

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 10: Ante Up

"Oh yeah. You think you can do better, cowgirl?"
"I know I can... Oh for Pete's sake!"

I hate the Wasteland. In less than half a minute I'd gone from feeling good... battered and slightly traumatized, but good... to watching a dozen zebras gunned down right before my eyes by one of their own kind. I hate a world where the trust I give then turns around and kills somepony else; I can accept it if I'm the one who suffers for my poor judgment, but when I keep sailing through while innocents (or at least as innocent as a pony can be in the Wasteland) drop around me? I hate that this is even possible, that there isn't some universal fail-safe that kicks in and says 'time out, too fucked up.' The numbness in my legs is just an errant worry compared to all that.

I hate that, as I'm lying here, I'm the one everypony is running to help. I hate that they're telling me not to move, that they're worrying for me. I can see a starved foal curled up no more than twenty feet from me. She could almost be asleep if not for her missing face. I hate that she had less than an hour of freedom before a zebra who had accompanied me ended her life. I hate that there was any reason why Lancer would ever do what he did. I hate that I'm so weak I can't even draw a breath to scream out to the others 'Help them! Even one of them! Save just one if you can, and don't worry about me.'

I hate that I was protected by another's kindness but was incapable of the same. The quarter-inch steel plate had buckled as it deflected the bullet. I hate that I had been warned twice and still hadn't questioned 'why is Lancer working with us?' I had arrogantly assumed that any threat he'd posed would be to me. Because I'm the mare with the hundred thousand cap bounty on her head. Because I'm a pony, so naturally his threat would be to me. I hate that I am such a stupid pony that I hadn't considered that he might have wished harm to the prisoners.

I hate that right now all I can do is cry as Glory tells me to stop moving. I hate that P-21 and Dusty Trails are pinning me down instead of letting me drag myself towards those unmoving striped bodies. I hate that she's wasting painkillers and healing potions on me when she should be using them on the zebras. I hate her for not saving one. Not even one. I hate that I'm not strong enough to make all this right. Most of all I hate the blackness that's rushing up to claim me because I know it will not last.

I hate the Wasteland.

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I'm on my stomach. That makes no sense; I sleep on my back. I'm also on a table. Why am I on a table? You sleep on beds. You play cards on a table. There are ponies around me? Why do I smell blood? Why do my shoulders hurt so much?

Why is P-21 saying that I'm waking up? Why is Glory yelling? What's the big deal? I need to wake up. There was something important I was doing.

I look at Glory with a bloody knife in her mouth as she leans over me. I'm... cut open again, aren't I? I've got to get out of here. I need to go. Somepony needs my help.

P-21 presses a little glowing ball to my horn. A little zap and I'm in a nice place. The stars are so beautiful. So very beautiful.

The lake is gone and I'm back on the table. Glory is shouting about my heart rate.

Zap. Back under the stars.

Back on the table. Glory needs more blood? Less please. There's plenty of blood here.

Zap. Back under the stars.

Back on the table. I'm crashing? No, I'm floating.

Zap. Back under the stars.

Please let me stay with the stars.

* * *

"I can't send anypony after Lancer right now, P-21. He's a zebra who can turn invisible. Kinda hard to track," Dusty Trails said firmly somewhere below me, which made little sense given that I was on my stomach on a mattress smelling of blood, sweat, and bad perfume. I risked opening my eyes and saw I was on the mine boss's bed. One of the places I didn't want to be. "Besides which, even if they could, I wouldn't send them anyway. He'd just kill them too."

"We can't let him get away with it," P-21 said in his angry, low, pissed-at-the-world voice.

"That's exactly what we're going to let him do. I know you want to get even for Blackjack, but I don't have the ponies to go tearing after Lancer," Dusty Trails said firmly. "And even if I did, P-21, Sidewinder's not going to take our defection lightly. I got thirty or so Pecos to ditch that bastard. We might get another ten or so if we're lucky. He's got at least fifty and a powerful incentive to come here. If he kills us then he'll not just have revenge but the mine and the bounty as well."

"Please keep your voices down. Blackjack needs to sleep. She's lost a lot of blood," Glory said in concern. I closed my eyes.

P-21's voice rose up the stairs. "Blackjack needs to get moving, Glory. Everypony who finds out she's here will be coming. I mean everypony. To them she's just a cap bounty ready to be cashed in. How soon till we can move her?"

I'd never heard Glory's voice so sharp, so tense, "Do you want her dead, P-21? We can't move her. I'm astonished she didn't die in surgery. The trauma to her spinal cord... if we move her she's dead or paralyzed. If I had access to some Enclave medical supplies..."

"Then go get some!" P-21 snapped. "You got wings! Fly up there and get what you need, Glory."

"I told you, I can't!"

"Horse hockey! Why the hell can't you? Give me one good solid reason."

"Because I'd get killed, alright?!" Glory yelled at him in a wet snuffling voice. "Don't you think the Enclave has protection against that sort of thing? If anything... pegasus, hot air balloon, flying machine, whatever... goes too high there are defense systems that will blast it to pieces. Thunderhead has more lightning rods than any place in the skies. We designed the lightning rod system! So I fly up there and I may as well shoot myself now."

"Well, get them from somewhere else, then!" P-21 demanded. "You say you want to help us,

then help!”

“Where, damn you! Point me to the Skyport and I’ll go right now! Tell me where there’s an Enclave base and I’ll go! I have no clue where the Enclave is in this damned city!” Glory sobbed brokenly. “I wish I’d never come. I wish I’d stayed in the clouds!”

There was silence for a moment and then P-21 said softly, “Don’t say that. Please. If you hadn’t been here, Glory, she’d never have pulled through.”

I closed my eyes. I’m so sorry Glory. You should have stayed in the clouds. You should have stayed where you could see stars. They’re so beautiful... the stars...

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I like playing cards. Like now. I’m playing cards with the Pecos: some draw poker. The whiskey is warm in my tummy. I’ve got a bowl of Sugar Apple Bombs. Life is good. “Ante up...” says the dealer. Not too sure about this hand so I put one chip in the pot. A teal filly looks up at me in worry. But it’s a bad hand. Dealer wins. Guts spill all over the ground.

A new hand. Not bad. I win and add a chip with a pretty pegasus. “Ante up.” Great hand. A surefire winner. I put forty foals in the middle of the table. Call. “Oooh, too bad. Ever wonder what if...”

“Shut up and deal,” I hate this dealer. He never stops smiling when he’s shuffling the deck.

“Ante up.” I throw my chips in the pile. Get lucky. Get a few chips. “Ante up.”

It’s a hell of a set. A hell of a set. Not good enough. Thirteen zebras get taken.

“Ante up,” the dealer tells me.

“I want to cash out,” I mutter.

The pony skull grins endlessly at me as his hooves shuffle the cards before me. “Oh, you wanna cash out? Just stick around, Blackjack. You’ll cash out soon.” He started to deal the cards. “Otherwise, ante up.”

