

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 7: Prices

"YOU TOUCH IT, YOU BUY IT. We take cash or credit."

I'm a killer.

The first pony I killed had been a male unicorn getting removed; that had been before I even got my cutie mark. I'd been told to tell him that he was now U-21 and ask him to report to security. I didn't know what that meant at the time. I took my sweet time doing it, going to the atrium cafeteria for a green gel smoothie, poking in on Midnight trying to learn her PipBuck routines, and taking a nap on a humming moisture condenser before I finally found him. He'd just smiled sadly and walked back with me.

I remember his white and red striped mane, like a candy cane. I remember his laugh. How sad his eyes looked as he walked beside me. Mom read the formal statement, I gave him his last dot, and then we stood by as the medics gave him a shot. He closed his eyes. Let out one last breath. That was it. I could almost imagine he was sleeping, except I knew he'd never wake up.

I know the excuses. I was just doing as I was told. We were just following the orders of the Overmare. We had no choice. There was nothing we could do. We had to prevent an Incident. I never actually gave him a shot. It was peaceful. It was merciful. I didn't know any better.

Horseapples. I killed him because I never once asked the question: is this right or wrong? I killed four other males in exactly the same way. I would have killed P-21, too, if the Overmare hadn't let Deus in first.

The first pony I killed with my own horn had been a raider. She'd surprised me. She'd had a shotgun and nearly used it on me. She'd killed others in my stable, one right in front of me, and would have killed more. Again, I know the excuses. It was self-defense. I was protecting Midnight. I was defending my stable. There was no time. There was nothing else I could do.

Raiders. At first, I didn't think much about them. They were mangy, psychotic killers or ponies who'd decided to be evil. Killing them had been required. My PipBuck turned every moral question into a simple answer: red it's dead, yellow be mellow. The next time I'd faced them, I'd killed many. Then I'd spared one, for the simple reason that the PipBuck had gone from red to yellow. Suddenly, she wasn't a raider anymore. Suddenly, she was free to go. I even laughed while she fled.

I'd deserved to be shot in the back.

Scoodle was the next pony I'd killed. Hers was the first death that actually got to me. Before that, all I'd demonstrated was that I was a slightly more effective killer than the diseased and maddened raiders I'd faced thus far. I hadn't listened to her... no, that wasn't true. I'd listened. I hadn't believed her, and I'd been so full of myself that I was sure I could face anything the Wasteland had to offer. I thought that after forty-eight hours I knew more than a filly who'd spent her entire life on the surface. I was wrong. Dead wrong. But I was "lucky" enough that somepony else had been killed by my pride,

arrogance, and stupidity.

At Pony Joe's I'd tried to turn Glory into a killer just like me. Mad? Upset? Scared? Kill somepony. Pick you right up. Of all the ponies I'd faced, though, the one that stuck with me was that poor bastard shitting himself, and me feeling so clever and cocky for sneaking up on him while he was occupied. I hadn't learned one thing. I thought I'd changed. That I'd devoted myself to being the better pony. And then I smashed his head in with a baton. I'd thought he'd yell or attack or something. Red is dead. Execution by PipBuck.

Now I'd just killed forty more colts and fillies. Some had been sick; there was no question of that. Letting them live would have been... what? Who the fuck am I to judge if a pony deserves to die? How did I know the Enclave couldn't have helped them? Or the Collegiate? Or... somepony? Fluttershy said to do better. Better for me was increasing my body count. And the final twist? I ended up with my body completely healed. I felt *great*.

"Hey, Blackjack. Are you okay?" P-21 asked as I tightened up the brace on his leg. He looked down at me with some concern as I buckled the straps.

No. I'm not okay. I'm a killer. I'm a cleaner, healthier raider with better aim. "Yeah, sure," I replied with a smile. "Not too tight?" He shook his head. "Did Glory get her healing potions, antidotes, and drugs squared away?" The gray pegasus had found some Enclave remains with a flight harness that doubled her pockets and holsters. He nodded again as I straightened and walked to the exit into the stasis pod chamber.

"Blackjack. Are you sure you're okay?" P-21 repeated the question, his dark eyes locked on mine, lips curled in a worried frown.

"Yeah. Just fine." Shoot me now P-21. "Let's grab Glory and get paid." Shoot me before I kill somepony else. "Come on." Please, P-21. "Let's go." Please.

* * *

Prince Splendid was not happy. The Collegiate ponies were not happy. I really couldn't care less, but I didn't want them killing each other once I left. "The Collegiate can figure out what systems work and don't work and see if they can reproduce some of the more powerful spell talismans. The Society can feed them and keep adequate guard so that they can work without being harassed." I looked at Splendid with a level stare, seeing him start to fidget and frown. "They can also see about getting the stasis pods to work again to deal with your problem, and you'll have first dibs to their findings."

He opened his beautiful mouth and closed it once more. I stared into his eyes, unblinking as I felt my horn twitch. Finally, he smiled and said graciously, "That will be acceptable to the Society."

"And you," I said as I looked at Archie sharply. "If somepony comes needing medical help, you try and help them. You've got a whole hospital to scavenge; I know you'll find enough. Charge caps if you want, but help. *Do better*," I said as I glared into his eyes, stressing each word. He swallowed hard and backed away so quick he landed on his rump.

"Right! Sure. The Collegiate is always happy to help. I'll make sure my superiors know when

they get here,” Archie stammered quickly.

I looked up towards the broken dome atop the interior chamber. “Also, keep an eye out for Enclave. I don’t know why they were here, but they were after something and they may be back.” Hopefully Glory would fill me in soon on what that something might be. I knew she’d found more than just parts for her beam pistol.

Prince Splendid signed the note to Bottlecap to pay me for his contract, and with no further delay we were on our way back. I took point, as usual, letting the pair trail behind me. Glory was showing off something she’d found. “It’s called a battle saddle. Most of the security forces use them. They let us handle larger guns without occupying our mouths,” Glory said as she fiddled with the strange harness she’d found. It looked more to me like some kind of weird bondage gear with beam pistols attached. I wasn’t quite sure she knew how to work it.

