

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 5: Work

“Step one... stay alive. Step two... I dunno. Step three... profit!”

So. That's Hoofington. The Hoof. Or 'the Core' if you were talking about the inner city where all the technological marvels were supposed to be. Glory had been filling us in all morning as we continued along the decayed road. But now, as it rose into an overpass, I had my first look at the city. And I didn't like it one bit.

The Core of Hoofington lay on an island surrounded by sluggishly flowing green fluids swirling with noxious pink contaminants. With such limited space, the buildings within the Core rose higher and higher until the tops disappeared into the cloud layer. Some buildings ended in broken-off spars, while others leaned precariously against their neighbors. Clouds of green clung to the black, crumbling spires, and if there were pegasi in those clouds... well, good luck to them. The entire Core was backlit by a perpetual green glow that pulsed and flickered like a heartbeat. I could barely make out the skeletal remains of a bridge several miles ahead of us beside a large oval structure.

On the sides of the river were the boroughs, the suburban sprawls that had once held the populace. Far less resilient than the skyscrapers of Hoofington proper, they formed a thick belt of crumbling buildings and blocked roads. With the exception of the highway cutting towards the Core, I couldn't see a way through it. The river flowed to the north on our left, the sprawl changing into more industrial-style buildings. To the right were more dead trees and raider territory. I could barely make out the top of a large building to our southwest.

But what mattered to the three of us was the massive square building beyond the overpass. The building was surrounded by a berm of scrapped carts, sky carriages, and other debris. Four large turrets clung to the corners, sweeping their long barrels back and forth. Bright neon lights flickered in the rainy gray weather: 'Megamart', they said, and beneath that in bright red paint was 'Finders Keepers'. Unless I was mistaken, this was the headquarters of the Finders.

We approached under the ominous gaze of the turrets. Each barrel seemed a match for Deus as we walked along the crumbling highway towards the gate. The half dozen ponies looking boredly at the small trickle of traffic perked up at the sight of the three of us. "Entrance fee," a unicorn mare said as she looked over my barding. Her green hide was mottled with the oddest brown and gray splotches.

"We have to pay to get in?" P-21 said skeptically.

"Five caps a head. Ten per Bessy. Or you can just become a Finder for the discount price of a thousand caps. You don't like it, pick a direction and start walking," she said matter-of-factly.

One of the guards looked closer at me and then broke into a grin. "Hey, Keystone! It's her. Security Mare!" The others took note as well and immediately started to chuckle and talk to each other. I could have found DJ Pon3 and punted him clear over the Core. They were saying it like I was Superpony. "Bottlecap wouldn't mind if we gave her a pass."

The camouflage mare looked at me coolly. "So she killed those psychos at Pony Joe's. That's not so much," she said as she looked me over. I half wanted to agree with her. I also didn't want to give up any caps just to get inside.

"Hey, I couldn't just let them hang out along the roads. Pretty sure you folks need them," I said as if it wasn't anything at all, but from the looks I'd scored a win. I grimaced, not happy with the role, but if it'd save me some money...

It looked like I'd managed to say the right thing. "Go in. Make sure you talk to the manager. She was talking about you earlier," Keystone said as she stepped aside and let us in. "Fire a weapon and bring the wrath of Gun down on you."

"Nice job, Security Mare," P-21 said once we were past, as we approached the front doors beneath the buzzing neon sign.

I snorted. "Shut it."

"You can be sore about the reputation or you can use it. Not both," P-21 replied casually. I stuck my tongue out at him, much to Glory's surprise.

I was surprised that the interior more resembled a junkyard than anything else. Piles and pallets of scrap lay in carefully stacked rows. There were perhaps a dozen booths with vendors hawking their wares. I saw a drum-fed shotgun and promptly started salivating. There was a crude medical clinic set up over by the pharmacy, and their advertisement of 'radiation purging' appealed more than the shotgun. A row of cots served as a hotel of sorts, and there was a kitchen. Overhead rested 'Gun', a huge cannon mounted in a ceiling turret. I didn't even want to imagine... okay... in my imagination the sight of it firing was pretty cool, but I'd be happy putting off witnessing the reality. Thing looked like it fired I-beams.

There were also probably as many ponies here as there were in Stable 99. They moved in small clumps, keeping a wary eye as they looked around. Some were obviously raiders, and I had to glance up at Gun to remind myself to behave. Most appeared to be fairly benign, talking and laughing with each other while they swapped stories and goods. Two well-dressed fillies were escorted by a dozen bodyguards as they chattered on about 'slumming'. Six ponies stomping in full power armor were given a wide berth as they seemed dead set on buying every grenade and missile they could get their hooves on. I felt a stab of guilt at the sight of four Crusaders walking out with a bag full of canned goods, though at least they weren't the ones I knew.

"It's a regular slice of the Wasteland. I wonder where the Enclavers are?" P-21 said, frowning as he looked at a bin full of grenades. "Where do they find this stuff?"

"All over," a lemon-furred blue-maned mare answered brightly as she approached us. She had three bottle caps for her cutie mark. She wore a slightly off-color navy blue vest with a name tag that read 'Hello, my name is Bottlecap, your Megamart Manager.' "Hoofington had more military bases around it than any city in Equestria, on account of the enemy constantly attempting to disrupt research and development. After the bombs fell, the ordnance just sat around in hidden caches and arsenals. We pay top caps for any and all war materiel." Her eyes looked at my security barding and she smiled. "Ah, you're the mare who cleared the Manehattan highway!"

Okay. Maybe there was a security discount or something. It was the only silver lining I could see. "Yeah. It's not a big deal. It just sort of happened," I said with an awkward smile. She gave me a very calculating look that made me shift awkwardly. "I mean, they were just raiders. Anypony would have killed them."

"I'm afraid you're mistaken," she said as she looked at me with a cool little smile. "Anypony would have given them a wide berth while they tried to extort my caravans. You were the one that shut them down. Perhaps not a big deal to you, but we've lost six caravans in as many months. Trade to Tenpony and Gutterville was down to a trickle." She reached into her vest and took out a small plastic bag filled with caps. "Consider this a 'thank you' from the Finders," she said as she tossed it to me with a smile.

"Wow. Very generous," P-21 observed curiously. There was a clear look of suspicion on his face. Was I the only pony in our merry band that tried to look open?