* * *

I woke to the sounds of tapping on a terminal. I opened an eye, glad to be away from the card game for a spell. P-21 was at the mine boss’s terminal, poking through the files. For the longest time I just watched him. He looked... tired. No. Not tired. Older. There were fresh wrinkles around his eyes.

“Find anything on Sanguine?” I asked quietly. He jumped, looking guilty. He doesn’t do the guilty look well.

“Everything and nothing,” he said, accompanied by another moment of typing. “This says that he arranged a contract for gems and expects the mine to deliver to the buyer over in ‘Progress’. Here’s one where he’s paying a 10% bonus for increased gems. Arranging for one hundred more slaves.” He tapped some more keys. “Near as I can tell, the mine owner was pocketing the incentives. Then Gorgon came to ‘encourage’ production. After that all the messages are him begging Sanguine to recall Gorgon. I bet he never had to deal with a bulletproof pony that could turn folks into stone before.”

I closed my eyes with a groan. It was so hot and stuffy in the room. I wished the rusty old fan overhead would work, but it seemed a century past its warranty. “Sounds like a lot of information.”

"I wish it was," he said, thumping his hoof irritably. "There's nothing to say how we contact him. Where is he? What does he want? He seems to be a broker, a middlepony, so to speak. I don't know if he was getting gems for himself or somepony else." He closed his eyes. "I know you count on me to know stuff, but... I'm sorry, Blackjack. I should have known better."

I looked back him hanging his head. "What are you talking about?"

"I knew Lancer was no good. I saw the way he looked at those zebras from the moment we left the mine. He didn't approach them. No hugging or hoofshakes. He just disappeared as soon as they were outside. I thought maybe he was sniping the last of the guards, but he wasn't. I should have warned you. Gotten them out of sight. Something." He rose to his hooves. "I got them killed."

I looked at him for a long moment. How... ridiculous? How could he be blaming himself? So what if he'd not said anything? Things were pretty hectic. I hadn't even noticed Lancer acting funny. "Not your fault. He never would have been there if not for me."

"No!" he shouted sharply, stomping his hoof hard and making me flinch, then wince. "Damn it, Blackjack, will you let me accept some of the blame for once?" he snapped. "You're always doing that. It's not always your fault. This was my screw up, Blackjack. Don't you dare blame yourself for this!" he said as tears ran down his cheeks. "Damn it," he said as he scrubbed his eyes. "I just want justice for a change."

I looked at him as he bowed his head, gritting his teeth as he tried to fight the tears. I wondered how many times he'd cried in his life. Slowly I smiled, then closed my eyes. "Okay. Fine. Damn it, P-21. How could you let your super amazing smarts fail to read the mind of a psychopathic cold-blooded zebra assassin? Really, I was totally expecting you to shove a stick of dynamite right up his rump."

P-21 gaped at me as if I'd kicked him, or kissed him, before he went bright red, and shook with snickers. Or more tears; I couldn't tell which. I'd like to think it was laughter though. "Oh... That is wrong on so many levels, Blackjack."

"If I'm going to do something wrong, I prefer to go all the way. That way everypony notices." I closed my eyes again. "Can you pass on a message to Glory? Can you ask her when I'll be able to feel my legs again?"

He jerked and swallowed. "Yeah. Should be soon. Probably."

"Good. 'Cause we need to get going," I muttered softly. "I feel like I have a great big bullseye on my back."

"Yeah... we're looking into that," he said as he limped to the door. "You want something to read? Apparently there was a serial killer in the Hoof." He reached over and lifted a paper in his mouth. 'Angel of Death: 8 foals. Hoofington Guard: 0 killers.' read the headline. Beneath that was something about the 'Proditor' being suspended for their involvement in Shattered Hoof Ridge. Right now I wasn't in the mood for either... or reading in general.

He caught my look and chuckled, tossing the paper aside. "You go ahead and rest, then. I'll see if I can actually think of something for a change." I couldn't help but smile as he walked away. Leg brace or not, P-21 sure had a cute ass.

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"What do you want?" Mother asked me, holding me in her hooves.

"To play."

"What do you want?" the Overmare asked me coldly, pink eyes digging into me.

"Revenge."

"What do you want?" Deus asked, sneering down at me.

"To kill."

"What do you want?" Lancer asked, with the rifle to my brow.

"Death."

"What do you want?" Dusty Trails asked, as she dealt the cards.

"Freedom."

"What do you want?" Fluttershy asked, hugging a dying foal.

"To do better."

"What do ya want?" Big Macintosh asked, looking over his shoulder at me.

"Love."

"What do you want?" Bottlecap asked with her calm, sure smile.

"I don't know."

"What do you want?" Scoodle asked, lying in two.

"Forgiveness."

"What do you want?" Morning Glory asked around the bloody scalpel in her mouth.

"Truth."

"What do you want?" P-21 asked, with that skeptical smile.

"You."

"What do you want?" Blackjack asked.

" "

* * *

I opened my eyes again to the feeling of a wet cloth across my brow. And my legs. And my butt. I looked up at Glory draping another across my shoulders. Ugh, I felt bad. Given my latest experiences with 'feeling bad', from getting shot to getting rad poisoning to getting battered in a rock crusher, this was oddly more mundane. Hot. Weak. Tired. Sick. That was it. I felt sick. I should report to medical... wait. Glory didn't work in medical. That's right. This wasn't the stable.

Crap. Was I *that* fucked up?

"What's up, doc?" I muttered, making her jump.

"Blackjack! I didn't realize you were awake," she said softly as she tugged the cloth off my face. "You have a slight postoperative infection. I think we've used every healing potion we could to try and fight it and get you back on your feet but..."

"Don't worry about it," I muttered with a groan. "I'm sure you'll have me fixed up in no time, Glory." I wiggled a rear hoof and smiled. "See... almost good as new. Though... I have to admit I'm

curious... you're what? A medical technician?"

"Something like that," she muttered before she dabbed the sweat off my brow.

"So where does a medical technician learn to do surgery like that?" I asked quietly, looking up at her before I closed my eyes. Maybe it was the fever; I figured I'd have to be on death's door to put two and two together. Glory chewed on her lower lip as she looked away. I sighed and smiled. "You don't have to tell me, but I have to admit there are a lot of questions adding up."

Glory stroked her hoof along my mane. "I worked under a very good teacher. An exceptional teacher. I was... ugh, I hate the word... they all said I was a prodigy. I'd already completed most of my preliminary studies by the time I got my cutie mark. I was right on the track to go into full medical, studying under Dr. Morningstar."

"I could really go for studying under a Dr. Whiskey right now."

"Alcohol's not going to help much at this point. We used all of it trying to sterilize you and the equipment anyway."

"I'm sterilized? And here I was hoping to make Mom the first grandmare of Stable 99." Oh the colors the small gray pegasus could change! "Pity the whiskey's all gone." Then I peeked at her. "Got any scotch?"

She laughed, trying to hide her grin by rubbing her hoof across her nose. "Funny, that was his favorite method of anesthesia after dealing with his students. That or it was the cure for his lectures. But he was a very good teacher and a wonderful doctor. I was given the opportunity to observe surgeries that I'd normally have to wait years to watch. He even let me assist on minor operations." She bowed her head as she murmured softly, "I saw him perform a procedure on a spine trauma similar to yours."