As we followed the road back east, I walked slow and steady. My head crashed over and over with what I’d done, pushing the mystery of EC-1101 from the forefront of my thoughts. Maybe I should have turned the kids over to the Collegiate. No... while they’d been fascinated by the notes I’d found, they’d been relieved that I’d disposed of the foals. Not their problem. The Society? Same. Everypony was glad they didn’t have to deal with forty traumatized and dying young.

“She’s not okay,” P-21 muttered softly. My jaw set.

“I thought she was going to shoot both of them if they argued,” Glory replied in her own whisper.

I glanced back at the pair and didn’t say a word. Glory immediately took a few steps back. P-21 just looked sad. “Blackjack...”

“What?” There was no good answer to my question. I was so angry I felt like a broken Sparkle-Cola bottle.

“It wasn’t your--”

“Shut up,” I snapped, and I was glad to see him angry. Because he was about to say it wasn’t my fault. If it wasn’t my fault, was it his for leaving the choice up to me? Glory’s for not stopping me? The Enclave for reconnecting the maneframe to the maintenance robots? Redheart? Fluttershy? Should I just blame ponies who fucked up two centuries before I was even born? Celestia? Zebras? Who was to blame? Who had to pay for what I’d done?

Somepony had to pay the price. Better me than P-21. Maybe if he was smart he’d ditch me before I got him killed. They’d be better off together without me. Perhaps in a few months they’d find me frothing mad, psychotic, and put me down.

I was so preoccupied that I walked right into the ambush. It didn’t help that I hadn’t reactivated my E.F.S. after the interference in the hospital. As I walked past an overturned sky trailer there was a resounding bang and the familiar shove of buckshot against my barding from behind. Tally up a new bruise, but nothing penetrated. I looked up at the two ponies in the trailer, Shotgun reloading as another gripping a pool cue jumped out at me. Two more stepped out of another overturned carriage.

Out came the automatic pistol and S.A.T.S. popped up. Four shots to Shotgun's head. Execute. Then I noticed that instead of turning his head into meaty goo, the two shots that hit just sparkled off his hide. Shit. I'd forgotten I'd loaded the clips with shock rounds: great against robots, but lousy against everything else. Pool Cue swung with all the strength she had, but I raised my PipBuck and let the wooden shaft shatter on its casing. My horn glowed as I plucked a foot-long shard with my magic, seized her shoulders with my hooves, and drove every inch into her eye socket. One.

Glory flew above, her aim wild as she tried to get her battle saddle to work. P-21 had his binoculars out. "Blackjack! Fifth one on the hill! Sniper!"

I wasted no time. When Shotgun reloaded, I heaved the female's body into his line of fire and felt only a sting of a pellet or two. Then I was in the trailer with him. I had no wish to use a whole clip of ammo, so out came the baton. He backed away, but there was nowhere to go; his hiding spot was also a dead end. He tried to say something, but simply gagged as I shoved him hard against the wall and magically swung the baton till his head went from convex to concave. Two.

One look at the shotgun and I tossed it aside. A single shot between reloads? My baton was better. I did levitate a clip of lead rounds for the automatic pistol out of my pocket and swapped ammunition before running back at the second pair Glory was keeping occupied. Her aim was horrible, but the beam pistols she'd hooked to the battle saddle were quite effective at keeping the pair moving as she circled overhead. One with an automatic pistol didn't even see me coming. Automatic turned his head just in time to see me take a stance, pistol raised, and aim five shots into his noggin. There was little left. Three.

The fourth one with a baseball bat tossed his weapon at me. At first it seemed nonsense till I saw him duck his head for a grenade hooked to his vest. His mouth closed around it just as my magic flicked the tab right off the end. His head lifted, tongue working to remove the pin that was already gone. I just stared into his eyes as his gaze widened in horror. Then his head exploded. Four.

The rifle round struck me in the neck at the line of my security barding. Sniper was already running for his life now, though. My PipBuck showed a red bar. Red is dead. Without listening to the shouts behind me, I tore up the hillside after him. A large concrete tower stood at the apex, with dishes pointed every direction. He could run, but not hide. I wove up through a gap in the dead trees, putting my gun away so I could telekinetically push dead bushes and branches out of my way. I saw him, and he saw me coming after him.

So did his friends. I staggered into the camp at the base of the tower with four more red bars and a number of yellow. "Granite, you dumb fucker! It's Security!" a unicorn screamed as she levitated an SMG at me. I'd seen a brief demonstration at Megamart. No time to use my gun against that rate of fire. Instead I snapped out the baton again with a very specific target: her horn. The swing fell just as she started to fire. With a purple sparkle and a spray of blood the lavender spire shattered and the SMG fell uselessly into the dirt.

Sniper tried to put another round in my back, but I'd ducked for the swing and his shot went wide. The others drew a knife, baseball bat, and tire iron.

I levitated up her dropped SMG.

I braced my magic and legs as I stood over the squirming, dehorned unicorn and unloaded a spray of lead that started with the sniper and then washed over the other three. Five. Six. Three seconds later the clip was empty. Thirty-five bullets in three seconds? I gaped at the weapon. The only way I could waste ammo faster would be to just dump it down the barrel of a shotgun and pull the trigger! Two ponies were still squirming; my automatic stopped that. Seven. Eight.

What the fuck am I doing? What the fuck am I doing?! The automatic started to shake in my telekinetic grip and I dropped it into the dirt. They had been done! Why did I just kill them? Just... killed. Eight. Eight. Eight.

"Thank you," somepony whispered from nearby. That was when I noticed that these raiders hadn't been alone. There were at least a dozen ponies chained together in a row by collars. They were filthy, many bloody.

The dehorned unicorn lay curled up, hooves pressed to the sheared-off stump of her horn as she shook. I'd once heard getting your horn smashed was like having all four legs cut off. It'd take some serious magic for that injury to heal. "What the fuck is going on here?" I'd seen plenty of raiders. These weren't raiders. Not unless they were going for a full-on twelve course banquet. P-21 and Glory ran up from the road.

"They're slavers," the lead pony in the chain said as he stared hard at the unicorn.