"Well, it was a standing contract. I am fairly sure you'll spend it here, so I'll recover some of it from the vendors. And if it outfits you, well, the more likely you'll bring in profitable goods in the future," Bottlecap said, regarding him with an even look as her explanation mollified him.

I glanced at my PipBuck and saw the amount. Five hundred caps, not counting the miscellaneous junk we'd acquired. I glanced at P-21 and Glory, both of whom were looking around in surprise. I counted out two groups of twenty-five caps each and handed them to Glory and P-21. "Why don't you two get something to eat and look around? Maybe you'll find some Enclave ponies," I suggested to Glory.

"No. We're not allowed here. This place is restricted," she said sullenly as she took the caps and turned to walk along the rows. P-21 gave me a curious look before he followed her.

"She's Enclave?" Bottlecap asked with a frown. I nodded hesitantly and she immediately scowled. "Be careful then. You may not realize it – she may not realize it – but she's trouble."

"I doubt she's very dangerous," I replied and got a dry look in return. Okay, Enclave a sore topic. I looked back at Bottlecap and gave her my surest smile. "Sorry about P-21's suspicion. He's dealing with a lot of pain. It's been a rough few days for us."

"Just a few days, imagine that," she replied dryly, arching her brow in a way that suggested I hadn't seen anything yet.

"Yeah..." Okay, try not to sound like a complete idiot. "I was wondering if we could get some information."

"Information is a commodity like bullets and armor," she answered back. "Simple questions are easy enough, but if you're looking for something specific then it'll be pricey."

I winced at that. "I have a data file. EC-1101. I need to find out what it is."

"Data analysis? Sweet Goddesses, you know how to jump to the top of the price list," she said, looking slightly pleased at this fact. I showed her the file and she frowned at my PipBuck. "Encrypted?" I

nodded and she closed her blue eyes, swaying her head back and forth a little before she concluded, "Ten thousand caps." She looked at me with an even, sober expression. "That includes our processing fee."

Had her expression been anything but professional and serious I would have laughed. "Ten thousand?"

"If you want a safe and reliable job, yes. I can think of cheaper sources, but they'd more likely shoot you and take the data themselves. If you want to buy an answer, ten thousand caps," she said with a conciliatory smile. "Sorry, but that's the honest answer."

Great. The 'get the info quick' plan just went swirling down the toilet. Now I needed to work on a 'get rich quick' plan. "Thanks. At least I have a number to aim for," I said with a sigh. A five-digit number. I gave my best 'Nightmare Moon may care' grin. "So, any suggestions on a way to get ten thousand caps?"

"I assume you want this money relatively quickly, rather than over the course of a lifetime?" Bottlecap asked with an arch of her brow and an approving smile. When I nodded she looked me over. "Well, competent help always demands a price," she said as she walked to a large bulletin board that was covered with pieces of paper. Some were printed documents, but most were hoof-written. "We don't just find things. We also handle ponies looking for special help. Sometimes it'll be retrieving goods, other times it's contract work like clearing out nests of dangerous wildlife or bounty hunting."

"Bounties?" I said as I looked over the papers. "You mean killing ponies for bottle caps?"

"Oh yes. That can be quite lucrative... provided you don't mind letting another decide if somepony should die," she said as she pointed at a section with a hoof. "Don't let the language fool you. They'll all be described as raiders, murderers, thieves, and killers... whether they are or not. Some are. Some aren't. You decide."

I needed ten thousand bottle caps, and in front of me I had a wall of opportunity. "Thanks. I'll have to read these closely." Actually, P-21 reading them would be a safer bet... P-21... I looked back at the yellow mare. "One last question. My friend was injured a few days ago. It's really hurting him and he's going to need some substantial healing. More than just a standard healing potion."

"Magical surgery's almost as expensive as data decryption and analysis." She regarded me for a long moment. "However, west of here is the Fluttershy Medical Center. If there were something salvageable, it would be there. The upper floors haven't been thoroughly looted or explored. It's a... difficult place. But shy of going to the Ministry of Peace's hub in the Core I can't think of any place it would be available."

"Thanks, Bottlecap."

"Don't thank me, Security. I just gave you a direction. You're the one that actually has to do the work. Good luck," she said as she walked off, hailing two ponies encased head to hoof in metal armor with some impressive multi-barreled hardware strapped to the sides. "Welcome, Steel Rangers! Missiles, grenades, or 5mm ammunition today?" So they were the Steel Rangers? Well it was good to know Deus wasn't the only one packing cannons.

I stopped by the clinic, where prices were scratched out on a busted slab of blackboard in chalk. *'Patchwork: 50c. Rad purge: 100c. Teeth pulled, 10c each. Worm and parasite removal: 25c. Ask about our stock of drugs, certain to pick you right up. Specials: Dash 75c. Amputations in under a minute or half off.'* The doctor, and I use the term lightly, was a scrawny old brown unicorn with a bonesaw for a cutie mark and wearing a white coat covered in old yellow stains.

I opted for the 'patchwork and purge special' for 125c. I unbelted my barding and let the blue and yellow padded armor be lifted from me. Beneath it my white hide was a roadmap of bruises, yellow discolorations, angry red lines, and half-healed strips of medical bandages. My neck still ached from the shots in the school and my cheek throbbed from Glory's welcome present. Bonesaw levitated a pair of spectacles onto his muzzle as he blinked at my injuries. "Well now. Somepony's been busy? Rad burns. Beam burns. Bullet holes. Lots of healing potion fixes." He shaded my eyes with his hoof and gave a grim nod. "Interesting. I've seen eyes like that before."

"Really?" Maybe he could fix them?

"Yup. See 'em all the time on ghouls," he said with a grim chuckle. "Looks like Security doesn't come easy."

"That's not my name," I said as my ears folded. "I don't know why DJ Pon3 called me that, but it's nonsense."

He looked at me coolly. "Girl, I've been in the Wasteland a while now and outlived my children and grandchildren. If there's one thing more precious than clean water and bullets, it's the feeling that tomorrow you're less likely to die than today. Those raiders might be replaced by some other band, but yesterday we nearly had a party when we'd heard we could send caravans safely to Manehattan again. That might be nonsense to you, but it means the world to us."

