

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 9: Stone

"There was no talking. There was no smiling. There were only rocks."

I was not a smart pony. I'd said it before. Others knew it. I was impulsive. Immature. Reckless. I knew two very smart ponies, though. P-21 taught himself to pick locks and hack terminals when he wasn't even supposed to be allowed to read. He somehow convinced Duct Tape to break just about every rule for fraternization and teach him the skills he'd need to eventually escape from the stable.

Morning Glory was a medical technician of the Enclave. She was younger than me, and she was already working for the only ponies who seemed capable of designing anything new. She could discern injuries and administer drugs at the drop of a feather. She'd even begun researching reasons behind the mental degradation and psychotic tendencies of raiders by analyzing their brains.

Me? I shot things. It wasn't not an intellectually demanding job. In fact, I was pretty sure it was based on one of the top three most common skillsets in the Wasteland. It involved a steady horn, a wanton disregard for personal injury, and lots of ammunition. And when shooting things was insufficient, I swapped to bashing things with a heavy metal stick. The effectiveness of both methods varied greatly from situation to situation. For instance, when I'd ignored the warnings of a young filly, both proved woefully inadequate in preventing her from being torn in two.

So I had come to accept that I was not nor would ever be a smart pony. Thus, when P-21 and Glory stated that I was an absolute idiot facing down five farm ponies almost unarmed and unarmored, I could only conclude that they were right. When they elaborated that I should have involved them because my safety mattered to them, I likewise could only assume that they knew something I didn't.

There was just one catch. It seemed that with two events I had somehow ended up with a rather gargantuan bounty on my head. The simple act of cutting my head and PipBuck off and presenting them to one Reaper named Deus would earn a staggering amount of wealth. Capturing me alive would double that amount, presumably so that Deus could take his time torturing me and violating my anus. He was that kind of pony.

P-21 would have me kill any and all would-be bounty claimants. By attempting to take my life, he assured me, they'd forfeited theirs. Eye for an eye. Hoof for a hoof. Everypony ending up blind and lame. I couldn't do it. Those five ponies weren't Deus. They weren't monsters. They had a need for the money, same as anypony. I could have killed them easily. Playing it back in my head, it wouldn't have taken much. They'd hoped to take me unawares and alone. A lucky shot in the night.

Was I wrong to let them live?

Morning Glory was put out with me for quite another reason. In facing said threats alone, I had somehow violated one of the tenets of friendship. One of us faced a threat, we all faced it. That was apparently a rule of friendship. Trying to protect her was wrong. Better she stood beside me like she had fighting the dragon mutants. She wanted to be there when I fought monsters. When I faced down bounty

hunters. When I murdered a roomful of traumatized children.

Didn't she realize I wasn't a good pony? I wasn't a hero. I was just trying to do better because everywhere I looked I saw things getting worse and worse and the only thing that made any sense was trying to make it better. Old Hoss said that Big Macintosh was a hero because he would have given his life for anypony. I sometimes wondered if I could turn in the bounty on myself and split the proceeds among the Crusaders, P-21, and Glory.

She was going to get hurt if she stayed with me. Hurt very badly.

To top it all off, I had a mystery inside my PipBuck. A computer file that was apparently so valuable that my stable had been raided to retrieve it. It was encrypted. Finding out just what it was supposed to do was going to be likewise very expensive, yet it was the only reliable chance I had short of trusting the Enclave, which I wasn't ready to do.

At the moment, though, none of that mattered a damn as I sat in 'detention' in a classroom on the second floor of the Roosehoof Academy library building with P-21, Glory, and the Crusaders. We'd found the academy under 'lockdown'. I didn't want to speculate on what had happened to any students caught in the lockdown two hundred years ago, but at least there weren't a lot of bones in the classrooms. Robronco sentries patrolled the academy perimeter, and so far no bounty hunters had faced the metallic protectors.

The seven of us had stumbled onto the grounds and been ordered to report to the office or face immediate vaporization. I had to admit, I considered the shooting option first and second. But the fact was that the academy buildings were the closest and largest structures to Brimstone's Fall, and if we started shooting it'd not only draw attention but also take away a layer of protection I could use right now. The seven of us had been taken in to see 'Acting Dean Hardy', one of the spidery levitating-style robots.

The office was a complete disaster area, which was actually pretty typical given that Equestria as a whole was a complete disaster area. A skeleton lay in the corner with a bullet hole through its skull. "Please explain why you are breaking lockdown procedures, Miss..." A buzz, click, whirr, and beep. I looked down at some of the yellowed papers on the desk, scanning them for a name.

"Marigold," I supplied, and seizing on a sudden whim I threw my hooves around P-21, who went stiff as rock. "I was just looking for some alone time with my buckfriend..." A glance at the page. "Um... Sureshot? Please don't call my mom." Because she was in a stable and I was pretty sure she'd be miffed if she had to come pick me up from school.

More clicks and beeps. "Miss Marigold, this is the third infraction for fraternizing with male students you've made within two hundred and -bzzzt- years. I'm afraid I have no choice but to contact your parents and have you all report for lunch detention in the library for the duration of the lockdown."

"Yes, Dean Hardy," I said as adolescently as possible. "Can we at least go to our rooms and get our homework?"

The dean beeped as his camera swung from one of us to the next. "Very well. Please carry your hall passes with you at all times or risk vaporization." He reached into the drawer of the dean's desk and withdrew a stack of faded faded paper cards covered in yellowing lamination. Each one hung from a

lanyard and still had a faintly glowing glyph stamped on it. "Now please report to detention in room 203 of the library."

Thus the seven of us became the newest students of Roosehoof Academy. "That was brilliant!" Glory gushed as we trotted by Robronco sentries urging us to get to class. "How did you think of that?"

"Do you have any idea how much time I spent in detention?" I asked her with a grin.

"Oh!" Suddenly she went red.

I blinked at her and then grinned. "Let me guess: your first time?"

"Well... yes," she admitted.

I put a hoof around her neck and pulled her close, grinning at her. "Well then, let me give you some advice. Always sit in the back row. Always pass on notes. If the teacher asks what you're doing, the answer is 'working', not 'studying'. Oh, and remember: you have a bladder the size of a pea."

"You really were in detention a lot," Glory muttered with some worry as I lowered my hoof. She looked over at P-21. "You were probably a much more diligent student," she said to him. I winced. Please don't bite her head off, I silently begged.

Thankfully, he was in one of his more wistful moods as he looked at the decaying library. "No. But I would have been," he said as he looked down at a textbook showing two red-striped zebras. I thought they looked a bit like hooved candy canes myself. I looked at the caption beneath. 'The Proditor, or 'traitors' in the zebra tongue, were those few zebras willing and allowed to fight for Equestria against their own kind. Using talismans to permanently alter their stripe color, they fought with distinction until being phased out due to security concerns after the Battle of Shattered Hoof Ridge.'

I noticed the Crusaders were looking a bit nervous. "What's up?" I asked them. "First day of school jitters?"

"No," Allegro protested, trying to look tough.

"It's just..." Adagio muttered, "...there's supposed to be ghosts here."

I would have laughed, but then again I laughed when Scoodle had seemed afraid in the boneyard. Not again. Besides, with the Wasteland, who knew what you might run into? "Well. If there are, they'll have to get through me first!" I replied. Sonata looked a little more at ease, at least.

