

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Sombra

Chapter 8: Long Roads

"Are you sayin' my mouth is makin' promises my legs can't keep?"

The word spread like wildfire. Did you hear about the bounty? What bounty? *The* bounty. The bounty of the year. The bounty of the century. Fifty thousand caps dead. A hundred thousand alive. A hundred thousand caps, imagine it! All for the head and PipBuck of some stable dweller? A stable dweller? Yeah, Security. Security? The mare DJ Pon3 talks about? Yeah, she's somewhere around Megamart. Are you going after her? Are you?

The answer had been yes. As I watched through P-21's binoculars I saw them drawn by the promise of easy money. That very morning a camp formed outside the main gates; only a half dozen. By noon it was twenty. By sundown, fifty. Most of them had pathetic weapons, rusty rifles and barely mended work implements. But that was changing. The professionals were starting to arrive. Professionals who were asking questions. What did Security look like? What weapons did she carry? What foods did she like to eat? Who were her friends?

By morning the next day, Megamart found itself inundated with 'customers'. Keystone made sure every one of them paid the toll, and even restricted weapons in case Gun wasn't enough deterrent. Each of the 'shoppers' kept an eye out for the mare with the black and red mane. Had a single one of them laid eyes on me I think they'd have torn me to pieces and hauled me to Deus in a bucket.

Still, for all the watchful eyes, nopony seemed too interested in the four wastelanders and their brahmin. Dressed in rags and cloaks, reeking of brahmin droppings, their packs rattled with salvage from all across Hoofington as they slowly crept north. Reaching the overpass, a gang of ten stopped them. "We're looking for Security."

"Oh, Security escaped last night. Didn't you hear? She was an Enclave agent. Cut her wings off ta fool us all," the old buck leading the caravan of wastelanders cackled.

"Horseapples," spat another caravanner, a gray mare with crossed knives for her cutie mark. "She's still in there. Security's from Tenpony. Got enough money ta buy the Finders. They're finally making their move on the Hoof!"

"She's travelling with a pegasus and an earth pony," the crème buck gang leader said as he glowered at the caravanners.

"Ain't no turkeys here," the old buck cackled again as the gang searched the packs. He was obviously telling the truth; clearly none of the travelling ponies could be hiding wings beneath their dusty robes and cloaks.

The leader of the ten looked at his fellows. "Yeah, well, we think Security might try and sneak out."

"Shit. Ya caught me," the left head of the brahmin muttered.

The other head gasped, "You're Security? You fucker. What'd you do with Hank?"

A few of the bounty hunters snorted at the two jabbering heads. The leader looked at the remaining buck and mare. "You. Get over here," he demanded briskly of the mare. "Get over here and get those rags off."

"Don't you lay a hoof on my girl!" The olive green buck glared, his eyes drilling into the leader. His wild black mane rose in a mad tangled ridge from brow to tail. A trio of varmint rifles fixed on him, making him bristle but step back.

The purple mare gave a coy giggle. "Oh, don't worry hun; I'm sure they'll be gentle." She wiggled out of the robe, revealing a petite body dressed in frilly, if slightly worn, lingerie that covered both flanks and back legs. Quite a cute mare, if you overlooked the male bits between his haunches. He fluttered his lashes at the leader. "Happy?"

The ten immediately lost interest and returned to looking at Megamart, scrambling as they realized three more caravans were leaving for three other directions. The caravan continued north, laughing and sharing jokes. A few miles beyond the overpass the two ponies following them turned back.

I never thought I'd be glad to see Pony Joe's again. As our 'caravan' walked around the back of the donut shop I glanced behind us once again before cackling with glee. "'Ya caught me'... you nearly made me laugh," I said fondly to Hank and Tony.

"I do standup," the brahmin's left head said with a chuckle.

Bottlecap smiled fondly as she reached back, licked over the crossed blades, and then carefully peeled off the cutie mark decal, spitting it into the garbage. "Are you sure you won't keep the disguise a little longer?" Bonesaw didn't really have much to remove from himself, as all his disguise entailed was his robes, so he helped me pull off the wiry black hair that'd been stuck to me with wax.

"Folks need to start spotting Security somewhere other than at Megamart. If they think we're still hiding there, sooner or later they'll try and storm the place or burn you out. If I know DJ Pon3, soon as I plug a raider he'll be all over it." Plug a raider... 'cause killing them was a joke. I really was that callous.

"You're lucky you've got such a puny horn. Never woulda been able to cover it otherwise," Bonesaw said as he magically yanked the clump of hair-coated wax off my brow.

I frowned, feeling a little hurt. "My horn isn't puny."

"It's barely bigger than a foal's!" he cackled.

I feigned an injured yet dignified expression. "It's not puny."

P-21 removed all his wastelander garments, frowning as he glanced at me with a small, almost amused smile. "Bonesaw, does the size of a unicorn's horn have any indication of their magical prowess? Because, Blackjack, I have to admit that I've never seen you do magic before," P-21 teased.

The wrinkled old buck rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"My horn isn't puny! I just wasn't taught any magic. That's all," I said defensively. "I was supposed to learn spells once I took over for Mom." Okay, that was a lie, but it was the best excuse I could manage.

The truth was that I *couldn't* really do magic. Oh, I could levitate guns and swing batons as well as any unicorn, but my telekinesis was hardly all that impressive. In medical they concluded that my magic hadn't fully developed yet. I still had bad dreams of spending hours with Marmalade trying to summon magic hoofcuffs or cast a stunning spell. Trying to get interrogation spells to work had been an absolute nightmare, particularly when my mom decided that it might help if she demonstrated them by using them on me. Having your mother dig through your porn stash was bad enough, but having her dig through the memories of how many times you put yourself on the breeding queue? And having her critique your performance and offer suggestions?

P-21 was looking at me in concern. "Blackjack? You okay?"

"Yeah. Just... yeah..." Oh Goddesses, was I really becoming that much of a basket case? "I didn't freak out, did I?"

"Well..." He gave me a definite smirk... oh yes, he was really smirking! That was a Blackjack kind of smirk, instead of a sullen, P-21 smirk. "It seemed like you were turning pretty interesting colors under that paint job."

"Ugh... leave the mental patient alone," I countered, but I was glad I wasn't thinking about Mom recommending I raise my hips--Goddesses, I was thinking it again! Groaning, I fished around for any other topic I could think of. "Hey, Bottlecap. Are ponies like Deus common in the Wasteland?"

She took out a bottle of mildly radioactive water--no way you'd waste filtered stuff for washing--and started scrubbing the gray paint off her hide. "There's always been Reapers around Hoofington, but most aren't as strong as Deus. When you become a Reaper they do something to you, make you stronger and tougher. But the oldest Reapers like Big Daddy and Deus have potent internal healing talismans and the like; the only ponies that come close to challenging their firepower are the Steel Rangers."

"Oh, why is that?" I asked as I peeled off my cutie mark decal and started scrubbing off my olive paint. For some reason wearing it made me... twitchy. I liked seeing my ace and queen of spades. Then I glanced over at P-21's male symbol and twenty-one dots before he covered them up with his saddlebags. What would his cutie mark have been? A book? A candle? A stubborn jackass?