I didn't know if I should feel encouraged, annoyed, or embarrassed, so I settled with shutting up and letting him get to work. P-21 and Glory stopped by, the former sipping water through a straw as the latter enjoyed a Sparkle-Cola. Both of them seemed a bit taken aback at the sight of me in my hide. Not that I was too embarrassed about that; clothing in 99 was a matter of duty and I'd been fine trotting around off-duty with my mark just hanging out. Bonesaw gave me a cup of some chalky gloop as he went to work with his magic. I had to admit that as scraggly as he was, Bonesaw knew his trade. By the time he finished I felt like I'd just received treatment at 99's medical center.

"Ten thousand caps?" Glory gaped at the pair of us once my treatment was finished. The doc had given me something called Buck, and I had to admit I felt more energized than ever. Glory frowned. "Is that a lot?"

"That Sparkle-Cola was ten caps. So it's the equivalent of a thousand colas," P-21 said calmly.

Glory winced. "Yeah. I guess that is a lot." Then she thought for a moment. "Well. There might be a cheaper option. I'm pretty sure that if we got to the Skyport, the Enclave might be able to crack the encryption for free. I'm sure they'd be happy to in exchange for returning me." She frowned, rubbing her mane as she rolled her eyes a little. "I'm... just a little unsure of how you get to the Skyport from here though. I think it's east...ish?"

"That's... a possibility." Maybe once I knew more about the Enclave than just two opinions. Morning Glory, I knew, would have happily helped. When I thought about Brolly's last broadcast, the clouds, and what had happened to the Volunteer Corps, I had doubts about the rest of the Enclave. Then I remembered something. "Glory, who is Rainbow Dash?"

Her eyes went round with shock, lips pressed close together as if trying to keep from blurting something out. Finally she stammered, "Rainbow Dash? She... ah... oh my..." Clearly this wasn't a topic she expected to discuss. "Well, she was the greatest heroine of the pegasi during the war... but... well..." She looked at me sadly. "When the bombs fell, she wanted us to go down to the surface and help."

P-21 looked at her in confusion. "So what's wrong with that? Isn't that why you're here?"

She shook her head firmly. "I want to help now, but she demanded the pegasi fly down and help despite the magical radiation of hundreds of balefire bombs poisoning the atmosphere. Tens of thousands of pegasi would have died, or more... We'd already lost Cloudsdale, so the pegasus council refused. She left... and probably died of radiation poisoning," she said quietly, looking at her hooves. "Some ponies really respect her for that, but..."

"I'm guessing you don't?" I asked with a little smile.

She sighed with a little frown, shaking her head. "If she'd stayed and listened to the council, she could have shaped things for the better. The Enclave was established to protect the pegasus people, and they do. But..." She glanced around the Megamart. "Well, maybe if Rainbow Dash hadn't left then the Enclave would have started helping the surface sooner. Instead she left and it took two hundred years of petitions and peaceful demonstrations for the Volunteer Corps to do what she'd wanted us to do right after the bombs blew." She finished drinking her Sparkle-Cola.

I had to admit my mane was itching in curiosity. "So, what's life in the clouds like?"

Again, clearly not a question she expected. "Um... it's different. That's all I can really say," she said softly. "We're not supposed to discuss Thunderhead. It's all classified." Huh, go figure. Secrets for her, suspicion from him. I could tell I had a long way to go on this whole 'making friends' thing. P-21 still wasn't even willing to carry a gun; he still saw me as embodying all the fucked up shit he'd endured in Stable 99.

Time for a topic change! "So, P-21. Have you seen their little bulletin board? I'm pretty sure if we can knock out some jobs, sell any salvage we don't need, and get lucky then we might be able to get that ten thousand caps pretty quick." Quick hopefully meaning that we wouldn't need months of searching. I really doubted we could evade Deus that long, particularly if that stupid DJ was giving my position away every other broadcast. I pulled out a couple of slips of paper and slid them to him. "I was hoping you could help me pick?"

"Right. Get rich quick. That's a plan that always works out," he replied sardonically, but took the papers. "Okay... kill so and so... no. No. No." He looked at one oddly, arching a brow. "Okay... kill and defile... no. Defile and kill? Ugh. What is wrong with these ponies?" He then frowned as he smoothed out a crumpled note written on the back of a lottery ticket. "This might be okay. Some mare wants us to

collect radscorpion venom glands.”

“Oh? To make anti-toxin?” Glory asked curiously.

“Casserole,” P-21 answered with a small roll of his eyes. Glory mouthed the word in bafflement as P-21 went on. “Apparently they’re delicious and nutritious. She’s paying twenty-five caps each. Six hundred caps if we can bring her twenty. Apparently there’s a pit west of here that’s full of them.”

“What’s a radscorpion?” I asked, glancing at Glory.

“Well, I heard they’re like scorpions... only bigger.”

“Great. So what’s a scorpion?” I asked with a crooked little smile.

Clearly she wasn’t used to facing my level of professional ignorance. “Um... a bug. Well, technically an arachnid, but...”

I stomped my hoof, cutting her off. “Aha! Bugs. I can kill bugs. Bring on the caps!” No moral ambiguity there. “What else you got?”

He sifted through more. “Murder... murder... not enough caps... murder... murder... Wait. Salvage.” He lifted the yellowed printout. “Ironshod Firearms R&D center. The poster wants us to get some components from their maneframe. Bonus if we can extract any blueprints still within the system.”

“Great. So we get to the maneframe, rip out the blueprints and yank any spare parts, and get rich!” I declared, getting wincing from both of them. “What?”

P-21 looked at Glory. “Can you remove the parts?”

“Well... I mean... I know the basics. Maybe?” Glory said with a sheepish smile as she tapped her hooves together. “Probably better than just yanking them out.”

“That would be a thousand caps, plus two hundred per blueprint,” P-21 said calmly as he fished through some more. “Huh. This is a recent one. ‘Time sensitive.’ Two thousand caps to remove squatters at the Fluttershy Medical Center.”

My ears immediately perked. “Remove? As in kill and mutilate?” Glory looked at me with some concern. “What? You’ve heard these contracts. The mutilation’s always implied.”

“It just says remove. Doesn’t say they’re raiders like all the rest so it might be legit.”

