

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 3: Learning Curve

"I'm so sorry..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Take them apart?" I levitated a rifle and concentrated. It was tough to telekinetically hold an object while messing with one small part of it, but I was able to unscrew and disassemble the various

portions of the weapon. Immediately, I saw what the teal pony had been talking about. Some of the screws on one rifle were almost rust-free. Another had an intact slide. One had a superior barrel. Of course, I had to listen closely to her directions as I assembled one weapon from four. When finished, my PipBuck suddenly showed a much higher value for my new rifle than any of the original four. How it knew that was slowly driving me crazy. When I finished I loaded five rounds into the clip and heard a comforting click as it loaded smoothly.

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

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

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

I saw that the teal pony that had been so helpful was getting upset so I adopted my easiest smile as I looked down at the fillies. "Well, I'm pretty sure she just wanted to be helpful after all the things that happened last night. Remember?" Scoodle definitely perked up at that, but the others still didn't look too happy. I couldn't blame them. I'd be ticked too if I saw some rube talked out of unloading a stack of bits back in 99.

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

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

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

of meat, wrapping them in some scrap paper from my duffel bag.

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

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

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

The trip along the road was made far easier by my E.F.S. picking out threats before they actually engaged us. The most prevalent were the bloatsprites and radhogs. The wildlife seemed incredibly aggressive and even lone radhogs didn't hesitate to charge our group. I took the opportunity to talk with Scoodle about the Wasteland. She seemed to delight in knowing more about the wastes than P-21 or myself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"So who might help us?" I asked her.

"Help ya with what?" she asked in return.

That was a very good question.

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

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

"Why does that just scream 'bad' to me?" I asked sarcastically, getting a smirk in return.

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

"Arlosté's a Reaper now," Boing said to Scoodle.

"Arlosté's too nice ta be a Reaper, so it'd never happen," Scoodle countered.

"Arlosté?" I asked, curious about this little digression.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Roboponies?" P-21 asked, curiously.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Oh. I'd completely forgotten about the files he'd transferred to my PipBuck. "Um... not yet?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Instantly, my PipBuck came alight with red bars as horrific screams raised in the air. The mounds around me shifted and from the depths emerged chunks of rotting meat clinging to pony frames. Shredded lips allowed jagged mouths to open far wider than any living pony's could. There was nowhere to run; they stepped out onto the road in both directions.

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

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

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

The teal filly was ripped in two before my eyes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

pans! Like, what does that even mean?"

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

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

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

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

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

We walked silently for several minutes before from behind us came the plaintive wail of "Tiara! Tiara! Where are you?"

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It was half an hour before we exited the boneyard. It didn't take long for the radiation I'd been soaking in to catch up with me and have me puking up my lunch. I felt like crap. I deserved to feel like crap. My guts gurgled and every square inch of my body felt like it'd been beaten. The Crusaders didn't say a single word. They didn't look at me or each other, but I could almost hear their thoughts in the back of my mind saying over and over again 'She killed Scoodle for a box of *bullets*.'

Finally clear, I looked behind me, trying for some kind of smile... something... to make this not the utter disaster it was. "Safe and..." Only P-21 was behind me. "Sound..." I looked at the long dead grass and bare bushes along the road. There was no sign of the Crusaders to be had. "They left..." How profoundly insightful I'd become since I'd fucked up.

"Yeah. A little bit ago," he replied evenly as he looked along the road. "I think there's a house up there. We can rest and take care of you."

"I don't want to be taken care of," I muttered softly.

"I'm sorry, did you say something?" P-21 walked in front of me, his sure blue eyes bearing down into mine. "Sometimes we don't get what we want," he said as he nudged me towards a single story house beside the road. "Sometimes we don't get to sit around and have pity parties for our mistakes. Sometimes we just have to keep going because, otherwise, we might as well just die."

"That's what..." I started to say.

He hit me hard enough to knock me on my side. I stared up into the sky and felt my guts churn and my pupils contract. "I'm sorry. Were you about to say you wanted to die? Is that it?" he said as he glared down at me. "If you were this weak, you should have just given yourself to Deus and been done with it."

"I killed Scoodle!" I yelled up at him. It felt like a confession.

"Yeah! You did, you fucking idiot!" he screamed back down at me. "Didn't I tell you to listen to her? Didn't you say to me that I know what's right when it comes to this sort of thing? But she's dead, Blackjack, and unless you wallowing in pity or dying will somehow magically bring her back to life then this is accomplishing nothing except indulging in your own selfish wishes!"