"So what happened?" I noticed her wince, looking away. "Oh no. Don't you start getting all evasive on me now. You were really on a roll there, Glory." She gave me a small smile.

She opened and closed her mouth several times, struggling for what to say. Finally she just sighed. "Well. The Volunteer Corps happened. The movement had been building for years. The Enclave always tightly controls access to the surface, but there were hundreds of students and faculty at the academy that wanted to do more. There were several petitions to the pegasus council. Finally the Volunteer Corps was established." She sighed softly. "Dr. Morningstar was... well... not a supporter of the Corps. He'd been to the surface with science teams."

Glory sighed, closing her eyes as she looked out the filthy windows. "We had a terrible fight. Absolutely terrible. I told him he was rude, callous, and monstrous for keeping his skills to the pegasi. He called me an idealistic fool destined for a pointless death."

"Ouch," I muttered.

"Yes, well, he tried to mend our relationship afterwards, but I'm such an idiot sometimes. I was quite turned off by the attitude. Pegasi I knew for years accused us of being Dashites and turning our backs on the Enclave." She looked so... angry. It wasn't an expression I'd seen on her often.

"Dashite? I'm guessing that's a bad thing." Given I was sick with an infection, I really didn't want to risk pissing off my doctor. Still, this was the most I'd gotten out of her in... ever!

Her scowl faded, but the hard frown remained. "Yes, it is. Some ponies leave the Enclave. They don't like the rules. A few flee to the surface to avoid punishment for their crimes. Others do it out of

admiration for Rainbow Dash.” She gave a little shiver. “It is an unpleasant prospect. A few find feral clouds to settle in. Most are forced to the surface. Once you’re a Dashite, you are banned from the Enclave forever. Worse is the shame you bring to your family. Parents can lose positions. Siblings can become pariahs. It’s not something that should be done lightly.” There was a firm certainty in her voice that I’d never before heard from the petite pegasus.

“Have you known any Dashites?” That question had been a mistake. I’d never seen Glory looking... well... like P-21. “How are the Volunteer Corps different?”

“We wanted to change the rules, not break them. Our laws aren’t carved in stone. Clouds change. So should laws that aren’t needed any more. I think Thunderhead just let us come down to end the annoyance, but the point is they let us.” She closed her eyes and said solemnly, “Rainbow Dash was a fine pony whose heart was in the right place, but whose head wasn’t. Had she waited twenty years, just twenty years, she could have changed so much.” She then looked at me with a very odd smile. “She was a phenomenal pony. She and her friends. But she was a bit of an idiot.”

“Oh, see. I must be getting better,” I said with a grin. “I think that was a crack at me.” I’d had enough of angry Glory. I hadn’t believed she had angry in her.

“W... what? No, I’d never. You’re... I mean... well... you’re phenomenal as well, Blackjack.” She grinned nervously as I gave her the look, and then she sighed and added ruefully, “And, occasionally... you can be an idiot too. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Everypony knows I’m not a smart pony,” I said as I relaxed against the mattress. “I just wish I could have saved one. Even one. But Lancer killed them all.” Glory didn’t look sad, though; she looked confused. Then she brightened.

“Oh no, he didn’t.” Blink. What was this? “Sekashi and her filly Majina both survived. They’re injured, and it was touch-and-go a bit with Majina, but they’ll survive.” Glory smiled at me. “Lancer was a murdering monster, but even he couldn’t make thirteen fatal shots in ten seconds flat.”

I could have kissed her, except that that would have required standing. And kissing. “I... thank you for telling me.” I chuckled, closing my eyes and thinking of the bony bastard shuffling the cards. You don’t get two. “He still has eleven to answer for,” I said, taking a deep breath. You don’t get two, you bony bastard. “I’d like to talk to them later. Right now, do you think I could take a nip into Macintosh’s memory orb? My back is killing me.”

“Ah... sure. And I’ll take a look at your dressings while you’re out,” she said as she went to my bags, withdrew the orb, and pressed it to my horn. I smiled as I made the connection, looking forward to seeing the stars again. It was so different from looking up at the sky. It was... peaceful.

oooOOOooo

Not peaceful! Not peaceful! Get me down! Get me down now! I was flying and couldn’t close my eyes as I snapped and banked through the smoky air. Bullets buzzed and popped in the air as monsters that were half bird and half giant cat yawed and cut back and forth behind me. I bit the bridle in my mouth as my wings snapped and I made a flip in the air. Facing backwards and upside down, one of the eagle creatures flew across my vision, and it felt almost like I had entered the stillness of S.A.T.S. The rifles at my sides let out a stream of leaden death interspersed with red fire. Burning, the eagle creature tumbled towards the ground below.

The ground way way below. A ground that became far far closer as the body I was in pulled his... his? -- Holy shit... *that* was definitely a his! -- legs and raced for the ground with the other eagle critter on his ass. Definitely not feeling much in common with this host right now! If I could have thrown

up, cried, or wet myself, I'd have given all three a shot. A blue pegasus below suddenly powered straight up at me. She was going to hit!

At the last possible moment she rolled left and my host rolled right. They passed by each other so close their hooves clapped together. Then she unloaded a stream of her own automatic fire as soon as her guns passed my host's tail. The bursts tore into the eagle creature, and it banked away smoking and racing for cover.

"I hate when griffins get away," the blue pegasus mare said with a grin as she looked at him. I gave a shrug and she nodded, "Yeah, yeah. There's always more. Let's get back to position. Zebras want something out here bad," she said, and we moved off.

Together we dove back towards the ground. I could see what she meant. We were flying over no pony's land and there was a zebra army pushing its way into the pony lines. Dragons swooped and looped towards the south; it seemed almost as if they were looking for something.

We landed at a concrete fortification atop a hill. A dozen or so ponies held off ten times that in zebra attackers. A huge gray pony swung a multi-barreled weapon in a socket back and forth, sending a killing stream of lead down the hill and into the enemy. "Eat it you bitchessss!" he roared in glee as the chain of bullets rapidly disappeared into the weapon. "Twissssst! Reload!" he yelled.

A red-maned mare with a buzz cut ducked down and ran to the gun's spent ammo feed box with a fresh box in her mouth. She kicked the almost-empty container aside and dropped the new one in its place. He took his hooves off the trigger toggles, his teeth champing impatiently. Flicking the lid off, she pulled out the end of the ammo belt with her teeth and with practiced ease used her hooves to latch it to the end of the one trailing from the gun. "All set!" she called out.

"Thanks!" he shouted as the gun started to fire its raking line of hot metal again. "Die, you striped mooootherfuckaaas!" the gray pony shouted in glee as he painted them with lead.

"No problem," the crème mare said with a grin. She looked completely out of place with most of these ponies, being perhaps half the age of some and wearing thick glasses held together with duct tape. Yet despite the bullets and rattle of the minigun, she looked excited. As she passed the pegasus I was in, she said, with a snicker and a nod to the minigun-wielding stallion, "Such a badass, isn't he, Stonewing." I heard my host snort and felt his wide grin.

