

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 11: Peace

"Sweet Celestia, she's drunk!"

Blackness. Unending. Absolute. Unyielding.

And then there was light.

I found myself lying naked on a strange mattress in a strange room, a dingy and cramped room that smelled of wax and hay. "Easy," said a male next to me on the bed. "Don't panic." That was an incredibly stupid thing to say, because this seemed like an ideal time to panic. I opened my eyes, took in what looked like some sort of basement lit with a few candles and dressed in the usual Wasteland décor, and immediately kicked at the male sitting beside me.

I still had my PipBuck, so I entered S.A.T.S. and queued three telekinetic bullets at the black unicorn. Maybe it was all the sickness, injury, and disappointment I'd suffered, but for some reason I hesitated and used that moment of frozen time to get a good look at my captor. I didn't know exactly what to expect. Ravenous raider? Blistered and bloated bounty hunter? Downgraded Deus? Okay, definitely not the last one.

He looked, in fact, quite ordinary. His black coat sported numerous thin scars all along his body. Mane was a dirty white, tail too. He wore no barding and I couldn't see a gun. In fact, the PipBuck said he was a non-hostile yellow. His cutie mark was a strange outline of a pegasus with hooves stretched above her and wings wide, surrounded by a sunburst of rays of light. I'd almost blown the head off a completely unarmed, non-hostile buck. I could hear the bony bastard shuffling his cards in the back of my mind.

When time resumed I flopped back on to my seat and took a shaking breath. "Right! Don't panic. Who's panicking? Me? Pssh. I kill monsters and slay slavers. No panic here." I grinned like an idiot; he looked at me with definite concern. I took a deep breath and thrust out my hoof. "I'm Blackjack. Nice to meet'cha."

"Priest," he replied. "Likewise."

Priest, huh. What were the odds that he was religious?

"So. A few standard questions I like to ask when I wake up in a strange bed next to somepony," I said, then cleared my throat. "Where am I? Where are my friends? Where are my clothes? Where's the bathroom? Was I good? Is this going to get back to my mother?" Then I blinked and added one. "And why do I feel... better?" I still felt on the battered and bruised side of life, but the 'Celestia fucked my spine with a power drill' pain was gone.

To my relief, he smiled. Maybe not laughed, but smiled. If I ran into another stoic buck, I was going to shoot him on principle. Maybe not kill him, but he was getting shot! "That is quite a list. Does this happen often?"

"Oh, after the last couple of days... yeah. It's become policy."

"All right. First question: you are in Chapel." Then his lips curled. "But of course you already knew that from your PipBuck." I did? Fuck! I tried to look nonchalantly down at the screen. "Naturally,

you're testing my honesty?"

"Of course. That's it precisely," I said softly before glancing down at the navigation tool. Sure enough... "Oh Celestia! How did I get way over here?" Chapel was right across the river from the southwestern side of the Hoof! That should have been two days walking, at least! "How long was I out? Why was I out?"

"I love answering questions, but if you keep tacking them on, we're never going to get out of bed," he said with an arch of his brow. "And I don't know about you, but I'm hungry." I had to admit that I was too. Ravenous, in fact. Walking ahead of me, he opened the cellar doors and stepped out into the drizzle. Did it ever stop raining in Hoofington?

Chapel consisted of four or five small buildings circumscribed by a wooden picket fence. Each house had raised growing beds covered by tarps and canvas sheets. The post office across the street seemed to hold most of the life in the town, as I saw several young mares stroll inside. In fact, the ponies caring for the vegetables were young too. Aside from Priest, I didn't see a single adult anywhere. "Okay..." Then I spotted the raggedy blue flag with a rearing white filly, fluttering weakly in the breeze. "Oh! Crusaders! This is where the Crusaders live?" Then I winced. "Oh, yeah. Adding it to the list."

"You must have quite a collection of questions already," he replied with a chuckle. *You have NO idea.* "As for your second question, about your friends, you were found alone. So I'm afraid I don't know where they are."

That brought me short. "What? They're..." I felt... I'm not sure how I felt. It was like all of a sudden two pieces of my insides had been yanked up into my throat. "Oh, shit... er... horseapples," I amended, looking at the black unicorn, giving a small smile. Yeah, that was the best I could fake; hopefully I'd hidden at least *some* of the extent of my distress.

His amusement shifted to concern. "I'm sorry. When the Crusaders found you, you were unconscious and alone. They recognized your security barding and carried you here. That patch convinced them; not many ponies wear Crusader patches. Unfortunately, your equipment was more than they could carry, and they had to hide it there instead. So as for your clothes, they are back where they found you, beside the tracks." He arched a brow. "Do you really need to go to the bathroom?"

"No. And you don't need to answer if I was decent or about my mom. Stupid questions..." I muttered. My friends were gone. Dead? Oh, why did I just think that? My head felt like I was looking into the sky. I sat down hard on my rump. "Shit. I... sorry. I know you're not supposed to swear around clergy ponies." I admit, I hadn't liked Stable 99's spiritual leader; she went around killing fun faster than the security ponies did, but I respected her. It wasn't easy, addressing the worries of a few hundred neurotic mares.

"Glory was just... she was starting to talk to me. Opening up." I didn't feel like crying. I didn't feel angry. There was just this hole where she'd been that was now filled with a great unknown. "She told me about her teacher. And her ideas about what causes raiders. And... there was more." Priest just gave an understanding smile as he waited.

And P-21. I'd called him insane! I'd said he was a murderer for setting up the execution of the mine boss. He'd been mad. Angry. I'd hurt him. I'd hurt him, and I don't think I apologized. And then there were Sekashi and her child. "I've got to find them. I have to. What happened?" I asked as I stood, looking at him.

"The Crusaders found you by some train tracks to the north. You were alone with your belongings scattered. I noted your injuries, but I suspect the culprit was this." He tugged a ragged plastic baggy from his saddlebags with his mouth. A memory orb glowed softly within. I reached out with my

magic, but he tugged the bag back and muttered, "Don't!" around the mouthful. He dropped it at his hooves. "It's trapped."

"How do you *trap* a memory orb?"

"Carefully. When the war was at its peak, memories could no longer be left accessible to any unicorn that happened across them. Zebras had unicorn sympathizers. The Ministry of Morale, together with the Ministry of Peace, eventually devised methods of extracting and sealing dangerous or sensitive memories away. The process was so difficult that it was used only for the most critical memories, but with constant zebra infiltration and sabotage, the technique of locking memories became vital here. Too many secrets in this city." He nudged the orb with a hoof as he looked down at it. "It has a password: some thought, or idea, or name you need to be thinking of."

"And if you don't have the password?" I asked, looking at the orb like it was a bomb.

He shook his head and sighed. "Most of the time, nothing. But if you try to force contact, it can render you unconscious. Place you in an endless nightmare. Even kill you."

What the *fuck*? "Kill me? Are you serious? How can a memory kill me?"

"Your mind resides in your brain. Your brain keeps your heart beating. I've never encountered such an orb, but I've heard of them."

"Yeah. Okay. No more memories for me," I muttered, kicking the little bag away from me.

"Don't say that," he replied with a small frown, walking to it and returning it to me. He looked... sad. "Please, don't say that. Memories are more than experiences. They're lessons. They teach us things that others have gone through." He cocked his head. "Is there any sense in suffering through the past twice? Have you not learned something from an orb?"

I sighed and looked away. Would I have ever seen the stars with my own eyes? Those beautiful little gems in all that black? Would I know love if I'd never seen it breaking in another mare's heart? Or seen the courage and valor of ponies now long dead? "I guess..."