Using their hall passes, P-21, Glory, and the Crusaders dispersed from the classroom and set about looting anything edible, drinkable, or medical they could get their hooves on. If they found an armory here, well... that'd just show how hardcore Cheerilee made education prior to the bombs going off. This left me alone in the second floor of the library and looking out at Brimstone's Fall. And we were doomed because I was going to have to come up with a plan. Me. The not a smart pony.

Brimstone's Fall wasn't much to look at, really; just a round, jagged hole punched in the badlands' surface. It had been a gemstone mine. Then, during the height of the war, a dragon had fallen right on

top of the mine workings. The 'Shadowbolts' pegasus strike force, along with heavy ground support, slew a powerful dragon allied with the zebras, but hundreds of soldiers had died before the dragon perished. I knew all of this because there was a framed news article hanging next to the window.

In two hundred years it hadn't changed much. It lay right beside rail lines stretching to the southwest, towards Fillydelphia. On the surface were a large administration building and two long barracks-style houses. Since I didn't see any slaves, I assumed that they had to be quartered underground. Two nested chain link fences topped by razor wire surrounded the hole and the three buildings, with a guarded hoof bridge built over the rail spurs where they passed through the fences. A chain link gate blocked the space under the bridge. Maybe we could find--

What the fuck? I stopped and stared at the corner of the room. Had something just moved? One of the Crusaders playing a trick on me? My mind finally cracking? Slowly, I rose to my hooves and checked my E.F.S. Nothing. My eyes scanned the room thoroughly, mane itching like crazy. "Huh..." I muttered. Nothing at all.

Bullshit. In the Wasteland it's never *nothing*. I put my back to the wall until the others returned. It happened again; I'd swear that I'd seen some dingy papers shift on their own right before the six entered the room. I rubbed my eyes, but then the others were inside. "You okay? You look spooked," P-21 said concernedly before he tossed me a Sparkle-Cola.

I caught it with my magic and deftly popped the top. It was warm, but it was Sparkle-Cola. "Yeah. Just trying to figure out how to get in there," I said as I scanned the mine once again for some chink in their defenses. The guards moved in threes and fours. There wasn't the slightest bit of cover to use to approach from the ground. And then there were the neighbors. Along the highway between the mine and the road was a strip mall. Most of the shops seemed more or less intact and there was a large gathering of ponies there. At least twenty or so. "Allegro? Who're they?"

He trotted to the window and I held the binoculars for him. "Oh, them. Pecos. They're just a gang outta Flank. Not as crazy as raiders. They usually work protection for the slavers."

Great. Between the Pecos and the slavers I was looking at forty or fifty enemies. "They're not slavers?"

Medley huffed, "I told you but no one listens to me. Slavers gots ta have a license outta Paradise to be slavers. Otherwise they'd just make slaves of each other. The licenses are, like, super expensive."

"Explains why they could afford my bounty," I said as I pursed my lips. Then I frowned as I watched a train come out of the mine. It was only four cars, which were being hauled by a dozen slaves as a slaver liberally lashed them with a whip. To my amazement, I saw several zebras among the slaves! I supposed slavers couldn't be choosers. The train slowed to a crawl as it passed under the bridge, the guards above sweeping their weapons while two ponies checked beneath for escapees. Once past the checkpoint, the train started to crawl towards Hoofington.

"Where are they going?" I asked.

"Tracks lead to the tunnels. Ain't safe down there. Ghouls and worse. Not sure where they go past that," Allegro said with his own curious frown. I chewed on a hoof as I looked down at the strip mall

again. If I attacked the mine, then the Pecos would reinforce the slaver guards. If I attacked the Pecos and lived, then the mine would be alert. I looked from pony to pony. They all wore cowpony hats and leather jackets with some twister or tornado patch on the back. Better yet, this gang was co-ed.

I smirked. "Hey, P-21. Think you can sneak down there and snag me a hat and jacket?"

"Why? What are you planning?" he asked with a frown.

Something not too smart. "Well, if we're going to be stuck in detention all day, at least one of us needs to be in a gang."

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It took P-21 quite some time to get the garments I needed. That was fine. I asked the Crusaders for every bit of trivia on the Pecos I could; the gang had muscle, pride, ambition, and not much else going for it. Not quite a joke, but definitely a long way from the top of the gang food chain. The sun was just starting to set when the train returned. Lots of empty boxes and crates; apparently the trade was all one way. Did the gems go back to Paradise, or somewhere else?

As I waited, Glory and the Crusaders went to look for more supplies. That left me alone with my thoughts. The plan wasn't quite together yet. I wanted the slavers out of operation, but niggling questions kept popping up. What'd stop another band from returning to the mines? I could blow the mines, assuming P-21 had the skills and the mine had the dynamite. What about the slaves that had nowhere to go? Sending them to Stockyard was hardly a sure bet, and sending them anywhere else would be making them bait for raiders or more slavers.

And I was not alone. I could feel it. My mane went nuts as I slowly looked around the room once more. I couldn't see anything. I couldn't hear anything. I still didn't think I was alone. I rose to my hooves, looking at the overturned desks, the bookshelves and cubbies. The teacher's desk. The teacher's desk... I trotted over to stand right in front of it with a small frown. My horn glowed as I shoved the large desk back against the wall as hard as I could.

Something shimmered faintly as hooves clattered on the teacher's desk top. Then a long, thin rifle barrel appeared from thin air, pressing right against my forehead. This close, I could make out the faintest of blurs in the air. "Hey. You've had hours to shoot me in the back. So what's up?"

No response, and that rifle continued to press just underneath my horn. I didn't blink, and somehow I doubted they did either. Then there was a blue flash and a shimmering gray cloak appeared draped around a lithe equine. A lithe... striped... equine. He reached up with a hoof and brushed the hood of his cloak back to look down at me with deep azure eyes.

I had to admit I was impressed and scared out of my gourd at the same time. I also didn't dare show it with a rifle to my head. He held it in his forelegs in the strangest way I'd ever imagined, yet without the slightest bit of strain, his mouth resting lightly on the trigger; I wasn't sure how he avoided falling on his face, balancing on just his back legs. "Blackjack," I said, gesturing to myself. "And I really hope I don't have to talk slow 'cause then I'll really look dumb," I added.

His voice was just as soft as P-21 on his surly days. "Lancer." Name? Occupation? Hobby?

"Okay, Lancer. Like I said. I don't think you want to kill me. I'd rather not kill you."

"Liar," he said quietly. "All ponies do. It is what you live for."

"Of all the shit going on my life, you're telling me I'm going to get killed over a war that was over two centuries ago?"

"The war is not over. The Remnant persists," he answered.

"Right," I groaned as I folded my hooves on the desktop, rested my chin on them, and closed my eyes with a sigh. "Who is holding a rifle to whose head? Who pushed a desk rather than firing a gun? I don't want to fight you." Particularly since he could turn invisible and had a rifle longer than my body pressed to my noggin. Those were pretty impressive liabilities to overcome. I was taking a good long look at that weapon while trying not to go cross eyed.