A yellow earth pony buck with a headset and so much equipment on his back that he resembled a camel or something was fumbling with what looked like the most awkward PipBuck I'd ever seen; it was almost as large as his lower foreleg. "Command wants us to pull back to position 210. The weather monitoring station."

"Shouldn't we fall back, then?" asked a sober-sounding buck draped head to hoof in a flak jacket. I couldn't even make out his face under the oversized helmet he wore. Unfortunately, my host barely glanced at him.

The blue pegasus looked over at a corpse in the corner. "Well, our officer can't confirm the order with a hole through his head." A big gold bar (now with a hole in it) decorated his helmet. Yeah, it sort of screamed 'shoot me'. The pegasus mare just snorted, "Forget what Command says. Half the time I don't know who our command really is."

"We need to follow the chain of command, Jetstream," Flak Jacket said in a low voice as he glared at the blue pegasus.

"What does the big guy say?" Twist asked.

I'd expected everypony to look over at the maniac with the chaingun. Instead, all of us, including the maniac, looked over to the left edge of the fortification, where a big red buck stood in a battle saddle mounting an automatic rifle and a belt-fed shotgun. He chewed on a grass stem as he looked down at the advancing zebra forces. "Anope," he said lazily. "We just got here. I reckon we oughta stick around."

"All right, Big Macintosh." Twist looked at the pony in all the electronic gear. "You heard 'im! Tell them we're pinned or busy or something!" She hopped to the edge while still remaining low, then pushed a helmet up above the parapet. The metal jerked as rounds struck it. Twist looked at the impact holes carefully. "Ooo... I'd say a hundred yards out," she said as she grinned at my host.

Why was she looking at m--EEEEEEEEEE!? I was back in the air with the blue pegasus and we were cutting our way through the sk--no, the sky was definitely farther above things to run into. The male I was in spun, dove, and strafed along a low ridge at the foot of the hill. I couldn't see anything, but suddenly zebras shimmered into being as the snipers' invisibility cloaks flickered. From atop the hill came a steady pour of fire. Not frantic, though they were drastically outnumbered. They became a rock that the zebra sea broke upon.

And the foundation of that rock wasn't the hill itself or the fortifications. It was Big Macintosh. He moved constantly but did not retreat or hide behind cover. He never swore or shouted at the enemies fighting their way up. With the rifle he fired precise and disciplined bursts of fire. When the enemy came too close, the shotgun would come into play with a deadly barrage of shells. Some zebras, running more swiftly than I thought physically possible, attempted to attack him with their bare hooves! Yet Big Macintosh remained atop that hill and took them down with awe-inspiring discipline and courage. Some ponies were wounded. Some ponies died. But while Big Macintosh stood, they would not break, even as the zebra line crawled closer and closer to their fortifications.

That small band of ponies returned fire and death against twenty times their number. Stealth cloaks were of little use against the minigun, but even the minigun couldn't fire everywhere at once; some managed to sneak all the way up to the fortifications. I was amazed to see Twist, the smallest, leap on them in furious hoof-to-hoof combat rather than let them attack her comrades. A white unicorn stood like a noble prince facing a monstrous horde as the guns in his battle saddle were supplemented by a pair of elegantly wrought pistols. I had to learn *that* trick! A black unicorn hardly moved at all as her rifle picked off zebra officers with disturbing accuracy.

These were heroes I could not have imagined. This was valor and courage I could never hope to match. I was so in awe of what I glimpsed that I forgot my fear of heights and the sky. Even my host and Jetstream amazed me. Remembering it was not actually me flying, I marveled at their skill and grace and peril. Jetstream was faster, my host stronger. I had more of those griffins try and attack, only to have Jetstream pick them off while their attentions were on me.

Eventually, the enemy was actually forced back down the hill, and I landed back atop it next to the other pegasus. "That was super, Jetstream," Twist said as she reloaded our ammo drums. She grinned around a peppermint stick lodged in her teeth. "Want one, Stonewing?" Stonewing, apparently the pegasus I was in, nodded enthusiastically.

The blue pegasus smiled and chewed hers happily. "Thanks... those are so good. When do you find time to make 'em?" I'd have liked the recipe myself. That was good eatin'! Of course, I couldn't cook to save my life, but it's the thought that counts.

"Eh. It's a complete mystery," she said with a grin, then looked over at a unicorn staring through a scope down the hill. "You want some, Psalm?" My host put his wing in front of Twist, shaking his head.

The pegasus beside me looked sad as we looked over at the black unicorn staring downhill, her

lips moving softly. She made slow, almost mechanical, shots with a long-barreled rifle. BLAM! "Forgive me Luna, for I have sinned: I have taken the life of another." BLAM! "Forgive me Celestia, for I have sinned: I have taken the life of another." BLAM! BLAM BLAM BLAM... each death came with a plea for forgiveness in a hopeless whisper.

I was seeing the forging of the Wasteland before my very eyes, one crushed soul at a time. Well... Stonewing's eyes... ugh! These memory orbs were confusing!

"How'd they get so close to the Hoof? We should have intercepted them long before they got here," Jetstream asked as she watched them reorganizing their lines for another attack.

"Dragons. Brimstone and a dozen more managed to carry an entire legion with them," said the handsome unicorn who reminded me of Prince Splendid, save for the emerald eyes and mane, and wore an automatic rifle on each side. I would have killed to know how he looked so delicious covered in mud and blood.

"But why *here*, Vanity? They're not pressing towards anything!" Jetstream protested. "I thought they were going for the clinic but they seem to care more about these hills. Setting up a foothold for a bigger invasion?"

"Stop trying to think like an officer, Jetstream. You don't have enough brain damage," Twist said as she looked downhill once more. "So are we staying, big guy?"

All eyes went to Big Macintosh, who calmly chewed his grass stem. He gave a long slow nod. "Ayep. Figger they want this hill pretty bad. They're gonna have ta pay fer it."

Looking at all the zebra bodies on the hillside, that was a hell of a price.

The pony with the electrical equipment perked his ears. "Um... Command again. They want us to *hold* the hill now. Shadowbolts are inbound. ETA two minutes. All pegasi are to form up and give support."

"Shadowbolts? They must be targeting the dragons. There's a big one south of here." Jetstream looked at my host with a lazy little grin. "Well let's go ahead and give Rainbow Dash a hoof. You gonna try and get her autograph again, Stone?" My host nodded again, grinning eagerly.

"I tell you, I read in Stud magazines that Dash is all about the fillies. You're wasting your time," the big gray pony said with a lazy chuckle.

"Do you kiss your mother with that mouth?" Twist asked with a scowl.

"Nah. But I kiss yours." Twist bristled and for a moment I was sure she was about to tackle the gray pony that was twice her size and age!

"Could you two please stop?" Flak Jacket muttered in irritation. Given that he was carrying a lot of grenades, I personally didn't want to see his bad side.