"Steel Rangers have the Ironmare naval station. The HMS *Celestia*'s tied up there. If they get the guns working on that ship, they'll be able to lob shells across half of Hoofington. They've got numbers and ammo and they're stocking up on every missile they can get their hooves on." Bottlecap looked to the east, but highlands to the north and east of us blocked our view. "Most Steel Rangers just worry about stockpiling weapons and technology from the past. I'm pretty sure 'Star Paladin' Steel Rain plans on something bigger. Fortunately, the Reapers love to pick fights from the west and the Enclave has them bottled up from the south, leaving them mostly stuck in Ironmare."

"You think they're going to try and take over Hoofington?" P-21 asked.

Bottlecap chewed her lip. "Elder Crunchy Carrots... never. But Elder Crunchy is growing increasingly old and feeble, and I think Steel Rain would just love to show Equestria what the Rangers can actually do. Unfortunately, the Enclave's of similar feelings. If they go to war, a whole third of Hoofington might be lost."

I frowned as I scanned the skies. "Speaking of the Enclave, where is Morning Glory? She left before us. She should be here." I glanced behind me at the door to the donut shop. "No. She wouldn't have actually gone inside..."

I walked to the back door and carefully opened it, expecting a wash of pure nausea. Instead, all I smelled was hot air. DJ Pon3 played calmly from within. Inch by inch I opened it and peeked inside the kitchen of horror, only to find... "It's clean." Well... clean in a figurative sense. The industrial mixer had been removed. The ovens and food preparation surfaces were so clean they sparkled. The bodies were all missing. Somepony had come by in the last day or two and scrubbed away every sign of atrocity.

Okay, this was one of the more creepy experiences I'd had in the last week. Not as bad as a few places, but still. I walked inside and found Glory reading a magazine in one of the booths, the radio in the corner filling the dining area with soothing music. A Sparkle-Cola sat on the tabletop beside her. If she hadn't been wearing that Enclave uniform and battle saddle, I would have thought she was a ghost, a pegasus filly from two centuries ago sitting here and waiting for her date to arrive. "Hey, Blackjack."

"Hey. I don't suppose you've been holding back a shocking talent at housecleaning, have you?" I said as I sat in the booth opposite her.

"Um, nope. You mean it wasn't like this before?" She gestured with a hoof. The duffel bag with my shotgun and reinforced barding rested next to her. She also had P-21's things in a sack.

I gave her a skeptical look. "This was a raider nest. You saw how they lived. This place should have bodies for decoration and guts for streamers." Fuck, did I really say that? I took a deep breath, feeling my head start pounding. "Somepony cleaned this place up."

"Well, it wasn't me. I've been waiting all morning," she said with a little smile, gesturing at some empty bottles of cola next to her. "There's running water in the sinks, but I think it might be radioactive. You should have P-21 check in the ladies' room. There's a locked first aid kit in there." She sighed, propping her hooves under her chin as she looked back down at her Scientific Equestria. "Though why anypony would lock up emergency medical supplies is beyond me."

"It does seem counterproductive," I agreed, then went out to tell the others they could come inside. P-21 went right to that locked first aid kit. The bathrooms were much more effective at removing the rest of the paint, even though Glory was right about the radiation. My eyes started to itch and my vision turned distinctly more amberish: minor magical radiation poisoning for sure. No patch and purge special this time.

I left the bathroom decidedly cleaner, went to the duffel, and sucked down a pack of RadAway, enjoying the tangy orange flavor. They could have bottled this stuff! Then I put on my new and improved... and heavier... armor. It certainly felt much more substantial. There was also a reinforced

helmet made in the same blue and gold motif. I could feel the metal plates sewn inside. Hopefully it would prevent more 'Blackjack got blown up within an inch of her life' mom--

Somepony had sewn the Crusader patch on the left flank of my barding, right below the word 'Security'. It might have been dingy, but seeing the little gold filly pawing defiantly at the air made me smile and choke up at the same time. Somehow I'd pay back the Crusaders as well. The faction everypony forgot about deserved help the most.

Stepping out, I saw Morning Glory talking with both Bottlecap and Bonesaw. I hung back, pretending to be interested in Glory's scavenged magazines. "Once the slides are prepared, please see they get to Dr. Morningstar at the RDSP with my notes. I'm sure he'll be interested in more. Let him know I'm travelling with Blackjack."

"You could just take them yourself," Bottlecap pointed out. "It's hazardous, but Keeper's caravan goes by the Skypoint every two weeks."

Glory looked over at me with a small smile. "Well. As terrifying as it's been, I think I'll stay with Blackjack. She's saved my life and she's trying to do the right thing. Maybe I can find more samples, too." D'aww, watch me blush.

"Well, glad to have you with us," I said, and I meant it. She was a little... literal, but she'd seen a lot of the same horrors I had and hadn't fallen apart nearly as badly as I did. And she could fly. Her Enclaveness was certainly concerning, but I was convinced her heart was in the right place.

Once everything was squared away, the three of us headed west towards Weather Monitoring Four, the broadcast tower a handy landmark. Now that I had shed the disguise, I felt a definite twitching between my shoulder blades. I also felt... good. Maybe it was just the day of downtime not killing anypony or Glory's vote of confidence or just the fact that I'd run into Deus and come out alive.

"So did your brains tell you anything?" I asked her, half teasing. I figured anypony after my head would show up as red on my E.F.S., but the only hostiles in these woods were bobbing bloatsprites.

"Yes. The raider sample had numerous lesions in the frontal lobe..." She caught my 'I'm not a smart pony, remember?' look and coughed. "The fronts of their brains were full of little holes. It looked almost like a sponge." See? Translate smart into stupid and I had no problem following along. "The front of the brain is where most of your impulse control and long-term decision-making happen."

"You'd probably see the same thing with Blackjack's brain," P-21 said, grinning at me. I did all I could to not say a word, feeling my heart throbbing in my ears. "So what do you think causes it?" he continued, not noticing my discomfort. "There's lots of ponies that live in the Wasteland who manage to stay sane." Sure, they might kill us anyway for a mountain of caps, but that was sane.

"Some bacteria or virus, I think. The decay is progressive; likely it takes months or years for full psychological breakdown to occur. Given that raiders are so aggressive and cannibalistic, they might spread it through eating infected ponies," she replied. "The Enclave reports that there's something down here that turns all ponies into raiders, but we've come across plenty that aren't. The slaver brain was perfectly healthy. No lesions at all." She looked positively ecstatic. "More samples are needed, of course, but the Enclave can get that. If I'm right, once they lock down the source, they can work on a

treatment. Imagine a Wasteland with no more raiders!”

“That just leaves radiation, ghouls, bandits, killer robots, slavers...” P-21 listed. I gave him a little shove. Taking raiders out of the equation would go a long way towards making Hoofington a safer place to live. He was right, but if she was right and the Enclave could come up with a cure, I’d sure be happy. Then they could just do something about those clouds...

While I wasn’t exactly thrilled about resting at the weather station, I knew there was food we’d left behind, and unless the robots rebuilt themselves we should be safe. By the time we reached the station, the rain had started to pick up and turn the ground into mud soup. We slipped back into the reinforced structure and I carefully and respectfully cleared out a room for us to use; I might not have been up to burying dozens of skeletons, but I didn’t have to toss their bones around like garbage, either. I levitated some mattresses over and we got settled in for the night.

...Have I mentioned I hate being bored?

I had one little curiosity sitting in my bag. Slowly I pulled out the glassy memory orb I’d received from the broken gazebo beside the lake. Lying on my mattress, I batted it back and forth between my hooves. Bonesaw had explained how they worked: a trip down somepony else’s experiences. See what they saw and feel what they felt. I assumed the first orb had been Miss Glitterhooves’s memory: Garnet, recalling an actual meeting with Fluttershy, Cheerilee, and Redheart. Granted, this time I probably wouldn’t wake up with my intestines... okay. Not thinking about that now.