You're going to make me do something stupid, aren't you, Lancer? The sound of Glory and the Crusaders (and possibly P-21 as well) returning made his eyes dart to the door. Yup, time for stupid. My horn flashed as I deftly depressed what I prayed was the magazine eject while my magic ratcheted back the bolt and ejected the round in the chamber. Then I caught the shell with my magic and beamed him right in the face with the heavy bullet. My hooves on the desk shot out and yanked his rear hooves out from under him.

He recovered quickly. Damn, didn't he though! He flipped through the air, catching the fallen magazine in his hoof and slamming it back into the weapon as he landed on all four hooves. The rifle lay along his back, his tail curling around the trigger as he sighted along the underside of the rifle. Then he felt the barrel of my shotgun press against the underside of his chin and his eye glanced down at the glowing weapon.

"I do not want to kill you," I said quietly. But I would, and damn him if he forced me to use P-21's universal counterattack policy from here on.

Lancer slowly pointed the rifle away, looking surprised for a moment. I took my gun off him. As Glory's hooves reached the door I said loudly, "I have company, Glory. Please don't spook him. He's very good with a rifle."

Glory frowned as she poked her head around the door. "Oh," she said delicately, eyes wide in shock as she laid her eyes on Lancer. Slowly he backed up, keeping his rifle roughly between the two of us. "A... ah... oh..." The Crusaders immediately took cover.

"Right. So. Like I said. I don't want to kill you. I'm pretty sure you don't want to kill me." I looked out the window and gestured to the mine with my head. "In fact, I bet you're here for the same reason I am: free the slaves?" He didn't nod. He didn't smile. He didn't blink. I covered my face with my hooves, groaning, "Ugh. Would you just trust me?"

"I would not be opposed to seeing my people returned to freedom," he finally answered.

Progress! Progress is good. "Okay. So. I'm trying to get a plan together. A zebra with a gun

like that would fit in very nicely.” I had no clue how, but I wanted to know if he’d cooperate at all.

“Do you serve the stars?” he asked me bluntly. *Wha...?*

“I’ve never even *seen* the stars with my own eyes. Or the moon. Or the sun. All I’ve ever seen of the sky is that.” I pointed out the window at the cloud layer.

“Then who do you serve?” As calmly as he said it, I was pretty sure that my answer might lead to me getting shot soon. I really did not want to get shot by that rifle.

“Of all the ponies in the Wasteland, you had to ask *me* a philosophical question? You should know that I’m something of an idiot,” I said, hoping for a reaction. A laugh? A smile? Nothing. Great. I sighed, closing my eyes. “I don’t know if there’s a who anymore, but I guess I serve a what: doing better, making things better,” I said as I looked at him. “If that’s not good enough or specific enough then I’m sorry. I didn’t know there was going to be an oral exam today!”

He straightened, and I relaxed as he sat and directed his rifle at the ceiling. “It is sufficient,” he said calmly. “How do you plan on freeing the slaves?”

“Well, that depends on if P-21 had any luck shopping,” I said as I leaned over to look past Glory at the blue pony, who looked positively stunned at the sight of a zebra in our detention room. I hadn’t seen his eyes so big since Prince Splendid. I smiled at him. “Hey. P-21? This is Lancer. He’s been very nice to not shoot me. Please be nice back.”

He set down a jacket and a beaten cowpony hat, and some boots. “Oh. I’ll try.” And he did. He actually managed a smile. “Um...hey.” Lancer did not respond. Apparently zebras had a stoicism... thing. At least Lancer certainly did.

The hat and jacket had clearly seen better days. I shucked my security barding and shrugged into the jacket. I really hoped the material came from something other than a brahmin, or worse. I looked at Glory. “So here’s the plan. I’m going to go down there and find out just how keen these Pecos are on protecting the mine. If things go bad, I’d like you on the roof of that building at the end. If I have to bolt, some covering fire would be great.”

“You realize that the Pecos wouldn’t blink at killing you for the bounty, right?” P-21 asked. “I heard them talking. Apparently the only thing keeping them from running off looking for you is their deal with the mine.” I could use that as a plan B if I had to.

“I figured as much, but if their leader’s smart, I might be able to give them a better long term arrangement.” I had to saw the back of one of the boots apart to get it to fit over my PipBuck; fortunately, Glory had some duct tape that closed it up. Hey, in the Wasteland, beggars couldn’t be choosers. I unzipped the duffel bag. “Okay. Alcohol, booze, cigarettes... if you picked them up anywhere, put them in here. I’m going to need to make myself pretty popular on short notice.” P-21 and Glory went through their saddlebags and produced a fair enough amount of the things I’d asked for. “Where’d you find all that?” I asked as I looked at the half empty bottles of scotch and cartons of cigarettes.

“Teacher’s lounge,” P-21 replied, not quite taking his eyes off Lancer in the corner.

Figures. "Okay. It's getting dark. I'll start down now. If you see me running, do what you can to keep them off me," I said to Glory. The gray pegasus beamed brightly and nodded once. P-21 nodded as well. Lancer just stared. I set my bag across my shoulders and floated up my shotgun as I headed for the stairs down.

"Blackjack," hissed Sonata from the filly's bathroom, her eyes wide as she glanced through the door at Lancer. "You shouldn't trust him," she warned.

"Why? Because he's a zebra?" I asked with a little half smile.

"He's a bad zebra. The Remnants... they do terrible things, Blackjack," the filly said as she shivered. "We can't stay here. Soon as we can, we're gonna run. Robots won't chase us far if they catch us at all."

"But where will you go?"

"We got a place over near Chapel. We'll head there." She pointed with a hoof along the railroad tracks.

I glanced back at Lancer again as he looked coolly down at the textbook I'd glanced at earlier before kicking it aside. Maybe she was right, but I needed all the help I could get. "Okay, Sonata. I'll remember what you said." I stepped back and let her run down the hall towards the stairs. The other three peeled out of their hiding places to follow her. Great. And now my mane was itching again.

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I was not a smart pony. For example, none of my plans were completely pulled together. There were little gaps here and there that I had to fill in on the fly. Actually, if you looked at all my plans, that's how they generally ran. Nice strings of improvisation piecing together a tiny bit of solid reasoning. This plan was simple: send the Pecos off on a wild parasprite hunt to the north. It wasn't always just because my brain was being lazy, though. Sometimes, it was because that no matter how well you plan, you'll always hit that point where everything falls apart.

For instance, I wasn't even halfway to the strip mall before somepony started shooting. Again, it wasn't me. And again, it wasn't at me. The fact that somepony was shooting this close to me, though, certainly put the nice and simple plan behind determining just what was going on. My E.F.S. gave me one clue: a big red bar and two amber non-hostiles. I put my rump in gear as I raced across the scrubland towards the shooting. Escaped slaves? The Crusaders in trouble?

Nope. Radscorpion, one every bit as large as the monster that had nearly eaten Glory and me in the gravel pit. Two ponies tried to return fire with a lever-action rifle and a revolver, but in the twilight their accuracy was at a huge disadvantage. Me? I had enough radiation in me that I knew exactly what I was aiming at! "Yeah!" I shouted as I raced towards the scene. Just in time, too; as I got close, the monster knocked one of the ponies down with a swipe of a huge claw. "Here! Here! Come here!" I didn't even bother with buckshot, loading slugs on the fly. The heavy shot battered and splattered its many eyes as I fired into its front as fast as I could.