"He's right. Knock it off, Doof," Big Macintosh said softly, and instantly all of them stopped and returned to the fortification. "Their big push is comin' soon. Jet. Stone. Get goin'. Back up the Shadowbolts and take out those dragons before they get here."

"You just be here when we get back. How can we be Macintosh's Marauders without Big Macintosh?" Jetstream asked before the pair crouched and flew off in unison. Dozens of pegasi from other units further east were rising as well, forming into long wings. I really wished I could close my eyes

right now, but from Stonewing's grin this was the time of his life.

Then they met the dragons. Fire and armored griffins broke the pegasus lines into snapping, screaming combat. The largest dragons had riders giving rifled air support! This was insane, and apparently a new challenge for the pegasi. They seemed at a loss of what to fight first. Griffins? Zebra snipers? The dragons spewing flame? For a minute or two I was certain that I was about to witness a rout.

Is that a rainbow?

The rainbow streak tore straight from Hoofington flanked by lines of crackling thundercloud. Below I had seen a squad of ponies fight like heroes. Now I saw nine pegasi who fought like goddesses--no. Not plural. Singular. As I watched, the nine never broke formation into smaller groups, as we had. The pegasus mare trailing a rainbow raced across the face of a dragon, blasting it with her guns. The next two did the same. And the next. And the next. And the last pair. The explosive shells of the concentrated fire blew the dragon's skull to pieces. Slowly it wheeled over and dumped the snipers into the air. Okay, I really didn't want to see that!

Wherever the rainbow went, the shadowy thunderclouds followed. If their formation broke, it reformed the instant they passed the obstacle. Whatever the rainbow mare shot, the others followed suit. I had never imagined such coordination or unity! They were not invincible, though. As they began to attack the largest dragon I could have imagined, one three times the size of the mutant we'd killed, two were caught in its fiery breath. Now seven, they closed ranks and never let up the attack.

"Stone!" I dimly heard the shout of warning. Then something struck Stonewing's head with an immense blast of pain and he fell spinning into darkness.

oooOOOooo

My eyes popped open, and I let out a gasp for air followed by a groan as my body reminded me that now was no time for strenuous activity. I was just glad I could move all my hooves. "You were out for a while," Dusty drawled softly, the sand colored pony sitting beside the bed. "Last time we couldn't keep you in the memory. This time I couldn't snap you out of it."

"She gave me the wrong memory," I groaned as I lifted the orb and looked at its swirling light. "They need to find a way to slap labels on these things."

"Afraid we all got bigger problems. You got only a couple hours before all hell arrives. Redbeard's found out yer here and wounded and I think every yahoo with a rifle is on their way. Got to get you outta here before then."

"What about you and the Pecos?"

"Don't worry about that. Your bounty is the only thing giving Sidewinder a chance at keeping most of the Pecos under him to try and take this place. With you gone and the freed ponies armed, I think we'll fight him off. Especially if I offer to hire 'em on." She chuckled and then shook her head. "If we get a few hundred bounty hunters after you... then things get impossible." She coughed and pulled out a crude mouth-drawn map. "Way I see it, your best bet is to follow the rails west, skirt between the Everfree Forest and the badlands, and come up through Ponyville. Heard somepony cleared out a healthy bunch of the raiders that live in those parts. From there you can get to New Appleloosa or try to get into Tenpony Tower." She looked at the map and frowned. "Should take about a month but..."

"I'm not spending a month just to run to Manehattan," I said with a groan as I tried to rise to my hooves. Emphasis on tried. Oh wasn't that a mistake.

"Maybe you haven't realized yet, but you're half dead and well on your way to becoming all dead. The slaves you freed here idolize ya, but they're just about a hundred and fifty or so folk against every greedy son of a gun that ever crawled outta their mamma lookin' for caps. That'd be a lot."

"I didn't say stay here," I said with a groan as I looked at the map. Lots would be coming from the north following the Sunset Highway. Others would be coming west from Flank and Paradise. "What's the other way?" I asked as I pointed at the rails going towards the Core. "Somepony mentioned rail tunnels."

"I can shoot you now. It'll be easier. You'd need an armed escort to get through the tunnels. Feral ghouls are all over down there. Radiation. Taint. The boss sent trains through there only on account he didn't want Gorgon petrifying him." Then she frowned. "Thing is, there's not much else that way either. Chapel's the only community, and I doubt they even have radios. There's other places you can hole up, too. Even a stable, or so I heard." Really... I had to admit I was curious. Terrified, too. Not something to mention to P-21 just yet.

"If we follow the train rails, we might be able to slip out with nopony the wiser. Let in a few bounty hunters to see I've gone. Let 'em chase me to Ponyville if they want."

"Funny. Does being sick raise yer smarts or something?" she said.

"Smart would be your plan," I said. "Well, been in bed long enough. Best get to my hooves..." And I tried to rise again. Again, tried was the operative word. A more accurate way to describe the situation would be 'moving one's limbs and groaning in pain'.

"Okay. I take back the smarts part," she sighed, scowling at me. "It's going to take forever to carry you out of here at this rate."

"Actually, I have an idea..." I said with a little smile.

* * *

Things were coming together. There were gaps in the plan, but I thought we could work through them. I was also able to stand. Walking... not so much. My fever had broken, but my back still felt like a hammer had been used on it... which technically would have been preferable to a bullet. P-21 had shown me the quarter inch-steel plate from my armor the last time he'd stopped by. It'd been bent in a 'U' around the impact.

I'd taken the time to write a little letter to Bottlecup about Dusty Trails and the change of ownership of Brimstone's Fall. With some luck, she might be willing to cut them a discount in exchange for first dibs at the mine. Magical gemstones like these were in huge demand, given how many magical weapons seemed to be floating around the Hoof. All that was left for me to do was wait for... ah. I heard the door close below. Time to get moving. My mane was starting to itch from being in one place for too long.

Funny. They were taking their time getting up here. Whoever was on the stairs walked with a slow, ponderous gait that I didn't like at all. A raspy laugh rose up the stairs as the door to the boss's office was slowly pushed open. The brown earth pony mare swayed as she stood in the door. I relaxed. "Oh, hey. How are you feeling, Tumbleweed?"

Those were the stupidest words ever to come out of my mouth... today. No. Something was very wrong as she swayed on her hooves. Tears ran down her cheeks as she slumped, and the most horrible laughing, sobbing noise rose in her throat. There was blood smeared across her lips... fresh and red. Bite marks covered her legs. Hooves shook as she stared at me with eyes that were already

yellowing.

"Help... me..." she begged, giggled, sobbed... all at once. I'd gone through my own share of the shakes, but I'd never seen another pony losing their mind before my eyes. *Weeks to months for 'mental decay' my ass, Glory!* Tumbleweed was falling apart in front of me, bloody froth creeping down her chin. She twitched continuously as her pinprick pupils jerked away from meeting my eyes. I started hoping this was some strange card game dream rife with metaphors. If so, I'd pass on whatever fucked-up wisdom my subconscious was trying to dredge up!

