Game over!"* The

recording broke off in a harsh crackle that made me wince. After some more static, the buck's voice returned.

"I got a whole bunch of kids from the Fluttershy clinic south of here! We need ponies to fly them out! Get them to the Shadowbolt Tower? Thunderhead? Somewhere! Come on you fuckers, I know you can hear us. I got a transmitter and power! Fuck! Answer me you fuckers!" he screamed into the recorder, his voice breaking into a peal of static. When it returned he was coughing. *"Fuck. It's so quiet outside. I think the fucking radiation's getting in somehow. If anypony can hear this, this is Brolly in Hoofington Weather Monitoring 4. I contacted Thunderhead, but they haven't sent shit to help. They told me to come home. There are kids here who need to be evacuated. Can anypony hear me? This is Brolly in Weather Four!"* There was a long pause and then he screamed once again, *"Answer you fuckers!"*

I stared at the PipBuck, feeling dread prick up and down my spine. The static crackled for the longest time and when it returned, his voice was a raspy whisper. *"Kids aren't doing so good. I'm not doing so good. Fuck. Couldn't get to Thunderhead now if I wanted. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I contacted Jack Knife at Weather One and Bluebells at Weather Three hours ago. They were told to abandon too. Think Jack left, I dunno. No pony's answering anymore. Somepony help us. Anypony."* The recording gave one last crackle and I heard him whisper, *"Fuck... they're fucking kids... fuck..."*

For the longest time I thought that was it. Then I heard a grating rasp that rose and fell. It wasn't static. *"Fuckers... fuckers abandoned us... told me... told me to stop transmitting... switched channels on me... fuckers... didn't give a shit for the kids."* There was a spate of coughing. *"Is that blood? Shit... it is, isn't it? Fuck... Dash was right... I thought... shit... Fucking right... fuck..."* With that, the recording continued playing silently for several minutes before I finally stopped it.

Damn it! I'd been fine when the bones were just bones. I didn't want to think of dozens of foals dying slowly of radiation poisoning while someone, somewhere, casually let them die. "How could they?"

P-21 stared at his hooves with his inscrutable expression. "Maybe... maybe things were so chaotic..."

"They told him to stop transmitting," I said as I stood. "They told him to shut up and die along with dozens of young ponies! They were organized enough for that!" I sighed, rubbing my stinging, itching, mutated eyes and feeling the tears start. "Fuck. I'm going to have to dig another grave."

I spotted her hiding in the doorway, sitting down on the floor looking at her hooves. "There was nothing we could do," she said in a soft, buzzing drawl. "After the bombs went off... every pegasus that could get home was recalled. We had to save as much as we could."

I felt my temper spike, but P-21 limped in front of me and shook his head slightly. Swallowing what I'd been about to say was like vomiting in reverse, and just as unpleasant. He took a seat, stretching out his injured leg with a sigh. "Come on in here. We're not going to hurt you." I forced myself to relax as well.

"Yeah," I said as I kept the pistols away. When she stepped back in I marveled at how compact and delicate she appeared. Her coat was a soft gray and her purple mane cut back into a buzz. I supposed it was some sort of military look or something. I looked at her uniform and remembered what

Scoodle had said. "You're Enclave?"

"Morning Glory, serial number 221-12-9921, first Volunteer Corps," she said as if reciting the information. She licked dried lips and I floated what remained of my Sparkle-Cola to her. She took it hesitantly and then drank it slowly. Still, it made her smile. That helped me to relax. "Thank you," she murmured.

"*Volunteer Corps?*" I asked.

"The Volunteer Corps enlisted with the Enclave to help with restoring contact with the surface," she said in a shaky voice. "It wasn't... wasn't supposed to be like this. They warned us..." She looked at the ash piles. "But I didn't believe them."

"Warned you?" P-21 gave me a concerned look.