"Slavers?" I asked, frowning in confusion. The lead pony looked a little concerned that I didn't recognize the term. "I thought they were raiders."

"Not much difference except in levels of crazy," he muttered. "Not every Wastelander is a psychopathic cannibal," he said as he looked at my stable barding. "Slavers round up ponies and sell us to places like Paradise, Appleloosa, or Fillydelphia." The gray pony glared at the squirming unicorn. I knew that glare. "They work a pony to death, and it doesn't take long." Nine, my head started to count.

"Blackjack," P-21 said in worry as I lifted the SMG, ejected the clip, and loaded it with explosive rounds.

Glory landed next to me. "Blackjack, stop. Please!"

Red rage boiled in my vision and I ignored them as I pressed it against the unicorn's head. Nine...

"What the fuck is wrong with you people? Aren't fucking raiders enough? Why the fuck are you doing this shit? Why!" I screamed in her face, pressing the short barrel against her clenched eye. "Am I going to have to kill every single fucked up pony in the Goddesses-damned Wasteland just to end this shit? Am I?" I roared as I stared into her terrified eye.

"I just... gotta survive," she whimpered as tears ran down her cheeks. "I have a kid..."

If I pulled the trigger I wouldn't stop. Nine. Not ever. Make it nine. But here was a pony willing to sell ponies for caps. I could almost forgive raiders now; they were at least crazy. She'd chosen to perpetuate this nightmare. Her life was forfeit! I just had to end her. End everything. Make it nine!

Be strong. Be kind.

My grip on the SMG trembled as I slowly pulled away from her eye. "Well how's that working for you?" I snapped. Eight was enough. One was enough. Fuck, I was crying now too. I tossed the SMG aside, grabbed her head between my hooves and clenched it as I stared into her eyes. "Get the fuck out of here. Find another line of work. Tell every slaver you know to find another line of work. I see you doing this shit again and I will turn you into paint! Do you understand me?" I shouted into her face.

"Yes..." she whimpered.

"Do you fucking understand me?" I roared.

"Yes!" she screamed. I shoved her away from me. She took one last look and ran as fast as her hooves would carry her. I saw fourteen pairs of eyes all staring at me. Some looked just as scared of me as the unicorn had. Others appeared angry I hadn't ventilated her.

Fuck them if eight wasn't enough. My death count was one less than it could have been. I looked to P-21, saying in a shaky voice, "Unlock them... please..." I walked away from the slaver camp. I found a rock, pressed my face to it, wrapping my forehooves around it, and I wept, choked, and sobbed. Then I felt a hoof stroking along my mane. I peeked up at Morning Glory as she gave me a soft smile.

"You did the right thing," she said gently.

I lifted my head. "I wouldn't know the right thing from a hole in the head," I said as I curled up on the rock. "I wanted to put every round into her, reload, and do it again."

"Blackjack," Glory said quietly. "I wanted to kill her too." Slowly I raised my head to stare at the delicate, compact pegasus as she closed her eyes. "At first it was because I thought she was a raider, but when I saw they were slavers... I wanted them dead. How dare they buy and sell ponies for bottle caps?" She sighed softly as she looked away in the direction the maimed slaver had taken. "I couldn't have. I don't think I could ever kill a pony that wasn't trying to kill me first. But I wanted to."

"But you said I should have let her go." Now I was just confused.

"Yes," she replied as she looked back at me. "What she did was wrong. Killing her won't undo it. But she's still alive and she'll have to make a choice. Maybe she'll choose to stop. Maybe she'll convince others to stop. Maybe she won't. No matter what, we're not going to make the Wasteland any better by killing everypony. Even if we really think they deserve it."

"I'm no different from her," I muttered softly, voicing the poisonous words.

"How can you say that?"

"Because it's true. I'll kill anypony if my Eyes Forward Sparkle says to. Red it's dead. Yellow be mellow. Right?" I felt disgusted at my supposed wit.

"Was she red or yellow?" Glory asked as she lay down and crossed her forelimbs.

"Huh?"

She nodded in the direction the slaver had fled. "Was she red or yellow when you spared her?"

"I..." I frowned. "I don't remember. I don't think I checked."

"So you chose to spare her. Not your PipBuck," Glory said with a little cock of her head that made me smile. "You're a killer, Blackjack, but you're not a raider. You can choose. You care enough to choose."

"Right," I muttered, and I gave her a smile. Clearly it was what she wanted. "Well, we should probably head back then." She rose to her hooves and flew up and over the trees back towards the camp. I hesitated.

She was right. I could choose. I chose to kill forty colts and fillies. No pep talk or show of mercy would change that. There was a price to be paid for being a killer. I was going to pay for it.

* * *

It took about an hour to get the captive slaves freed and distribute the slavers' weapons. I'd thought the dozen freed ponies would travel together. Instead they began to bleed off in ones and twos. Many shot me nervous glances; apparently my little display proved just as unnerving as the slavers themselves. The gray colt in the lead got the SMG, though I'd replaced the bullets. The explosive rounds would probably detonate if fired on full auto. I probably could have sold it for enough to replace my shotgun, but at the moment I felt so damned numb that I couldn't care less about caps. They headed off to the north, perhaps because I'd already wandered around it and cleared most of the raiders.

The gray pony with a bow tie cutie mark was the last to go. "I'm heading down to Flank," he said with a grateful smile. "If you get that far south, look up Frisk. I'll see about putting a good word in for you." I didn't deserve a good word. I deserved a good warning. Blackjack: contents under pressure. Highly volatile. Reacts poorly to bullets.

Once we were alone again Glory took her time seeing to my spreading bruises. Nothing serious, but I was thankful for the relief. Then I watched with a detached, surreal feeling as she took the dropped knife, tested the edge, and started to saw off the head of one of the slavers. My eye twitched slightly at the sight. "Um... Glory? What are you doing?" She didn't seem like the kind for desecration.

She jammed the knife between vertebrae and gave a sharp twist. I winced at the loud pop. "Well, you were talking about raiders, right?" Was this a rehearsal? "I got to thinking... why are raiders so aggressive? They attack everypony on sight. Even if they already have food, they attack. The only time they flee is in the face of overwhelming odds. So I was thinking that if I could examine a raider's brain compared to a non-raider's brain I might be able to detect something."