I slowly opened my eyes, looking into his. He hated me. I hated me. Yet no matter how much I wanted to be done, I had to admit that he was right. Me dying right now wouldn't bring back Scoodle. It wouldn't right some great cosmic wrong and fix anything. It would just be another corpse in the wastelands. "I'm so sorry," I whispered softly.

"Then prove it, Blackjack. Live and don't ever fuck up like that again. Learn from this, because if you ever kill another pony through stupidity then I will fucking end you." He shoved his head under my shoulders and turned me over so I no longer stared into that terrible void above... only now I had an equally vast void within and I couldn't look away from it.

* * *

When I had been a little filly, I'd been drilled on the various stages of radiation poisoning. Nausea arrived first, followed rapidly by diarrhea, headache, muscle weakness and fatigue, bruising, mane loss, neurological disorders, and at the most extreme end, being cooked by the prolonged exposure. That was the 'flesh melting radiation' I was so concerned about. P-21 managed to get me into the derelict house after I'd shat myself but before I collapsed. Lying on my side on a filthy mattress, I felt like I was rotting from the inside out. That wasn't completely inaccurate, as the next time my bowels moved it was to dump blood over my hind legs. I drifted between guilt-ridden consciousness and blissful unconsciousness.

The worst was when I was stuck between the two. I saw Deus laughing at me as he sawed off my PipBuck with a chainsaw penis. The Overmare reminded me that I was ultimately disposable. The little orange pony figurine told me that she could only help so much; I'd have to get up and be strong on my own. I felt eyeglasses melting on my face and covering my cheeks in cracked glass. Scoodle's severed head lay on the bed next to me and whispered softly over and over again, "Stable ponies don't know nothin'. Don't touch anything!"

All the while, P-21 nursed me back to health. He'd disappear for hours on end and I'd lie there wondering if he'd died or simply moved on. I didn't understand why he wasted his time with me, and yet

he did. He didn't say a word of complaint, nor did he mention anything more about the events in the boneyard.

When I awoke to lucidity, feeling like a clogged up toilet, I saw the spritebot hovering before my face. Watcher cleared his throat. "So. Is this it?"

I carefully raised my head. The spritebot wasn't transforming into some face eating nightmare. "Watcher?"

"Yeah. That's me. What about you, Blackjack? Is this it? Is this the point where the Wasteland breaks you?" The spritebot looked particularly solemn as it hovered before me.

Carefully I pushed myself up and covered my face with my hooves. "I fucked up, Watcher."

"You're not the first. And if I can be blunt, your fuck up only killed one filly. I've known ponies whose fuck ups killed millions. So on the grand scale of fuck ups, I think you're overrating yourself." Slowly I dropped my hooves from my face to look at the little machine as it went on. "So I'm asking you: is this it? Are you just a pony that wallows in self-pity and kicks herself for a mistake, or not? Because if this is it, then I'll leave you be. I can't help you. You can't help anypony."

It would have been easy to just fold right then. But as I sat on the edge of the bed, damn me, I couldn't help smiling as I looked at the machine. I reeked of vomit, crap, blood, and despair but I still felt my lips curl mirthlessly as I looked at the device. "Are you on that grand scale of fuck ups too, Watcher?"

There was a long pause, and I wondered if I'd offended him to the point that he would just wash his hooves of me. "Yeah. I am."

"Did your fuck up kill someone who didn't deserve it?" There was silence and I knew he wouldn't answer. He didn't have to. I sat there for a minute longer, looking at my hooves. "I was so proud when I saved those girls from those raiders. Now..." I closed my eyes and grit my teeth. It would be so easy just to give up. Fold the hand. Cash in the chips. Quitters might not go bust, but they'd also never make it big. I opened my eyes as I looked right at the machine, wondering what Watcher's face looked like right now. Finally, I asked softly, "So how do I move on, Watcher?"

"You do everything you can to make up for it, knowing that you'll never succeed in getting rid of the guilt. You devote yourself to spending every second trying to do better despite the fact that it will never be enough. And you pray with every single good act you do that somehow when your life is over that your lifetime will come close to making up for the wrong you committed." Watcher spoke so clear and true that I couldn't stop smiling and crying at the same time.

"Well. That sounds like a plan," I whispered. "So where do I start?"

* * *

Turns out, starting involved me getting off that filthy bed and finding some RadAway before I either died outright or grew a second head. While that might have doubled my smarts, it wasn't something I was exactly looking forward to. On the plus side, Watcher knew a possible source of the radiation-purging drug. A sky carriage had crashed with a load of Ministry of Peace supplies that hadn't

been scavenged. The reason was simple.