“I think I’m going to take a peek inside,” I said as I looked at the orb.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” P-21 asked with obvious skepticism.

“It’s one of my ideas. Of course it isn’t good,” I said as I lifted it in my hoof. “As soon as I go into this thing we’ll be stormed by bounty hunters, ghouls, and Deus. But I’m bored and I’m curious, so I’ll need you two to protect me from Deus raping me with his cannon.”

Glory frowned, rubbing her chin with a wingtip. “I really don’t think it’d fit. That bore has to be a hundred and twenty two millimeters and that’s almost the width of a mare giving birth so figuring in the thickness of the barrel...” She finally caught my look. “Oh. Blackjack humor. Sorry.” She smiled sheepishly. “Yes, we will protect you from a hypothetical Deus and his hypothetical cannon.”

“Next you should teach her about innuendo,” P-21 observed dryly. Then he looked at me in concern, “I’m not sure exactly how that thing works, but be careful if you can.”

“Heh... it’s probably a nightmare phantasmagoria of blood and death, the way my luck’s been.” I touched the tip of my horn to the glowing orb and made the magic connection. The world faded to black...

oooOOOooo

Stars. They’d been a five letter word and a black page covered in white speckles in a history book I’d been too bored to really read. Now a million points of light filled the heavens above me. That was nothing compared to the moon: luminous and white like a polished bottle cap. Ugh, had I just used junk money to describe the moon? I had no poetry in my soul.

The lake before me looked as if it were a piece of the night sky: no scummy gray water, swampy weeds, or radigators fouling its flat peacefulness. The air was filled with the sweet smell of clean water and delicate fragrances I could only imagine were flowers. The unicorn mare I occupied fit so well I felt as if I myself were standing there. I wanted to taste that water and explore those sweet scents. Sadly, I could not, as she stood underneath a gazebo roof that hadn't yet been crushed by falling skywagons.

I heard hoofsteps on the bridge to the shore and I felt her lips curl. "You're going back again, aren't you?"

"Ayep," a deep, mournful voice said softly. I felt him brush up against her flank, felt her body lean against his, her eyes closing as she took in his rich smell and felt his strong body beside hers.

"Isn't fifteen years of your life enough, Macintosh?" she asked softly, stroking her cheek against his neck.

"They need me," came his slow reply. "The Princess will be there. I think this might finally be over."

"Over..." She opened her eyes to look up at his powerful jaw and those soft yet so wonderfully strong eyes gazing down at her. "Will it ever really be over for you, Macintosh?"

He smiled and lowered his head to nuzzle me with shocking tenderness for so powerful a stallion. "Now that I've got you, I reckon so." Oh how I adored this... she adored... oh Goddesses, it was getting hard to tell where she ended and I began. "I gotta do this. For my sis. For all my friends I've lost. For the Princess. Heck, for you. Gold says the zebras respect me. If I'm there... maybe they'll be more likely to go for a ceasefire."

I felt her lean against him. "Then I guess you have to do it," she whispered. A soft sigh, and then she asked in a much firmer tone, "Have you told your sister about me?"

He jerked and gulped, "Well... um... she's busy... and... ah..."

"Big Macintosh! We've been together for a year and you still haven't told her?" I kicked his leg with a forehoof, but felt myself smiling. He was far too strong for my hoof to hurt him.

"I'm sorry. I just hoped that if we were together long enough that she'd figger it out." He gave a sheepish smile. "I'll tell you what, Miss Maripony. When we're done at Shattered Hoof I'll hand over my resignation then and there..."

"And?" I felt myself arch a brow.

"And I'll tell my sister and everyone who this wonderful pony is..." he added as he lowered his head to my own.

"And?" I asked softly. He looked apprehensive for only a moment before he sighed.

"And... I'll tell 'em we got to start planning for a wedding."

I melted against him once again, kissing him and feeling him hold me. Finally, like trying to tear out my own heart, our lips parted. "Well... all right then," I whispered, tears running down my cheek. There were the sounds of a sky carriage approaching and landing by the house on the hillside beside the lake. "I've waited this long. I can wait a little bit more."

"I love you, Maripony," he whispered in my ear.

"I love you, Macintosh," I replied. We stood together like that for a moment or two longer, and then parted. I hadn't realized how cool the night was till I stood there alone beneath the stars. I listened to his fading footsteps across the bridge, glancing back to see him looking at me. Then he boarded the sky carriage.

Then my eyes closed and I felt my lips move; a whisper so soft that I could only make it out from the shapes of my lips.

You're going to be a father.

oooOOOooo

I came out of the memory at once, staring at the softly glowing curve beneath my horn. Love. It was like stars. I'd never seen it before, not like that. Not love so obvious it made my chest hurt. Glory and P-21 looked at me in concern. "You... are you all right, Blackjack?" P-21 asked.

Was I? I had no idea. Could I do anything without having my brain or emotions wrenched in an entirely new direction? I sat up, trying to sort my emotions into the correct holes. "Who was Macintosh?" I asked, looking at both of them.

"Did you sleep through *all* your classes?" P-21 asked with a still concerned frown. "Big Macintosh was the hero of the Equestrian Army. He never became an officer, but he was pivotal right up to his death at the Shattered Hoof assassination attempt."

Assassination? Suddenly I remembered old Hoss's journal entries at the flooded field farmhouse. "He died saving Princess Celestia," I said as I looked back at the innocuous orb. "Did he have anyone?" They looked at me in confusion. "Did he have anyone? A family? A kid?" I swallowed hard against the lump in my throat. "Somepony named Mari? Maripony maybe?"

"His younger sisters were Applejack and Apple Bloom... but other than that, no. I don't think so," Glory said as she shook her head.

Shit. Now I knew how to feel. Was there some sadistic being out there beyond the stars serving up a buffet of misery and regret for me to wallow through? No... I couldn't let myself start thinking that way. There was no way out of that hole.

"I'm sorry. I guess it was bad," Glory said softly in concern.

"No..." I said quietly. He'd died and left her alone with a child, completely forgotten by everypony. "It wasn't bad. It was wonderful." And that made it so very much worse. I closed my eyes as I walked

out of the room to step outside and let the rain wash some of the sorrow away.

* * *

When I'd come in out of the rain, I shared what was on the memory with both of them. Surprisingly, P-21 looked more touched than Glory that the hero of Equestria had a love that never made it into the history books. I wondered why she had been forgotten. Had she remained silent, bearing a colt or filly free of the stain of that tragedy? Did she try and connect to Applejack? Had some editor just thought she wasn't worth printing? And, most pernicious of all, what had been her ultimate fate? Had she died beside that lake with Big Macintosh's child, the waters fouled by radioactive fallout as the world crashed around her?

I knew that I shouldn't care. She'd been gone more than two centuries. So why care about a pony that no longer existed? Was it vanity? Did I want somepony to remember Security two centuries from now? Was it loneliness, now that my world had gone from a stable of a few hundred to less than a half dozen ponies, and was I desperate to connect to somepony good? Somepony that could teach me about positive things in life? Just seeing Fluttershy's statue had inspired me to do better. I needed to do better.

I watched the memory three more times, but there was nothing there but regret.