"Um... I doubt Bottlecap will be okay with us bringing in *heads*," I pointed out as she wrapped up the intact noggin. "Besides. What are the chances we'll run into raiders between here and Megamart?"

I had to ask.

The fight with the raiders proved terribly short. Nine. Almost disappointing. Ten. There were only four of them and they didn't have a gun between them. Eleven. Glory got her second head and looked decidedly happy about the fact. Twelve. Walking back, P-21 asked about the radio. I hadn't turned it on since that broadcast by DJ Pon3, but it'd be hours to reach the Finders. Nothing hostile on my E.F.S. No excuse to not turn it on.

I had to admit, I liked the music. So much of it was upbeat. The parts that were sad were also a relief. When DJ Pon3 came on I cringed, but he just warned folks around New Appleloosa to keep their eyes out for trouble and to watch out for each other. Occasionally he referenced other ponies fighting the good fight all across Equestria. One that he called the 'Stable Dweller' seemed to have completely shut down a town of slavers. Now *that* was impressive. I doubted the Stable Dweller would ever kill a room full of helpless ponies.

"And for all you folks out east who feel like you don't have a 'Stable Dweller' of your own, here's a little heads up on what Security's been up to. Yes, Hoofington, she's been busy busy busy. If you thought cleaning up the Manehattan Highway was impressive you should see what else Security is doing for the Hoof. It looks like the Fluttershy hospital is open for business again, courtesy of... whoa, can this report be accurate? It must be! Looks like Security actually got the Eggheads and the Bluebloods working together. Talk about a miracle. And it seems like she's got a bone to pick with the slavers in Paradise. Let's play the audio!"

I froze dead in my tracks as my voice, slightly strained and tinny, played out from my PipBuck. *"Get the fuck out of here. Find another line of work. Tell every slaver you know to find another line of work. I see you doing this shit again and I will turn you into paint! Do you understand me? Do you fucking understand me?!"* Followed by her cry of 'Yes!' Did I really sound like that?

"Looks like the Security Mare is just reminding Paradise that ponies selling ponies to ponies who work ponies to death is wrong. And Security doesn't like wrong. So in light of that, Hoofington, this is just for you from Sapphire Shores's hit..." Whatever else he said and the heavier beat that started went ignored as I felt numb from horn to hoof.

I sat down right in the middle of the cracked road, then turned the radio off. Looking at P-21 I gave my sweetest smile. "Shoot me? Please?" Please please please...

"Like it or not, you have to admit DJ Pon3 is helping you. It's clear that the Finders and the Collegiate only were willing to work with us because he told them what you'd done," Glory said with a curious smile and tilt of her head. "So why resent it?"

I sighed. How to explain it without saying the wrong thing? "It feels like a lie. Like he's playing up all the best parts and overlooking what really happens. Sure, I got the Society ponies to work with the Eggheads, but what about all the other stuff that happened? Would DJ Pon3 give me such high praise if he'd known what I did back in the hospital? Even playing that recording... like I'm going to take out every slaver I come across..."

"Are you saying that, if you did come across a band of slavers and your PipBuck labeled them yellow, you'd let them past?" P-21 asked skeptically.

"No. Of course not. But..."

"And... how did DJ Pon3 put it? Ponies selling ponies to ponies that work ponies to death need to be stopped?" Damn it. They were both smiling. I felt my heart start to pound.

"Yeah... but..."

"Then what's the big deal? Let him call you a hero," P-21 said with his sure little smile, "and just be a hero."

"I'm not a fucking hero!" I yelled at him, so angry I was glad that I wasn't holding a gun. Thirteen. Oh wait... I was... "I kill ponies that try and kill me or try and kill ponies who don't deserve it! I didn't kill those slavers because they were evil and wrong! I shot them because they shot first and my PipBuck was red." Thirteen... "If I hadn't chased after that sniper I wouldn't have had a clue there were slaves up there at all!" I said, watching their smiles vanish, seeing the gun tremble in my magical grip.

I couldn't catch my breath as I covered my face with my hooves. Thirteen. I felt my magic tighten more and more on the automatic's handle. Every part of me was shaking as my breathing became louder and louder, faster and faster. I saw the snapped-off tip of a knife rammed into a neck. One. I saw a teal foal torn in two. Twenty. My body felt like it was burning up as I felt P-21 shaking me... or killing me... whichever he decided. I saw a skinned pegasus pop out of a box on a spring. Everything started to spin as I felt like I was falling off the world.

I clenched my eyes shut but all I kept seeing was ponies dying. An eyeball popping under my baton. Twenty-two. A head disintegrating as I raced out the tunnel. Nine. Guts spilling out amid bones. Twenty. Automatic fire tearing holes in three ponies. Seventy-three, four, five... Pushing a button. Twenty-seven to sixty-seven. My heart beat harder and harder and I could make out the distant noises of them saying things to me. Guts spilling from my torso; I felt like I was falling into the sky to break against the dark clouds overhead. The roaring in my ears chased me into the blackness.

What was the price for killing so many?

* * *

I awoke to the steady tap of water falling into a coffee tin near my head. My head pounded as I opened my eyes. I wasn't exactly sure where I was, only that I was alone. For once I didn't feel like crying. It felt as though something inside me had snapped. Maybe I'd finally gone off the deep end and killed both my friends. Wouldn't that be something? Water dripped through a hole in the roof into the tin, and I could dimly hear the sound of rain.

The room was small but neatly organized. A desk in one corner with a terminal. A safe. A shelf holding numerous books. A refrigerator in the second corner. Wastebasket. Then the cot I occupied in the third corner. I saw a toilet and sink through one open door. A faded plastic banner hung near the ceiling reading 'Megamart, always lowest prices, always highest quality'. Lowest prices...

There were other things too. Little hints of a world before this one. The Megamart employee of the year had been somepony named Boxcars. There was a little award for record profits selling 'canned and preserved foods and ammunition'. A strange photograph of two groups of soldiers in the parking lot,

one in green combat armor and the other... zebras with red stripes? A curly-maned mare with purple glasses bumped hooves with a red zebra filly. The caption read 'Macintosh's Marauders invade Megamart with the Red Stripes. Great deals ensue.'