By the wonders of adrenaline, I shifted and prayed I didn't paralyze myself. I slowly pushed myself onto my side to face her, hooves pulled up and ready. I tried to speak nice and calmly. "Tumbleweed. Where's Glory? You need Glory." That was a lie. She needed a lot more than Glory. She needed a prayer and a bullet; damn me, I couldn't give her both.

"Turkey... I like turkeys... tastes good..." she whimpered, and I could only lay there in horror as I saw her raise her leg and suddenly spasm, biting down hard. As fresh blood spilled, I watched as she started to swallow. "Tastes... good... tastes so good..." she said a moment later. She gave one last sob, choking in the back of her throat. "Help me..." she whimpered before resuming giggling, long and slow, but building. My magic grasped around for something I could use as a weapon. Empty Med-X needles. Plastic jars of Buck. Fucking pillows. And as much as I wanted to help Tumbleweed, I had an even more horrifying thought: had she already come across Glory? What if some of that blood wasn't hers?

That giggle rose higher and higher. Her entire body was shaking now. "Tastes so fucking good... fucking good... Yeah!" It was like watching somepony dying of radscorpion venom, only when she expired I was next on the menu! Sweet Goddesses, if I'd known I'd have let her die from the poison! I tried lifting the terminal on the desk, but it was bolted down. I yanked the drawers open one after the next as I looked for something lethal. A knife. A pipe. A frigging pencil. Anything! My magic rifled through each frantically. Wait! What was this?

I yanked out a clipboard covered in two hundred year old finance information. Fuck fuckity fuck fuck fuck... She lunged for the bed, bloody mouth wide and screaming in glee.

Rolling onto my back hurt like mad, but it was the only thing that let me push her away as she tried to turn me into lunch. Unlike other raiders, she wasn't half-starved and raw. She was quite a healthy pony, and she was trying her hardest to chomp on my belly. I pushed her snapping, giggling, biting maw aside with my telekinesis and forelegs, but it was so hard. Every motion made it feel like a drill was working in my spine. And if it was true that she had a disease... rabid raider Blackjack! No thank you!

Right now though, she was stronger than me. I'd die for my baton... my gun... which was funny given I was about to die lacking them! All I had was my telekinesis, but I had to have something to use it *on*. It wasn't like you could just shove telekinesis at something... right? I stared at her. "Tumbleweed. Please stop... please..." Oh don't make me try this... "Please!" This was not an experiment I wanted to do right now! I almost didn't want it to work. My magic focused from pushing against her head to pushing just one single point. There was no way this could work. No way. Crap...

Fuck it. I shoved my focused little cone of telekinesis right into her eye. She screamed and fell back, covering her head with her hooves as she writhed in agony. Finally she stilled, clutching the socket as clear, faintly yellow fluid crept down her cheek. "It hurts... it hurts... my head hurts... I'm so hungry... so angry... please..." she begged as she stared at me with her remaining pinprick pupil.

"Tumbleweed," I panted, my breath hissing as I nearly hyperventilated. Oh Celestia, did that ever sting! "Have you ever eaten meat?"

"No..." She started to giggle again as she rocked towards me. "But I'd love to!"

I focused all my telekinesis into another bolt and rammed it into her head. Still not enough. I glanced at my PipBuck. Would it even work? Looking at Tumbleweed, I entered S.A.T.S., and to my surprise--and a little bit of concern--I was able to queue up two attacks: 'Telekinetic Bullet'. My horn flashed twice and I watched the magic augur into her skull. The second time, the tiny cone of magic burst out the rear of her head. She jerked and spasmed before she slowly slid down to the floor beside my bed.

I prayed it was just my wishful thinking she looked so happy to be dead. I looked at the bites on my forelimbs, feeling a new cold worry settle in my gut. I brought up the ridiculously long list of things to worry about and scribbled the newest one on it. Then I sighed. Nothing to do about that now.

Slowly, I rolled onto my side, my horn throbbing as if I'd just been smacking myself with my own baton. "Not going to be trying that again soon," I said softly as I looked down at the mare's still form. Sweet Celestia, what was hell was going on here?

* * *

There are times, rare and momentous, when Blackjack, daughter of Gin Rummy, granddaughter of who knows, has a good idea. Perhaps the stars overhead were aligned just so beyond the clouds. Maybe I was finally getting a little karma in my favor. Perhaps it was even something so radical as me getting smarter. Rather than try and get a whole flatcar together to haul my butt out of Brimstone's Fall, we simply rolled up two flatbed minecarts. The tracks in the gem mine had the same gauge as the rail lines, and the minecarts could be pulled fairly easily by only one pony each. Dusty and two other unicorns carefully lifted me up and carried me down to the first floor of the administration building. I was glad to see that P-21 had gotten their collars off.

I slumped, my legs shaky and my back achy, wishing to know why I could slug down healing potions right and left and they didn't do anything. Healing potions should heal! My eyes passed over a framed news clipping: 'Officer Softheart clears Brimstone's Fall of involvement in Angel of Death killings. Investigation continues.' A unicorn mare in a uniform shook hooves with some manager-type pony. Personally, I thought 'Sofheart' vs. 'Angel of Death' to be a bit of a mismatch.

Dusty was leading the way with my duffel bag slung across her shoulders. She still hadn't said much about Tumbleweed. I sensed the relationship between the two had been more than simple affiliation with the Pecos. Now that I was leaving though, she started to talk. "How could that happen? She wasn't a raider. She wasn't even a good Pecos! She didn't even eat meat!" She stomped her hooves in aggravation. "A week ago she was in Flank whining about her salad being all... wilted! What kind of Pecos whines about their salad and then turns around and tries to eat themselves!"

"Glory thinks there's something that causes raiders around the Hoof. Some disease that turns their brains all spongy." I swallowed as I was levitated through the meeting room. Thankfully, whatever Tumbleweed had said about turkeys, Glory had been seeing to the injured zebras. More's the pity. If only something could have been done. Get two zebra back, pay one Tumbleweed.

"Okay, stop." I said as we reached the door. "Set me down."

"Down?" Dusty trails asked, then looked at the door. "Oh no. You think you're going to walk out of here in your condition? That is a whole new level of stupid, Blackjack." She coughed and muttered, "Besides, Glory would probably kill me if I let ya."

"Then you're surprised? Good," I said as I looked at the unicorns. It was the look. Slowly gravity took its hold. My hooves touched down; as I assumed my own weight, my legs started to feel like they

would bend like wet clay. I was still standing, though. Standing was good. “Good. Mind stepping out just a second? I need to ask Dusty something.” The two unicorns looked at me in worry before they stepped out.

I’d faced a pony abomination, a mutated dragon, a glowing ghoul pony, and being eviscerated. All of that was nothing compared to the challenge of standing. “Good. Pass me the Buck?” Dusty looked stubborn. I looked... probably really pathetic. Fortunately, I’d saved her life, handed her one of the most productive gem mines in the Hoof, and stopped her friend from becoming an equicidal maniac (okay, so I did that by *killing* her friend, but still...).

She floated the bottle over and carefully unscrewed the cap. “You know, Glory warned us to only give it to you if you crashed.”