"That the surface was deadly and savage," she said softly as she rubbed her face with her hoof. "That all surface ponies do is rape and murder and then rape what they murdered." She looked at the ash piles with a little shiver. "I... all my friends... we were sent to make contact... we had gifts... no heavy weapons. No power armor." She began to shake and clenched her eyes tight. "Oh Celestia! The things... they did such horrible things!"

"Sounds like you ran into raiders," I replied.

"Half of us they slaughtered and ate. Some were still alive. We fell back here when I detected the transmissions. We couldn't access the system though, and the sentries activated. I..." She clenched her eyes shut. "I'd crawled underneath to connect the power. I heard them all die." She started shaking again.

"Hey. Hey. Breathe, Glory... just take some deep breaths." I gave P-21 a long look before I tried to put her at ease. "Sounds a lot like what the two of us just went through. Wasteland seems to love tossing one nightmare after another against a pony. So why don't you just, you know?" I gestured skywards with a nod of my horn.

She flushed and looked away. "I... I just can't."

Okay. Psychological trauma *and* distrust. I knew exactly what this called for. "Want to do something about it?"

P-21 looked at me and just groaned. Morning Glory glanced at me, then at P-21 in confusion. "Do? What do you mean?"

"If you ran here, those raiders' camp can't be far. I say we go and make sure they don't eat any more ponies," I said with a sure little grin. "Trust me. Hunting raiders is pretty..." I rolled my eyes, tapping my hoof thoughtfully. "Help me out here, P-21."

"Asinine? Juvenile? Hazardous?" he suggested as he passed me the weapons and ammunition he'd scavenged. A nice replacement automatic pistol and some clips of ammo; finally, something I could aim that went bang!

"Nah... fun!" I said as I clapped my hooves together.

P-21 sighed, looking mournfully at Morning Glory. "You get used to the madness."

Clearly Morning Glory hadn't quite figured out our style of banter just yet. "You want to kill the ponies that killed my platoon... for fun?"

I let out a long sigh. "Actually, no. First, I don't want anypony caught by raiders if I can do something about it. Secondly, I don't like the idea of raiders having beam weapons taken off your comrades. Thirdly, there might be five young fillies in this area and I don't like the idea of them getting captured again. Fourthly, I need caps and ammunition and taking it from murdering scum sounds fine to me," I said as I listed them all off, rolling my eyes in thought. "Oh yeah, *and* it's fun. You'll find that out if you come with us."

"Come with you?" she asked in complete shock.

"Sure. Your friends were attacked and killed. You've been trapped in a coffin under a terminal for a week. I'm pretty sure some part of you wants some payback." She just stared and shook her head. I grimaced. "Not even a little?" Another shake of her head. "A smidge?" I offered, holding my hooves a millimeter apart. She finally gave me the ghost of a smile but still shook her head.

Great. I wagered I was the only pony in the Wasteland who could attract *pacifists*. "Okay. Well you can stay here and we can come back for you, come with us, or else good luck."

"I'll... I'll come with you. I don't want to be alone," Morning Glory said warily, clearly not trusting me. I levitated her beam pistol back over to her. Still looking uncertain, she took the weapon and slipped it into her holster. That put her a little more at ease.

"Not to be nit-picky, but are all of you armed with... well." I nodded to the dinged up beam pistol. "Seems sorta poor quality."

"Oh no. The Volunteer Corps are issued surplus arms and armor separate from security and scouting forces." Armor? She counted that uniform as armor? My security barding was better armor than that! "May I see some of the others' beam pistols? I might be able to improve things," she asked warily. I remembered what Scoodle had done with the rifles, so I put the four other beam pistols down and let her get to work. P-21 looked on in interest as she skillfully broke the weapons down and repaired the best of the lot. When she finished, it looked much more impressive. She didn't even have to slam the cartridge container closed.

"Nice work. Do you normally fix stuff?"