I was back with the Finders, which meant that my friends were probably alive. I felt a little relieved at that thought. I should have felt more relieved. Slowly I rocked back and forth before tipping over onto my hooves. I could only assume that this was Bottlecap's office, though why I was here I didn't have a clue. My stomach felt like a pit, but there were some biological urges that needed addressing. Once I'd flushed, a drink of rainwater from the tin helped alleviate some of the pounding in my skull.

"Welcome back," Bottlecap said softly from behind her desk as she casually turned the pages of a book, making me jump. My magic immediately grabbed for weapons that weren't there. It took me a moment to finally sit back on my haunches and blink at her as she scanned a hoof along the page.

"You are a very quiet pony," I muttered, feeling embarrassed by my alarm.

"Not really. You have very noisy bowels. Leave the fan on and close the door," she said as she continued to read. I reddened but did as she asked, feeling apprehensive. I expected a question or comment but Bottlecap didn't say a word as she just read. Then she said softly, "Your friends handled the transactions while you've been indisposed. They took your barding to be repaired. I recommend some additional protection. Four hundred and twenty-five caps for the glands. Twenty-five hundred from the Society account. Twenty-two hundred from Orion's Herd. You're halfway to your goal, minus the cost of resupply."

News that we'd amassed a small fortune in caps didn't do much for me. "Did they... did they tell you what happened?" I asked as I sat back down on the cot in that vertical fashion that drew a curious look from Bottlecap.

"Should they have? You were unconscious when the three of you got here. I felt you'd recover better with some privacy." She looked up from her ledger and gave a little smile and shrug. "I'm usually too busy to sleep, so it was no trouble."

I rubbed my face. "I fell apart out there," I admitted. "I must have gone a little crazy."

"Perhaps, but I doubt it. I suspect it was simply the result of you throwing yourself at a bit too much Wasteland. I take it that, DJ Pon3's accounts aside, your experience has been somewhat terrible?" I cringed in anticipation of the h-word, but it never came. Instead Bottlecap looked back down at the book. "I never understood his habit of casting ponies in the role of hero or villain. It seems a bit immature."

"So you don't think I'm a hero?"

"Hero." She said the word almost with disdain. "The Wasteland is no place for heroes. It chews heroes up and swallows them. They burn out, burn up, or change for the worse. The price of being a hero is just too high in the Wasteland," Bottlecap said as she sat, looking at me with a warm smile. "I think you are an individual and judge you accordingly, instead of holding you to some romantic ideal of how I think you should act."

I gave the yellow mare a grateful smile in return. "Well, thanks for loaning me your bed. I'm better now. I should probably check in on P-21 and Glory and look for more work." Yup. All better now. Whatever had happened on the road was done with and I didn't have to worry about it. Nope. Not at all.

Guts spreading over cracked asphalt...

Not at all.

"It's three in the morning," Bottlecap said simply. "Your friends, and most of the Megamart, are asleep."

"Oh. I didn't mean to keep you awake," I said as I looked over the ledger, but it made little sense to me. "What are you working on?"

"Finding a way to keep the Megamart in business," she replied as she looked at the numbers. "The same thing I do every day. Your work on the Manehattan Highway gave us some wiggle room, but we're bleeding trade month after month."

"Really? I'm sorry you're losing money." I knew less about business than I did terminals and medicine. My condolences seemed to amuse her.

"Money comes and goes. What we're losing is trade," she said as she closed her ledger. "There's three trade hubs for the Finders and we're all in competition with each other."

"Competition? If you're Finders shouldn't you work together?"

Bottlecap sighed and walked to the fridge, taking out two Sparkle-Colas. She bit the caps off and spat them into her desk drawer. I levitated one over and enjoyed chilled carrot goodness. "It's more complicated than that. You see, my father is the owner of the Finders. He has three daughters, one of which is me. Each of my sisters controls the other two hubs. Unfortunately my sisters and I have... differing economic philosophies," she said with a scowl and a regretful sigh. "When Father dies, one of us will assume control. I'm sure you can see the dilemma."

"I'm afraid I still don't get it," I replied. "Sorry, I wish I was smarter about this whole marketing stuff." One good thing about talking with Bottlecap: it occupied all of my brain power. I barely thought about pushing a button... barely... I swallowed as I felt my hooves shake on the bottle. "What, you don't get along with your sisters or something?"

"Caprice is of the opinion that the Finders should diversify away from pure salvage. She peddles sex and chems to anypony willing to pay for it from the Finders hub in Flank. She sees nothing wrong with sucking every last cap out of an addict. She's quite experienced at that." She scowled in thought, then glanced at me with a small smile. "As you can guess, she thinks I'm simply a prude."

"I don't understand. Isn't getting caps the point of business?"

"What would be the point of having a pile of caps? To swim in it?" Bottlecap said with a smile as she dug out one of the caps and held it up. "This is just a stamped piece of metal. What matters is trade. Taking goods for caps. Selling goods and getting caps. The amount of caps doesn't matter compared to

the trade. If anything has a chance of holding us together, it's trade. After all, everypony wants something."

I laughed softly, hoping I wasn't being too rude. "Sorry, but you sound so serious about it. How do merchants save Equestria?"

"Is that so shocking? Trade requires rules, understanding, and agreements. It demands a certain level of respect and acknowledgement for others. I suppose I could have pushed my profit margins a little more aggressively, but that would strain trade even more. This way I help contribute to the peace and order of the Wasteland," Bottlecap said as she finished her Sparkle-Cola. "I know it might seem silly, but it's a big Wasteland and I'm absolutely lousy with a gun."

I remembered how often I thought I was useless because all I could do was shoot things. "Trust me, being good with a gun isn't much better."

"I disagree." Bottlecap cocked her head with a pleasant smile. "You do things, Blackjack. By your hoof and your will, ponies live and die. That's a power that..." Her eyes looked at me solemnly and sadly. "I see..."