I'd like to say that in the morning the rain stopped. Actually, I'd like to say the rain stopped and for the first time I saw the moon and stars and maybe the sun too. The reality was the rain slacked up enough to travel, but drizzled enough to turn everything into wet muck. We were north of Ironshod R&D, but I wanted a good look around with P-21's binoculars. A hill rose to the west and I guessed that we might be able to see the Sunset Highway from the top. It'd be nice to find out just how many bounty hunters were on our tail.

The slope wasn't anything terrible and it was covered by patches of yellowing grass and thorn bushes. Still, the saturated ground sometimes slumped alarmingly underhoof as we made our way upwards. My PipBuck mapping tool chimed: Hill 255. Suddenly there was a metallic groan beneath us. The entire hillside started to slide out from underneath our hooves. Glory took to the skies as I wrapped my magic around P-21's leg and we scrambled to the side.

To my amazement a vast metal shape turned over as it breached the water-drenched surface. Slowly it came to a stop behind us, and I stared at the mud-slathered turret of a two-hundred-year-old tank. Around it and beneath it, poking from the slumping mud, were hundreds of rotten bones freed from the earth. Slowly, I swept my eyes across the field to the west of us. There rose the mountains, stark and sheer. North lay the lake; was it my imagination, or could I see the tiny remains of the gazebo from here? South I could make out the many wings of the Fluttershy hospital.

But immediately south and west lay only battlefield. Even two hundred years hadn't obscured the battle lines. Armored skeletons lay next to strangely graceful zebra weapons. I made out one large glowing crater southwest of the hill; it wasn't alone. Small lakes and ribbons of contaminated water lay everywhere; even atop the hill my radiation scanner ticked softly.

A ring of concrete crumbled at the top of the hill and I could make out something spray-painted on it: *'Take care of...'* but the rest had been lost to time. Taking out the binoculars, I scanned the terrain

behind us.

"Wow... there's a lot of folks between here and Manehattan." I could see them moving like bugs along the two lines of asphalt between the Boneyard and Megamart. South of us there seemed to be quite a few wandering eastward from the clinic. Past the clinic, though, it looked like most of the road was abandoned. I made out a few large rectangular buildings beside the winding highway. I smiled a little. "I think if we just skirt around the Fluttershy Clinic and keep our heads down we might be able to get past." Then I noticed P-21 wasn't listening as he looked down at the tank.

P-21 rubbed his chin thoughtfully with a hoof as he looked at the wreck now lying on its muddy treads. "Think we could get it working?"

"You want to fix the tank? It's a two-hundred-year-old relic that's been buried upside-down in a hill!" I said incredulously. Then I blinked and looked at Glory. "Think we could get it working?"

Thank Celestia the gray pegasus simply gaped at the wreck. "I wouldn't have a clue where to begin!" Leaving the wreck and visions of rolling along in an armored war machine behind, we picked our way south. The PipBuck mapping function just labeled the entire battlefield as 'No Pony's Land'. Given the number of decaying zebra weapons and sets of armor, I'd say it was accurate.

I clicked on the radio, glad to have the music to cut some of the gloom. We didn't have long to wait before the DJ -- Bottlecap had finally explained what a DJ actually was yesterday -- came on. "Can't beat Sapphire Shores for sass and spunk. That was 'Ain't gonna hang my head'. Well, if you were listening earlier you probably heard Security Mare's little declaration of war against Paradise Mall. It looks like Paradise has responded in kind by putting a big bounty on Security.

"Now I know times are tough. I know a number like that is bound to turn anypony's head. But given where the money's coming from I just gotta ask: what's to stop 'em from turning around the second you step out the door, taking the money back, and tossing your tail into Brimstone's Fall? Even if they do let you walk away, enjoy spending every day of your life keeping an eye out for bandits and slavers. Oh." There was a shaking of paper and a conspicuous clearing of his throat, "And I got a little memo from the Tenpony Tower management: those caps count as raiding activity should you collect, so don't plan to come here with 'em.

"We're never gonna do better if we kill everypony trying to do the right thing. Ponies selling ponies to ponies who work ponies to death is just wrong, no matter how you buck it. So with that in mind," the music began again, "here is Sweetie Belle with 'Priceless'."

For the first time, I was starting to warm a little to the DJ. I had to agree, making me out to be a hero was annoyingly helpful, but it was good to hear anypony arguing against fifty thousand caps for my head. I just wish he'd got it right that it was Deus that made the bounty... though on second thought that bastard would probably enjoy it. It also explained why so many hunters were watching every inch between Megamart and Manehattan: if DJ Pon3 was in my corner, maybe I was running there now.

Somepony started shooting.

First, it wasn't any of us. Second, it wasn't at any of us. I relaxed as I took out the shotgun. The gunshots came from the south, and moving quickly I could make out lots of yellow bars on my E.F.S.

Glory glided carefully between the hills as we came across a siege. A dozen ponies fired potshots at a bunker that returned fire through armored slits.

"Getcher tails outta there!" shouted a mustard brown pony in a battle saddle armed with two automatic rifles as we circled around behind them. "We're gonna skin ya for them brahmin ya eet!"

"Not a very convincing argument for them to get out," P-21 said as he glanced at me. "We could just go around and let them shoot it out."

That would be probably the smart idea. Unfortunately, I am not a smart pony. I moved up behind Assault Rifles and levitated out my baton. "Hey. What's up?" I asked brightly.

"Got a bunch o' them thieving Crusaders holed up in there. Ate three of our brahmin," Assault Rifles said as he scratched his pockmarked hide with a hoof. I might not have cared for his hygiene, but I had to admit that I liked the mirrored sunglasses he wore. Very snazzy.

"Twelve adults shooting at Crusaders?" I said incredulously.

"Yeah... well, it's our third brahmin they eet." He glanced at me and then at the door of the bunker.

"And you're sure it was these kids and not, say... a radigator or something else?" I said as suggestively as possible. Doubt flickered in his eyes as his scowl turned sourer.

"Well... I guess. Maybe," he muttered, and then he looked over at me. He lowered his glasses to stare at my barding. Then his eyes widened as dreams of avarice bloomed in his eyes.

"Don't do it," I warned, giving him the look, pressing the tip of the baton against his chin. "You won't live to get your share."

"Right. Well. Guess we might as well git outta the rain. Come on boys," he said with a sickly grin. The other ponies gave a few more shots, but quickly they moved off into a clump, talking between themselves and looking back at me more and more.

"I've got a distinct feeling we're going to have to fight them pretty soon," P-21 said sourly as the mob moved further south. "That bunch is just screaming 'ambush' to me."

"Then when they shoot first they can find out how bad an idea it is," I said as I approached the door to the bunker. "You can come out, Crusaders. They've gone."

The rifle shot against my barding told me they weren't convinced. It stung like mad, but no penetration. The bars were still yellow, so I could only guess that that was a warning shot. I reached out with my magic and gave a hard yank on the muzzle. The rifle came flying out the slot in the door. "Hey! Not fair!" somepony protested inside.

There was some tense muttering inside and then one by one fillies and colts stepped into view. All wore the same cloak with the same patch on it. A chartreuse unicorn's eyes widened at the sight of me. "Whoa... it's Security." A little bit of pride blossomed inside me. Then she turned to the other three,

"If we take her out, we can get thousands and thousands of caps!" That pride shriveled and died and rotted in a pernicious cloud of decay.

If I had to kill Crusaders, I'd just put my head on a platter for Deus and give 'em the full bounty.