"I... I was a student at the Thunderhead academy," she flushed. "There were some protests... nothing serious. Just a lot of us wanting to come down. That's why the Volunteer Corps were established." And ripped to pieces by raiders. Convenient.

Something about all of this stunk. "So... the Enclave came here to help the Wasteland. They let volunteers like you come and help out. Then they give you old weapons and uniforms... did they even

train you how to use them?"

"I... I had a two week training and survival course," she said defensively.

Right. And then they sent these volunteers on a peace mission to raiders? If that was incompetence, they deserved an award for the sheer scale of it. I had a real bad feeling it wasn't incompetence. Did their scouts miss the severed heads and mutilated corpses? I glanced over at P-21, but he looked grim as well as he gave a little shake of his head. Morning Glory was young, traumatized, but still innocent. Maybe it was just paranoia, but suddenly I understood why Scoodle had been wary of the Enclave.

"Well, your call," I said, gathering up Brolly's remains in a bag. Outside, I found a tree and cleared out a hole at its base with my horn. There wasn't room or time to do anything fancy, so I set the bag into the depression and covered it once again. I levitated a pointed rock and scratched out 'Brolly' and 'He tried.' on the trunk. I spotted both of them staring at me oddly; P-21 had an approving look and Morning Glory simply seemed confused.

"So. Coming with us?" I asked as I checked the automatic pistol and my ammunition. Morning Glory nodded and I looked to her beam pistol, floating several cartridges to her. "I know you might not like the idea of shooting raiders, but trust me... try. Especially if you see me shooting." Red, it's dead. Yellow, be mellow.

* * *

As we journeyed back towards the west, I let Glory take some potshots at the bloatsprites. She could shoot when she worked up the nerve. I couldn't begin to guess how she aimed a weapon like that with no sights, but between a half dozen bloatsprites and one radhog I was pleasantly impressed.

"So just how is the Enclave trying to help? I mean, I haven't seen signs of swooping pegasi flying over and laying waste to every raider that pokes their heads out," I said, glancing to the sky. Mistake. I staggered so hard I ran into Morning Glory and nearly knocked her over. "Sorry," I muttered, getting my gaze below horizon.

"Well. We're trying to assist by providing food and clothing to the locals around the Skyport. There's been diplomatic missions as well." Like her mission to get friendly with a bunch of raiders? What genius thought that up? "We also offer free medical assistance."

That got my attention as I glanced back at P-21's limp. "Really? That's generous," I said. He was in such pain that he just grunted his agreement.

"Unfortunately there's many factions that appear to be quite hostile to Enclave activities. The Steel Rangers in particular have attacked us at the Skyport. There's a lot of distrust I simply can't understand. Why won't ponies let us help?" Morning Glory's frustration was clear. Personally I wasn't opposed to the idea of helping folks who needed it, but there was something off with the Enclave's offer. I kept thinking back to the Overmare's recording about this Sanguine giving her everything she wanted.

Generosity didn't come cheap here.

There was some irony in that the raiders were based out of a donut shop along the road from

Withers; if I hadn't made that detour, we'd be facing much stiffer resistance. A faded brown unicorn held a ring and the chipped lettering read 'Pony Joe's'. How cute, they'd nailed body parts to the hoof as sprinkles. Artistic and grotesque. The PipBuck detected only a sole hostile wandering out the back door. I glanced back at P-21. This would be a lot easier without him giving the alarm. I slowly slid the baton out of its holster.

"What if he's..." Morning Glory whispered hoarsely.

"Innocent? Unarmed?" I looked at the raider as he squatted beside a ditch. PipBuck read as red. I closed my eyes. What was the difference between me and the raiders, besides that I seemed to have a little more discretion as per my PipBuck? If I didn't have that convenient red bar, would I be as much a murderer as the raiders? "If he gives up... fine."

