

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 2: Trust

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You want to live?" And it zipped away through the bushes. I could hear Deus now. It was like the rapid thumping, grinding noise the old food wafer stamping machine was making before it blew. From

the snapping and crunching, I wondered if he was even bothering to go around the trees or just running straight through them. Come to think of it, I did want to live. I glanced at P-21, who shrugged at my look, and we turned to the left and raced in the direction the weird metal bug had taken.

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

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

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

I was gonna die.

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

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

Slowly, he reached up with his hooves and covered my eyes. Immediately, the sensation of up being down ended and I fell over. I wanted to retch, but there was nothing to bring up. I made sure my eyes were on the dirt when I opened them. I could finally lower my breathing rate to normal levels. "Thanks," I said softly, sincerely. He could have just trotted off and left me like that. If I'd left him behind, that's exactly how Deus would have found me eventually.

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

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

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

'What the fuck?' list.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I don’t...” he muttered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Damn it.

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

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

"Oh, that's not good," I muttered as I took some more steps forward and the clicking increased. This wasn't the 'flesh stripping radiation' I'd been warned of in school safety courses, but suddenly the pools seemed as inviting as a raider's welcome mat. Moving up the hillside, we could see a small still-intact farmhouse next to a barn. I could also make out the rainbow swirl on the pools and several rusted barrels sticking out of the water. More barrels were spilling from a large smashed vehicle that looked as if it'd just fallen from the sky into the center of the fields.

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

Inside, the place had been ransacked. Most of the furniture had been tossed about, the shelves were mostly bare, and the floors were covered with broken dishes and garbage. Some old bones and rags had been tossed in one corner, and a few newspapers lay in grubby heaps in another. 'Hoofington's

Angel of Death strikes again!' declared one headline. 'Four foals filleted', said the one beneath.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And this was why I didn’t touch terminals. “So, she taught you how to do this?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh. You look... cleaner,” he replied with a flush as he returned to the screen. He hit a few more

keys and suddenly smiled. "Finally. 'Granny'. Interesting password."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Entry 7) one generation pases away and anothr genertion comes, but Euestra abides fore

Log-in time out. Disconnecting.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Her hooves kicked at the air above her as she grinned confidently at me.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But could I go back? With Deus still out looking for me, what was to stop him from following me

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

No... I couldn't go back.

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

And just like that, being outside sucked.

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

Shit.

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

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

If he had my PipBuck tag, he could find me... was there a range on these things? Everypony in security was locatable anywhere in the stable, if there wasn't local interference. I activated Mom's tag... nothing. Maybe it was blocked by the stable walls. "She better be. I've never seen Deus this pissed before," a mare muttered softly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

...I couldn’t do it. “Sorry...” I muttered to her. She shuddered and closed her eyes. I hoped that that was that.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Wasn't it?

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

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

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

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

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

Suddenly, the thought of being on my own loomed inside me. It was a feeling I didn't like one bit. One of the most effective forms of punishment in 99 was isolation. I'd gotten it twice: twenty-four hours in a virtual closet for mouthing off about the Overmare. It was worse than detention; at least in there you

could hear ponies through the bars.

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

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

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

That was just crazy.

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

* * *

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

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

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

"No," he said simply.

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

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

That had started the disagreement. No matter what, he refused to take one of the guns. I didn't want to fight right now, not after everything he'd done for me the night before. Still, it bothered me. I also didn't like the idea of him being unable to protect himself or to save my butt if things went bad. I couldn't get him to open up about anything.

We weren't friends.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

P-21 reached over and lifted a dismembered pony's head. He looked at me grimly and then

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

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

Glancing back to make sure P-21 was behind me, I advanced down the central hallway, looking to the left and right and trying to keep track of the red marks ahead of me, alert for rapid movement that suggested they were charging. The raiders had spared little effort defiling the school. Most of the posters meant to motivate learning were defaced or torn down. Ruined books covered the floors in heaps of moldy paper. I peeked into one classroom that had been turned into a slaughterhouse, the foals' desks transformed into butcher's blocks.

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

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

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

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

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

"I told you..."

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

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

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

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

...Okay, what?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I don’t think that would help much. In 99, all the PipBuck showed me was red,” he said as he

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Cunt," he said, then gripped the stem of an apple bomb with his foul brown teeth. What was it with raiders and that word? Still, something felt off. He wasn't acting suicidal. He was acting cocky. Then again, if I shot him and that apple thing exploded, then this would definitely have an unhappy ending. Carefully, I shifted the shotgun into my front hooves and turned it to place the trigger in my mouth like I'd seen other ponies do. Then I slowly advanced. It had to be the most awkward approach attempted in pony history, but it was working. His grin wavered as he looked confused and then worried. Finally I took a step too far and he yanked the stem from the apple.

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

"I didn't..." he stammered.

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

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

There were some extra raiders in the hallway. "The one you spared must have gone for help. They snuck up behind you, and I thought they'd killed you," P-21 said quietly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"P-21," he chimed in.

"Y'all got funny names." That seemed to count in our favor. The teal pony lifted the box of Sugar Apple Bombs and poured them into her mouth, chewing frantically before letting out a loud belch, much to the giggles of the other fillies. She pointed at P-21. "He's got a great nose for findin' stuff. Got into that safe in the office and everything. Just click and open! Y'all should join up with 'em."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

There was a billboard at the edge of Withers where the road straightened to the southeast. 'Welcome to Hoofington, city of tomorrow!' read the caption over an image of soaring gray towers connected by bridges. In the sky above, seven pegasi flew like an arrowhead trailing crackling thunder. 'See Shadowbolt Tower!' declared bold words in one starburst. 'Home to the Hoofington Reapers!' announced another burst next to a grinning gap-toothed cartoon buck in a black helmet. 'Tour Robronco's Headquarters. Free for fillies and colts!' a little robot pony said with a wide smile.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

night.

Footnote: Level Up.

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

(Great thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, and huge thanks to Hinds and Bronode, without whose help I would never be able to finish. Also, thanks to everypony for reading and providing feedback.)

(Note: This chapter, too, is not its original version, though it is closer to it than the revised Chapter 1 is to its. Regrettably, though, our time is not unlimited, so we ask that you please bear with us through the slightly lower quality of the next few chapters. It gets better.)