Its heavy pincers snapped at me as I moved, but in the minimal armor of the Pecos outfit I was

able to leap aside while blasting it again with the shotgun. I laughed like a maniac; anything to keep its attention on me and off the fallen pony. The other, the unicorn with the lever-action, wasted no time picking her shots. The magnum rounds fired by her rifle were almost as effective as my own slugs. With two targets so close, the radscorpion stung at one of us and pinched at the other. Finally, my luck worked out and a slug obliterated its skull; it collapsed into a twitching heap.

"Tumbleweed! You stung?" the unicorn asked as she rushed to her fallen friend. The earth pony curled up in a ball, shaking. "Shit. Damn it." I knew exactly how that felt.

"I got something for that," I said as I opened the duffel bag and pulled out some of Glory's anti-venom. I jammed it into the poisoned pony's flank and pushed the plunger. She shook a little bit longer, then relaxed a touch. "Anti-venom. Never leave home without it."

"Thanks. How you managed to dance around that critter I'll never know. Can't see my hoof in front of my face," she complained as she searched around. I pushed the mirrored glasses a little further up my muzzle as I checked the earth pony's breathing. She seemed like she was doing better.

"What are you two doing out here?" I asked.

Before they could answer, a spotlight from one of the towers on the fence lit up and washed us in its harsh yellow glare. A voice over a loudspeaker said, in mock sympathy, "Awww. I shouldn't have bet on the scorp." There was laughter, and then the voice warned, "Get back to your hole, Pecos." A bullet smacked into the dirt at our hooves.

"They were in range?" I marveled, and then seethed. "Assholes."

"You must be new. Fresh out of Flank?" she asked as we helped her friend get to her hooves and walked her away from the tower.

"Yeah. Name's Marigold," I replied.

"Dusty Trails. This is Tumbleweed." She snorted as we picked our way towards the distant lights. I had little trouble, but the pair stumbled over the uneven ground. "Well, you want my advice? Keep walking. Being a Pecos is hell out here. It's fun enough when you can strut around in Flank, but we're getting screwed in the worst ways here."

"Oh yeah?" My mane prickled like crazy. "How so?"

"You just saw it. Sidewinder's got his protection racket, but he gets the caps and we get left out here for weeks. We're supposed to deal with the trouble, but all we really get is bashed around by those bastards at the mine, the critters in the waste, and any slaver looking to up their quota."

The strip mall had to be getting its power from somewhere, as neon light poured into the cracked parking lot. It wasn't a town, per se. I couldn't see ponies raising families here. It seemed more like a glorified hangout for the Pecos. One large shop bore flickering red neon letters: 'Pecos Bill's Western Wear'. The other was a bar named 'Twister's'. In the middle were a liquor store looted long ago, a gun store, and a barbershop. "Seriously?" I asked as we made our way towards the bar. "You're supposed to be protecting them, but they'll snatch you if you're alone?"

"Yup. We're not 'licensed' with Paradise, so better not be near the mine on your lonesome. They'll invite you in and then never let you leave." She sighed, "But being a Pecos is better than being solo, or so I keep telling myself every damned day." I gave a grin and prayed to Celestia she didn't ask *me* why I happened to be on my lonesome.

"I'm gonna go lay down, Dusty," Tumbleweed said, the brown mare giving me a grateful smile. "Thanks for the medicine, ma'am." There was something in her vacuous eyes that bothered me. She kept... twitching. And swallowing.

"You sure she's okay?" I asked worriedly, watching her twitch as she made her way towards the apparel store.

"Yeah. Probably just the poison, or something she ate," Dusty Trails said, the sandy-hided pony leading me towards the bar.

Suddenly three bucks rolled out the door, kicking and biting each other. Dusty just stepped around them. Inside were ponies drinking, talking, hoof wrestling, or reading very ragged magazines. It was the cards being dealt, though, that drew my eye. "You play?" Dusty asked with a nod of her head.

"A bit," I said with a grin. A few minutes later I settled in at the table, passing around a bottle of whiskey and swapping cigarettes for poker chips. It wouldn't do for me to seem too ready to play. But once I settled in I felt more relaxed than I had in days. Sure, any of these ponies would kill me for a huge bounty if they had a clue that I was Security, but why worry about that now? Five hands in, I wasn't winning, but I wasn't losing either. "So what's your story, Dusty?"

"My story? What am I, a two bit novel?" she asked with a chuckle.

"Nah. Five bits at least," I said with a laugh.

She joined my laugh as we drew new cards. "Well, the name says it all. I was born to a caravan family. Soon as I could walk we were roaming. Here to Friendship City. Even Fillydelphia, but that was years ago." She took two, shuffling her hand back and forth before raising. Then she continued, "My dad liked to say he specialized in ammunition, and he was happy to give out free samples to raiders. Then one day we did some business, and he found an armed landmine in his saddlebags. They came back and finished off the rest of us. I was only a year past my cutie mark, so they sold me in Paradise."

"You were a slave?" The thought of a pony who had been a slave protecting other slavers was beyond comprehension.

"Something like that. Got picked up by a Society pony. They like to call their slaves 'servants' or 'serfs', but you're somepony else's property all the same. Mostly was used for sex and housekeeping for an old mare in the Applette family. Coulda been a lot worse." I wasn't paying attention; my little pair was a joke to her three of a kind. "When she died, her granddaughter didn't really know what to do with me. Didn't want me for sex. Didn't need me for cleaning. So she just let me go. Sweet girl. 'Course, unarmed and broke, I wasn't in a real good position to survive long. Got into debt to one of Usury's little pet ponies. Joined with the Pecos to pay it off."

I didn't really know what to say. I'd thought I'd gone through a lot in my week in the Wasteland, but the reality was that I hadn't really experienced anything. She was so matter-of-fact about the circumstances that led her to this point that I felt more confused than ever. Worse, it seemed I'd opened a door and, one after another, the Pecos were stepping through. A buck named Big Red, who was the smallest pony at the table, had been a whoreson in Flank. He'd nearly been sold for chems by his mother before running away. He'd bounced from gang to gang between Stockyard and Paradise before landing with the Pecos.

Poleaxe had been at different times a bandit and a slaver and had even once run with a Reaper gang, drifting from place to place for as long as he'd lived. He also freely shared his Sugar Apple Bombs with me. Yeah, he killed ponies, but it wasn't personal. It was work, that was how he saw it. If he didn't work then he was gonna die. And apparently banditry and slaving was hard work: one mistake or misjudged target and you were dead. He didn't target foals though, and preferred not to force mares. After all, one good kick and they could take his bits clean off. His last band had gone raider. When they'd tried to get him to turn cannibal, he'd refused, and that'd put him on the menu instead. Now he was with the Pecos. 'Cause it was work.

Harbinger claimed she had been an acolyte for the Steel Rangers, but that a Reaper attack gutted their bunker. She'd gotten lost, ended up on the west side of the river, and signed up with the Finders for a spell in Megamart. Eventually, she got bored and hooked up with the Pecos for some excitement. She'd been able to get the buildings power from a still-active subterranean power line.

"You mean there's still power in the city?" That shocked me, given the devastation I saw all around us. "How?"