I approached as quietly as I was able, baton floating beside me as the raider let out a rather epic bowel movement. He'd probably have to kill it with a shovel afterwards. Fortunately, he'd brought one with a jagged bloodstained edge. The reek made me gag, but I closed the distance and was quite glad he finished. He muttered something sounding like a language of strung together obscenities as I gripped the baton even tighter and poked him with my hoof. "Hey."

He froze and slowly turned to stare at me. One eye was a swollen, pus-dripping mass that couldn't close. The other pupil was so contracted I wondered if he was blind. He slowly grinned, revealing teeth sharpened to points as he started to giggle. "Don't..." I warned as his giggles grew louder and louder. "Don't," I repeated through grit teeth, but it was too late. He jerked his head, grabbing the handle of the shovel. I had no choice as I brought the baton down on the back of his head with all the strength my horn could muster. A pulpy noise that oddly matched his bowels filled the air and his whole body jerked and fell flat next to his reeking pile of filth.

I looked at Glory watching in horror and frowned at her. "Happy?" I asked as I pointed at his frozen maniacal grin with the baton. She looked away, and P-21 gave me a look that read simply as '*not fair, Blackjack.*' I didn't care; I didn't want to discuss the equity of any pony so crazy they adopted radical new styles of dentistry to suit their dietary habits. "Now, I'm going in there. If I have to get out fast I'd really appreciate if you could be ready to cover me." I didn't look to see if she'd nod or not. Hopefully P-21 would get through to her.

She'd shoot me in the face but didn't want to kill a raider. Fuck fuckity fuck fuck fuck...

I carefully opened the back door to the diner. Old donut making equipment stood coated in black and crimson sludge. The stench coming out the door was so intense that I almost retched. Flies buzzed over every surface, and there was an industrial mixer with limbs sticking out. There seemed to be more than a few wings. Maggots thrived in great squirming lumps that popped underhoof as I moved in as carefully as I could. The knot of raiders seemed to be concentrated in the dining area.

"Squarr! Finish shittin' and get in here! Squaaaaar!" a mare shrieked from the front. "I'm gonna make him eat it. Anyone wanna see him eat it?" Raucous laughter filled the air as one bar detached from the mass, coming towards the doorway. I looked left and right, and then tried my best to squeeze into the fetid corner between the wall and mixer. I couldn't help but glance in and wish I hadn't. There was some kind of jelly in there. It was moving...

When the mare walked past my hiding spot I saw the floating beam pistol in front of her. Knowing how fast they shot, and really sick of burns, I hit S.A.T.S. at once and brought the metal curve of my baton across her throat. Any warning she was going to make died as the second swing smashed across her face, and I saw with disturbing clarity the orb of her eye burst and spray viscous yellowed jelly across her cheek. I couldn't stop if I wanted to, and I really didn't want to as the final swing finished caving in her eye socket. I grabbed her with my hooves to keep her from falling and lowered her to the floor of the kitchen. The laughter from the far side had drowned out her collapse.

I glanced at the beam gun: just like the ones at the monitoring station. I counted four more bars moving. I doubted I'd be lucky enough to catch another alone. P-21's method had dropped two; time to finish it Blackjack style.

Coming around the corner, pistol raised, I wasted no time going into S.A.T.S. and putting all four rounds into the nearest raider's skull. The third round effectively turned his skull into chunks and I immediately backed away. Red blasts of light peppered the doorway as I waited. Sure enough, one came around wearing a welding helmet. The automatic roared along with me as each round scooped out great bloody hooffuls from his chest. After the fifth burst he finally went down.

A metal clang and clatter beside me was all the warning I needed; I dove back into the dining area and crouched low. The grenade's explosion made my eardrums throb and blew pieces out of the remaining mare's neck and head. She tried to draw a beam pistol, but my bullets bit into something arterial and a bloody spray spewed out from her neck as she collapsed, twitching. That left... oh fuck!