"Those are some nasty looking reptiles," I muttered as I looked down at the lake surrounded by dead trees and gangly weeds. A small island on a cove was connected to the mainland by a rotten bridge. I could barely make out the sight of the upside down sky carriage mixed in with the remains of a gazebo. P-21 and I were crouched in the flattened remains of a small cottage a small ways above the gray waters of the small lake. 'Lake Macintosh' appeared on my PipBuck map.

I had no idea what the reptiles might be. No doubt if I put a hunk of their remains in my bag something would pop up. In his scavenging, P-21 had rounded up six rounds for the rifle and six shotgun shells. It would have to do.

"You're being stupid again," P-21 warned me.

"Ending me stupid?"

"No, just standard stupid."

"That means I'm improving," I said, and even he smiled at it, shaking his head. I looked out at the gazebo and crashed carriage. The E.F.S. informed me that there were three, but, after the boneyard, I wasn't going to take it for granted. "I'm dying without that RadAway," I said as I slumped against the mossy foundation stones. "A few more days and I'll go like Hoss did. Say I'm wrong." He pressed his lips together as he scowled at me.

"So let me sneak over there and get it," he pressed.

"No," I replied firmly. "I appreciate all the help you've given me, P-21. I'm not going to let you risk your life for mine over this." He might be sneaky, but I had no idea if those mutated animals could sniff him out; I wasn't about to let him take that chance.

"Let me? You're dying of radiation poisoning, Blackjack. How are you planning to stop me?" he asked as he turned towards the ruined gazebo.

I just looked at him, then down at the lounging mutant alligators. The rifle came up and without any hesitation I fired a shot right into a mutant gator. It gave a bellow and rose out of the water, charging towards the two of us. P-21 stared at me with a scathing look that would do any raider proud, eyelid twitching, before he turned and ran for cover. "Sorry, P-21. I've got to save my own life this time," I said as I faced the enemy.

One way or another, it was about to be resolved. I triggered my S.A.T.S. and placed two rounds exactly in the forehead of my target. The fourth round caught his eye, and the beast staggered. The fifth missed. The final round, three past what I'd hoped to use, dropped the beast in its tracks. I discarded the rifle and backed away up the hill as rapidly as I could. The radiation poisoning and fever were slowing me down, but it still kept the gators in front of me.

Out came the shotgun as the two closed in. The recharge on my S.A.T.S. slowed to a crawl as I unloaded shot after shot into the leading crocodile. Three shots left. Two. One. The buckshot of the final round scattered its brains across its back.

Unfortunately, I was now out of ammo. This would normally be the point where I would die and P-21 would take over and probably do the Wasteland a lot more good. There was just one catch: I wasn't done paying for a little teal pony. As the gator lunged, my magic flipped the shotgun vertical and rammed it into the gator's mouth. It hissed and tried to claw at the pump action, the weapon bending under the ferocious strength of its jaws.

From my saddlebags I floated an apple-shaped grenade and plunged it straight into the radigator's maw. My telekinesis plucked the stem from the tip as it disappeared down the gator's throat. Five... four... three... two... one... huh. The shotgun snapped in two and immediately I backed away, trying to draw out my last grenade.

The mutant gator exploded in a nice spray of faintly radioactive blood. Given the massive dose I'd already taken, I quickly moved away before I simply keeled over dead. I really didn't want to win and then fall over. Slowly I staggered my way down towards the rotten bridge and the gazebo.

P-21 emerged at my side. "Feeling better?" His tone might have been snide, but there was some sincerity in his question.

"A little bit," I replied. The wastelands were giving me a brutal education, but I would rise to the challenge. I'd be stronger, and I'd try to never let my stupidity endanger another pony if I could. "I know you wanted to help me, P-21. I'm sorry that I couldn't let you this time."

He rolled his eyes and gave a long sigh. "I'm back in the stable again." I detected more than a little bitterness in that comment.

I looked over at him in confusion as we walked over the bridge. "Huh?"

He rounded on me, teeth bared as he glared with undisguised anger. "My whole life, I've had mares telling me what I can and can't do. I wasn't even allowed the option of turning a mare down if she was on my breeding rotation." He gave a little snort. "Did you know some males in 99 would cut or beat themselves just to get a break? Just to do something we wanted instead of what we were instructed to do?"

I honestly didn't have a clue. I could barely imagine. "We all had to do things that we didn't want to do in 99. I didn't want to be in security." That was how 99 went. You did what you were told, filled your role, and never thought outside it.

"You didn't want to be anything, Blackjack. If there was a 'sit on my tail and play cards all day' job you'd have been fine, but otherwise you wouldn't have been happy doing anything," he said as we approached the wrecked gazebo. The rusty skywagon still had bright yellow paint and a pink butterfly visible. Inside were a number of rotten and rusty boxes, but there were at least three that appeared intact. "Tell me you had some pining need to be a maintenance mare like Rivets. Did you curse your rotten luck that you missed out on protein recycling duty or an exciting future in waste management?"