"Forewarned is forearmed," he said calmly. "Fortunately, I'm decent with a number of spells and I was able to disconnect you from the orb. I also took advantage of your unconsciousness to heal you with magic."

Wait? This was magic? "I've been slogging down magical healing potions right and left and I've never felt like this!" Well, that wasn't true. The regeneration talisman had done a dandy job on me. "How long have I been out? I feel like I've been sleeping for a week." Aside from the lingering soreness between my shoulders, I felt ready to hunt down my friends.

"A few hours. So you don't know about the Enervation?" he asked as his horn floated two healing potions out of his bags. One was a typical watery purple; the other looked as vivid as wet paint.

"That's one of those ten cap words I never picked up in the stable," I replied, and pointed a hoof at the bright purple vial. "What's that one? A super mega healing potion?" Maybe I could get it for when I found P-21.

He chuckled, "Comparatively, perhaps, but they're both the same kind of potion. The fainter potion is simply a week older."

"Wait... so what happened to it? That Enervation thingy?" I guessed, and felt pleased when he

nodded. Miracle of miracles, could I be learning?

“During the war there were countless projects and studies. All the strange energies and magics scarred the landscape, even before the bombs fell. There’s contamination deep within the very soil of Hoofington. For miles around the city, the Enervation saps the life and magic of any living thing. In some places there are Enervation fields strong enough to kill a pony. You won’t see a thing. You’ll simply start to die.” Seeing my horrified expression, he added, “Your best defense is to get away as quickly as possible.” Dying from bullets and raiders and monstrous vermin was one thing, but now I had to worry about keeling over from invisible magic?

“Can my PipBuck detect it? Is there an Enervation sensor on this thing?” I said as I waved it at him.

“No. But since the Enervation saps healing magic, keep an eye on your healing potions. If they go clear, that means the Enervation’s drained them enough to make them useless. If the potion starts turning other colors, gets cloudy, or starts to smell, run, and lose the potion. It’d only make you sick. And if you start bleeding from head to hoof, get away.”

“Why does *anypony* actually *live* here?” I asked, then glared at the towers of Hoofington. The blackened spires and scorched walls seemed to ask the same question. From the green light glowing from the depths of the city, it felt almost as if the broken towers had a special loathing of anypony within a hundred miles.

“Why do you think life is so tough and desperate here? Almost anypony who can leave the Hoof does. Those who can’t live in the safest pockets they can find. But there are also great opportunities to be had here. Weapons and armor. Lost technology. Mineral wealth. Secrets. Things worth risking lives for, apparently. Some ponies come thinking they’ll strike it big. Then they get a cut on the hoof, an infection, and wonder why their healing potions no longer work. The strong prey on the weak and the land dies a little more each day.” He bowed his head solemnly. “Celestia protects. Luna defends.”

Do they? I didn’t see it. I never saw it. In 99, Hymnal usually went on and on about how Celestia had appointed the Overmare, how we should have faith in the Overmare. That questioning the Overmare was like questioning the divine Princesses themselves. I’d seen exactly what came of that kind of blind loyalty.

“It’s just... ugh. I hate discovering one bad thing after the next. First it was raider disease. Then magical radiation poisoning. Now it’s trapped memory orbs and invisible zones of death. Hoofington needs an instruction guide for idiots like me. With big print and bright colorful pictures!” I stomped my hooves hard, and then noticed his smile. “What?”

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“Why didn’t I have this a week ago?” I muttered as I lay on a mattress on the floor of the post office; in front of me was an open copy of ‘The Wasteland Survival Guide: Hoofington Edition’. Dangers of scavenging! What’s that beeping noise? Robots and you. The who’s who of the Hoof. Information that would have come in so handy over the last few days lay right before my eyes. “This should be stapled outside every stable for any hornhead that goes racing out into the Wasteland!”

While I did want to track down P-21, Glory, and Sekashi, Priest had pointed out that my friends knew I was coming in this direction. Chapel being the only community near the rail line, it was a good bet that they’d come here if they could. If we were all wandering around looking for each other, we might never find one another. As I’d read the book I’d told him what I could; he’d proven a wonderful listener and conversationalist as I’d outlined my last few days to him. An inner voice, sounding very much like P-21, muttered that he was probably a foal-fondling cannibal who sacrificed ponies to his idols of Celestia

and Luna. It seemed impossible that the Wasteland would allow somepony nice to exist.

The Crusaders had proven to be quite curious about me. Why was I lying beside the tracks? Was I a super mutant raider bandit Wasteland walker who could shoot deathbeams from my glowing eyes? Where was I from? Sugar Apple Bombs or Sugar Carrot Cakes: which side was I on? Dolls or colts and robbers? Did I lose my momma too? More than twenty foals were at the post office, which had been made part rec room and part hotel. Toys scavenged or manufactured by the young ponies lay everywhere; it was a bit of a trick not to slip and bust a leg.

"Would you have taken the time to read it?" he asked with a chuckle. "As I recall, you had a horse of the apocalypse after you at the time. I don't think I'd stop and grab a book with Deus Ex after me."

I glanced at him curiously, "You know about Deus?"

"Most ponies know of 'Deus Ex Machina'. The name's zebra-speak for 'God of the Machine'. And yes, he gave it to himself. He's been around the Hoof..." The black unicorn frowned a moment in consideration before continuing, "for as long as I can remember. He's the Reaper's Reaper. The Raider God. Number two in the Arena behind Big Daddy Reaper."

I'd found the section about Big Daddy Reaper and the Arena. The old photograph of the Hoofington Sports Arena dominated most of the article.

Reapers: Your best friend or else.

You see that pony? Not the one foaming at the mouth, that's a raider. Not the one with the nice explosive collars, that's a slaver. Not the one taking all your stuff, that's a bandit. No, that pony. The pony so badass over-the-top amazing-looking that you are sure he's going to kill you with a glare? That's a Reaper.

Reapers have been in Hoofington since before there was a Wasteland. The stadium was home to the Hoofington Reapers, and that's where Big Daddy took the name from. What kind of ponies are Reapers? Well, before the bombs, the Hoofington Reapers hoofball team claimed the records for most consecutive injuries, fouls, and penalties in the E.H.L., and they were proud of it. That's not to say Reapers kill everypony on sight, but they are very good at it. The only ways to become a Reaper are to kill a Reaper in one-on-one combat or to win against dozens of wannabes at a tryout, so whatever Reaper you're meeting is probably more badass than the Reaper they replaced. That means they're almost certainly tougher than you.

In their odd way, Reapers are celebrities around Hoofington. Lots of ponies have a favorite like Deus, Rampage, or Psychoshy, and discussions of their various fights can usually be found across Hoofington. Reaper matches are one of the few forms of entertainment Hoofingtonites actually get to enjoy. So if you meet mister Reaper pony, be polite. Do what he asks. Pray that he's gentle. Because if you cross a Reaper, you have just invited an entire world of hurt on yourself.

I was about to ask if shooting a Reaper with ceiling-mounted artillery counted as 'crossing' when a light pink filly... no, make that colt... approached us. "Excuse me, Priestie, but there's pilgrims coming to the chapel." His cutie mark was making me thirsty.

Priest looked solemn at the news. "How many, Sparkle-Cola?"

"Three. None our age," the colt replied.

"Thank Celestia for small favors," he said as he rose to his hooves with a deep sigh. He smiled at

me. "Sorry. I really should see to them."

"Is anything the matter? Can I help?" I asked as I sat up.

His smile was tinged with sadness. "You just did by asking. But no. This is my burden to bear. You should go on reading. The more you know, the better prepared you are." He walked out, his head hanging slightly.