My heart had redoubled its pounding. I struggled for breath. The bottle of Sparkle-Cola slipped from my magic and the brown fluid sloshed over the floor. I did everything I could to stop the shaking in my forelegs. "It's not... It's not a power I should have. That anypony should have."

She looked at me steadily and didn't say a word. She waited for my heart rate to slow; for the vertigo to pass. Then she spoke in a softly respectful tone. "But it is a power you do have, Blackjack. And it's a power that many ponies are willing to use. Eager to use."

"I used my power to kill children," I said as I clenched my eyes shut. I could still hear the singing. Why had we sung as they died? Forty... I couldn't help myself. I poured out every terrible event that occurred, finishing with what happened with the raiders.

Bottlecap closed her eyes, seeming to ruminate on everything that I'd told her. Then she said quietly, "There was no right choice, Blackjack, but I would have done the same thing." Slowly I opened my eyes to look at her solemn features. "The Collegiate are fine ponies, but they don't care for fixing ponies broken centuries ago. They're more interested in discovering lost spells and technology. Those foals would have remained as you left them for centuries. They wouldn't have pulled the plug. They simply would have closed the door. As for the Enclave helping... why would they? They weren't pegasus foals."

"Maybe. The blood is on my hooves though. I'll have to pay for it someday," I muttered. I levitated the bottle up, drank what remained inside, and then carefully levitated the fluid off the floor. I wasn't very sure I could do it, actually, but I managed to get most of the spilt soda into a fizzy, dirty, faintly radioactive ball and down the sink.

Bottlecap waited for me to finish before continuing. "Yes. You will. You're paying for it right now." I looked at her in shock. I'd expected... what had I expected? "And you'll keep paying until you don't care anymore. You'll pay for that blood even if you do nothing but sit back in a glorified store."

"You? But... unless your employee discipline policy involves executions, who have you killed?" I gasped. Bottlecap, a killer? I wasn't seeing it.

"You've seen the bounties posted. I'm not naïve enough to believe they're all guilty and deserving of death, but I connect bounty hunters to bounties. I sell the ammunition and weapons that kill them. In my own way I've facilitated the death of thousands of ponies. But I have to hope that in the end I've helped more than I've hurt." She looked at me, saying levelly, "If I lose that, then I'm no better than my sister Usury in Paradise."

"Usury?" I straightened as I remembered the freed ponies mentioning Paradise. I might not have been a smart pony, but I made the connection. "Your sister runs the slave market? The Finders are involved in the slave trade?"

"We are now," Bottlecap said as she closed her eyes with a reserved frown. "Usury believed it was a mistake to ignore the slave market. That ponies are every bit as much a commodity as salvage or sex." She sighed softly. "Like I said, Megamart is losing trade. More and more ponies go to Paradise and Flank instead of here to exchange goods. And when Father dies I'll either be selling drugs and flesh, or ponies." She smiled grimly. "Though, more likely, I'll simply quit and set up shop in Tenpony or Friendship City. Some things I'm not willing to buy or sell." Somehow I figured she wasn't talking about salvage any more.

I looked at Bottlecap for the longest time, feeling odd emotions churning inside me. Respect... no. Admiration. Here was a pony that had lived in the Wasteland her entire life and refused to sell out her integrity. Even when it hurt her business, she insisted on doing the right thing. I didn't really think it was possible for businesses to care more about their effects than wealth.

I suddenly had a feeling about how I could pay off some of my debt.

"So... how do I hurt her trade?" I asked quietly.

"Are you able to?" Bottlecap stood and walked to me with a probing expression. "Because if you want to do something in the Wasteland, somepony is going to get hurt. Maybe you. Maybe your friends. Maybe somepony who deserves to hurt. Maybe somepony who doesn't. Can you handle it?"

Then I realized what she was asking me. Could I hurt? Could I kill? Could I handle paying the price for being a killer, or would I keep breaking over and over again till there was nothing left? "I don't know," I replied. "I thought I was. Now I don't know what to think."

"Guess we'll find out," Bottlecap said softly. "You already struck a blow against her, thanks to DJ Pon3. I'll never know how he got that recording, but I'm sure every slaving band is wondering just how much of a threat you really are. The more you disrupt supply, the better. But, eventually, you'll have to tackle the demand. Some, like Red Eye in Fillydelphia, probably wouldn't stop unless he died. But there are others, like Brimstone's Fall, where the slave operations are smaller and more manageable."

I glanced at my PipBuck and noticed that it had added a square far to the south and west of Megamart. How did it do that? Bottlecap noticed my look and smiled. "I can't, of course, offer you a contract for this. If my sisters thought I was deliberately undermining them, it would be all-out war within the Finders."

I looked back at her. *Do better.* Could I? I had to. Otherwise I'd be nothing more than a killer. "Know of any contract work in the area?" I offered a tense smile. "After all, trouble seems to find me easily enough. When it does, who can say what'll happen?"

* * *

The jobs were simple and legitimate. Patrol the Sunset Highway between Megamart and Flank, poke through the Miramare Air Station for some electronic parts, and deliver some mail to Flank's residents. The route would also take me within spitting distance of Brimstone's Fall. If something should happen that put a dent in the demand side of the slave trade, then it'd not only help the people of the Wasteland but Bottlecap as well.

I wasn't sure if I was good with this or not. Unlike my first talk with Watcher, I didn't feel much more confident. I still wanted to do better, though. Watcher, DJ Pon3, Bottlecap... even the figurine of Fluttershy all extolled me to do better. Do more. Help others. If I did, maybe I'd be able to come to terms with all the wrong things I'd done. Pay my price.

Still, first things first: get a new shotgun and pick up my barding. The specialty rounds were effective, but hell on the workings of a gun. I'd need to save them or start carrying backup shotguns. Actually, given that everypony was asleep at this hour, what I should have done was go back to bed till dawn. The thought of trying to take a nap didn't appeal much, though.

"Ante up," I heard a mare, Keystone, I think her name was, say from the entrance. My ears stood right up and I moseyed over to where five ponies sat around a table. And they had cards and colored chits. A true, real smile crossed my face.

"Deal me in?" I gave her my widest and sincerest 'I won't tell the Overmare' smile.