"Don't be an idjit, Medley," a rose colt with magenta mane snapped. "She kills raiders by lookin' at 'em. Besides, she helped Boing's band out of a pinch."

"And got Scoots ate by ghoulies, Allegro," a lackadaisical blue colt with a purple mane replied.

"And she got us outta a pinch too. Or you think them brahmin farmers were gonna just let us outta here?"

A purple filly with a silvery-white mane looked curiously at the patch on my barding. "And she's a Crusader too." She easily had to be the youngest of the four.

"What? No she isn't, Sonata. She's too old!" Medley said as she scowled at me, walking around to look at the Crusader patch. "Wha... what are you doing wearing our patch?" she demanded crossly. "You're old!" I wonder if she thought there was a certain age that the patch would just pop off.

"How old do I have to be before I can't be a Crusader?" I asked her and she scowled, opened her mouth, then closed it again in confusion. "I do want to help the Crusaders if I can."

"Well... don't hear that often," the rose colt said with a grin. "I'm Allegro. That's my bro Adagio. Over there is Sonata. And the horn head is Medley." He leaned towards me and added in a stage whisper, "Don't worry about her. She's a pill."

"I am not!" she shouted back at them. "I just don't think we should be nice to her. She got Scoodle eaten!" Medley pointed an accusatory hoof at me.

I sighed, sitting down in front of the four. "I did. I was stupid. She tried to tell me what to do and I didn't listen." Medley's scowl faded a little. "I thought she was stupid and frightened. I was stupid. I should have been frightened. If I would have died it would have been fair, but I didn't. She did. For that I'll always be sorry." I could only hope that they'd believe me. I don't think I could have fought them if they didn't.

Medley frowned but looked away with a huff. The three earth ponies seemed to accept my apology. "It's okay, miss. Ghoulies what don't talk'll munch most anypony," Sonata said solemnly.

"So why were those ponies after you?" P-21 asked with a nod of his head in the direction the dozen ponies had taken towards the south.

"Oh, those lot think we're poachin' brahmin," Allegro said with a snort. "We got one rifle and brahmin ain't stupid! Well... not as stupid as radhog. But they got it out fer us. Bad blood and all." He pointed a hoof towards the crater. "There's a bunch o' mutant critters livin' in them old bunkers what got blowed up."

"They're dragons," Adagio said lazily as he lay down next to the rose colored colt. "All mutated

up.”

“Dragons?” Glory said in alarm.

“Mutanted up.” The blue colt gave a slack grin, “Ain’t nearly so big and dumb as mud. They come out, snatch a brahmin that’s strayed, run back into the rocks. Some breathe fire too. But Crusaders is easier than going huntin’ fer dragon critters.”

I looked to the south. “Are there a lot of ponies at this ranch?”

“The Stockyard? Oh yeah. Biggest town on Sunset till Flank,” Allegro supplied. “Twenty... thirty ponies?”

I didn’t want to have to add twenty or thirty ponies to my list. I looked at P-21 and Glory. He sighed, “You want to go dragon hunting, don’t you?”

“If we don’t we might have to shoot our way through a whole bunch of ponies. I’d rather avoid it if I can.” I looked over at the Crusaders. “And besides, maybe we can patch up some of the... uh... bad blood?”

“Blackjack, do you even have a clue what we’re going against?” he asked plaintively, cocking his head.

“Yup,” I grinned as I sat with the Crusaders. “Dragons. Mutanted up.”

* * *

Okay. I admit it. I had no idea what I was facing. I didn’t know how tough they were or how many of them there were. All I knew was that for a change I had an option to help ponies instead of shooting them. That was what I was going to do. I didn’t want to die. I just wanted to do the right thing.

If these dragons turned out to be sentient and starving with a pitiful sob story... well, then I’d want to die. Till then...

The cave the dragon mutants lived in was a crevice in the ground that I almost fell into before spotting. Just to the south stretched the pasturelands and their brahmin. I could make out a few ponies with rifles, but either they hadn’t seen us or weren’t that fussed about us being on the north edge of their land. I loaded the shotgun with a drum of slugs and a second drum with black needle rounds and orange explosive rounds. I had no clue how tough the dragons’ hides would be. Just another reason why this was a bad idea.

I was going anyway of course.

I dropped carefully into the crevasse, sliding down ten or twenty feet. Glory carried P-21 down with her. I didn’t like him going in unarmed, but that was nothing new. Inside the crevasse my rad meter started to click. Glory deftly pulled three syringes from one of her many pockets and gave us each an injection. The clicking slowed to less worrisome levels. “Let’s go quick,” I said as I took the lead. As the light dimmed, my vision turned amber and the interior of the cave grew in sharp relief.

We didn't have to go far. As we slid down a slope, my E.F.S. lit up with eight or ten red bars. The first two picked over the bones of a slain brahmin. They were much smaller than I anticipated: barely larger than foals. Their heads were flat and topped with wide staring eyes that glowed bright yellow. Sharp claws tipped their fingers and toes. Thank the Goddesses they didn't appear sentient at all, just dangerous.

Soon as I stepped around the corner they opened their toothy maws wide, hissed, and charged, gnashing their teeth ravenously. At such close range I hit S.A.T.S. and placed both shots right in the closest one's mouth. The buckshot easily took its head clean off. These things might look like dragons, but they weren't nearly as tough as in the stories.

Glory's beam pistols slammed into the other and the fourth soft beam 'krak' transformed it into a heap of popping ash. I chuckled, looking at P-21. "Piece of cake. These things aren't nearly as tough as dragons."

"Or they were babies!" Glory cried out, as from the tunnel emerged one twice the size of the first two. Its mouth looked large enough to bite me in half. Glory leaped up to a ledge a few feet higher as I tried to move to the side and find more room. The shotgun blasts did little to its hide and it bit down, grabbing me in its mouth. Its little forearms tried to tear through the barding as its teeth scraped against the steel plates.

"Stop chewing on me!" I yelled as S.A.T.S. recharged and I swapped out the baton. I levitated it right above the thing's head and targeted four blows, then released the spell. As resistant as the mutant was to bullets, its neck smashed just fine. On the fourth strike something in the dragon mutant snapped and it fell into a twitching heap.

Unfortunately, more were coming up the tunnel. I swapped drums, mourning the damage the specialty rounds would do to the weapon. Then I noticed P-21 sneaking closer to the dragons and tossing two mines out in the middle of their path. *Why was he carrying mines?* He fell back and covered his head as the first mine beeped, then the second a moment later. The explosions blew the legs off two leaders. "Yes!" I cheered at P-21, who now did all he could to disappear against the cave wall. I charged forward, screaming, grinning like a madmare as Glory nimbly sprang along the rock ledges above me. Her beam shots did little, but I'd take all the help I could right now.

S.A.T.S. let me target two shots to one mutant's chest. The first explosive round blew out a plate-sized circle and showered me with shards of shell. The second shot fired a hoof-sized spread of the finned darts into the hole. Blood sprayed from the creature's chest wound and mouth as the flechettes tumbled through its meaty interior and shredded vulnerable organs. Maybe it was just luck, but the dragon mutant went down in a heap.

With no time for S.A.T.S., we wore down the sixth dragon through a barrage of shots. It died messily; I was plenty beaten and bruised under my barding. I definitely owed Keystone for upgrading it. I slugged down a healing potion and then turned to look coolly at P-21. "Okay, Mr. I-don't-trust-myself-with-guns. What are you doing with mines?"