"Shouldn't he be glad to have pilgrims? I mean, that's a good thing, right?" I asked Sparkle-Cola, but the colt with the poofy soda-brown mane gave me the 'stable ponies ask stupid questions' look and returned to his friends. I sighed, looking down at the book. Quickly, I started to flip through the wrinkled pages, trying to find--there it was.

Chapel: A small community located on the Fillydelphia Turnpike outside the Core. Noted as a place for troubled ponies to find peace. Home of Hoofington's Crusaders, see page 56.

I flipped to the cover, looking at the author's name below the pony skull picture. "Thanks, Ditzzy Doo," I muttered sourly, then blinked. On the wall was a faded poster, intact only because of the glass pane covering it. A gray mare with a yellow, walleyed expression goggled at me with a stack of envelopes in her mouth. The caption beneath read 'Sign up with the Equestrian Mail Service: Ditzzy Doo needs your help!' I couldn't help but find the pegasus with bubbles on her butt as incredibly cute. It had to be a coincidence. Ponies didn't live for two centuries in the Wasteland. Not without becoming monsters. It was impossible.

I opened the book again and started looking through the early pages. There was a short section near the front on 'Other Famous Wasteland Locations' with a few paragraphs of text for each entry and the advice to get a non-Hoofington-edition copy of the Guide if you were planning to leave the city. Most of it I skimmed over, but the entry for Canterlot caught my eye.

Once the capital of Equestria, Canterlot and the surrounding area should now be avoided by everypony who isn't a Canterlot ghoul and doesn't have a really good reason to be there. The city wasn't hit by any balefire, but that's where the good news ends; the zebras detonated a megaspell inside the city that sent out a Pink Cloud laced with some really nasty magic. Princess Celestia and Princess Luna were in the city at the time and put an enormous magical bubble around the city to trap the Cloud inside, probably saving much of central Equestria from suffering the same fate as the capital. Sadly, and I'm sorry if you've just left a stable and haven't learned this yet, the Pink Cloud trapped and still building inside the bubble was enough to kill even them; while many of us believe that Celestia and Luna live on in another form, their bodies died with Canterlot. The ruins of the city are still filled with the Cloud to this day, as is the area under the city that was drenched by Cloud-infused water when the bubble failed, and both are filled with feral Canterlot ghouls. If you've never fought a Canterlot ghoul before, try to keep it that way; they're extremely hard to kill and very dangerous. If you really must visit the city, I'm afraid that, though the general Guide includes more information you need, there's no edition of the Guide specifically for the area; the ruins are still mostly unexplored. My advice to you is to find a non-feral Canterlot ghoul guide, but that's not likely to be easy.

I leaned back. I hadn't really expected the Princesses to be alive, of course; if they had been, they'd have been... doing something. Helping ponies. If they'd been alive, how could they have allowed the Wasteland to exist? On the other hoof, though, it was hard to wrap my head around them really being killed; I'd never been really into history or religion in 99, but still. They were goddesses. Of course, their physical deaths hadn't stopped people like Priest... I sat there for a few moments, staring into space. Eventually, though, I sat forward and started flipping through the book again. What had happened two centuries ago didn't really matter much now, I supposed, and however dead the Princesses really were, they certainly didn't seem to be able to help the Wasteland in any noticeable way.

I turned back to the section on 'Places to go, Places to avoid'. Megamart, been there. Stockyard, Ironmare (only if you had Ranger business), Elysium, Flank (only ponies eighteen and over), Hoofington U., the Arena (at your own risk), Meatlocker, and Paradise. I was a little amused to see Paradise listed as both a place to go and a place to avoid. Apparently, the Fluttershy Medical Center and the Rainbow Dash Skyport were 'safe' salvage places.

Most of the places to avoid had vague names and not much else. A few I knew: Pony Joe's (any Pony Joe's, apparently -- Raiders seemed drawn to them). Brimstone's Fall was there, too. I wondered if someday it'd pop over to the places to go side. I really hoped so. No Pony's Land. Boneyard had a high feral ghoull warning. If I'd read this long ago, would Scoodle still be alive? Because I would have believed a book more than her? There were other places, though, that were little more than a list of names to me. Boom Inc. Refinery, Black Pony Mountain, the Luna Space Center and Museum, the Hoofington Dams, and Robronco HQ, just to name a few.

What surprised me the most, though, was the section marked 'The Core'.

So, you want to go to the Core? Think you'll nip in, get some kind of super tech, get out, and be rolling in the caps? It's the city center, right? It's still standing. It's got to be a mother lode of wonders unimagined! It probably is.

Because every single living pony that's tried to go into the Core has died. Every single one. There are some places in Equestria you do not go. Canterlot. The Badlands. Splendid Valley. Do not go to these places. They are too toxic, too infested, or too radioactive to inhabit. The Core of Hoofington is different: it is all of the above plus a designed deathtrap. I know because I tried going there myself. I made it as far as the wall and I've only met one pony who can say the same. Automated energy turrets nearly vaporized me. Pegasus robot drones scrambled. If I hadn't gone for a swim, I'd have ended up a dusty ghoulie.

And for you ghouls who think radiation is another pony's problem, there're energies in that place that'll remind you of your death. I felt it sucking out... I don't know. My mind? My soul? Yes. THAT is how dangerous the Core is. So don't go. There are lots of other thrilling and exciting places in the Wasteland to explore, places that aren't guaranteed to kill you by simple proximity. Turn down the forbidden treasures and have a nice and happy life.

It was stupid, but for some reason, her warning made me want to go even more. I wondered if there was some way to neutralize the defenses. A sniper like that black unicorn I'd seen with Macintosh's Maruaders. Maybe Gun could be... ugh. What was wrong with me? The very magic of that place was deadly! There was just something so tempting about the word 'forbidden'. *Forbidden? Not to this little miss Blackjack.*

"Ugh. I'm being an idiot again," I groaned as I stood up and gave myself a good shake. "That's the problem with reading stuff. It puts unhealthy ideas in your head." I closed the guide, glancing again at the poster on the wall. "One dusty ghoulie... really."

I trotted over to the customer service desk, which doubled as the store for the Crusaders. "One Sugar Apple Bombs and a Sparkle-Cola, please," I said to the young filly.

"Thirty-five caps, lady," she said as she dug around behind the counter.

I blinked. "Um, don't you think that's a little expensive for some cereal and a soda?"

"Nope," she countered as she put them on the counter, and then covered them with her hooves.

"It's highway robbery! Twenty-five caps."

She looked at me flatly. "Oh, so I'm a robber huh? Forty caps."

"Forty! That's not how you haggle!"

"Go find yer sugar apples someplace else then," she said as she pulled them back behind the counter.

I took a deep breath and gave a polite smile. "Hun, it's just two little things. I'm Security, I gotta save money to buy bullets and guns and things to take out the bad ponies," I said with a grin.

Her eyes got big. Her smile got wide. "You got the money ta buy guns and stuff? Seventy-five!"

I muttered about how the little extortion artist should intern for Bottlecap as the filly put the goods back on the counter. I reached back with my magic for my caps... reached back... I looked back and remembered that all my stuff was hidden out on some rail line or something. I looked back at the yellow filly with a wide smile. "Put it on my tab?" My growling stomach added 'please?'

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Forget Bottlecap, that filly should study under Usury. She had a heart of stacked caps. I'd at least gotten her to agree to spread the word to the other Crusaders to keep Glory, P-21, or Sekashi from following me till I returned. She also attempted to sell me the location of my stuff for fifty caps, even after I pointed out that I didn't have money with me. This didn't bother her in the slightest: I'd owe her when I got back.