This raider had something new; over his raider armor he was wearing a harness that slung his weapons at his sides. Said weapons were two large, long, boxy things, bigger versions of beam pistols. I tried to kick into S.A.T.S., but the spell still needed time to recharge. I fired wildly as I dodged back into the kitchen as the beam rifles mounted to his sides ignited a smoking line where my head had been a second before.

I couldn't counter that firepower! I gave ground as he pursued, his shots melting the festering equipment in the kitchen as I emptied my clip. Still backing up, I ejected it and levitated a new one into the mag well before diving out the back door.

"Flash! Flash flash flash!" he screamed in glee over and over again as he stepped outside. My automatic suddenly seemed woefully inadequate as he pointed both barrels at me. I kept trying to drill his head with the automatic, but the metal helmet he wore deflected most of my shots.

Suddenly, Morning Glory appeared on the roof of the donut shop, pistol clenched in her teeth as she stared down at him. She was shaking so badly I was sure she was going to drop the weapon! She fired a shot that had to be by accident, smoking the gravel beside him. Slowly he turned, looking up, bringing the beam rifles to bear. We'd already established that my automatic wasn't of sufficient caliber to threaten him.

"Shoot!" P-21 and I shouted in unison.

"Flash!" screamed the raider. The air filled with red beams.

Suddenly the raider's backpack let out an immense spark and crackle as Glory's shots tore into it.

He screamed as burning components cascaded down his sides. The two beam rifles smoked as he tried to fire at the shaking gray pegasus. "Nooooo! Flash! FLASH!" the raider screamed as he looked at me rising.

"Stop it! Just run away!" Glory screamed down at him. The raider wasn't listening and bolted for the sharpened shovel. Damn it! I raised the gun again, trying to find some vulnerable place to drop him with as he picked the shovel up in his jaws and began to swing it at me.

I went through a second clip before the sharpened edge sliced almost exactly opposite the burn that Glory had given me. Fuck! Was it too much to ask them to watch the face? I drank my last healing potion and went to reload... two bullets? Two fucking bullets!

Not good.

I used S.A.T.S. to place the shots in his head. Effective, but not fatal. He seemed to not feel the slightest bit of pain as he stabbed the shovel edge into my upper foreleg. I drew my baton, hoping it could finish him off.

Suddenly Glory appeared above him and fired every single shot left in the beam cartridge. One shot seemed to consume him in a bright red glow that fully engulfed him and sent him collapsing into a heap of ash at my hooves. I scrambled back as Glory continued to fire, tears on her cheeks as she landed. When the gun was empty she spat it out, screaming at the smoking pile of ash, "I only wanted to help! I wanted to help!" She then shook and voided her stomach as she staggered to the side, weeping. I did the only thing I could; I put my hooves around her and held her close as she shook and whimpered over and over again that simple plea.

Me too. The Wasteland made murderers of everypony.

* * *

"She's an emotionally unstable and naive liability, Blackjack," P-21 said when we'd found a trailer to hole up in for the night. It didn't do more than keep the rain off us. P-21 had only been able to strip the weapons off the raiders and find a number of mixed rounds and other lousy weapons before he'd gotten sick. I'd try using a beam pistol for now; we had twice as much ammo for that as we did for the automatic. How I missed my shotgun.

"Perfect. She'll fit in fine then," I replied. My leg burned terribly from the untreated slash. Without healing potions all I could do was hope we came across some help.

"I'm not saying leave her here. I'm saying don't let her carry a gun. She nearly shot you as much as that raider," P-21 argued softly. Glory lay curled on her side on the far end of the trailer in her smelly uniform. I'd give sexual favors for a laundromat right now.

"I'm not disarming her either, P-21. There are three of us and I can't be the only one shooting. So, unless you're going to start packing..."

"You know I can't do that."

“Right. Well, she can. She just needs to get her hooves under her and some training discipline. As for her ideals... what can I say? I might think there's something off with this whole Enclave business, but she wants to help. I do too. I think it's the only difference between us and raiders.” I had to admit that in three days I'd fallen into a somewhat frightening eagerness to shoot ponies.