“Well, we should give it a shot, then. After that, we can poke around. We might find something valuable.” I tried to keep my voice as calm as possible, but P-21 still looked suspicious... okay, he usually looked suspicious. Honestly, what was the deal? You round up a guy for summary execution and they never trust you again? Well, if we found something to help his bum leg, maybe then he’d start thinking of me as a friend rather than ‘stable reminder’.

“Okay. So we stomp some bugs, yank out some wires, and roust some squatters. How hard can

that be?" I said with a grin at the other two. P-21 covered his face with his hoof while Glory clearly seemed to have some doubts. "What?"

"She just had to say it," P-21 muttered.

* * *

"I just had to say it!" I shouted over the chittering, snapping horde that was advancing at me. The drum-fed combat shotgun I'd picked up for a hundred caps roared over and over again as I retreated around the gravel pit, a half dozen of the radscorpions clawing at me with their pincers and stabbing with their venom-tipped stingers. I couldn't miss at this range... but I also wasn't having the best of luck piercing their hides.

S.A.T.S. had finally failed me, too. The targeting and time manipulation spell might have slowed things down, but it didn't *stop* time. By the time it finished, two of the radscorpions were dead, but the remainder had put new holes in my forelegs with their razor-sharp pincers. I was going to have to visit Bonesaw again when this was all done. Fortunately, their barbed tails hadn't penetrated my barding yet.

The gravel pit was filled with rusted machinery that made Morning Glory's job infinitely harder. She had to swoop under and around the girders, busted conveyors, and decaying equipment to try and follow me as I blasted ammo like crazy. She proved much more adept with the beam pistol fighting insects than ponies. I had no clue how she could aim the boxy contraption clenched in her teeth, but the soft 'crak' of each shot mixed well with the throaty 'boom' of my shotgun.

"This is getting out of hoof!" P-21 called from the lip of the pit, watching through a pair of binoculars. While I really wanted him to get a gun and join in the fight, I was glad for any help right now. "More are coming out of that cave, Blackjack!" he yelled as he gestured to the far wall of the gravel pit.

"Glory!" I shouted, leaping aside as one got close enough to jab me with its stinger. It was with some satisfaction that my return shot took its tail off. Now if it just didn't have claws, pincers, or razor sharp mandibles... "Flash 'em!"

The small pegasus blushed furiously, but the term was appropriate enough. The radscorpions didn't seem to know how to attack a flying enemy. Meanwhile, her beam pistol rained down more shots to keep them off the grounded and more munchable pony. The flashing shots kept them disorganized, and I took some satisfaction when her shots killed one of the smaller varieties.

I tripped over some rusty equipment and flailed as I struggled to stay on my hooves. One of the radscorpions pounced, and I rolled onto my back while kicking with all four hooves to try and keep all its nasty pointy bits out of myself. Fortunately, I didn't need my hooves to fire my gun. I floated the barrel right against the scorpion's head; a single shot transformed the head into a spray of green globules and shattered chitin. If I could just keep them off me, this could be easy; they didn't seem to realize the shotgun was the real threat, not me. I kicked the corpse off, and the remaining radscorpions shied aside long enough for me to get my hooves under me.

I turned and ran, feeling nicks to my flanks as I took a healing potion, telekinetically unloaded the spent drum, and levitated a fresh one from my pack. Smacking it in place, feeling the magic take away some of the pain from my injuries, I turned once more and laid down a rain of buckshot that eroded the

tenacious arachnids. Finally the last one dropped and I was able to go help Glory. I was quite glad she'd managed to keep them off me as I ran in towards the confused, milling mass. They were already worn down by the time I got there, too; half a dozen shots finished the rest of the chittering vermin.

"Okay. That wasn't so bad," I said with a laugh as Glory landed beside me.

"That was terrible!" she countered. I decided not to tell her what I'd seen inside Pony Joe's. I'd take fighting bugs over smelling that any day.

Why'd the ground just move? "Look out!" I screamed, seeing flashbacks of ghouls exploding from heaps of bone as I knocked Glory aside. From the middle of the pit heaved the largest radscorpion I'd ever seen! It was as large as three ponies combined, with pincers large enough to snip my limbs and head like a daisy... well... pictures of daisies. I always thought they were flimsy looking flowers... but why was I thinking about flowers now? Its tail struck with such force that I could imagine it going right through me.

"Run away!" We didn't have anything that could harm something like this. The problem was, for me at least, that the only way out was behind the giant radscorpion. Worse, the thing was fast! I'd expected something so big to move ponderously, but it skittered after us with tenacity and swiftness. The only thing we had going for us was its size and the wreckage in the base of the gravel pit. A few shots revealed that I was right that the shotgun and beam pistol did nothing to it.

Still, I had one ace in my pocket. I fished out the grenade with the blue band. "Eat this!" I shouted as I telekinetically shot it right at the beast's maw. Eating was this thing's forte, and I pulled the stem right before it disappeared into the radscorpion's mouth. Five seconds. Ten... why was Glory looking at me like that? "What?"

"That was a shock grenade!" she yelled as the giant radscorpion scurried around towards us.

"A what?"

"It only works on robots!" she screamed at me.

"Who makes a bomb that only works on robots?" I screamed back at her. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever... look out!" I yelled as its tail shot out through the wreckage and nearly took Glory's head off. I kept looking for some opportunity to get past it and run out of the gravel pit, but it kept moving left and right. I could only fall back as it moved me towards... the cave... oh hell no! "It's herding us!"

"What?"

"It's pushing us back towards that hole." And once in there I seriously doubted I'd last long.

"Let me fly you out!" Morning Glory yelled as the giant radscorpion was tangled in some rusty cabling from a steam crane. There weren't enough words to express my skepticism, but then there also weren't enough words to stress how much I really didn't want to be in that pit.

"If you think you can," I said as it scurried towards us. I felt her bite the back of my barding behind my neck and felt her hooves hook into my straps. Her wings beat furiously and I was stunned as

we slowly rose up into the air.

Rising: good. Slowly: not so good. The giant radscorpion jumped up on the side of the steam crane and snapped its tail out. Morning Glory cried out as the barbed tip bit deeply into her flank, and gravity returned with a vengeance. Had I fallen to the ground I probably would have broken something vital. Instead, I landed on the roof of the huge steel crane. I looked back to see Morning Glory fluttering down to the floor of the gravel pit. The radscorpion turned and started to scuttle towards her.