Of course, as soon as she told me, even though I had no idea where the shed she talked about was, there was instantly a little toggle on my PipBuck telling me where to go. With no roads, I figured I'd climb up a low hill and get the lay of the land. I also turned on DJ Pon3; with some luck, I might hear something about my friends. DJ seemed to have a thing for heroines. I imaged he didn't get out much.

Atop the hill to the north, I looked back through the still-falling drizzle at the little community beside the turnpike. Just past the post office, along the road to Hoofington, I saw what had to be Chapel's chapel. The building was set back behind a low ridge, so I couldn't make out more than the steeple and long roof. It didn't have quite the same level of neglect as the rest of the buildings. It actually looked as if somepony had painted it in the last decade.

Play.

Fucking STOP, brain. I am sick of it! Still, I felt my pulse spike and my head throb.

I had to take a few deep breaths as I looked over at the Core of Hoofington. That Steel Ranger acolyte had called the city a fortress. Now I realized exactly what she meant. Hoofington hadn't just been the R&D heart of Equestria's war effort, it had also been, in many ways, the primary target. The city had been built to withstand any attack. Gray walls of concrete rose above the slithering moat of the Hoofington River. The towering buildings behind that wall had no windows facing out. They'd forsaken a view of the world outside in return for greater security. I couldn't imagine an uglier city. I honestly couldn't imagine any ponies actually wanting to live there.

Hills rose to the south of Hoofington, but they were dwarfed by a massive, nearly-sheer-sided piece of granite rising from the southern end of the Core island; Mount Hoof. Atop the giant rock was another of those huge, tapering concrete towers, and from the cliff stretched a wall of concrete half as tall as the miniature mountain. The great curved wall stretched across the mouth of a wide valley to meet another, smaller tower built into the steep hillside on the other side of the valley, and from the base of the

wall flowed the branch of the Hoofington River that flowed along the western shore of the Core island. I could make out an immense erratically-spotlit relief of a unicorn... No... it had wings too... It had to be an image of one of the Princesses carved in the concrete. Given the pockmarks the dam had received, I couldn't guess which Princess it was supposed to be. One of the Hoofington dams, I supposed, but my PipBuck apparently wasn't close enough to pluck its name out of the ether. The lights still glowed atop the dam, atop that curtain wall surrounding the Core, and on the ugly pillar-like buildings. If you overlooked the green glow of radiation and the cracks and leaning towers, you might almost imagine ponies still living in that damned city.

I looked away; I wasn't getting any closer to my stuff by standing on this hill. It was getting dark, but with my eyes that didn't mean much. I pretty much navigated by PipBuck, anyway, keeping the little blinking icon straight ahead of me to the north. What I didn't expect was for my PipBuck to chirp with a new location marker. Beyond the dead trees and thorny gray bushes rose a single large square building. Four round pillars were wrapped with desiccated vines, and even with my mutant night sight I couldn't make out the letters over the door. Fortunately, my PipBuck supplied the location: Hoofington Museum of Natural History.

I had told the Crusaders I'd be going straight to my stuff and back, but honestly, walking alone in just my coat didn't sit well with me. Besides, I still had a ten-thousand-cap goal to attain. If there was something useful within, maybe I should see if I could find it. The front doors were reinforced, and from the scorch marks it looked as if somepony had tried to blast their way in. Well, so much for that idea.

I picked my way around the corner, saw a clear path north past the building, and turned my mind back to retrieving my stuff. As I passed the next corner, though, I happened to glance at the back wall of the building. There was a concrete loading dock in the back, the remains of a wagon full of decaying boxes still sitting there partially unloaded (or loaded? I couldn't tell). Apart from that, rusty tin cans and scrap metal were all that remained on the concrete pad. And bones, of course. It wasn't the Wasteland without bones. I walked up to the loading dock door, where another unicorn skeleton huddled against the metal. There was a tiny cardboard box in its hoof. I lifted it and gave it a shake, looking at the two slightly rusted bobby pins.

I looked at the scratched-up lock. P-21 had explained the procedure of picking a lock to me; he'd even demonstrated once or twice. I didn't have a screwdriver, but maybe magic would do. I smiled as I recalled his calm, serious voice. "It's half feeling and half listening. You find the right angle, tap it against the pins just so, and twist." I'd gone through five of his bobby pins before he'd taken over and opened the medical box. Now I just had two.

Half feeling. Half listening. I tapped and scraped, listening to the tiny ticks of the pins inside the lock. My horn glowed as I rotated the lock, then felt it jam. A moment later the bobby pin snapped in two. I sighed, glaring at the lock. P-21 made this look so easy... I realized more and more how much I depended on him. I needed my friends. I moved the pin into a slightly shallower angle, and instead of twisting all at once, I stopped the instant I felt the lock struggle. Twist the pin a little more, rotate... and... I stared in amazement as the lock clicked.

"Hope for me after all," I said as I slipped inside. "Though, given that I'm breaking and entering, or trespassing, I wonder if I'll have to bust myself," I muttered, and then I paused. In a glance back out across the dark lot at the weeds and sickly trees, I thought I saw... something. Was it... no. That was crazy. I glanced through my E.F.S.... yellow bar? I slowly took a step forward, then another. My amber eyes pierced the darkness to make out a vaguely pony-shaped object. A horn... wings...

"No way..." I whispered. Then, with a flash, it disappeared.

I sat there for the longest time, just wondering what it was I'd seen... because I knew I couldn't have just seen Princess Luna.

Could I? I thumped my temples and closed my eyes. No, it wasn't possible. They couldn't still be around, and if they were, they wouldn't be playing peekaboo with a security mare out for a midnight stroll. They'd be fixing things... I sighed, looking at where it had vanished. "Just... don't think about it, Blackjack."

Suiting the action to the word and putting it out of my mind, I slipped into the storeroom in the back of the museum. There were tons of boxes, but nothing that looked as if I could really count it as valuable. Though... I looked closer. Yes, bullet holes. What were bullet holes doing in a closed-up museum? I couldn't smell any cordite, so I guessed these weren't recent additions. So what was with all the red bars on my E.F.S.?

One of the skeletons wore worker's coveralls. I carefully removed the bones and wiggled into the clothing. Pockets. Pockets were good. Guns would be better. Few things were better than guns. Oh! Healing potions. And Sugar Apple Bombs. Personally I doubted I'd find any of them here. After all, what did they keep in museums besides crates and crates of boring?

More bones. Bullet casings. Small caliber automatics; small machine guns? Old, though, and covered with dust. I checked the bones for signs of bullet impacts. Yes, somepony had shot these workers a long time back. Great. Security arriving two hundred years after a multiple murder.

Speaking of murder, it looked like Softheart had finally caught her mare. 'M.o.M. victorious! Four-year murder spree comes to an end!' was the headline of a paper beside one of the bodies.

The Ministry of Morale reports that the notorious murderer known as the Angel of Death has been apprehended by M.o.M. officers. The Angel of Death is believed responsible for over twenty foal slayings over the last four years, with many cases unaccounted for. While her identity has not been released, Ministry officials have declared that "she's an evil wicked no good very baaaaaad pony, and we're going to make sure that she can't do it any more!"

Huh... who would have thought that the Ministry of Morale had cops? I thought they only threw parties.

The success came at a terrible price, however, as Officer Softheart was critically injured in the arrest. Ministry of Peace officials refuse to disclose her condition. The Angel's first victim was--

Suddenly, I noticed one red bar moving back and forth much faster than the others. I straightened, wondering what it could be. Feral zombie children out for an outing? Killer security robots? A two-century-old mummy glad to finally have somepony to eat?! Bring it on!