“Good. I’m about to crash,” I said as my legs shook. She floated a tablet to my mouth and I chewed the chalky tablet before swallowing. I could almost feel the sensation as the chem hit my stomach and then rapidly spread. The shaking stopped and I even felt, dare I admit it, better. “Now my barding.”

“I think you’re turning into a raider too,” she said as she pulled it out and draped it over my body. I was hot. My limbs, fortified by Buck, still felt like jelly as the armor settled around me. On top of everything else, said armor hurt like crazy as it was buckled in place. I searched my pockets and found a syringe of Med-X. ‘For all your hurting ouchies’. Boy did I have an ouchie. I jammed the needle into my leg and the fire between my shoulder blades dwindled somewhat. Now it only felt like I had rebar stuck there instead of one of Deus’s guns.

“Why are you doing this?” Dusty was clearly concerned and just a touch worried.

“Which do you think is better, everypony out there seeing me for the cripple I am, or everypony seeing me walk out of here on my own hooves?” I asked as I straightened. “Better yet, when the bounty hunters hear about it, hopefully they’ll think that maybe I’m just as dangerous as before and go the fuck home. I can do this. It’s just walking to the minecarts.”

“Well, that and dealing with the mine administrator,” she said with a little smile. “The ponies you freed wanted to give you a special parting present.”

Fucking what? Ohh! Maybe they were going to let me push the button down in the mine! Big red buttons should always do something amazing! But then the door opened and Glory stared up at both of us. Her lavender eyes widened and the gray mare stared at me. She then closed her eyes. “You are an idiot, Blackjack. Get on those carts before you die on your hooves in front of everypony!” she hissed as she stepped aside, giving Dusty a withering glare. The Pecos made herself busy looking at anything other than the glaring pegasus.

That was a lot of ponies. The entire mine yard was filled with dozens of ponies. More than a hundred. Most had the worn look of slaves, but I picked out the Pecos with their hats and jackets. The few guards who’d joined the revolt were visible from their subdued expressions. I could tell it’d be a long time before they completely shed that past. I slowly made my way down the stairs, glad, despite the way my legs felt, to no longer feel the unicorns’ telekinesis supporting me. If the sham were revealed I’d never shake most of the hunters off me.

Step. Step. Step. It was the longest walk of my life, longer than when my guts were dragging on the floor be... *do NOT think about that now, you moron!* The former slaves parted in front of me with expressions of awe and concern. There was no way I could hide the pain. I doubted I could hide the fever. I just had to hide the weakness. *Be strong.* I lifted my head and forced my lips to curl back.

The crowd exploded into cheers. I nearly fell over right then and there.

Reaching the two mine flatbeds, I was relieved to see that it wasn't much of a step. I climbed aboard and sat with relief. There was just enough room for one pony per flatbed, or two if they were cozy. P-21 looked at me from the second flatbed with a sigh, shaking his head. "You're amazing. Ridiculous, but amazing."

"Thanks. And I'm glad you were able to get the collars off them safely."

"I'm glad I didn't have any accidents while doing it," he answered with a strangely smug smile. "And I'm glad they won't be going to waste."

I looked back at him in worry. "What... you're going to use them in the mine?" I rubbed my twitching mane. There was something being set up on the one of the flatbed train cars. The crowd began to back away.

"Better," he said as the movement of the crowd revealed the fat pony. His forelegs were swollen to the size of melons and he'd been beaten till he looked like he was part bloatsprite. But what really chilled my blood, despite the heat, was the sight of him wearing dozens and dozens of explosive slave collars. "For justice."

Sweet Celestia, what the fuck made you think this up, P-21? Dusty smiled as she floated over the flimsy little shackle I'd busted off him during the breakout. There was a shiny red button attached. "Thought it right you give the fucker a send-off he deserves."

I felt a further chill wash over me, despite the lingering fever. "Are... you... fucking... insane?" I whispered as softly as I could. P-21 jerked as if I'd just shot him in the face with a telekinetic bullet. The crowd went wild, stamping their hooves as they yelled his damnation. I stared at the pathetic, blubbing mass on the end of the car. He shook as if he was going to faint at any moment as he stammered for his mommy.

"I'm sorry, is there something to think about here? This buck is responsible for the death of possibly hundreds of ponies. He's been in charge of Brimstone for years!" P-21 said in a low voice. "He's hurt everypony here. Now they get justice!"

"This isn't fucking justice!" I hissed as I stared at him, unable to touch that button, unable to look away. "It's murder."

Now I regretted my show. If I'd appeared near death... no, that would have put the blood on somepony else's hooves. And he'd be just as dead.

P-21 would have killed me right then if he could. Cold rage burned in his eyes as he leaned towards me. "Do you know what fucking justice is? It's giving to others as is given to you." *Be kind.* "It's killing the fucker to make sure that she never does it again." *Be kind.* "It's making sure every bastard who even thinks of copying her crime hesitates because they know they might face the same punishment." *Be kind.* "It's what's fair!"

...be kind...

These ponies needed justice. Was this it? Killing him wouldn't bring anypony he had killed back. Would it even bring peace? Or would somepony else decide that it wasn't enough and drag one of the former guards up there next?

He was dead anyway. Send his broken body out the gate and the Wasteland would eat him.

They'd track him down and lynch him. It wasn't any different in Stable 99; he'd be retired without hesitation. Recycled. If he was put on some kind of trial, what verdict would be returned besides guilty? How was this not justice? Just a week ago I wouldn't have hesitated. In fact, I probably would have been honored to push the nice red button.

...be kind...

Ante up.

"Listen!" I screamed at the top of my lungs. I almost fell off the cart as the entire world spun, and only Dusty's magic suddenly gripping me and stopping me from falling on my face preserved my illusion. Shouts faded away bit by bit as eyes turned upon me. "I know you want me to kill this pony. I know he deserves it. I know he's hurt you over and over again for his own gain."

I clenched my eyes shut, twisting my hooves against the metal beneath me. "A long time ago there was a war between ponies and zebras. I saw a memory of it not long ago. I saw the hate and the blood and carnage. Some ponies think the bombs ended it. But I disagree. This is a war that is still being fought today, only now we're fighting between ourselves. And every single time we kill, we keep it going."

I wondered if, when I finished, I'd be next. "I've learned of a pony from that time who realized what everypony else didn't. The war had to end, and if we were ever going to win it we would have to do better. Be better. Not better killers. Not more ruthless. We would have to be... kind."

"I'm not an executioner. I'm Security. If he'd threatened another I wouldn't stop fighting him till he gave up. If he threatened your lives I'd do all I could to end his. But like this... I can't give you what you want. I'm sorry." I floated the detonator back to Dusty Trails, who looked at me with an unfathomable expression. Contempt for my weakness? Pity? Respect? "I know I can't stop you from killing him. I know that many of you need this. But I'm begging you... please... be better. Be kind."

Before, I think that some of the freed slaves had actually fought with each other for the privilege of pulling the mining flatbeds. Only Glory and the zebra Sekashi pulled the squeaking vehicles out of Brimstone's Fall. Her filly walked quietly beside us. Cheers had been replaced by little mutters and hard looks. I'd tried to look the hero. I'd tried to be inspiring. I'd tried to be better. I'd forgotten just what the Wasteland did with heroes. I didn't look back.