He shifted a little in embarrassment. "Well they're not guns, are they?" He opened his saddlebag to show a number of the round tins. And some grenades. And round sticks tipped with brass caps.

"What are these?" I asked as I lifted one out, casually flipping off the brass cap as I did so. It instantly started to hiss and smoke. *Oh that can't be good.*

"Toss it! Toss it!" P-21 shouted, diving for the ground. I threw it as hard as I could down the tunnel. The boom was both sharper and quieter than the detonation of a grenade. He firmly closed his saddlebags. "It's called dynamite; as explosive as a grenade, but a lot cheaper."

"Right. Pop the top, throw. Simple enough." I found myself unsurprisingly unnerved by the explosives. "So why are you carrying them again?"

"Because I'm sick of being useless," he replied sharply, closing his eyes, pressing his lips together. "I still don't like firearms, but explosives take more... deliberation. It's harder than just pulling a trigger. So I think I'm safer with them."

He's safer with explosives than with something that puts a nice, neat hole in things? Why did that not make me feel better? "Well... please don't blow us up, okay?" He nodded. I still didn't feel much better!

"We'd better hurry," Glory said as she landed beside us. My rad meter now crept into yellow.

I could still make out two or three further in. Theoretically we could have taken one corpse, left, and said 'Huzzah, proof!' but it'd be head and hooves better if we could say 'Huzzah, they're all dead! Please don't shoot at me for the bounty.' So without further ado we moved forward as quietly as we were able. The path sloped downwards and after several twists and turns disappeared into a hole in a concrete wall. Inside was a bunker of some sort, half filled with rubble and numerous crates and containers. Most of them were all manner of smashed, but a few looked intact. Of more immediate concern was the beast charging at us.

Glory immediately took to the air and began strafing maneuvers while I stepped forward with S.A.T.S. ready. Then I noticed a stick of dynamite fly over my head and directly into the path of the mutant dragon. My mane rose on end, but the detonation sent the charging monster sprawling on its face. I glanced back at P-21 with a wide-eyed look; clearly this would take a lot of getting used to! With S.A.T.S., I finished off the torso. I winced at how loose the feed felt as I reloaded.

Some of my luck must have rubbed off on Glory because one of her beam pistols neatly incinerated the remaining dragon mutant. She landed beside me. "That it?"

No... actually it wasn't. There was one red bar remaining in the room, but all that lay in that direction was a big heap of rubble. Then I cocked my head and groaned softly, "Aww... fuck me..."

The rubble shifted and rolled, and from behind it stirred a gray shape even larger than the ones we'd just finished off. I watched in horror as it climbed out of a depression in the floor; this was clearly much more dragon than mutant. The creature's back legs had atrophied almost to nothing, but its swollen forelimbs were more than capable of dragging its hulking mass over the ground. It let out a mindless shriek and opened its maw wide to spray flame across the three of us. We managed to jump behind the cover of some storage crates, but there was definitely some scorched mane smell in the air.

“Okay. Beam guns. Shotgun. Explosives. What sounds best against a dragon?” I asked, looking from one to the other with wide, bulging eyes.

“I don’t think I have a bomb big enough. Even all my bombs!” P-21 shouted.

It was crawling towards us, making the bunker shake and sending rocks and pebbles raining down on us. I looked up. The ceiling was a mess of cracks and gaps. I grinned. “Wanna do something stupid?”

P-21’s mouth hung open for a second. “Sure! Why not?” he said, throwing his hooves up in a shrug.

“Use those explosives of yours to bring the roof down.”

“On top of us?” Glory said, her eyes wide with shock.

“There’s more of him than us,” I pointed out as her brows furrowed together.

P-21 looked at where the cracks snaked down the walls. “I’ll need some time. These bombs will have to be deliberate.” He reached into his barding, drew a syringe of Med-X, and jammed it into the side of his leg through the brace straps. Then he sighed and... pulled out a magazine?

“You’re reading *now*?!” I shouted as I saw the dragon was coming after us. The magazine seemed to have something to do with explosives.

“I am if you want this to work!” he shouted, not taking his eyes off the diagrams of the article. “Keep it busy!”

“I love when a plan comes together. Let’s do this!” I shouted and ran out to the side, ejecting the drum with explosive rounds, snagging it, and taking out an empty drum. As I raced ahead of the spewing flame, a stream of green-banded rounds slipped into the drum.

I saved S.A.T.S. and shouted, “Go for the eyes, Glory!” I went for everything else. I began to fire the green rounds. They didn’t penetrate in the slightest. Instead, green gunk spread over its limbs, then flared bright green and sank through the thick hide. The dragon lurched, now looking a bit ill as the toxic rounds went to work. I had no idea if their effect was cumulative, but it seemed to slow and disorient the beastie as P-21 raced around the edge of the room.

“Hey! Hey dragon! Hey! Yo ugly!” I shouted and shrieked as I kept light on my hooves. Glory buzzed around, her battle saddle strafing him with little effect. The dragon’s mouth opened wide, and she tucked almost into a ball to avoid being bitten in half. Me? I had to worry about a tail thicker than I was snapping out and sweeping around. Unfortunately, even though I dodged it, it created a wave of debris that swept me off my hooves.

Come on, P-21!

“Blackjack!” he shouted from the crevice leading out. I dared to take my eyes off the dragon long enough to see the dynamite he’d stuffed into the cracks.

“Get out, Glory,” I yelled as I focused my horn. Trying to flick a brass cap off a stick of dynamite from across a room while a dragon wanted to pulp me wasn’t exactly easy. I holstered the shotgun and raced around the perimeter of the room ahead of another massive tail sweep. Every cluster of dynamite I passed, my magic swept out and popped off a half dozen caps.

The debris carried by its tail caught me just as I finished arming the last row of caps. Knocked off my hooves again, I rolled along with the dented crates and hunks of mutant dragon spawn. BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! Suddenly the air filled with dirt and rock as the cracks gave way and the other half of the bunker fell in. I found myself crouched in the tiny gap between a block of concrete rubble and a heavy steel crate. Clouds rolled overhead and rain trickled in. A half dozen farm ponies poked their heads over the edge, looking down at me laughing like crazy.

Then the dragon got out.

Okay. Not completely out. I should have been clued in when I saw it slept underneath these armored crates. But it was definitely not going to stay pinned long.

“P-21! Grenade!” I yelled as I rose to my hooves. Woocommerce... not steady. No time for that. I hit S.A.T.S. but this time I queued up a little improvisation. The first attack involved a six foot piece of rebar. I had so much radiation poisoning my vision was perfect and the jagged metal pierced its eye like a knife. Steaming yellow mung immediately spurted out as the second attack triggered. P-21 pulled out a grenade and tossed it towards me. I flicked off the stem of the grenade and magically plunged it deep into the eye.

The blast covered me head to toe in mutant dragon eye gunk.

It also didn’t kill the dragon.

Of course it didn’t fucking kill the dragon!

“Die! Die! Die!” I screamed as it worked itself free and I charged towards its snapping head. Luck kept me from being bitten in two as it spasmed. I leaped into the hollowed-out eye socket and jammed the muzzle of my shotgun into the tiny bloody hole in the back of the eye cavity. Round after poisoned round deposited the toxin directly into its brain. It reared up, clawed at the wound, then gave one last shudder and collapsed.