Then a particularly large bug scurried into view, waving its antennae at me. "Ew," I said flatly, feeling slightly disappointed as I looked at the large bug and stamped my hoof hard. It gave a satisfying crunch. I was not going to angst or panic over squishing bugs.

I found the break room and rummaged through things a little. Some pre-war bits earned me a Sunrise Sarsaparilla from the vending machine. I missed the carrot goodness of Sparkle-Cola. And really, what was a little radiation? I tried my horn at picking the lock on a simple medical kit. Success on the lock, but the healing potions within were a pale lilac. Not good. Then I really scored: a half-empty bottle of Wild Pegasus bourbon in a locker. "Somepony's been naughty," I said as I swirled the bottle before my eyes. The smart thing would have been to save it till later, but fortunately I was not a smart pony. I proceeded further into the display section of the museum with a warm glow in my gut.

Moving into the next room, I emerged into a large central hall and foyer. More bones. More bullet holes and shell casings. What the hay happened here? As I walked, the emergency lights began

to flicker. There was a crackle of static in the air, and then music began to fade slowly in and out as the audio system struggled to play some sort of light and airy melody. The skeleton of a dragon posed in the entrance rotunda menaced patrons; I wasn't impressed. As I touched the front doors, there was a buzz overhead and an automated voice said, "I am sorry -bzzzt- patron, the museum is under temporary lockdown. Please contact -bzzzt- in security."

"Heh. I *am* Security," I said as I looked at the open doors on the sides of the atrium, slightly put out that I hadn't yet found anything particularly useful or valuable. 'Rocks of Equestria'. Pass. "Come on. Where is the 'Guns of Equestria' exhibit? 'Batons of the Ages'?" I wondered aloud as I stepped down the side hall and into an exhibit. The emergency lighting flickered to life as I stepped closer.

"The Hoofington river valley was first colonized -bzzzzt- ago by nomadic zebra tribes. Although their exact numbers are unknown, they eventually established some of the oldest communities in -bzzzt- bzzzt-. However, due to mysterious circumstances, the Hoof -bzzt kraak- was abandoned by all inhabitants. Equinologists hypothesize that a volcanic event may have led to a catastrophic -krakle bzzzt- primitive tribal communities. Other experts suspect a spread of unknown -zzzzzt- causing a population crash."

I looked at the smashed display cases. These hadn't been looted, but the contents hadn't aged well. Torn woven baskets and smashed clay jars lay in abundance all over the floor. There were pictures on the wall that were either faded or eaten by mildew. I saw one diorama of a 'Potential Ancient Zebra Settlement' still protected inside its case. A tiny magical volcano puffed wispy rings of smoke as it loomed over the zebra settlement at its base. I picked up a zebra spear, only to have it crumble in my magic's grip; it was just a wooden replica. There was a picture of a zebra with red stripes being pelted with rocks and sticks with a caption above: 'Red stripes, the mark of shame.'

Moving into the next room, I was struck by the image of a white unicorn wearing leather barding and a metal helmet and levitating a brass spyglass before his face. The entire dramatic effect was spoiled by the statue lying on its side next to the base it should have been mounted on. The lights flickered to life. "The first Equestrian explorers to reach the Hoofington -bzzzzzzzt- ley were an expedition led by Prince Blueblood the Third. According to his highly questionable memoirs, he faced cannibalistic zebra pigmies, a swarm of highly territorial -kzzzt- griffins, and one ursa major. Despite his ardent claims, no proof has ever been found to substantiate -bzzt-. Upon his return to Canterlot, -kraaapop- denied his claim to the entire region, giving him a small part of the upper river valley as reward for his discovery."

I didn't really listen to the playback. I had seen a sword, but not just any sword. A sword twenty percent cooler than any sword I could ever have imagined, a sword made of white silver metal and decorated with etched unicorns. One look at it hanging in its case and I knew that my self-defense concerns would soon be dealt with. I hammered the case with my hooves. I levitated the heaviest thing I could manage and smashed it over and over. I even tried to pick the lock, but it was so complicated that I couldn't even get the bobby pin in to try! Figures.

There were four pictures that I found interesting. The display was titled, 'How the Hoofington Volcano destroyed the zebras'. The first showed a large volcano with a large zebra city at its base. The second showed half the mountain blowing out over the zebra city. The third had a large crater sitting at the base of the granite dome, the depression full of lava. The last showed the filled crater cooled, with the river flowing in two branches around it. Ash coated everything in sight. It looked like the Wasteland.

Stepping into the next room, I froze at the sight of the alicorn. She stared down at me in complete contempt, horn leveled to strike me down. Then, as the lights rose, my heartbeat slowed as I saw it was just another statue. "The tiny hamlet of Hoofington played a small role in Nightmare Moon's first appearance. Local lore suggests that, prior to making her challenge for supremacy over Equestria, Nightmare Moon was spotted many times -bzzzzzzzt-. While Manehattan academics strongly dispute these claims, sufficient eye witness -skrrrr klick-."

I really didn't see anything else interesting in this section. Certainly nothing valuable. I trotted into the next section. The lights flickered several times. This room had more pictures on the walls and a small diorama in the middle; the diorama depicted the large knob of granite I'd seen outside, the town at its base, and some of the surrounding area. There were several smaller communities on either side of the forked river. "Over time, Hoofington developed from a rural -bzzzt- into an academic and cultural center for much of Equestria. While many prestigious -fzzzt- continue to operate out of Canterlot, Hoofington specialized in higher learning and technological advancement. Numerous doctors, scientists, alchemists, and other academics flocked -zzzzz- peace of Hoofington." Lots of pictures of big brick buildings with white pillars out front. Yawn. Lots of eggheads. Got it.

The next room certainly wasn't boring! It was made to look like it was on fire. The crackling music died, replaced by the sound of flaming timber. "The Burning of Hoofington will often be remembered as the night that sealed the city on the road to total war. Following the unprecedented slaughter of innocent students at Littlehorn, the zebras wasted no time in committing another atrocity with a surprise attack on the city. Though it had never before been targeted in the wider campaign, zebra commandos penetrated deep within Equestria to bring the war to Hoofington. With incendiary explosives, the zebras ignited a firestorm that destroyed the city's heart; an estimated nine hundred innocent civilians lost their lives trying to flee from the flames that consumed the island."

Suddenly, there was a pop and then a whirring noise from overhead; I jumped back, expecting a killer turret or something. Instead, a projector started to shine an image on a blank square of wall. The image was so grainy that I couldn't make much out. Burned buildings to the sides, a pony crowd looking up at some sort of platform, and somepony addressing them. Then a buck's staticky, crackling voice started to speak.

"Today, zebrakind has revealed its true face to all of Equestria, not just in the killing of the helpless and innocent foals of Littlehorn, but now against unarmed pony civilians deep inside Equestria. They have attacked our places of learning, of discovery, of creation. And I will tell you why: fear. Fear of what our accomplishments will mean. Fear of a future where their superstitions are left behind. Fear of what we are capable of. Well, I tell you now, they are right to be afraid!

"I call on all of Hoofington, all of Equestria, and all of the free-thinking intellects of the world, to come to Hoofington and make the nightmare of the zebras a reality. To build a city devoted to the victory of all ponykind. To dedicate ourselves to unlocking the secrets of the stars themselves and to making our enemies pay for their crimes! I call to the generosity of our wealthy to help fund this reconstruction; for all that you have given, your reward is the advancement of our people. I call upon the working ponies to lend their sweat and muscle to make this city a reality. I call upon the intellectuals to give the genius and vision needed to craft a city of knowledge and light.