I saw a teal filly torn in two before my eyes.

"No!" I bellowed as I ejected the drum and slammed in a fresh one. I only had a dozen or so slugs. They'd do the job or it wouldn't matter. I jumped from the roof of the crane and landed right in the middle of the giant monster's back. Crouching low on the middle of its heaving back, I triggered S.A.T.S. as I pressed the barrel against its tail. The slugs tore into the meaty appendage with a spray of sour yellow flesh and greenish-black ichor. A third shot severed the tail entirely, and more importantly made me its first priority.

I jammed my front hooves into a groove in its armored carapace, feeling my limbs squeezed almost to breaking as it bucked and squirmed wildly. Its claws weren't quite agile enough to simply pluck me off, so instead it swept the claws back and forth over its back to knock me loose. I ducked my head down, gritting my teeth as I waited for S.A.T.S. to recharge enough to chance a shot. I locked in a blast that caught the radscorpion at the base of the pincer and took it completely off. When it finally flipped over on its back to scrape me off, I kicked free and rolled in the loose gravel, screaming as I rose to my hooves and charged the monster. I wanted every remaining slug to matter as I closed to point blank range and opened fire.

It attempted to shield itself with a claw, and I had just enough charge in S.A.T.S. to target that limb as well. The shotgun's roar stretched out as the black pincer spun off in a slow arc. "Die! Die! Die!" I screamed again and again as I pulverized its head with my three remaining slugs. Finally I reversed the spent weapon and smashed the butt against whatever goop might have constituted a brain stem. I didn't stop until it did. In fact, I might not have stopped even then if P-21 hadn't yelled to snap me out of it.

"Ow... ow... ow..." Morning Glory cried as she limped over to us. "No offense, but I really am starting to dislike the surface."

"Join the club," I remarked, then saw their looks. I was splashed almost head to hoof in radscorpion bits. P-21 gave Glory one of our healing potions, but even though the hole in her flank right above her sunrise cutie mark closed, she still didn't look so good. "Are you okay?" I asked her.

"Yeah, sure. I'm just a little lightheaded; hope it's just blood loss. I'll be fine," she said as she took a seat.

"When we get back, I'm going to find you some decent armor," I promised. "That uniform you've got is worse than useless."

I had no idea what constituted a 'radscorpion poison gland', but apparently P-21 did. He and Glory went from scorpion to scorpion collecting them. It looked like we'd be making that bonus. Meanwhile, I headed over to the cave... more of a pit in the wall, really. Dozens of bones and other

debris filled the cavity. Mostly earth and unicorn ponies, but there were two picked-over pegasi too. I took the time to sift through with my telekinesis and was rewarded with an assortment of ammunition, two energy cartridges, and a workable bolt-action rifle. I also found a Crusader's cape. There wasn't much of it left, but I still saw the rearing white filly on the stained blue patch. Carefully, I tore it from the scrap.

Part of me wanted to wear it. Even though my mother was still alive, I doubted I would see her again, but then I thought about Scoodle and Boing. I thought about asking P-21, but... I couldn't keep using him as my ethical barometer. I owed the Crusaders. Carefully I took the patch and slipped it into a pocket.

"Blackjack!" I was really starting to hate people shouting my name. I ran back out and saw P-21 kneeling over the prone gray pegasus.

Damn it! She wasn't fine. "She's poisoned, isn't she?" I demanded as I ran to them. I wanted to hug her and kick her.

"Sorry," she said weakly. "I said I hoped it was just blood loss."

I hissed softly through my teeth. I couldn't shoot, kick, or beat poison out of her. "What can we do?" Because we had to be able to do something. If I just had to sit here and watch her die then I would completely lose it.

"I could synthesize an antidote. One poison gland... one healing potion... but I'd need lab equipment..." Morning Glory said softly, her breathing labored.

I looked up to the west at the large brown building that my PipBuck identified as the destination for the next job. "P-21, R&D means research and something, right?"

"Development, yeah," he said as he followed my look.

"Let's go," I said as I loaded a fresh drum into my shotgun. Morning Glory needed a lab, and I would find one. We weren't going to lose another pony on my watch.

* * *

Ironshod Firearms; I could have worked for these ponies. I really could have. Just looking at the faded pictures of firearms sitting over desks was enough to make my insides moist. Especially at the sight of the drum-fed IF-88 'Ironpony' combat shotgun. Now that was a glorious-looking weapon! Still, I had no time to admire their works when it seemed like every automated turret and Robronco sentry was out to render us into glue.

"I want that gun," I shouted, my buckshot peppering the head of a sentry pony as I embarked on a grand unofficial tour of the premises. "I want a lab first, but after that I want an IF-88 'Ironpony'. Can I have one?"

"I'm sure you do," P-21 said as he carried Morning Glory on his back, watching as my second shot destroyed the sentry. "Ask your mother."

"She'd never let me have one." It was crazy. I was crazy. Every second I had to keep moving or I'd look at Morning Glory. I had to joke because if I thought about Glory... without waiting for S.A.T.S. to recharge, I hopped right over the blasted sentry and into the next room. A sweep with my gun and a check with my E.F.S. and I was moving on to the next hallway. Jumping through the next door I heard an ominous beep underhoof.

I glanced down just in time to hit the override button on the mine with my magic. That sent prickles up and down my spine. I'd help nopony if I got us blown up. Levitating the mine into my gear, I moved through this hallway with more care, finding two more mines hidden under debris. The two were so close together I detonated them with a shot just to move faster. Passing bathrooms, I moved into a large production area.

"Greetings, zebra scum! Time to get wiped!" a metallic voice cheered with gusto as a multi-limbed hovering robot lowered down and sprayed fire across the doorway.

"Wipe this!" I shouted, the moment's levity leaving me feeling raw as I moved under the bot, firing into the levitation talisman built into the base. With a sizzle of sparks it collapsed behind me, and I finished it off with some more bullets to the central processing matrix.

"The labs might be on the second floor," P-21 suggested as he looked up the stairs with their narrow catwalks. What kind of pony designed places like this? Still, we'd only seen offices and this manufacturing space on the first floor.

"I'll take her," I said as I carefully transferred her from his back to my own. She felt like she was burning up. That was good... I'd take feverish and alive over cold and stiff. Using my telekinesis to hold her in place, I ran up the steps as fast as I dared.