"No pony's gone to the Core to figure it out. Any pony who does doesn't come back. The Collegiate thinks the spark turbines in the Hoofington dams are providing power, but the controls are all wonked. Or maybe there's some power plant in the badlands sending juice to the Core," Harbinger said as she checked her cards. "But yeah. They buried all kinds of stuff underground. Folks might not realize it, but Hoofington's a fucking fortress. The whole city was designed by the best minds at the M.W.T. and Stable-Tec. The zebras seemed so dead set on destroying the city that they had to. At the end of the war, Hoofington was getting attacked by the hour. Zebras wanted it bad, but they never took it," she explained as she drew four cards with a soft hiss of disappointment. "Now the underground is ghoulish territory, and worse. Drives the Steel Rangers crazy, not being able to get at all the tech buried down there."

"So, which stable did you grow up in, Marigold?" Dusty asked me with a grin, just as I took a pull off the whiskey bottle. I choked, stinging alcohol burning in my sinuses. I didn't even have a chance to lie! "Knew it."

For a moment I was sure I was in trouble, but then realized no pony was screaming for my head. "That obvious, huh?"

"Stable ponies are always asking questions. So what's your story?"

"Not much. I was in my stable... Honestly I have no idea where it is," which was truth enough. It was somewhere north, but I'd be hard pressed to find it, even with my PipBuck's navigation software. "Our overmare went nuts and tried to kill every pony in the stable." Also kinda true given that she'd let in

Deus and some raiders for her own aggrandizement and survival. "I managed to get out before everypony died. Been wandering around since."

Something was wrong. My head felt... off. Like my thinking was slowed down a little. Then I caught the slight glow of magic around Harbinger's horn. What were the odds that Steel Ranger acolytes were taught interrogation spells? Was she reading my mind? If so, she had a poker face to die for. A truth spell? No, or I'd be a lot more accurate. A lie detection spell! Easiest to learn... even if I couldn't.

"And what did you do in your stable?" Harbinger asked sweetly.

I gave a non-committal shrug. "Honestly, as little as I could. Played cards mostly. 99 was all about the Overmare, so as long as I didn't cross her I was in the clear." Technically true. I hoped that it was at least true enough for her spell. Since Harbinger looked disappointed, I assumed I'd squeaked by.

"So why'd you join the Pecos?" Dusty asked me.

Technically I hadn't. "I dunno really," I said, thinking. If I had to join the Pecos, why would I? Then I looked at the bottle of whiskey, the cards, and the ponies around me. "Guess so that I wouldn't be lonely any more. Have a life like I did in 99."

Harbinger's horn finally stopped glowing and I took a breath. "Well here's to your life. Hope it's worth it."

A bit later, the game broke up as Big Red and Harbinger left. I needed a little bit of air, so I stepped outside... and into the faint drizzle. Not even really rain. I looked down at my hooves. Was there still power underneath me? Even after two centuries and the bombing? *Hoofington was like a country within a country. Lots of secrets are buried here. Hoofington's a fucking fortress.* I looked to the north at the faint green glow in the distance. Secrets. Why did it feel like EC-1101 was burning a hole in my leg?

A buck lay on the porch outside Twister's, his muzzle pressed into a filthy plastic bag reeking of dung. He inhaled deeply over and over again, twitching. Dusty caught my look and chuckled. "Yeah. Believe it or not he's supposed to be in charge here. Poor jackass is so hooked on Dash that he's trying to get a buzz from huffing brahmin shit."

"Can he do that?" I asked in a tone of disgust.

"Nope, but it doesn't stop him from trying," Dusty said, closing her eyes and letting the rain play along her sand colored face. "So, guess you're not one of Sidewinder's more clueless spies."

"You thought I was a spy?"

"Showing up in the middle of the night? Asking questions like you do? You're something," Dusty said with a grin as she looked up at the clouds. "Not a bad night. Didn't get eaten by radscorps. Got a new Pecos that's decent at cards. What more could a mare want?"

"A life of her own?" I asked as I looked at her speculatively. She caught my tone and looked at me. "Dusty, how do you feel about slavery?"

"Why do stable ponies ask the dumbest questions?" she asked in turn with a sigh and a frown. "It doesn't matter how I feel. Slavery happens. It's not even the worst thing that can happen to a pony. Ghouls losing their minds? Going crazy and turning into cannibals? Mutating into some creature? Being torn in half by waste critters? There's a thousand and one ways to die. Wearing a slave collar is somewhere in the middle of that list."

"But is it okay?" I pressed.

"It happens. Who cares if I think it's okay?" she retorted with a frown as I pressed my luck. "There's nothing I can do about it."

"What if you could?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

She stared at me, now looking scared. "Who the fuck are you really?" I just looked at her, pulling off the glasses to look straight into her eyes. She shook her head slowly. "No... fuck... no... no you're not... no fucking way..."

"Yeah. I am. And I'm going to do something about the mine. Just like I said I would. But I'm going to need help. I need your help. If you really don't care about slaves then yell for the others. I wouldn't blame you. And I won't kill you. But if you do want to do something about those slaves, then help me."

"No... I can't... fuck... no! How-- how the fuck can you do this?" she hissed as she paced back and forth. "You saved my fucking life. You saved Tumbleweed's too. How the..." She clenched her eyes shut as she sat and thumped the sides of her head. "This is some fucked up booze dream and I'm going to wake up right the fuck now."

I put a hoof on her shoulder. "It's not a dream. It's a chance to do better. I can't guarantee it'll work. In fact, given how my plans usually go, I'd be fucking scared to death. But it's still a chance for a free life. For you. For those slaves in the mine."

Dusty Trails closed her eyes, raising her face to the clouds as the rain drizzled along her muzzle. Finally she pulled off her hat and sighed as she glared at me. "Fuck..."

* * *

The strip mall rang with shouts and cries as the Pecos scrambled to their hooves. Security had breached their defenses, shared their liquor, bypassed their interrogation attempts, and basically pissed in everypony's faces. Now the night was filled with cries for the hundred thousand bottlecap mare's head and they scattered to the north and east in a vengeful frenzy. A lone spotlight opened up and swept across the empty buildings in an almost forlorn fashion, as if stung there'd been a party and they couldn't attend.

There was such a rush for vengeance and money by those certain that Security was off east towards Flank that nopony thought to check along the railroad tracks just north of the ruined little strip mall. The sound of the nighttime drizzle, now punctuated by the occasional shout and gunshot, gave way to the grinding of rusty wheels on rusty metal and the snap of a whip on sweaty ponies' backs. The

incoming train rattled and banged its way towards the mine, the sound of the pulling slaves' hooves loud on the track, until the cry of 'rocks' filled the air and the pullers began stumbling. The whip master immediately grabbed a wheel next to her seat with her magic and spun it as fast as she could. Rusty squeals filled the night air.

"Move them, you worthless slugs. Move them!" The brakes were released, and the railcars began crawling slowly along as the lead bucks shoved the rocks off the tracks and the rest continued to pull the empty flatcars forward. With only a few hundred yards to the mine spur, there was no time to build up their earlier momentum, and the cars crept slowly past the tumbled stones on the track and onto the spur.

The gate on the incoming track opened and the cars began to pass under the bridge, spotlights slowly sweeping back and forth over the cars and across the interior field of the yard. One or two guards gave a cursory glance underneath the flatcars, but the hard magical glare of the spotlights ruined any night vision they may have had. Once the train came to a stop, half the guards detached the slave ponies while the rest headed to the two long barracks, glad for a night's rest. Apparently three trips in one day was exceptionally productive for them.