"And I call upon the zebras to look on in terror and hatred. You thought to kill us through murder and secrecy. Never again! Hoofington will rise, and you will break your hooves and teeth against its foundations before we fall again! From this city, we shall return the pain and blood that you visited upon us a thousand fold! And when the future arrives, you will come to Hoofington in awe and wonder and shame! For Equestria, for Princess Luna, for all of Ponykind, Hoofington rises!"

The crowd went wild, breaking into mass stomping, and cheers of 'Hoofington Rises!' built and grew on each other. The cheers blended together into one massive voice, chanting in unison, 'Hoofington Rises! Hoofington Rises!' The projector flickered just as I thought I was about to make out the buck's face. The speakers spat out some garblygook at me, then gave a static whine and went silent.

Oh damn. There was something severely wrong with me... I wanted to learn what happened next! After a speech like that, I could understand how the survivors of an entire city would rally together. Hell, this girl would give her all for the Hoof! Still, the effect was spoiled somewhat by the reality of knowing the zebras had, in fact, won against the Hoof. Somehow they'd gotten a balefire megaspell into the center and blown the entire city apart. So much for 'Hoofington Rises'.

In the next section I paid more attention to the faded and decayed pictures. One showed four parallel rail lines with a train on each and building materials stacked high on every train cart. Apparently ten percent of Fillydelphia's output went into the first two years of reconstruction; I supposed that was a lot. Another picture showed cranes and teams of pegasi lifting slabs of stone and concrete into place. One picture had robots working alongside earth ponies as they dug trenches and underground tunnels beneath the city. A small corner talked about zebra ruins excavated in the reconstruction. 'The Manehattan Archaeological Society protested the destruction of zebra artifacts. Reconstruction office's response: 'Hoofington Rises.'

The display that caught my eye the most was on the six ministries. There was a large color picture that had browned with age, but I could make out six mares standing around a table, pointing at papers and designs while dozens of ponies looked on in concern and anticipation. The speakers crackled and popped before saying, "Following the kingdom's commitment to the reconstruction effort, it was decided that each of the new ministries would have a -bzzzt- presence in the city to interact with each other and help coordinate their efforts to protect Equestria. To facilitate this goal the Office of -kzzzt- was founded in -bzzzt, crackle, zzzzt- with the Princess."

Office of what? I looked around and spotted a tiny poster showing a gray ring. 'Office of Interministry Affairs. Join today.' Somepony needed to fire their poster designer.

A radroach's squeal was followed by a wet pop. I looked down... I hadn't stepped on one.

I froze and slowly panned my gaze across the museum. There were a whole lot more red bars in here!

"Idiot," somepony whispered as my ears twitched.

"I hate them damned bugs," a pony whispered back, right around the corner from the sound of it.

"You'll hate it even more if she bucks your head off. You lot get upstairs. The rest of you watch the back door. This is our best chance to get her alive if you don't screw it up!"

Well, Celestia, shall I just kneel down now and spread my back legs wide for the fucking you've delivered unto me? I felt strangely... detached. No guns. No real weapons. No armor to speak of. Not much healing, and the museum was just full of ponies very intent on delivering me to Deus. So why was I smiling?

Two ponies came around the corner and just froze. There was a moment when their grins showed this to be the best night of the lives. I hoped they enjoyed that moment as I walked slowly towards them. My eyes locked with theirs as I turned my head and smiled sweetly. "Hey boys."

"Sweet Celestia's crotch, she's *drunk*," whispered the one in a dual-rifle battle saddle, goggling in astonishment. His companion grinned around the pistol gripped in his mouth. I winced at the rust I could see flaking the weapons. I approached, step by step, hips swinging as I took a pull off the bottle.

"Mmmm, just a bit," I said as I closed the distance between us. Suddenly concern began to strike them as I continued to stare.

"You... you stay back," the buck with the varmint rifles warned with a gulp.

"Aww... scared of a girl?" I teased as I felt my cheeks go all rosy. "One sec. Still got a little left," I said critically as I swirled the bottle one more time and then poured the rest into my mouth.

"Now... you come along quietly... no fuss... nice and easy," the blue battle-saddled buck said as he swallowed. "You ain't got a gun, so no point in making this hard."

"True. I don't have a gun," I said as I stood right before him, my lips curled in a happy little smile. "And you do make a good point," I purred as I stroked my hoof over his chest, making his eyelid twitch. "But there's just one problem with that surrendering stuff," I sighed with the bottle swaying beside me. "Like you said... I'm just a little bit drunk."

The bottle shattered as it smashed into the side of pistol boy's face, and I telekinetically drove every single shard as deep as I could, dragging the remains across his features and down across his throat while my mouth opened wide and bit the bridle of the other pony's battle saddle and I hooked my forehooves around the rifles. Then my horn glowed again as I lifted the dropped pistol. The blue buck opened his mouth wide to yell for help and received a mouthful of gun. I spat out his bridle. "And *now* I got a gun." And I sent the back of his head across the room.

"You hear that?" somepony muttered. There were sounds of things getting noisy in some of the other display rooms. "Hey! Joss? Haystack? You there?"

I rounded the corner back into the atrium and spotted a mare with a levitated sawed-off just ten feet away from my doorway. Three more stood further away. "Nope," I replied as I sent the remainder of the clip into her face. Releasing the pistol, I swept the double-barreled shotgun into my magical grip as I walked around the platform holding the posed dragon skeleton. Unfortunately, the other three further into the room were a bit outside blast range. While whiskey mathematics might have made two shells equal three dead ponies, their return gunfire definitely skewed my inebriated calculations. The bullets did nothing to the dragon bones, but the wires holding them together were another story; they started to ping and snap as the bones swayed. The three ponies advanced, firing wildly as I hunkered down, the dragon bones above creaking ominously.

I started to hum to myself as I looked at the skeleton and the two pipes holding its base. Twelve gauge shots took care of those. I shoved the skeleton backwards and the wires snapped apart, bones cascading down over the three. The gaping skull landed right on one's head, the impact snapping the widespread jaws shut. Before I knew it, I found myself singing a tune I'd heard the Pecos playing.

*"Oh they shoulda just sent the whiskey
When they saw the trouble coming,
Oh they shoulda just sent the whiskey!"
Then they wouldn't be a-running.
Times are tough and things are bad
So why be dumb and risky?
When you see the trouble come,
Ya better just send the whiskey!"*

One pony picked herself out of the jumbled bones and tried to bring her assault carbines to bear on me. I jumped onto the platform, she sprayed fire where I'd just stood, and I kicked two hooffuls of bones in her face. The flinch was all I needed as I jumped from the platform and onto her back, wrapping my hooves around her neck and smashing the butt of the sawed-off shotgun against her skull again and again. Eventually, something in her noggin snapped or crunched or something; she went down in a twitching heap. Unfortunately, the third one pulled himself free and grabbed one of the bones in his teeth, charging me as I continued to shout the song.

*"Now, I hear wine is mighty fine
It makes you feel so frisky!
But trouble's come, so get 'er done
And don't forget the whiskey!"*

He had a nice long bone in his mouth. I had pieces of a shotgun. This needed to be fixed. I grabbed a bone too, a much smaller one. He swung, but right now I wasn't feeling too much pain from the impact as I rose up on my hind legs, hooked my hooves around the bone in his jaws, and pushed down as hard as I could. His eyes stared wide, neck straining back, as I brought my bone across his throat. My bone happened to be a six-inch-long dragon claw. The ponies upstairs were rushing down, shouting. I could run for cover. Instead, I raced up the stairs to meet them, yelling the song.