The mottled gray and green mare looked up in surprise, and a little suspicion. "You know Head and Hoof style?" I shook my head, but I guessed that they knew we'd gotten paid today. It was actually really similar to a style of poker Rivets had been fond of. You got two cards face down (your head) and then two cards were turned face up (your hooves). Every round you added a card to either your head or your hooves as you raised the bet. Everypony made the best hand out of seven. With six players, that meant keeping track of forty-two cards. With half a deck in play, it was more gamble than figuring out the odds. They forwarded some chips for me and we got to playing.

In two hours, the game broke down more and more between me and Keystone. She was a lot smarter than me, and she kept making smart bets. Me? I won big. I lost big too. Still, I won just a bit more than I lost with each hoof dealt. The cards and the winning were only half of it, though; contrary to what I'd thought, I'd missed this. The banter. The jokes. The remembrances of a life where I didn't expect to kill somepony every day.

Then, of course, there was the whiskey. I had to admit that I'd never really drunk before. We didn't have legal alcohol in Stable 99, so my first drink went down like a Sparkle-Cola. Once I'd stopped coughing and choking, I figured out that whiskey was supposed to be drunk slowly rather than fast, and soon I had a pleasant warmth in my belly that quickly drove out all the fears and doubts rolling around in my skull. I felt happy.

Then I saw a ghost. The unicorn buck stood at the end of a row of scrap metal. His tan mane and brown hide were nothing spectacular. The only thing that stood out was an odd cutie mark. A cutie mark identical to P-21's.

U-21. I rose to my hooves as he disappeared out of sight. "Deal me out this round. I need to... take a leak."

"That was information I did not need to know," Keystone replied, happily taking my cards. When I ran down the row... okay, weaved down the row... she called after me, "Hey! Toilets are that way! Don't be peeing on the merchandise!"

"Heeere... pony pony pony..." I called out as I made my way to the end of the row and turned. "I just want to ask you a few questions about Mr. Deus and Sanguine. I'm not gonna hurt'cha." I really hoped I wouldn't have to hurt him. It'd be nice to get some answers without hurting anyone.

I spotted him fidgeting next to two pallets stacked high with rusty generators or electrical equipment. He stared at me, swallowing as he trembled. "Hey. U-21. You met somepony named Sanguine. I really want to meet him too."

"I'm sorry," he muttered, and then his shaking stopped. His lips curled in a small satisfied smirk. "But he only wants your PipBuck." His horn flared brightly.

"Oh horse--" I started to say, when a powerful telekinetic field wrapped around my throat and squeezed tight, lifting me into the air. Then what I'd taken for a heap of scrap slowly rose to his hooves.

"Hello, Security Cunt." In the stable, he'd looked big. Now, he looked *huge*. Even ignoring the metal plates fused to his hide and the pistons supporting his weight, he stood a whole head higher than me. The sight of metal plunging into flesh, distorting it as he moved, would normally have turned my stomach. Just at the moment, though, I had enough sobriety to notice but more than enough inebriation to not care about it. Or that I was dangling helplessly between his massive guns. "You have no idea how aggravating it's been to find you."

"Hasn't been fun for me either," I gasped with a forced grin. "So. Heard you want a certain computer file I've got? Won't do you any good. It's encrypted."

"Sanguine doesn't care about that, cunt. All he wants is your PipBuck." He reached out with his hoof and caressed my cheek... it was like being touched by manufacturing equipment. "If you'd given it to me right outside that damned stable, I might have let you walk away. Eventually. Crawl, perhaps. But after leading me on a chase for nearly a week? I'm afraid I'm not in the mood anymore."

"Funny." I laughed in his scowling, ugly face. "If you'd pulled this a few hours ago, I'd probably have just given you my PipBuck. Probably the leg too," I said as I gave him a little smile. He blinked in confusion as he looked at me. "There's just two little problems right now: one, I dunno if you noticed, but I'm really stupid. And two..." I paused as I looked over at the cannons. Yup... *that* was probably it right there. Least I knew my guns. "Two... I'm pretty sure I'm drunk."

And my own magic reached out and deftly depressed the trigger mechanisms on those two

cannons pointing to either side of me. The roar of the shots blasted second by second just feet away. Shells sent pallets of scrap flying and tumbling down on U-21, breaking his magical grip on me. I landed in a heap in front of Deus, curling into a little ball. I couldn't hear anything as my ears rang and I went fetal. *Oh thank you sweet merciful whiskey for you have taken the concussive beating that comes from hanging a few feet from a firing cannon muzzle and rendered it into a nice full-body numbness.*

He stood over me, his mouth working as his metallic hoof pressed down right over my leg. It sounded like he was screaming at me from under water. "What did you think that accomplished, huh, cunt?" He started to apply pressure; I wondered if he could just stomp my leg clean off. Probably.

"Wrath of Gun," I muttered, and then he looked up. The massive turret was swinging the barrel around to point right at Deus. He stepped back, eyes widening, and I curled up as tightly as I could, giggling, "Mine's bigger." Gun fired.

Wee... I'm flying!

Whoopsie. Never mind. Gravity works.

I crashed through the chain mesh draped across a firearms stall and landed behind the counter. Ammo boxes weren't particularly soft; actually, they were the antithesis of soft. But they did hold ammo. And so, as I lay there behind the counter, marveling at the many painkilling properties of alcohol, I took said ammo and loaded said firearms.

It was crazy time in Megamart. I could make out the long, drawn-out noise of 'Cunnnnnnt!' being shouted by Deus. Keystone and the other ponies were scrambling. Gun was tracking Deus, but not firing. And me, I was staggering out from behind the counter with my new... shotgun? Rifle? It was all kinda blurry at the moment. Oh well. I could tell the business end from the trigger and that was all I needed. "Hey Deus! You still want my PipBuck? You can have it when you pry it off my cold... dead..." Oh. Vomiting. Not nearly what I'd been going for.

Oh look! There was Deus. Minus one gun. It looked like he'd missed getting shot by Gun, but his gear hadn't. That made him keel over with each step as he fought to keep his balance. I blew him a kiss. He blew one back... wait, no. That was a shell. It was only luck and him being so off balance that kept me from turning into a Blackjack colored stain.