For once something went our way. Passing through a door, we found ourselves surrounded by lab equipment... and spent shells. Lots of spent shells. I almost dropped Glory as my hooves skidded beneath me. There were reloading benches, work tables, and lab equipment. Some of it was smashed but... "That's the stuff you need, right Glory? Glory?" I gave her a telekinetic slap. "Glory!"

She stirred and looked around in a daze, muttering softly, "No. I don't want to do this anymore." Her pupils were unfocused as she stared around. "No more weapons. Please..."

"Glory! Antidote. You said you can make one?" I gave her a little shake.

"Antidote... why... wouldn't make any sense... it'd need to be an antibiotic..." she muttered weakly. I gave her another slap and relaxed a little as her eyes focused on me. "Stop... stop slapping my face..."

"You *shot* my face. Tell us how to make an antidote," I said as P-21 checked the lab equipment and burners.

"Poison gland... mix with a type A or B healing potion... simmer... filter the extract... inject..." she murmured in a daze.

"Please, please tell me you understood that?" I asked P-21.

"I think so," he said as he got to work. He dug through his bags and extracted a used needle, sterilizing the tip on a burner flame. "Did you get the impression she's more than just a good-intentioned idealist?"

"I don't care. She helped us. We're going to help her," I said sharply as he worked. This was *not* the time to bring this up with me.

"But..."

"Enough with your suspicion!" I yelled as I rounded on him. "Right now she needs our help. I know you don't trust anypony, but we are going to do this." Clearly my outburst shocked him. I took a deep breath and sighed. "Look. I know she's Enclave. I know she says she wants to help. I also know I'd love to see what the sun is really like. But letting her die isn't an option for me."

"I..." He looked over at her and then sighed. "I wasn't going to let her die. I just... why do you trust her? You trust everypony. Watcher. Bottlecap. Even the Crusaders. Morning Glory. You even trust me when I've told you that I want to shoot you."

I looked at him as he worked to mix the gland and the healing potion. "I don't know. I can't help it. I just accept people until they try to kill me or hurt somepony else." Maybe it was an effect of 99. With the exception of the Overmare, there was no real chance for guile there; everypony knew everypony and even deep secrets were common enough knowledge. The closest you came to deception was bluffing at poker. I probably knew the dirt and flaws on a hundred different mares in 99. "I just believe that ponies are more likely to help than screw each other over."

He chuckled softly. "Just what the Wasteland needs: an optimist."

I sighed and rolled my eyes. "P-21..."

"I mean it," he said seriously, surprising me. He instructed me to fill the syringe since my magic was a touch more precise than his mouth and hooves. Once it was full, we injected it into her leg. A minute later she shuddered as her breathing deepened. "You frustrate me, annoy me, and sometimes scare me half to death, but you also impress me terribly from time to time."

"So does that mean next time I talk to Watcher I can tell him we're friends?" I asked with a smile.

"Closer to friends," he said as he held his hooves a millimeter apart. "About this much."

I laughed and shook my head. "Okay. Good to know I'm making progress." I sighed as I finally returned to actually paying attention to my surroundings. There were a number of red marks on my E.F.S. "I'm going to clear the lab and see if I can find the maneframe."

"Right. Don't try and take parts out of it," he said with a half joking, half serious smile.

I proceeded further into the lab, kicking brass and shotgun hulls with each step. I had to admit I was glad nopony had made it up here before us. There was a veritable cornucopia of ammunition up here. I passed by ammo crates with pistol, revolver, shotgun, and rifle ammunition. Several of them had

markings I'd never seen before: red, orange, green, blue, and black bands. And here I had a number of sentry robots to try them out on!

Red proved to be some sort of incendiary that seemed rather futile. An orange shotgun shell, on the other hoof, exploded on contact like a grenade! Perhaps not as large a blast radius as the thrown variety, but still impressive! Green just splattered some sort of goo all over the metal. Then I fired a blue shell at a turret. There was an electric flash and then the turret just stopped. I looked skeptically at the disabled device and then at my gun. At first I'd been impressed. Then a minute later, the damn thing powered back up again, and I had to disable it the old-fashioned way: with buckshot. Black simply fired a bunch of tiny sharpened nails that bounced right off the armor of the few remaining sentries.

I got to one door and immediately froze. I could feel the tingle in my skin even before I could hear the clicking of the PipBuck on my foreleg. Whatever was behind the locked door, I could live with the mystery. Finally I cleared the last turret and discovered an office. 'Dr. Trottenheimer. Research Lead.' was written on a tarnished plaque on the front. Inside were a safe and terminal; I'd leave them to the more reliable hooves of P-21. A unicorn skeleton sat in the chair, an unusual pistol on the floor next to it.

As I looked, however, I noticed the bones appeared... wrong. Like his skull was made of wax and left too long near a heating duct. The hole in the skull didn't look blown out, but instead appeared melted. I reached out with my magic and carefully lifted the gun. I'd never seen its like before, but something about it made me squirm. I put it in my duffel bag. Most ominously, perhaps, my PipBuck identified it as simply 'Trottenheimer's Folly'. Then I looked at the wall the exit wound pointed at...

Like most buildings in the Wasteland, Ironshod Firearms R&D was ridiculously overengineered. I might not have known the first thing about construction, but there were some walls with three inches of armored plate squeezed inside a foot of reinforced concrete. It was made to withstand missiles. So when I walked to the hole in the wall, I could only stare through the glassy tunnel that passed through the armored office and the exterior wall of the room beyond that. I glanced back at Dr. Trottenheimer's corpse, then looked back at the hole. What the fuck kind of bullet had done that?

* * *

It was an hour later when I swapped shifts with P-21 so he could work his lockpicking magic. He passed me a ratty old magazine with half the pages falling out. Apparently, it was some sort of 'cookbook', though it had some pretty odd articles like 'Plastic explosives and you' and 'How did Pinkie Pie foil the Prance bombing? Three theories'.

Glory's breathing had slowed and deepened, and it was a few minutes after P-21 left that she finally opened her eyes. "I'm alive?" she asked quietly.

"Does this look like the afterlife?" I said with a snort. "Yeah. We flipped a bottle cap and it landed carrot up, so we had to save you," I said with a flippant grin.