*"Oh you shoulda just sent the whiskey,
When ya heard that trouble's coming
Oh you shoulda just sent the whiskey
Then all this woulda been nothing!"*

I rammed my shoulder into the lead buck, shoving hard and pinning him between me and the boys behind him. My dragon claw plunged deep into his chest over and over again as he tried to duck his head enough to blow my butt off with his mouthheld revolver. Unfortunately, I wasn't going to finish him off in time, so I stopped pushing and ducked aside. The shoving bucks behind sent him tumbling down the stairs in a heap. The nearest of his two friends lurched beside me. Our eyes met, and I was the one grinning as I ducked down underneath him.

I see Hoofton, I see Prance... My dragon claw swept before me, sending a horrified shriek echoing into the air; I then heaved my body upward, flipping him over the railing and down into the mess of bones below. Darn, he was still squirming, clutching his groin and howling in pain as I grinned at the remaining buck right above me.

He stood for one second and then jumped over the rail after his friend. Even with his newly-busted legs, he tried to stagger for the rear exit. He was unable to do this, as, in addition to his injured legs, that exit was now blocked by more ponies surging into the room below me. "Take her alive, you idiots! She's worth more alive!" Somepony wasn't up on the plot.

*"Now vodka grows from winter snows
That make you cold and shivery!
But that icy bite just don't feel right
So best send me a whiskey!"*

Fearless Leader calling for my capture looked up just in time to break my fall. Unfortunately, while things under my hooves snapped nicely, the fall sent *me* staggering too. A unicorn swung her shotgun around towards my head. I responded by sending the dragon claw as deep into the barrel as I could. She fired, and the claw whizzed back inches from my head as the back of her shotgun exploded into her face. My telekinesis took her ruined shotgun, pulled it from her grip, and spun it around, smashing in the side of her head.

Unfortunately, that still left two fully-grown bucks ramming into me with such force that I was slammed upright against the display case. "Cut her fucking throat! Hurry!" one yelled.

"But we got her!" the other laughed. I grinned into the face of the smart pony. Then I looked at his friend with the nice knife that would have done wonders if he'd used it. My horn glowed, plucking the weapon deftly from its sheath and stabbing it into his neck over and over again.

*"Oh you shoulda just sent the whiskey
When you knew that I was coming!
Oh you shoulda just sent the whiskey
Then you wouldn't get a thumping!"*

"Freak!" he shouted as he leapt back, biting his battle saddle bit and bringing his rifles to bear.

I queued S.A.T.S. and my horn flared brightly as three telekinetic bullets slammed into his face. He staggered, blind as he fired wildly where I'd stood.

*"Times are rough and things are bad
But don't you get sad and weepy!
When you know that I'm a coming
Just send me your whiskey!"*

I finished the song, cutting his throat with the Bowie knife, feeling my heart pounding as I limped around the floor, stepping past the buck squirming and curled up, protecting his precious bits (or what was left of them, anyway). I searched the bodies, and sweet Celestia suckle me, I found a second bottle of Wild Pegasus. Levitating it, I walked to where Busted Legs and Nicked Jewels squirmed in terror. I took a drink and then sat beside them. "Sorry about that," I said as I felt that wonderful burn all the way down. "Still got 'em?" I asked the buck clutching himself with his hooves.

The pair looked at me in horror.

"Damn. That was low of me. Heat of the moment and all that," I said as I floated the bottle to Busted Legs. He took a gulp as he shook. "Now, I know we all need caps really bad," I said, trying to be the voice of reason. I gave Nicked Jewels two drinks. "But I need to live too. There's a whole heap of ponies that deserve my kind of trouble, and I'd rather you two not get it." I passed Nicked Jewels the few healing potions I had. "So I'd appreciate it if you could pass on to everypony you know that there's safer ways to get their caps and keep themselves intact." I offered them both another drink.

"Yes ma'am," Busted Legs muttered. Nicked Jewels just whimpered. I don't think he wanted to check and see how bad his injury was.

"Now sit tight a second," I said as I went through to make sure I had all the guns, bullets, knives, ammunition, and dragon claw I could manage, as well as poking through the upstairs. I found a holotape recording and a terminal, but the latter defied me... and then locked me out. Damn it. Terminals needed to be easier. I did find a medical brace in the security office, and helped splint one of Busted Legs's busted legs. And I gave another healing potion to the other male.

"Well, take care of yourselves," I said, rising with a groan. I hummed as I took what I'd salvaged from the bounty hunters and strolled on towards the exit. The whole world was swinging as I sung to myself and swayed in return.

"She's a fucking monster drunk," I heard Busted Legs say to the other.

"Shut the fuck up! Do you want her to come *back*?"

* * *

"Sweet Celestia, kill me now. Give me a bullet," I groaned as I sprawled on my face on the mattress. Having both successfully scavenged the looted museum (and the unexpected attackers) and retrieved my belongings, I should have been quite pleased with myself. However, I had returned to Chapel in quite the state of amusing inebriation. The Crusaders, having discovered my alcoholic

melodies the night before, now proceeded to take vicious advantage of my hangover by jabbering to each other at an earsplitting level.

"One bullet, three caps," the filly behind the counter declared firmly. "Otherwise use yer own. Priestie might put you out of yer pain fer free, but I ain't running a charity here." That young lady was going to run the Finders someday.

Priest strolled over with an amused look on his face. "Ah, the price we pay for the gift of Celestia's merriment."

"Heal me. Please heal me," I whimpered.

"I did, when you returned, singing," he replied with a soft chuckle. "What you're feeling now is your body teaching you that too much alcohol is bad."

"My body fucking sucks," I groaned, curling up and clutching my throbbing skull.

"I'd disagree," he replied calmly, and I opened one eye to peek up at him. Did he just make a pass at me? Was that even allowed? "Regardless, I'm glad you spared those two. Your mercy speaks better of you than your wrath."

"Priest, I think I gelded one of them," I muttered as I sat up. He looked at the counter and asked for a bottle of water. To my chagrin she levitated it to him without once demanding payment. Her scowl to me told me to not expect the same treatment.

"Well, small mercy is better than no mercy," he said with a soft cough before rising. "I'd suggest getting some air outside as well. Take a walk in the rain. Clear your head."

"How are your pilgrims?" I asked, looking up at him, trying to ignore the headache pounding on my skull. Evidently those telekinetic bullet spells packed a wallop to my noggin, which didn't help things much. I couldn't even levitate the bottle of water to my lips with my current focus.

"Leaving soon," he said softly, sadly. I guess he wanted more time with them.

"Sorry, I guess you don't get many out this way," I said as I sat up, held the bottle with my hooves and took a drink. Water... no rads... no buzz... sure it kept you alive, but where was the great taste?

"On the contrary. I get all too many, it seems," he said cryptically before leaving the post office.

"Arrrgh... more elusive bucks. Why can't they just say what's bugging them? Why is that so--owwww..." I whimpered as my voice caught up with my hangover. "Stupid hangover. Stupid brain."

"Ten caps for the water," the salesfilly said sharply from behind the counter.

"What? You *gave* it to him." I pointed towards the door with my hoof.

"But *you're* drinking it." She took a deep breath. "Ten caps please!" she yelled at the top of her shrill little lungs.

That little salesfilly was going to own the Wasteland someday. Every single cap would be hers. It was just a matter of time.