Another low, deep 'crump' from overhead and the shell buried itself in the concrete, throwing rocky debris everywhere. I guessed Gun's shells didn't go boom like Deus's... made sense being inside and all. Off balance and heavy as he was, Deus was still a quick pony!

"Hey Deus. I got a gun too," I shouted, or I think I shouted. I might have just said, 'Hadahhhhhsss! Mwahhhguaaataaa!' but he was charging and I really had no time for elocution. Instead I pointed my gun thing and fired, hitting S.A.T.S. as the shell left the barrel and rocketed towards him. Wait? S.A.T.S. then fire... S.A.T.S. then fire... Canceling S.A.T.S. I watched as the shell hit Deus right in the chest. Darn. I'd wanted to aim for his head.

Then Deus exploded! I looked down at the weapon in my magical grip, focusing on the blurry letters. Grenade... launcher? I thought you just threw 'em! Unfortunately Deus was not a dead pony. He wasn't a happy pony either. Actually, looking around, there were a *lot* of unhappy ponies. Well, not

me. I was happy. I had a tummy of whiskey residue and my head was going around and around and whee.

P-21 and Glory found me and immediately started dumping healing potions down my gullet. Funny, but why did I hurt more when I was healed? The spinning and the underwater noise receded and I became aware of the copious amounts of blood coming from my ears and nostrils. Heck, I looked like I'd gotten peppered with concrete buckshot. Suddenly I didn't feel so good. In fact I was rapidly going from good to 'aw fuck'. Why couldn't I stop shaking?

They helped sit me up as Bottlecap, flanked by Keystone and the rest of her security team, kept weapons trained. "This is done, Deus. I'll send the bill to Big Daddy. You two can settle it between you."

"This isn't done yet." He pointed a hoof right at me. "Hand her over, Bottlecap. I'll pay fifty thousand for her right now."

"You don't have that kind of money," Bottlecap said, but I could hear her doubt. "Besides, even if you did, some things aren't for sale."

"Bullshit, Bottlecap. This is a store. Everything's for sale!" he said with a wide grin.

Bottlecap looked at him with complete disdain. "You've got me confused with my sisters. You don't have a clue what it is you're trying to purchase from me. Now get out, Deus, or I'll sell what's left of you to the ghouls."

He glanced up and around, then scowled. "Fine. But I got one last piece of business here." He pointed his hoof at me and yelled, "Bounty on Security. Fifty thousand caps. You want to collect, bring her head and her PipBuck -- intact -- to the Arena! If she's alive, one hundred thousand bottlecaps! Usury will back me up on payment. After all, she's the sister who doesn't give a fuck," he added, sneering down at Bottlecap. He grinned at me one final time and then the cybernetic pony walked for the exit. U-21 limped after him, smirking at me with malicious glee.

Suddenly more ponies were glancing at me and muttering to each other. "Come on, Blackjack. Let's get you to Bonesaw," P-21 said as he shoved up underneath me. "Ugh, good Goddesses, we just fixed you up, Blackjack. It's like there's some universal rule that you've got to get hurt all the time."

"Just the price I got to pay," I muttered softly as they helped me away.

* * *

I was getting pretty familiar with Bottlecap's office by now. Deus had come in like any shopper and simply waited, knowing that I'd arrive eventually to collect on my contracts. Now that there was a price on my head, Keystone and Bottlecap had thought it best I recover out of sight before I started a riot. Without putting up a single piece of paper, Deus had created the largest bounty in Hoofington history. And that was me dead; me *alive* was twice as much.

"Most ponies are lucky to see a thousand caps in their life," Keystone said with a scowl as she brought me my barding. "We've got to get you out of here or they'll tear the whole place apart looking for you." My whole body throbbed, most particularly my head. I'd thought that Bonesaw took care of

patching me up, but the throbbing in my head made me wonder if I had a skull fracture he missed. Even with everything he'd done, I still felt like I'd been shoved in a dryer set to spin.

I regarded Megamart's security chief with a curious half smile. "Not looking to collect yourself?" Keystone didn't smile back.

The mottled gray and green mare gave a snort. "I'm not an ungrateful shit. You helped us and helped others. I get my paycheck the honest way now," she said as she tossed the barding down on the cot beside me. "Courtesy of your poker winnings."

I levitated it and then frowned. Why was it heavier? "What happened to it?" I felt stiff plates sewn underneath the kevlar weave.

"Armor plates. I thought you needed something a little more substantial. You get shot way too much," Keystone said with a small smile. "I also included something special. Hurry up and kill Deus so we can have another game."

"Any clue where I can find him?" And head in the opposite direction?

"He's a Reaper. If he's not killing somepony, he's probably at the Arena." I looked at my PipBuck... yup. 'Hoofington Sports Arena' was now on the map. If I wasn't wrapped head to hoof in healing bandages I'd be screaming about how. "He's one of Big Daddy's Four Horses of the Apocalypse... and yeah. They really do call themselves that."

P-21 and Glory had spent a sizable amount of our caps on a new drum-fed shotgun. I'd take better care of this one. There was also a backup automatic pistol and a brand spanking new baton. "Thanks. It's not even my birthday." I looked over at Bottlecap. "So I'm guessing those jobs are going to be on hold for a while?"

The lemon mare smiled. "Why? Your bounty doesn't disqualify you from getting paid for other jobs. Every trade hub is supposed to be neutral ground, and you can send Glory or P-21 in to collect payments. Just be careful. That is a lot of money for a bounty, and I know many ponies won't care if you're Security or not."

"Not to be a wet blanket, but how are we supposed to get out of here without said hordes of avarice descending on us the second we set hoof out the door?" P-21 asked, in perfect deadpan wet blanket fashion.

Bottlecap just smiled, and my mane proceeded to itch.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Quick Draw - Holstering and drawing weapons is 50% faster.

Quest Perk: The Stare (Level 1) - You can intimidate non-hostile contacts through eye contact.

(Once again, thanks to Kkat for inspiring me to write. Thanks to Hinds for making all this 120% cooler.)