"Well..." I stammered.

He stood there, staring at me with his lips pressed together.

"Can we hold this conversation until after I'm not irradiated?" I asked with a feeble smile.

"No. No, I don't think so. I think I want to have this conversation *now*," he said in his firm and irritated voice. I could see that now the dam had been cracked, and nothing was going to stop this deluge. "So what is it, Blackjack? If you had a choice to not be in security, what would you do? Huh?" He stomped to the first box, clenched his teeth on the bobby pin, and started on the lock.

And to be honest, I didn't know what to answer. I'd always thought that I was stuck with security, which meant I resented it. To be honest though, it hadn't been a bad job. Taking males out of the population was about the worst it got. There was dealing with the Overmare more closely, but there were plenty of ponies that worked a lot harder than I had whose jobs were far more critical to the survival of the stable.

"I guess you're right. I guess security wasn't that bad for me," I admitted. I was also too tired and feverish to do more than sit on my butt as he worked. "What about you, P-21? Tell me what you wanted to do." He kept his glare on the lock. I sighed. "If you want, that is."

He glanced at me and then opened the lock. Inside were two healing potions and some Rad-X. 'Don't let radiation get you down', the label read. "I wanted to be a teacher," he finally said softly.

"A teacher?" I winced at the skepticism in my voice. I just couldn't imagine a male doing... that.

"Yes, a teacher." He examined one rusty lock on the second, jammed in the screwdriver, and gave it a hard twist. With a pop, it opened right up. "Before I was P-1 I tried to learn all I could about arcane sciences. That was how I knew Duct Tape so well; I studied off her as she went through training. I thought that if I knew enough that maybe the Overmare would let me teach. I would have been fine doing both jobs." He opened up the crate and took out two empty syringes and two boxes of some kind of canned meat. "Know what the Overmare said? She said she'd let me teach sex education in my breeding rotation."

I winced. That sounded just like her. I lay down, feeling lightheaded. My eyes stared at the third container as he attacked the lock with bobby pin and screwdriver. "Still... a teacher," I said as I closed my eyes, feeling exhausted. "I bet you would have been good at it. I saw how you were with the Crusaders."

He glanced at me and then carefully adjusted the lockpick. There was a quiet scraping noise as he worked whatever magic he did, then a soft click as the top opened.

Inside were three clear plastic pouches filled with amber fluid. 'RadAway, your source of radiation relief', it proclaimed. "Well, if it's any consolation, I think you were one of the best mares in security. No pony else would have tried to stop Daisy and Marmalade from beating the snot out of a male. And you were the one who came up with the idea to lead Deus out of the stable."

"You have no idea how depressing that statement is," I said. He hoofed me the first pouch and, after fiddling with the straw for a moment, I slurped it down. Ooh, orangey! On my PipBuck, the rad meter dropped a bit closer towards yellow. By the time all three doses were inside me, the needle hovered around the middle of the yellow band. I still felt crummy, but a little better than I had before. With luck, I wouldn't lose my mane or turn into one of those ghoulish things.

"I was just being stupid," I muttered, keeping my eyes down. "I have a habit of doing that."

"You have a habit of being reckless, Blackjack. What you did was brave, even with that glowing ghoul. I never would have thought to talk to it or do hoof bumps," he said calmly as he proceeded to dig through the remains of the cart as the drug did its work. Sadly, there were no bullets to be found on a Ministry of Peace sky carriage. He did, however, find a glowing marble in the wreckage of the gazebo. "What's this?"

I held out my hoof and looked at it. Well, it wasn't radioactive, didn't go bang, and didn't seem edible. I dropped it in my bag and frowned as 'Lake Macintosh Memory Orb' appeared in my inventory. How the heck did my PipBuck know what it was when I didn't? "No clue. I'll worry about it later." Standing, I had to admit I felt stronger... not 100% yet, but better. "So. Does this mean next time I see Watcher I can tell him we're friends?" I was only half serious, but the other half was curious about his thoughts.

"No," he replied firmly, and then gave me a grudging smile, "but we're closer to it than we were."

"Well. That means I'm improving."

Footnote: Level Up.

Skill Note: Guns (50)

New Perk: Run and Gun - Better accuracy with ranged weapons while moving.

Quest Perk: Minor Mutation: Rad Sight - When under the effects of minor radiation poisoning, gain +1 Perception in low light conditions. -15 to sneak, speech when not wearing sunglasses, authority glasses, or mirrored sunglasses.