"You flipped..."

"A joke," I explained. "Don't Enclavers joke?" I asked, arching a brow.

"It's just Enclave ponies, Blackjack. Not Enclavers..." Morning Glory looked away. "And no. I

don't suppose that we do," she said as she slowly sat up, holding her head with her hooves. "Ow... ow..."

"Headache?" Stupid question. I fished in my bags for a bottle of Sparkle-Cola and levitated it to her, deftly flipping off the top and pocketing it. She smirked as she held it in her hooves and took a drink. "So. You said some things while you were out of it that made P-21 curious."

Instant evasive look. Not good. Worse, she looked upset. "I did?"

"Something about 'no more weapons'? I mean I just found it ironic given the nearest lab we found was a munitions laboratory, but P-21 was a little more curious," I said softly, hoping to coax her into opening up a little.

She closed her eyes, looking away. "I... I don't want to talk about it."

"That's fine. Just fine." P-21 wants to shoot me for reminding him of home but he doesn't want to talk about it. She did something with weapons in the Enclave and doesn't want to talk about it. I'd give one of my left legs for somepony without a dark and troubled past. "Just, if you ever do, I know that I'd be glad to hear it," I said as I rose, leaving her to her Sparkle-Cola.

"I didn't have a choice," she said to my back, softly.

"Excuse me?" I looked back at her with a politely curious expression.

She stared down at the fizzy carrot flavored water. "I didn't have a choice. In the Enclave... if you have aptitude then you're... encouraged... to accept training and an assigned job in your field." She sighed and closed her eyes. "My aptitudes were in technical engineering and medical procedures. I never worked on anything critical, but there was always... talk. Talk about how something could be weaponized. Talk about how something could be used for the Enclave's security." She looked back at the bottle. "I didn't like it."

"So you couldn't just quit?" Gee... looks like Stable 99 wasn't so unique after all.

"I could, but... it would have been complicated." I could tell she wasn't going to elaborate past that. "So I transferred into the Volunteer Corps. Got my two weeks training and came down here."

I gave a crooked smile. "You know, someday I'd really love to hear about life in the Enclave. Compare notes and all that?"

"It's... I can't. Please... it's not that I don't want to," she said softly as she stared at her hooves. "It's that I can't. If they ever found out I broke that protocol... I have family." Her lavender eyes begged me to understand. "They'd be investigated. There'd be inquiries. My sister might lose her job. My father would certainly be disgraced. I can't talk about it. Not about Thunderhead or what I did there. Nothing." She covered her face with her hooves. "It's not that I don't want to tell you. I can't," she said as she gave a snotty sniff.

I felt that if I pushed right now I could make her crack. My mane itched just right to get some solid answers. Instead I sighed and brushed my magic along her purple mane. "Don't worry about it. I get it. And I'll tell P-21 to drop it as well." So it looked like I'd be putting up with secrets for a bit longer. I rose

and stretched. "Finish that off, and then do me a favor; take three or four of those glands and mix up a few more doses of antidote. I'd like to avoid doing this again." She smiled and nodded. Sure, we wouldn't get the full bounty, but I'd live with that. We might not live without it.

"I'm going to go find P-21. Find out if he needs any help." I had no idea how I was going to help him crack terminals or locks, but hey. It sounded better than saying 'I'm useless unless there's something to shoot.' Leaving her to recompose herself, I headed back to the doctor's office. While I walked I levitated out the pistol. I'd never seen its like, and the design was absolutely bizarre. I couldn't find a place for a clip, so it couldn't be an automatic as I had assumed. The caliber was huge; almost as big as my horn! It seemed as if the pistol had been armored. It loaded from a breech like a break-action shotgun, but clearly it'd been engineered for precision.

Well, worse came to worse I could hit someone with it. It had a value of more than two thousand caps, but I couldn't imagine it would fetch that price if I didn't find bullets for it.

"So... any luck?" I asked as I sat on the desk, crossing my rear hooves as I perched upright, getting a distinctly odd look from P-21. I noticed a little plaque on the desk. *I have become death, destroyer of worlds.* Creepy.

"I'm on attempt sixty-one," he replied with a soft sigh, returning his gaze to the terminal. After a moment, he suddenly brightened a bit. "And... apparently sixty-two is the charm." There was a click, and the safe in the corner opened up. "There are some journal entries here. Want to read them while I see what we have?"

"Ugh... I probably shouldn't. It'll just depress me," I said, but did I mention I hate being bored? I really couldn't help myself as I rocked forward onto my hooves and trotted around the desk to read the journal entries off the terminal.

Entry 1> I am writing these entries in the event that I am detained or have my memory modified by the MoM. My move from Horizon Labs to Ironshod Firearms is jarring, to say the least, but vital to my safety. G.B. is doing everything he can to protect myself and S.S. from the director. I fear it may not be enough. B was quite thankful to get an intellect such as mine on his R&D staff, but I've noticed considerable resentment of my addition from the old team. That doesn't matter; though the new work may be far below my abilities, it is at least enough to provide for myself and my family. And, considering the current circumstances, it is probably better for me to keep my genius to myself for a while anyway.

Entry 2> T.B. came by trying to convince me to work with the new director. Odious mule. He has no loyalties to anypony but himself. It's clear that he feels quite superior for his betrayal; he kept going on about 'the winning side'. P.P. sent more MoM goons to search my files, but they did not find these records. I hope I will be safe, if only for the moment. G.B. is fighting for us all.

Entry 3> G.B. came to me last night. I've no idea how he bypasses security. I've never seen him so... disturbed. For once, G.B. appeared quite at a loss, and he was truly desperate for my expertise. After P.H. and P.S., haven't I done enough? No. For him, for his faith in believing in me when none would... I owe him this. He swore it would never be used on P.L. or P.C. He said the most peculiar thing: 'There are greater threats.' I am uneasy, but I will do this for him. Fortunately, I've grown quite adept at keeping secrets from my loved ones; this would only worry them, and the less they know, the safer they'll be from the MoM.

Entry 4> I fear that my security may be compromised. Another conspicuous visit by the director again. He may be quite amiable, but I cannot allow him to sway me. He promised me a transfer to the M.A.S. if I agreed to work with him. It was tempting. I was destined to work with the greatest forces known to ponykind, not to make... bullets. As glorious as it would be to work under T.S. again, I had to decline. The director was quite put out.