Some of the spotlights winked out. Others turned back towards the wasteland. Carefully, the four of us crept out one after another. We moved quickly to the dark administration building. If I were a slave owner, I'd keep the guns as far from my own guards as from my slaves. Just inside the door was a meeting room with two bored guards; Lancer's rifle made a pair of soft little 'pfft' noises, and they turned into two dead guards. I resolved to never, ever annoy a zebra who could make two ponies dead before the first one even started falling. We moved inside before somepony spotted us.

P-21 and Glory went to work looting anything potentially valuable as I made my way up the stairs. Green light shone through an open door as a pony frantically typed on a terminal. "I don't care how much Sanguine wants. I'll sell for half price if he takes that thing out of here," I heard a pony whisper hoarsely. I peeked in, but saw only a fat pony typing his message and a filthy cobalt mare wearing a dark black collar and chained to the wall beside the bed. I carefully opened the door, the mare looking at me as I held my baton to my lips.

She looked at me, looked at him, and then made a quiet motion of her hooves slamming together. Was she telling me to beat him up? Gladly... wait. He wore something on his hoof. Too small to be a PipBuck. What if it was some kind of alarm?

He turned to spot me in my security barding and his hoof reached for the band. S.A.T.S. popped up immediately and I targeted four strikes, praying I didn't kill him. Not that in this case I'd be that fussed if he expired, but I had questions. In rapid succession I slammed the baton twice against each of his front fetlocks and was rewarded with crunches of splintering bone. He cried out, wetting himself as he curled up in a fetal position.

"You're going to get us all killed," he whimpered as his broken legs shook. Whatever the device on his hoof was, it was a lot less resilient than my PipBuck.

"Isn't that line supposed to be 'You're going to kill all of us'?" I asked as I searched his desk and found a key to the shackles the mare wore.

"He's talking about Gorgon," she said as I freed her. "He's taken over the mine's operation. Demands huge output. I don't know what he is, but he's a monster." The mare rubbed at where the shackles had chafed her forelegs raw. "Please tell me you can take this off?" she asked as she pointed to the collar she wore.

"What is it?" I asked, looking closely with a small frown.

"A bomb," she replied. Instantly I wasn't looking nearly so closely.

"A bomb?" I stared at the black collar and then hissed at the fat buck, "Why the fuck would you put a bomb on someone you screw?!"

The mare gave a sigh but also small smile as she explained. "It keeps us from running away. Get too far and... boom. Can you deactivate it?" Deactivate it? I didn't even want to breathe hard on it! I shook my head and she sighed. "Too much to hope for."

Somehow I found the prospect of fighting something that had the slavers scared witless a little concerning. "What is Gorgon?" I asked the mare as I hauled the fat, whimpering buck into her place and chained him by his back legs. "Is he a Reaper?" Just what I needed, another cyber-monster to get blown up by. While she spoke, I went over to the terminal and transferred what files I could on to my PipBuck. The bastard had mentioned 'Sanguine'. We were going to talk about that later. Searching his desk, I found a sack of caps and two glowing memory orbs. All of them disappeared into my bag.

"He's... I don't know. He's strong and bulletproof," she said. I nodded as I listened. If slugs wouldn't cut it, maybe grenades? They seemed incredibly effective when used internally. "He also has... a spell I guess. He looks at you and he turns you into stone."

"Into *stone*?" Okay. That just bumped him above Deus on the what-the-fuckometer. A few days ago I would have laughed at such a claim. Forty-one young ponies later I admitted he could probably do exactly what she said. "So. Strong. Bulletproof. Turns ponies into stone. Anything else?"

"He can fly?" the mare offered. I facehoofed. I just had to ask, didn't I?

I pointed at the mine boss. "Please sit on him and make sure he doesn't try anything." Downstairs I found P-21 picking at the lock of a door. A half dozen bobby pins lay scattered around him as he grit his teeth and scraped at the lock. His blue eyes swore a death oath to this door and lock. Then there was a soft snap as the metal broke in his teeth.

"Allow me," I said as I floated the mine boss's key to the lock, and opened it. From the look he gave me, I'd violated some lock picker code of ethics. Inside, however, we were greeted by quite the little arsenal. Assault carbines. Another shotgun. More ammunition that I happily dumped in my bags and let my PipBuck reorganize. There were energy cartridges for Glory and a strange pointy pistol-like object that smelled of ozone, so I guessed it was an energy weapon. I tossed it to her as well, and she gave a little squeal as she immediately swapped out one beam pistol for the new weapon.

"Do I want to know?" I asked as I tied the carbines together to make them easier to carry across my back. P-21 clenched his eyes shut as he dropped a few automatic pistols and revolvers into his bag. I'd have to carry the ammo, I knew. Lancer watched the door, utterly disinterested in our looting.

"It's a disintegration pistol! It magically breaks down the bonds..." she faltered at my 'I am not a smart pony' look. "Well, they do much more damage than energy beams. There's a chance it can start a chain reaction that... well... disintegrates things."

"Good. You almost lost me at the word 'reaction'," I said as we finished cleaning out the armory. Glory spotted a medical container that had a few healing potions, but far more chems. "Just take it all." No idea if it'd come in useful or not when things got rolling.

"Lancer, have you ever heard of a pony named Gorgon?" No reaction. "I take that as a no. Glory?" She shook her head. "Okay. Apparently there's a... something... here named Gorgon. He's strong. He's bulletproof. He can fly. He can turn you to stone with a look." Even Lancer looked taken aback at that.

"Fuck me," Glory muttered softly, then blinked and went bright red as she looked at her hooves. "Sorry!"

"That's my line," I replied with a grin at her. "Anyway... I just wanted to warn you. He's in the mine. So dynamite and internal grenades if we can swing it?" I looked at P-21. He nodded. "Zappy zappy disintegration fun from above?" Glory, still embarrassed, gave a nod. "Shoot him in the eye?" I asked Lancer. He looked thoughtful and then nodded stiffly, seeming quite put out by taking a suggestion from me. "If all that doesn't work... I'll try something stupid." Both Glory and P-21 winced.

"That's your plan?" Lancer asked skeptically.

"Good one, ain't it? Lots of flexibility." Now he had a definite expression. Worry. It looked good on him. The stoic mask was getting old.

We dragged the bodies into the arsenal and locked them inside, wiped up the blood as well as we could, and then made our way quietly to the mouth of the mine. A barricade had been built across the entrance to the sloping tunnel that led underground. Once again, the mine boss's keys expedited our entrance, much to P-21's chagrin. I passed him the keys once we were inside. "Just think of them as really accurate lock-picks."

"Or I could think of them as keys," he replied sourly as we slipped inside the mine.

"Cheer up. We're facing a monster. No moral angsting here!"

He gave me a little smirk. "Oh yeah? What if it turns out he was tragically transformed into a monster and wants only to be normal and loved?"

"Oh. I hadn't thought of that." And suddenly the niggling thoughts began to rise up in the back of my mind. "Maybe we should talk first and..." But P-21 suddenly stopped smiling as he reached up and turned my head to look at the side of the tunnel. *Broken statues*, was my first impression. The most horribly accurate pony statues ever carved. Their faces were frozen in expressions of absolute horror and pain. "Right." I grabbed those niggling little thoughts, wrapped them in duct tape, and tossed them into the closet.