Slowly I stepped out of the dragon’s skull. Blood and yellow vitreous fluids dripped from my security barding. My eyes glowed like mining lamps as I looked up at the farmers and Crusaders with a wide grin. “Now who wants to try and collect on that bounty?” I yelled up at them, waving my steaming shotgun overhead and laughing wildly into the rain.

There weren’t any takers. Honestly, P-21 could have finished me off with three hooves tied behind his back. The dragon, curiously enough, had been the source of the radiation in the cave. Seems crawling into the irradiated body cavity of a dragon was as smart as climbing into a barrelful of magic waste. When I emerged I was radsick. Oh sweet Celestia I had radiation oozing out of every hole. I felt like I could piss balefire at that moment. I wondered if it’d be better to just keel over dead or try out ghouldom.

Fortunately, Stockyard had their own medic. Okay. She was a vet. At this point I'd take medical care from Deus. Her local remedy of brahmin milk, RadAway, and Rad-X along with a healing potion did the trick. Okay. It got me off death's door, and stopped the more embarrassing side effects of radiation poisoning before I was shitting myself. A plus. Really. I was also fairly sure that once word of this got around I wouldn't have to deal with swarms of poor desperate ponies.

I really didn't want to deal with killing poor desperate ponies. Sweet Celestia, please don't make me have to kill poor desperate ponies!

Roundup, the buck with the assault rifles from earlier, was apparently the leader of Stockyard and gave some mutters of thanks, along with some apologetic sounding words to the Crusaders. Then he told me to leave. Given that he wasn't trying to shoot me in the back, I considered this a fair enough trade. I did make one small demand. I took his snazzy mirrored sunglasses and slipped them over my glowing eyes. "Thanks, Boss," I said as the seven of us continued down the road.

* * *

"Then she was like 'Die die die!' and the dragon was all like ROAR and she was all 'Who wants some!' and they were all like 'not me' and that was so awesome!" Sonata shrieked as she bounced in glee around me on the tips of her hooves. Clearly the event of her life. Adagio hummed along with Sapphire Shores on the radio.

"We know, Sonata. We were there, remember?" The chartreuse unicorn certainly hadn't repeated that if they turned me in they'd have enough caps to swim in. Now that my body was far less radioactive, I had to admit that the fight with those dragon critters hadn't gone that badly. I may have been battered and bruised, but I hadn't gotten burned or munched.

"You know, I got to wonder... how'd you four hear about the bounty? It's only been two days." I couldn't believe word got out that fast.

"Oh. Redbeard was going on about it on Paradise Radio. You can pick it up this far south," Allegro said as he pointed at my PipBuck. "Gotta warn ya, he's a bit o' a jerk. We just listen ta him 'cause sometimes he'll talk about a big score. We make sure we ain't tha score."

I frowned and switched channels, getting a sigh of disappointment from Adagio. After two channel changes there was a sharp crackle, and then a buck's harsh and grating voice filled my ears. It sounded like the voice of a rusty bucket. "...know what I think? I think it's a scam, that's what I think. We've got it pretty good around the Hoof. We got better tech, better food, better water, better everything. In bad times we're on top. So what does Tenpony do? They dig up some cunt, dress her up, and send her here to stir up trouble. We already got Enclave poking their snouts where they don't belong. We got Steel Raiders... oh, sorry. Rangers... threatening to blow up half the city. One outsider after the next coming here stirring up trouble.

"And now Security. Either she's a Manehattan thug with an itchy trigger horn, or she's one of these brain-damaged stable ponies now out in the wide world and can't help but fuck with us. This is our home! Our lives! She butchered Roses's group, smashed her horn clean off, and then gave her a five second head start before siccing the goons on her. Oh, yeah, Security is all up in arms against bad

things happening to ponies, unless you're the pony she doesn't like. Then she doesn't give a fuck about you! That's why I'm glad Usury didn't just back Deus's bounty but matched it. The sooner this hypocrite is out of our manes, the better. So, someone put Security to rest and collect yourselves a hundred thousand caps. Or, better yet, give her skanky ass to Deus and double that! What do you say? What do you fucking say?!" The sound of cheering and stomping hooves answered him.

I switched the radio off, feeling like I was going to be sick. Okay. I hadn't expected that. I'd thought that DJ Pon3 was bad enough. "Two hundred thousand caps..."

"Yeah. That's pretty amazing actually," Adagio said lazily. "I thought that 10k for Bill the Slasherpony was a lot, but that's nothing."

Honestly, I had no idea how many monsters I could kill that would be a deterrent for desperate ponies after my head. Ponies after a lucky shot. Ponies who'd kill me in my sleep. Worse... I had to agree with him. If you were red on my PipBuck, there was no mercy or consideration. I'd basically threatened every slaver with death, but like Roses had said: she had a kid.

Then P-21 smacked the back of my head. Hard. I hissed, hugging my throbbing skull. "What'd you do that for?"

He rounded and looked me square in the eyes. "I know that look. I'd rather not have you pass out again." His blue eyes narrowed, "What was Miss Roses doing when you 'butchered' her group?"

"She was... slaving?"

"As I recall, she was trying to kill you, Blackjack. Remember that machine gun? But yeah, she was slaving too," he said with a huff, sitting in my path. "So to review, she was trying to kill you while slaving. Do you think when she started that career she was aware that maybe somepony might kill her for that? Or did somepony issue some sort of slaving license to her that makes her immune?"

"Actually, Paradise does that. Slavers ain't allowed to shoot slavers what have a Paradise license," Medley offered with a smile. She received a number of dirty looks and the unicorn filly gave an injured, "What? They do!"

P-21 took a deep breath. "Right. So unless you started working for Paradise slavers, you have no reason to blame yourself for any of that. You are not responsible for the grief and blood that others bring on themselves by being greedy, cruel, or stupid."

"I don't want to kill ponies that just want a better life."

"I do! Especially if the way they're trying to get that better life is by killing my friends!" he shouted at me. "Anypony that takes a shot at us has forfeited any right to live, Blackjack. You have got to learn this!"

"No!" I shouted back. "I can't do that! I can't just kill somepony because they're red on my PipBuck." I took a step back, trying to get my heart and breathing under control. "If somepony comes after me... I kill them if I have to. If I can get away... or scare them off... or something... 'Red is dead' can't be my first option, P-21!"

He covered his face with his hoof, shaking his head. When he lowered it, he wore a small smile. "You are absolutely amazing, you know that?"

"Comes from being stupid," I countered lamely, pawing at the cracked asphalt with my hoof. "So... um... I'm your friend?" I gave the smallest smile of my own.

He coughed, eyes going wide as he rubbed the back of his head with a hoof. "I don't know a word for a pony that drives me crazy with her stubbornness and refusal to use basic common sense. If that's a friend, then that's exactly what you are."

I heard a crunch and looked over at the Crusaders and Glory sitting in a row. Allegro had pulled out a box of two-hundred-year-stale popcorn and munched it. The pegasus was red from ear to throat as she stared at us. "Just kiss her already!" Medley shouted.

We glanced at each other and I started to laugh as P-21 stammered and then snapped, "Oh, shut up!" Somehow that made it all the funnier. So, I finally had a friend. I wondered if I'd ever get a chance to tell Watcher.

* * *

Medley shrieked as the buck ploughed into her over and over again. Sonata just whimpered with every shove as she took it like a broken doll. Adagio curled up as he was stomped again and again till bones cracked, skin split, organs spilled... Allegro tried to fight. Out came the knives as they started to carve him into pieces. Glory screamed as they pulled her wings clear off and then fell over in a bloody heap as they proceeded to mount her as well. P-21's severed head lay beside me as he muttered, "Should have fought 'em, Blackjack. Them or us."