I hated to admit it, but the air did me some good. The rain tasted metallic on my lips; it was probably unhealthy, but it also helped soothe my throbbing brain. Clearly, museums and other places of

learning were unhealthy to ponies like me. I trotted up the ridge towards the chapel and then froze.

That's a lot of headstones. Row upon row of marble knobs stuck out of the yellowed grass. I couldn't even begin to guess how many. Thousands? Tens of thousands? Row after row stretched back as far as the eye could see. I couldn't even guess where the graveyard ended, with all the long grass. This wasn't from the bomb. This was from ten years of Hoofington being right in the zebras' crosshairs. I hesitated for a moment, then slowly walked across the field. A name. A race. A date. A cutie mark engraving. The shortest of epitaphs on the small marble headstones: loving father, caring mother, best damn bastard, surest friend.

I'd never seen something like this before. Not the dead. I'd seen so many pony bones that it seemed like they just blended into the background. Only when a name was attached did I care. These dead were cared for. In Stable 99, when you died it was as if you simply never were. Death had been an annoyance because you were then obligated to breed and train your replacement. The dead were taken to the machines and recycled, along with all the byproducts of the stable. Recycled. Reprocessed. Mixed with vat-grown algae, yeast, and fungus and made into chips. It wasn't cannibalism; there was nothing equine about your meal. We didn't eat Leg of Duct Tape. It was just the way things were. You lived in Stable 99 till you didn't any more, and didn't think about it.

I read the epitaphs as I passed for as long as I could. Eventually, I thought I'd rather have stared at the sky than imagine long passed ponies as I walked through the soggy grass.

The chapel had also seen better days. It'd clearly been vandalized several times, but somepony had fixed it more times than torn it down. Even slapped a coat of whitewash on the boards. I felt like an intruder as I quietly walked up the steps. There were two rows of threadbare pillows on the floor for the congregation and a balcony along the back wall. Most of the windows were boarded up, but somepony had taken the time and effort to restore one window with a design made of colored glass tiles. It depicted Celestia raising the sun, perfectly matching Priest's cutie mark. I turned and looked; over the door, a similar window showed a calm and certain Luna. Something about the image was comforting.

Painted on the walls were pictures of six mares: the Ministry Mares I'd seen in the museum. Time had done what it could to destroy the images, but somepony had painstakingly repaired them. I gazed at the image of Fluttershy, feeling the urge to hug somepony. Rainbow Dash looked like somepony I'd want to drink with. Applejack... reminded me of Mom. Pinkie Pie seemed... off. Rarity... yeah. Somehow a pony looking that good was simply wrong to me. And Twilight? I found myself thinking of P-21.

Priest was talking quietly to the three pilgrims; they looked horrid. Emaciated. Tired. One of them had a yellowing of her eyes and a twitch that convinced me she was on her way to becoming a raider, if Glory was right. Still, she wasn't trying to bite Priest's hoof as he touched her brow gently.

A few other ponies sat scattered on the pillows, looking more like 'locals'. A gray mare reading a ratty magazine about the Princesses. A pensive looking filly gazing at that stained glass image of Celestia. A large unicorn mare dressed head to hoof in black mourner's garb. She whispered prayers softly to herself as she rocked back and forth on her pillow.

The three pilgrims stepped back away from Priest. They wept, yet they also appeared oddly happy. "You can return if you want. There's no need to hurry," Priest told them in his collected voice. He was crying too... but why? He said he had plenty of pilgrims stopping by. I supposed each one was precious to him.

"No. It's time. Thank you. Celestia protects," the twitchy mare said quietly.

"And Luna defends," Priest said in a tone of finality, and the pilgrims began slowly walking out.

"You know," I said with a small smile. "Last night I was almost certain I saw Princess Luna. It was on my E.F.S. and everything. Crazy, huh?" I held the grin that he didn't share.

"No. You didn't see the Princess. She's gone now." He spoke with an iron certainty as he looked up at the picture of Luna. Weird; I expected him to be more... excited.

"Are you all right?" I asked softly once they'd left.

"No, but it's the price I pay for my virtue. Sometimes ponies just need a sympathetic ear and a kind word. I'd hoped to convince one to stay a few more days, but they arrived together and they'll depart together." Clearly he wasn't happy about that, but it seemed pretty intrusive, even for me.

"Your virtue?" I asked him with a questioning cant of my head. "That's just... being nice, right?"

"I suppose some might think of it that way," he said as he looked at the paintings on the wall. "Forgive me if I sound a little preachy; it comes with the job." He took a deep breath. "According to what I believe, all ponies possess a virtue. It's an aspect of themselves that is their most pure and honest self. It is what makes a pony good, an integrity that nopony can take from you."

I swallowed, feeling oddly guilty. "Ah... well that's easy. My virtue is getting drunk and causing huge disasters." I tried to smile, but for some reason my levity died as soon as the words left me. I mocked something clearly important to him. Strangely, it felt important to me as well. "I'm sorry."

He gave me a patient smile. "Ponies who know their virtue can keep a sense of self. Have you met any ponies who seem... together? Even with the horrors that we all face?"

Bottlecap, Keystone, Bonesaw, and even Dusty Trails stood out in my mind. "I have," I replied.

"Ponies who know their virtue and embrace it can last longer in the face of adversity. They have inner strength to support their flesh and blood." He bowed his head. "Unfortunately, virtue is not enough. It needs something more."

"More?" Great, now I really felt lacking.

"Friendship. A virtue alone will inevitably erode. The Wasteland will poison it, corrupt it into a dark reflection of itself. A virtue corrupted is a horrible thing," he said solemnly as he turned to look at me. "Friendships that support and bolster the virtues of the participants empower them against any challenge. Friends united in a common cause are stronger than anything the Wasteland can throw at them."

I remembered how I'd felt when I'd discovered I was alone. "And what about friendships of ponies who don't know their virtue?"

"They may remain together, but there will always be strain and struggle. I can't think of any friends lasting for long without knowing themselves. How can you be friends with a stranger?" he said with a soft shrug.

I could think of many things to describe myself, but none of them were particularly virtuous. I really doubted stupidity counted. "What's your virtue?" I asked softly.

"Only Celestia truly knows my virtue," he said quietly, but from the look on his face it would be all he'd answer. Maybe you didn't have to know it. Maybe you could just live it.

I looked back at the door behind me. "I hope your pilgrims will be safe on their trip home."

"They're not going home," he replied softly. "They're continuing their pilgrimage."

Now I frowned. "You mean to other chapels?"

"To Celestia."

I stared at him a moment, my eyes widening as they saw the sadness in his expression.

"How could you?" I whispered and then turned and raced out the door. I looked up the road, hoping to see some sign of them. That I was wrong. Instead, I looked towards Hoofington. There they were, just starting across the bridge towards the city.

"Wait!" I yelled, running as fast as I could towards the trio. My heart thumped in my chest as busted asphalt cracked up under my hooves. My head be damned, I had to warn them. To stop them! "Wait! Don't go that way! Stop!" I screamed as my hooves clattered on the bridge.

The twitchy filly with the yellowing eyes stopped to look back at me. The other two just kept walking.

"Please! Sweet Celestia, don't!" I yelled.

She was still smiling as the red beams lanced out from the top of the wall and swept through their bodies. Red energy swirled, consuming every inch of her being and turning it to ash. Celestia damn them, her smile was the last thing to disappear.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk added: Tough hide (Level 2) - The Brutal experiences of the Equestrian Wasteland have toughened you. You gain +3 Damage Threshold for each level of this perk you take.

Skill note: Lockpicking (25)

(Huge thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, Hinds for making it as awesome as possible, and to all my readers who leave lots of nummy feedback and comments.)