We found a guard station and four guards behind a second barricade. The sounds of machinery and grinding rock reverberated in the air, making sneaking almost unnecessary. The lighting must have been abysmal to anypony without mutated eyes. Really, it was more an execution than an attack, with the exception that there was a large red button next to them. I didn't know what that button was connected to. An alarm? A lockdown? Detonate slave collars? I just knew I didn't want to find out just now.

Lancer's silenced rifle took down the one closest to the button. Glory strafed with red beams from one pistol and slower-moving pink bolts from the other. The remaining guards scrambled for weapons and to hit the alarm, but my buckshot tore into them equally. No pony reached that button, and thanks to our barrage, no pony would. P-21 searched through the remains as I stared at the red button on the wall, chewing my hoof. What did it do?

"Stop staring at the button, Blackjack," P-21 said without looking up.

"What? I wasn't..." I huffed and made a big show of checking my shotgun. When we were ready to move on I glanced at the button again. Someday... Alarm? Self-destruct device? Buzzer? Decoration? Arrrrgh!

My mood now thoroughly ruined by the thought of being transformed into a horrified statue, and thus being prevented from ever discovering the function of the mysterious button, I slogged ahead in the lead keeping an eye out for... oh, hello! The chamber was a massive dome pierced by a round hole at its apex. On the ground, white bones lay amid gem encrusted stones. Strange pink and green energy seemed to bleed slowly into the rock.

Crawling amid the immense slabs of stone were dozens and dozens of ponies and zebras. A squad of guards bored down into the blocks using some kind of drill, set some explosives, and blasted the blocks chunk by chunk into smaller pieces. These were loaded onto smaller flatbed minecarts that were then pushed up stone ramps by mares to a stone platform ringing the chamber and dumped onto a shaking metal ramp that fed into a rock crusher. The crusher fed a conveyor belt that ran up to the hole in the roof; young ponies, many of whom didn't even have their cutie marks, were running up and down the belt, pulling the brightly-colored gemstones from the gravel.

Somepony had thought of a mining system that effectively used foals in the production process. Somepony needed to meet Mr. Baton. Everywhere we looked were statues of ponies frozen in positions of agony. A few appeared to have been guards rather than slaves. The guards weren't guarding. They were working. Some looked as ragged as the slaves they were supposed to be watching. I felt a small sense of justice at work, but no pony or zebra deserved this.

And there, lying atop the softly glowing bones overlooking the whole mining pit, was Gorgon. At first, very first, I might have mistaken him for a white pegasus. Then you realized that whatever he was, it wasn't a pony. His wings weren't softly feathered like Glory's but instead were leathery. He had scales along his spine and flank. A long, serpentine tail swayed back and forth behind him. For the first time ever, I saw a pony with eyes that glowed exactly like mine.

I knew they did because they were looking right at me.

Gorgon rose to his hooves, stretching languidly, first his bleached white wings and then his

powerful legs. "Scatter!" I yelled, barely audible over the din of the machinery in the booming cavity. He launched himself into the air as we separated, landing with a thunderous crash where we'd stood moments before. I didn't target him. I simply fired wherever I thought he was and prayed to Celestia I didn't hit somepony else. I stole little glances as I could, dancing around on the broad stone ledge. The ponies up here ran for cover, but the ones below continued working.

Glory fired a stream of energy bolts from above that seemed moderately more effective than my shotgun shells. I tossed the carbines on my back at the feet of two mares. "Take them!" I yelled. The dust-coated ponies simply looked at me in horror and shook their heads. They actually grabbed pickaxes and resumed trying to gouge gems from the walls around the ledge.

They were so scared they didn't dare stop working. Even working to death was better than being turned to stone.

My shotgun was useless at this range, so I flipped it behind my back and drew one of the automatic assault carbines. I marveled as my PipBuck provided a magazine of... interesting. Armor piercing rounds? My curiosity was piqued as I looked at the solid-jacketed bullets. I didn't have many from the armory, but maybe I wouldn't need that many.

I flicked the fire select switch to burst mode, my eyes picking out Gorgon and Glory's shapes as they flew around and through the jagged dragon bones heaped in the center. When Gorgon came into view I gave a S.A.T.S.-guided set of bursts right into his head. They didn't even seem to penetrate. "What the fuck is he made of?" I shouted, ejecting the magazine and moving to green rounds. I bit my lip as he came around again. I had enough S.A.T.S. charge for one burst. The toxic rifle rounds just dripped off his hide.

Glory clipped the tip of a spur of bone, jerking in midair. Gorgon caught her in his hooves as they landed on the far side of the pit. His glowing eyes stared into hers, and I watched as I saw her writhe. I'd never imagined turning to stone would be... slow. Her equipment and violet mane turned white first. Then her limbs froze in their twisted state, and finally her head finished in still alabaster.

'Lancer, please tell me you can shoot him in the eye,' I thought as he took to the air once again. I raced past still-laboring ponies as I made my way to her. Not one looked at me. Not one dared to stop working with Gorgon still alive. Some of the workers were fresh statues as well, having been turned to stone by accident for watching our fight.

Suddenly I heard muffled booms over the din of the machinery. P-21 demonstrated his affinity for explosives by tossing dynamite as quickly as he could pop the brass tops. When Gorgon landed and advanced, P-21 backed away, throwing mines in his path. The monster didn't even try and step around them. The explosions scuffed his scaly hide, and not much more. I raced as quickly as I could to help. Maybe I could ram a stick of dynamite up his scaly ass! Where was--

I ran into a stone wall. No. Make that an invisible stone wall. My head spun for a moment before I looked up. I reached out with a hoof and saw the faint shimmer. Apparently being turned to stone hadn't disrupted the enchantment in his cloak. I looked through the petrified zebra, watching as P-21 was transformed into a statue as well.

Monsters. Deus was a monster. Gorgon was one too. My weapons were useless against

monsters like them. How was I supposed to fight something like this? The only thing I could do was see, which would apparently kill me. Then I looked at the magical lights illuminating the space. My mane began to itch. "Fuck. Something stupid, then."

I immediately began to shoot out every light I could. With each detonation more and more darkness claimed the interior. As darkness spread, I saw Gorgon begin searching; he couldn't see in the dark. Finally, I had something going for me! I couldn't plunge the entire room into darkness; the radiation from the dragon's remains provided some illumination. I needed some way to kill him. I looked at the pile of dragon bones in the middle of the room... they'd withstood two centuries of mining around them.

No. I needed another edge. Something to avoid being turned into stone. Gun had been my edge against Deus. Deus... Deus!

Oh shit. Would that work? My mane itched like mad. Deus and Gorgon were both monsters the likes of which I'd never seen. The mine boss had mentioned Sanguine. Maybe... maybe. I trotted into the gloom, hearing Gorgon's wings whoosh even over the grinding machinery. Gorgon was bulletproof, beam poof, and bomb proof. I hoped he was as cocky as I'd be if I were him. I moved to the nearest edge, and then turned on my PipBuck, bringing the file EC-1101 to the top. The letters should be a nice bright lure in the gloom.