I screamed as I felt Deus pin me beneath him and with one shove rip me in two.

My eyes opened as I lay in the darkness of the culvert, listening to the gurgle of water flowing beneath the platform built in the middle of the concrete pipe. Four mattresses lay in a row; they smelled a bit like mildew, but they were more comfortable than the ground. It took me several minutes to get my breathing slowed enough to look over at the sleeping forms of the Crusaders and P-21. My hooves trembled slightly as I unzipped my duffel and took out one of Keystone's parting gifts: a bottle of whiskey.

I carefully undid the top and sipped some down. Not enough to get drunk, I hoped, but enough to put a little warmth in my stomach and steady my legs. One more sip for luck, and then I put the bottle back in the duffel. I didn't want to wake everypony putting the security barding back on, so I simply seized the baton. Then I carefully walked towards the edge of the culvert to climb up to where Glory was keeping watch.

"I don't get her. I don't understand her behavior at all." I heard her voice from above. Looking up, even with the glasses, I could see her in my amber sight lying perfectly on the edge of the bridge. "She can be obtuse, vulgar, and obscene in one moment and then in the next she's kind, laughing, and more noble than any pony I know. She killed children one day and saves them the next. Is it some kind of dissociative identity disorder, or can a pony actually survive being torn in two directions so severely?"

"Her companion is equally inscrutable. More of a realist, perhaps; it's clear he's dealt with far more long-term psychological trauma. It seems to have helped him adapt to the realities of the Wasteland better than she or I have. His insistence on deliberate self-control is remarkable, but I worry about its source. Unlike Security, he doesn't seem fixated on some ideal self-standard but instead has a deeply repressed rage kept contained. I think he's right to not want a gun."

I carefully moved up the slope and saw her talking into a small device between her forelegs. "And me... have I adapted at all? I still operate inside a bubble of terror. I feel like if I leave her presence I'll be trapped under the floor once again. I'm in a constant state of anxiety. She throws herself in harm's way with almost suicidal eagerness; I'd likely have died many times had she not. When I came here, I expected savagery, not protectiveness. I have to do something." Her mouth lowered as she whispered softly into the device.

I smiled and backed away down the slope to the mouth of the culvert, coughed, and climbed up the slope with much more noise. When I reached the road again, the device was gone. "Hello Blackjack. What are you doing up? Your watch doesn't begin for an hour."

I stood there for a moment, staring out into the still night before answering, "Had to take a leak. I doubt I'll get back to sleep now." I looked at her with a smile. "Why don't you go tuck in early? You look a bit spent."

She looked concerned, but then nodded. "All right. Good night." She hopped onto the edge of the bridge.

"Glory?" She froze. "I got to wonder... we friends?"

She looked back at me, her mouth opening and closing soundlessly before she gave a little worried frown. Finally she showed a shy smile. "I'd like to think so." Then she gracefully leaped off the edge and disappeared into the concrete pipe beneath the road.

"Yeah. Me too," I said softly as I looked up the road in the direction we'd come.

Five red bars slowly approached. I twirled the baton in my magic grip. I saw them trying to sneak along the road towards our camp. Trotting in the middle of the road, I approached them instead. Two unicorns. Three earth ponies. A shotgun, a rifle, a pipe, a shovel, and a pitchfork. Exactly the kind of ponies I didn't want to fight. I tapped the baton against the cracked asphalt. "I don't want to fight you."

"Make it easy then. Come with us nice and quiet. Your bounty will go a long way helping the Stockyard," the unicorn mare with the shotgun said softly.

I asked curiously, "You ever lose someone to slavers?"

"We've all lost someone, Security. Except you, it seems."

I sighed softly as I closed my eyes. "Yeah. I guess you're right." Who had I lost? I heard them moving closer.

When I opened my eyes, S.A.T.S. activated and out came the baton. In slow motion it swung

down before me. The unicorn tried to use her shotgun as a shield, but she wasn't my target. The baton smashed into the upraised gun once... twice... and it tumbled away in two halves. The third swing brought the baton around upwards, connecting with the other unicorn's levitating rifle and knocking it skyward. Coming out of S.A.T.S., I battered the weapon with two more swings, glad when the magazine was dislodged with a metallic crunching noise. The unicorn pulled the trigger wildly, but it merely clicked.

The other three moved, trying to ponypile on me. I knelt and tagged one on the face with a double hoof kick as my magic swept the baton low in front of me. Legs buckled and folded as the joints gave way to my swing. I kept moving, light on my hooves as I swung the baton. When S.A.T.S. recharged I unloaded one strike each per opponent rather than simply beating in one skull after the next. I raised both front hooves and blocked the shovel with my PipBuck, glad for the reinforced casing, and then brought my baton up smartly between his legs. He dropped his weapon, but I got a pitchfork in the ass for my trouble.

I telekinetically grabbed the end of the prong, pulled it out, and gave the whole pitchfork a hard twist. The wielder's jaw cracked like a gunshot. Shotgun mare grabbed the shovel with her magic and tried to stab me with the sharpened tip. The baton popped up in my own glowing magic grip, deflecting the implement up as I ducked beneath it and body slammed her to the ground.

"I!" Kick. "Do not!" Stomp. "Want to fight!" Ram. "You!" I finished as I stood over her. Then I realized she wasn't breathing. Oh sweet Goddesses. Not again! "Glory!" I screamed as the other four backed away.

The gray pegasus dropped from the night sky, beam pistols ready as she landed. P-21 emerged from the gloom with a grenade in his mouth as he looked at the remaining four and slowly shook his head. Glory at once started to pull out equipment. She administered a healing potion, and then pulled out two small talismans on wires connected to a spark battery. "Get back," she told me as she connected one talisman to the fallen unicorn's horn and the other to her cutie mark: a brahmin, curiously enough. There was a crackle and a rainbow light shot through her as she was revived by the spell.

"She just killed you," Glory said quietly to the gasping unicorn. "And she just saved your life. Leave her alone now, please. She's got better things to do than beat up farm ponies after a quick cap."

The unicorn mare staggered to her feet and the other four battered ponies together started their way back towards Stockyard. "Thank you," I muttered.

"I knew something was wrong. Those five must have been waiting till your shift. You saw them, didn't you?" She gestured to my PipBuck. I nodded. Glory looked down at me and said softly, "We're friends, right?"

"I'd like to think so," I replied softly.

"Then don't do that again. Understand?" Glory said firmly. "Friends let friends help them, even against themselves." Morning Glory then crouched and the petite pegasus leaped into the air, flying back into the culvert.

I sighed, noting that she hadn't given me a healing potion for my own injuries. I looked at P-21. "Your turn?"

He just thought a moment and spat the grenade back into his saddlebags. "Nah. I think she covered it." He started back towards the culvert. "No offense, Blackjack, but sometimes you really *aren't* a smart pony."

I groaned and flopped on my back, my butt throbbing as I covered my eyes with my hooves. "Tell me about it."

Footnote: Level Up.

Skill Note: Melee (50)

New Perk: Rad resistance - You resist 20% of radiation exposure. This makes you 20% cooler!

(Thanks to Kkatman for creating this wonder and letting me play with it. Thanks to Hinds for helping me make it 120% cooler. Thanks to every one's comments that keep me writing!)