Still, my words must have had some effect. They *were* kind. They were kind enough to let me get out of sight before pushing the button.

* * *

I hated the Wasteland. I hated that bony bastard dealing the cards and stacking the deck. I hated ponies, 'sane' ponies, killing other ponies. Raiders at least had the excuse of holey brains. I hated P-21 for thinking that I'd want to kill the mine administrator like that. I hated being a coward. I hated being weak. If I'd just pushed the button, everything would have been better.

Be kind. What kindness was there in what I did? What did kindness even mean in the Wasteland? What was it other than a liability? I'd tried to be kind to P-21, and his leg had been shattered. I'd tried being kind to Glory, and I'd left her feeling abandoned. I want to be kind, Fluttershy. I want to be better. I want to be good. Because the alternative was to become the Wasteland. Cruel. Hard. Murderous.

I couldn't think about that fat bastard on the train car. I'm glad I only heard the explosion instead of seeing him turned to paint. I thought about Lancer. Was I really just a hypocritical coward? Lancer

deserved to die. I wanted to kill him. But would I? Deus was a monster trying to hunt me down. He deserved to die. Was that justice? Vengeance? Or was it just the Wasteland trying to wiggle its way inside me and crush whatever good remained inside?

Good. Had I ever been good?

"I am reminded of a funny story," Sekashi said brightly as she looked over her shoulder. I admit, I hadn't paid very much attention to the zebra and her filly. She had a strange cutie mark: abstract lines that seemed to form a smiling face. Her green eyes looked back at me with a bright curiousness in them. I hadn't seen eyes like that in a long time. Without waiting for permission, the lithe yet strong zebra said, "Once upon a time, in my homeland there was a very good but very silly zebra. He wished for some fine shoes and paid well for them. Walking home, however, he lost a nail."

"How terrible," he cried out. "How could I have lost it? Somepony will surely step upon it!" But he did not see the nail being picked up by another whose shoe barely clung to her hoof. He continued home, but soon the shoe came off entirely. It sailed through the crowd and struck a fleeing thief in the head. But he said, "Oh no, my shoe hurt him. How terrible I am!" He limped home, and once there met his wife and three children. He was very sad. He had the shoes removed and let each of his children take them away. "Oh wife, I am such a terrible husband. I have lost my shoes. I am a terrible zebra, for I hurt others. I am a terrible father, who gives only a shoe apiece to his children."

"But his wife was a very clever wife, and the next day when he went out he found the mare who had needed his nail, and she thanked him. If not for his nail, she would have lost her shoe as well. He thought that very strange, and as he walked he found the guards who thanked him for stopping the notorious thief by throwing his shoe. He thought this very odd as well. When he returned home, he found his lovely children playing with the shoes he had given them. They thanked him for the present."

"My wife! What a strange day I have had. Zebras keep thanking me for helping them. But I am a terrible zebra. I do not know why they do as they do!" But his wife just nodded. "Often it is the good we do not realize we do that matters more than the good we intend, husband." The zebra mare gave a long sigh with a smile over her shoulder back at me. "But of course he did not understand, for he was a very good but very silly zebra."

"I am sensing a moral," I said with a mirthless smile.

She looked at my lips carefully, but then gave an easy smile. Sweet Celestia how I wished I could smile like that again. "Ah, but that would ruin the story! So therefore it cannot have such a thing," she said with a prim nod. I chuckled despite myself.

"So, if I can ask, why did Lancer... do what he did?" I asked softly, hoping that it wasn't treading on sensitive hooves. The deaf zebra nearly tripped on a stone, yet she was so nimble on her hooves that I barely noticed her recovery.

"Ah. That is another funny story. Once upon a time there was a great king who ordered all his people to go forth and make great war against a terrible enemy. And so they did. It was great and it was terrible. And when it ended the king was slain, the enemy was slain, and all the armies of the world were slain. But afterwards, some who remained remembered the great king's order and so went out to do war with an enemy long past. And they marched left and they marched right and they raised their spears and shouted old cheers and all they came across they counted as their enemy. When they found other zebras they insisted they follow his orders as well. Any who refused were counted as the enemy. And so they fight a silly war against enemies of their own making for a great king long since fallen."

"That's not funny! That's terrible!" Glory protested. The zebra glanced at her, and Glory flushed as she spoke with exaggerated lip movement, "How can you call something so terrible like that silly?"

"Hmmm. Perhaps something is lost in the translation. Still, one might think such zebras to be quite foolish, and it is only fitting to find fools funny. Why would they try so hard at their foolishness if they did not wish us to laugh at them?"

I couldn't imagine laughing at Lancer, but I had to admit that there was something phenomenally stupid about continuing a war two hundred years past. I chuckled despite myself. "So you were zebras who refused to fight? He killed you for that?"

"Oh no no no. There are many tribes that refuse to fight. So long as they bow and quiver, they are spared. My tribe's crime was infinitely worse," she said with a solemn expression as she glanced back at us. "Our crime was that we laughed at their foolishness. I suppose it was too much to hope that they would laugh as well. A fearsome fool is a fool still, and it is hard to fear something so funny."

"So when I meet Lancer again, I should laugh at him?"

"Can you imagine anything more terrible?" she countered. For a zebra like that, I had to conclude that I really couldn't.

"You seem incredibly perky for a slave," P-21 said sourly.

The zebra looked back at the blue pony in surprise. "I am kinky for a slave?"

The look on P-21's face was priceless as his eyes popped wide. "Perky, perky! Why are you so *happy*?!"

"Ah, I am sorry. I suppose I could think of many terrible things. Scowl. Weep. But I am alive. My daughter is alive. I may be hungry tonight and dead tomorrow, but for now I shall choose to think of better thoughts. They are fewer and all the more precious than those that are sad." P-21 looked away with a soft hiss.

Glory frowned back at him. "What is the matter with you, P-21? Don't you have any sensitivity at all?" He glared back at her.

'You know this right and wrong shit,' I'd once told him. Now I wasn't so sure. It was as if we were swapping places and he was becoming more and more reactive and I more and more reserved. Our friendship had barely set and already cracks were forming. I looked at him staring away with his worried blue gaze. What should I say? Tell him it was all right? Say he was wrong?

As the cart ground towards the northeast, towards Hoofington, I wished that somehow I could be smart enough to know what to say. But I am not a smart pony. I am not a kind pony. All I could hope was that I found a way to be a better pony.

The mining cart passed the weathered bones of a pony stretched out along the side of the tracks. Its frozen grin said quietly: ante up.

Footnote: Level Up.

Perk added: Intense Training - Your experiences travelling in the Wasteland have allowed you to add one to your intelligence.

Quest perk added: Telekinetic Bullet spell- you may now attack enemies at close range with a bolt of telekinetic energy equivalent to a pistol.

(Tons of thanks to Kkat for inspiring me and letting me play in her sandbox, and Hinds for making this as awesome as possible.)