They were. Gorgon landed in front of me and our eyes met. Instantly I felt a needle stab through my eye sockets and into my body. It felt as if every inch of my body were being slowly pinched off cell by cell. I couldn't look away if I wanted to, but I could scream. "See this! Sanguine wants this!" I yelled right into Gorgon's face, and for the first time since the battle started, he balked. "You turn it to stone and the data is fucked!" I had no idea if that was true or not, but all I could hope was that he didn't know either.

The sensation abruptly reversed and I swayed on my hooves a moment. That was a sensation I'd happily avoid. I pulled out my baton as I backed till my rear hooves touched the edge. I knew there were lots of nice jagged pieces of dragonbone down there. "Come on... you want it? You'll have to take my leg first." I had no idea if he could hear me over the din, but from the smile blooming on his face, I guessed he could.

He charged: a reckless, full frontal assault that only an impregnable abomination would undertake. I didn't swing the baton, I *threw* it right at his head. Whether through reflex or annoyance, he closed his eyes before he rammed into me. I knew he probably planned on winging me away to tear me limb from limb. Only I didn't just grab his scaly hide with all four hooves. I also used every bit of magic I could to hold his wings in place. We tumbled end over end over the edge...

...and landed on the wide metal slide covered in rock chunks being fed into the rock crusher. Gorgon looked down at me and pulled back his foreleg, slamming it down with enough force to turn the rock next to my head into stinging powder. I didn't let go as we struggled on top of the rolling, tumbling rocks. A second kick grazed the side of my head, and only the helmet Keystone had given me kept my skull from being pulped. His wings struggled for freedom as he fought to get airborne once more. I gripped him as tightly as I could, not giving him the leverage. He struggled against the flow as the angle increased. I shoved hard, forcing myself a foot or two above him.

I saw the first signs of fear in Gorgon's eyes.

His scream was muted by the roar beneath us as his long snake-like tail was caught in the grinding teeth of the rock crusher. Not even I could hold him then, but now I didn't have to. I kicked and shoved and did all I could to keep him under me. "No you don't!" I screamed, not caring if only Celestia heard, as rocks battered both of us. The working jaws and flow of stone pulled him down inch by inch. Hooves slammed into the teeth, and for a moment I feared he might actually break the mechanism. Then one of them caught in the pumping jaws. There was a resounding pop.

I heard *that* scream.

I stomped my hooves into his face, watching as the heavy iron jaws of the rock crusher turned red with muddy pulp. Inch by inch he was fed into the machine, and it was all I could do to keep him beneath me. I clawed up the stream of rock as the poor foals continued their labors, kicking wildly as popping fragments and flailing hooves battered at my barding. Some mechanism within gave a yank and his chest disappeared into the gap. The teeth slammed down with a dry explosion of ribs, his mouth opening wide as bloody organs spewed over my legs. The jaws withdrew and Gorgon's glowing eyes stared up at me for one final moment before the jaws slammed shut.

His skull was just another rock.

Unfortunately, now I struggled to keep out of those jaws myself! I kept imagining a great big red button marked 'Emergency shutoff'. I hated to admit it, but I was getting tired; all I would need was one rock to pin my leg or crack my head. I wondered if I'd go through as well and these poor bastards would just keep working, never realizing the monster was dead.

Then wings beat above me. I felt hooves hook in my barding. I glanced back at the glorious gloriosity of Morning Glory as the pegasus lifted me from the crusher's feeder and into the air above the work pit. The conveyor belt to the surface was a ribbon of pulped Gorgon. "If he regenerates from that, I quit," I said. At least, I hoped I said it. My ears were filled with endless ringing and throbbing.

Glory set us down, and I saw that realization of Gorgon's demise had finally spread to the workers. The unicorns were arming themselves with the carbines. The earth ponies took up the revolvers. I looked around for the guard workers, but saw they had had a complete change of heart after being on the receiving end. There were a few lips moving from my friends... my not petrified friends. Indeed, many of the petrified ponies were once more free to move around.

Broken stone ponies, though, remained broken stone.

The workers used strange hoof signals I didn't understand as we made our way up out of the pit. I enjoyed the sensation of a Med-X painkiller accompanied by a healing potion. I really could have used a Sparkle-Cola, but given how the slaves around us appeared it would have been crude. We reached the barricade and I looked at that bright red button with a parting sigh.

We stepped out into the drizzling night. The guards had gathered, looking unsure of what to do when we emerged. Most of the slaves were exhausted. Many had multiple injuries. All of them were hungry. Few were trained in firearms. Some ponies, the guards apparently included, based on how they began rallying, might think that that would put the slaves at a disadvantage against the twenty or so armed, healthy, rested guards that remained. They would be right, except that such a pony had likely never imagined the absolute rage a pony could feel when armed and facing their tormentors.

Even then, with the guards outnumbered three to one, the fight that ensued was vicious. Glory strafed the few snipers that tried to pick off the freed slaves from the towers along the wall. P-21 restrained himself from using explosives. Instead, he raced around the side of the battle, shouting directions and gestures to the slaves to return fire. When bullets ran out, the guns became clubs.

Then the Pecos arrived. The thirty or so gang members surged in down the rail line and under the bridge, the gate having been quickly smashed open. The slavers bolstered and readied themselves to put down the uprising once and for all. Across the fighting, my eyes met Dusty Trails's. I couldn't say anything. I couldn't hear anything. I could only hope.

The Pecos crashed into the backs of the slavers and took them out in one charging wave. The nasty final moments involved a few desperate hoof to hoof fights.

Then it was over. Dusty Trails and the other Pecos helped deal with the wounded slaves. Whatever guards had been in the mine, they'd shed their uniforms by now. Any allegiance to the old mine was forsaken. When it was over, I yelled for P-21 to find the pantry to get them fed and Glory to do what she could to help the injured. Dusty Trails directed the Pecos to take positions in the guard towers; there were other things in the wastes to be wary of.

I had no idea where Lancer had gone, nor did I know what I would have had him do. The dozen or so zebras stood apart from the others, watching the development with trepidation. I rubbed my ear furiously, trying to rid it of the ringing as I approached them. "Hey. Rough night, huh?" They glanced at each other and made gestures. Then I realized every single one of them was deaf. An elder buck approached, bowed formally to me, and then said in an odd accent, "We thank you. We cannot hear your words. We must read them on your lips."

"Well. You are free to go. Or stay, if you want," I said, my mouth exaggerating a bit. I wasn't used to talking to deaf folk.

"That is not necessary," Lancer said behind me as his cloak deactivated. His shot between my shoulder blades slammed me into the ground, knocking the wind from my lungs and numbing my entire lower body. For a horrible moment, I wondered if I was paralyzed. Then I realized that that wasn't even the beginning as he pointed his rifle at the clump of zebras. "For your treason against the fallen Caesar..." The stream of 'pffft's filled my ears as I watched him butcher every buck, mare, and foal with stripes. When the shots ended, not a pony raised a rifle to stop him. Everypony seemed paralyzed... even me. "The war is *never* over, Security," Lancer said softly before the zebra's stealth cloak shimmered and he disappeared once more.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Tough Hide (level 1) - The brutal experiences of the Equestrian Wasteland have toughened you. You gain +3 Damage Threshold for each level of this perk you take.

(Huge thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, and huge thanks to Hinds for helping me make it 120% cooler!)