P-21 sighed and looked out the window at the drizzle that clanged against the roof in a soft staccato. “How long is it supposed to keep doing this?”

“Glory said it could go on for hours or even days. Pegasi don't try and control the weather anymore, remember?” That had been a shock to me. I'd thought that interminable gray-black layer was the sky. Learning that it wasn't, that it was a mass of clouds perpetuated by the pegasi, really undermined the whole ‘Help Wastelanders’ argument. Glory hadn't been too happy to admit it either.

I didn't particularly mind the rain. It was cold and wet, sure, but the steady noise reminded me of the hum of ventilation recyclers constantly turning over the thick, stinky air. Even though it was depressing, I liked to think the rain was doing all it could to wash away the bloodstains.

Listening to rain, though, was hardly stimulating, and I quickly found myself bored. I didn't want to listen to the Overmare's craziness, though. I switched over to the radio channels, doubting that there was a chance I'd pick up 99's internal radio signals. Still, I slowly clicked one channel after the next, and then blinked as music filled the dingy trailer. Music in 99 was all stately pomp reminding us how we should all be loyal to the stable and Overmare. It was never this sweet, pining music that seemed to drive out the gloom before it.

“...let it go. Let it go. Let it go. Let it go...
When pain is all you have, let it go.”

The voice demanded every iota of my attention and I gave it happily. I had no idea who she was or what she was singing about, but I knew pain. All of us did. And as she sang on I felt my chest relax just a little bit. For a few brief minutes I was able to leave the Wasteland behind and be someplace else.

It finally trailed away, and a buck gave a long sigh. “That was Sweetie Belle with ‘Let it go’. Just giving us all a reminder that sometimes, when things are at their worst, it's best to just forgive and forget. This is DJ Pon3 with a shout-out to all my listeners back east around the Hoof. I know some of you feel like you don't get as many headlines out there, but it's a great big old Wasteland. So this news is just for you, Hoofington.

“Turns out the road between Manehattan and the Hoof is just a little safer now thanks to a pair of ponies fresh from a stable. You're gonna love this... looks like the Hoof has just a little more Security than a few days ago. That's right, she's got it displayed loud and proud. She's already carved up the raiders from Withers all the way to Megamart, and she doesn't look like she's going to be stopping any time soon. So here's a big thank you from DJ Pon3 to the Security Mare. Looking forward to seeing what law and order you bring down next.”

What the fuck? “What the fuck? Who the hell was that? How does he know what I'm doing? What...” Suddenly I knew. “Watcher...”

“Watcher?” P-21 said with a little frown.

"It's gotta be. Who knew we left a stable and took down raiders in Withers?" I crossed my hooves and nodded. "It makes perfect sense."

P-21 looked skeptical but didn't argue. Then he cracked a smile. "Security Mare, huh? Catchy."

I didn't feel catchy. I felt pissed! "He just told Deus where we are! The road..."

"Is really long and even Deus probably can't search the whole thing," P-21 interrupted reasonably.

"Well... what about that 'bringing down law and order' stuff? I'm not doing that. And he didn't even mention you beyond 'pair of ponies'!" I had to admit I was more than a little paranoid now. Why had Watcher just told Hoofington what I was up to? "It's like he's making me out to be some kind of law pony!"

"Well, aren't you? You attacked those raiders without hesitation in large part because what they're doing is wrong. You might not be upholding a written law, but you yourself said what they're doing is wrong and you were going to stop them." P-21 seemed to enjoy needling me. "So what's wrong?"

"Cause he's skipping the parts where I fucked up. No mention of what I did in the Boneyard or how I got Scoodle killed." It was like he was making me into some damned folk hero. I didn't want that.

Of course, the question was: how could I stop it?

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Friend of the Night - Your eyes adapt quickly to low-light situations.

(Huge thanks to Mr. H for helping me make this ten times better than I could on my own.)