Entry 5> G.B. has provided the metal, Flux, and cores necessary. As I am working for a firearms manufacturer, I craft the devices in the shape of bullets and guns. It is true enough to their function. I warned G.B. of the risks, but he was quite dismissive. I am not certain of him anymore. Is his agitation paranoia or legitimate alarm? Am I crafting another 'Dragon Killer' bullet like the ones that slew B.M.? I do not know any longer. Four Leaf wants me to spend more time at home. She says the girls miss me terribly. I hope that, after this, things will finally settle down.

Entry 6> We are undone. G.B. has been arrested. My lab was raided by MoM officials. I don't think I've ever seen P.P. so happy. She questioned me personally. I told her precisely what I had done; it was not my fault that she lacked the intellect to understand me. I foiled her interrogation spells and sent her mind-digging lackeys on a tour of the Trottingham countryside. They've seized all my work, but they missed bullet #9 still in the fabricator. It was quite pleasing to watch them gape at my art like stupid mules. Still, I am feeling quite ill from the Flux. I should go home but... there's still so much to do. Even with G.B. gone... there are others he trusted, and I know how important he thought this was, even if I don't know why.

Entry 7> There's something going on in the city. I thought it was just another attack when the sirens went off, but this was something different. Something far more substantial. For a moment I heard the most horrible scream. After that, the entire building went into security lockdown. I can't leave my own office for fear of being vaporized by our own security ponies! There is no line out of my office. I suspect something quite terrible has happened. I fear the illness from Flux contamination is progressing.

Entry 8> There is no more point in waiting. No pony is coming. I'm not going to wait days for Flux contamination or dehydration to claim me. The BGP, and one BBP. Irony. So much work and sacrifice for it these past weeks, so much concern for the vitally important need G.B. never bothered to tell me the details of, and this will be its first and only use. I've decided to rename it 'Trottenheimer's Folly'. I am sorry, Four Leaf. You always said I was an unlucky pony; I don't know about unlucky, but I feel that I have been incredibly stupid. If anyone should ever discover this hidden log, please know that I always endeavored to serve Equestria with diligence, dignity, and honor. If by some chance my family should read this, know that Daddy is sorry. Farewell.

Okay. Well, at least I was right about one thing: it had depressed me. Also confused me out of my horn. I looked at the hole blasted through the wall and floated Folly in front of me. No shell casing remained in the breach. "What do you think did this?" I couldn't think of anything that could have caused that kind of damage. With bullets that ignited, exploded, shocked, perforated, or poisoned, what did you need that could do more than that?

"No idea," P-21 said as he put some gold coins in my duffel bag. There were tons of finance reports and other papers in the safe, as well as a strange black case. It was a little longer than my hoof, but skinny. As I touched it, there was a soft pop and it opened. He immediately looked a little agitated. "Wait. How'd you open that? I didn't see a lock or a seam or anything!"

I furrowed my brows as I smiled at him. "Um... P-21? I shoot things. You're asking the wrong pony," I said as I flipped open the lid and looked down at the empty interior. "Well, that's anticlimactic," I muttered as I looked at the orange velvet-lined space, showing it to him. He looked equally baffled.

After carefully going through the lab and the downstairs offices, I found myself sitting on more ammunition than I'd encountered yet. I even had a sizable collection of the specialty rounds, but nothing marked 'BBP'. Despite my reservations, P-21 opened the locked door and discovered a room filled with dozens of containers. One labeled 'Biomagical Flux #13' had broken open and oozed strange rainbow-colored fluid that glowed softly. My PipBuck clicked ominously, and I closed the door once again. If there was anything valuable in there, some other, more radiation-proof pony could benefit.

We found the Ironshod Firearms maneframe in the basement. Of course, all I really did was sit there while P-21 entered the doctor's password and downloaded the contents into my PipBuck. EC-1101 could have some company. I looked at the musty poster that read 'Ironshod Firearms: How do you like *them* apples?' and chuckled at the joke.

Then, with nothing in particular to do, my mind wandered back to the journal entries from Trottenheimer's terminal. Just what had been going on in this place before the bombs fell? "Hey, Glory, who was running this place during the war?"

"Well, probably the Ministry of Wartime Technology, ultimately." I looked at her blankly and she back with unease. "The Ministry of Wartime Technology. One of the six ministries that ran all of Equestria?" I smiled and cocked my head to the side. "Didn't they have a school in your stable?" she blurted.

"Does Blackjack strike you as very studious?" P-21 asked with a thin smile.

Glory sighed. "Well... in a nutshell... the ministries ran the war effort. There were six of them, and the Ministry of Wartime Technology was in charge of Equestria's private companies, particularly the defense contractors. The Ministry Mare of the M.W.T., the pony who ran it, was Applejack," Glory supplied as she peered into the guts of the machine. "I don't really know much about her personally, I'm afraid. There was apparently plenty of friction between her and the ponies under her, though. Half of Hoofington was probably connected to the M.W.T. in some way. Ironshod. Robronco. Flash Industries. Aegis Security. Boom Incorporated. They were all developing weapons for the war effort."

"All in Hoofington?" I asked as I found a desk and sat my haunches on it, facing her and earning an amusingly baffled look.

"Hoofington was the war research effort. I understand it used to be a college town, but when the war picked up, the old town was leveled in a surprise zebra raid early on. The survivors swore to rebuild, and they did with a vengeance. Hoofington existed to invent things to kill zebras. And they were very good at it." Carefully, she deactivated the power and started to remove some internal components. "Hoofington was a strange city, though. All the ministries were involved here. Even the Ministry of Awesome, since Hoofington housed the Shadowbolts. Still, according to the official records, Hoofington was almost like a country unto itself. Lots of secrets. Manehattan might have been bigger, Canterlot the capital, Fillydelphia the industrial nexus, but Hoofington was the city of the future. Small wonder the zebras never wasted a chance to attack it. No other city in Equestria was targeted more."

“And then everything blew up,” I commented softly. “Along with the future.”

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Shotgun Surgeon - When using shotguns, regardless of the type of ammunition used, you ignore an additional 10 points of a target's damage threshold.

(Thanks to Kkat for creating FoE. Props to Hinds for helping me make this halfway decent.)