

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 12: Denial

"Obviously, that's why I zipped my mouth closed, then locked it with a key, then dug a hole, then buried the key, then built a house on top of the hole where I buried the key, then moved into the house on top of the hole."

I sat down on the cracked asphalt, looking at where three ponies had stood. The rain increased, pouring out great wet drops that washed away any remains left on the rusting span. They were just gone, and even though I hadn't known them, I somehow missed them. How could I miss complete strangers?

"I'm sorry," Priest said over the rain hissing off the river.

"Why didn't you stop them?" I asked as I slowly turned to glare at him over my shoulder.

He didn't look angry. Just sad. Somehow, that made me even more furious. "Because it's not my place to stop them."

"Not your place?" I whirled, glaring into his eyes. "You're a... a... whatever you are! How could it not be your place to stop them?" No mare in Stable 99 would ever kill herself and deprive the stable of her abilities. Every life was needed! Important!

"What should I have done, Blackjack? Locked them up? Drugged them?" No anger. Why wasn't he angry about this? How dare he be so calm about letting three ponies walk to their death! "I talked to them, just as I talked to you. I listened. I prayed. But in the end the choice was theirs."

"You just let them kill themselves because it was a choice?" I felt my horn tingle. I was about to make a choice of my own.

"Yes. We get so few choices in the Wasteland, Blackjack. Most of them are too horrible to contemplate. Do I starve or do I let my children starve? Do I die or do I kill to survive? Do I do the wrong thing and live, or not?" Calm. "I try to talk each and every pony out of it. Try to convince them to choose to live. I tell them that they'll have a home in Chapel if they want, or I'll help them get to Stockyard or Guttenville. But the choice to live has to be theirs. Otherwise, I am no different than the Wasteland. I won't take away the choice to die painlessly of their own volition. And if they do make that choice, how can I deny them a little peace?"

My pulse thudded in my ears as I breathed low and fast. "So if I were to walk down this bridge right now, you wouldn't try to stop me?" I asked, my mane itching like crazy.

"No. I would not," he replied calmly. "I would argue, politely, that you have far more to live for than to die for. You have your friends out there, looking for you. You have questions for which you lack answers. You have enemies that wish you to die. And I suspect that Celestia and Luna would be disappointed if you took that walk." He was so rational and calm about it. "You've never thought about that choice?"

“No! I...” But I faltered as I glared at him. Hadn't I? Lying on a mattress dying of radiation poisoning, in the hall after I was sure Glory had died following me into a deathtrap... they'd both been moments when I'd have happily died to escape the guilt. If I'd been standing here now after killing Scoodle, would I be arguing against taking that walk? I wanted to be angry. I didn't want to think about this! “What about foals? Do you let them walk too?”

From the look of pain on his face, I knew the answer. “My only rule is that children must go last. The Crusaders exist for that reason: to give them a family to live with once their own is gone. But yes, some make the final walk too. And Celestia damn me, I let them.” He turned and slowly started to walk back towards the village. I watched him go, hating him for being capable of doing that. P-21 was right: there was no way the Wasteland would allow a nice buck to exist. It poisoned everything, and if you couldn't see the poison right away, you just weren't looking hard enough.

Don't think about it. That's all there was to it. Don't think about it and get through the day. Somepony had written something on the asphalt long ago in flaking white paint. Carefully I approached, looking down. The rain splashed down over the carefully written letters: ‘Mercy’.

When I finally got my butt off that bridge and back into town, I spotted a line of ponies funneling into the chapel. I didn't want to go in after them. I'd have much rather just returned to the post office and slept off what remained of my hangover. I didn't want to know what they were gathering for; it was probably just to discuss who was going to kill themselves next, or worse.

It wasn't as if I'd never felt that suicidal impulse, but at the times I had there were ponies who stopped me. They'd talked me down, and I'd listened. I'd like to think that if I hadn't, they would have done something to save me from myself. Yet as I stood there on the road, looking at the chapel and at Priest standing beside the door, I found myself questioning that. If I hadn't gotten off that mattress, would Watcher have tried to force me? If I had tried to blow my own head off after thinking Glory was dead, would P-21 have fought me?

I don't know what drew me towards that white building. I know it wasn't something spiritual; I didn't have a single spiritual bone in my body. Curiosity, I suppose. If this was some morbid gathering of death, then I'd leave. That would be that. I stood at the door, looking in at a few of the occupied pillows. I smiled a little at the sight of Medley sitting alongside the little capmonger and a few other unicorns. I hoped the other four were here too, but I couldn't spot them.

Priest looked at the gathered, his eyes lingering on me just long enough for me to give an awkward smile in return. “Today we give voice to our hope for the future: that it may bring us happiness. We pray for our faith that the sun and moon remain just beyond the clouds. We stand together, shoulder to shoulder, together, for the day when we may be reunited with our Princesses once again. Celestia protects. Luna defends.”

Everypony bowed their heads. Well, everypony except me. Call me a cynic, but to me barding and a shotgun protected and defended much more reliably than belief. Then a tiny mote of light appeared at the end of Priest's horn. For a moment, I wondered just what was to happen. From the tiny little glow of magic emerged a soft melody. I'd never heard an instrument that could make music like that, like a hundred deep flutes playing in unison. I froze as the simple tune played once. A pause.

And then everypony except me began to sing. Motes of light glowed from the horns of the unicorns, and flutes, violins, banjos, a drum, an accordion, and a harmonica joined in, Priest's great piping music pulling them into a blend that almost knocked me to the floor. Thirty young unicorns on a balcony united in song, blending together into a tone of harmony. From below, the adults raised their voices as well, supporting the melody in soft voices, rough voices, quiet voices, and deep voices. All raised their voices to Celestia and Luna in hope and reverence.

One rainy night I'd discovered Sweetie Belle. I would always be a fan of Sapphire Shores. I'd heard music that could inspire, amuse, even invigorate. This was as if I were hearing all that music for the very first time. This was music that saved. It saved the adults from that final leg of their pilgrimage across the bridge. It saved foals from being consumed by the Wasteland. Everypony belonged to it, except me. I don't think I could have made a tune or sung a note right then. I was too busy crying.

I'd never before experienced music so honest and good that it hurt. I ached as it swept me along, and yet it was a good hurt. It felt as if something dark was being drawn out of my chest and set aside. It wasn't perfect. I could hear off notes. That didn't matter. Ponies weren't perfect. But for just a few minutes, there was beauty in Equestria.

I'd finally had to leave. Maybe someday I could stay and listen, but right then I couldn't stand it any longer. For the first time since I could remember, I felt... good. Did Big Macintosh and his Maripony feel this way? Had everypony felt this way before things had gone wrong? I didn't fool myself, I knew that there wasn't any greater magic to it. When they finished singing, the Wasteland would still be the Wasteland. Hoofington still loomed ominously to the northeast. The skies were still dark with clouds.

But at least it'd stopped raining.

* * *

I'd done another sweep of the surrounding area, more to compose myself than to look for trouble. I'd come across some nasty radigators that'd gotten a bit too close for my taste, but my shotgun still took them out before they could do any damage. I'd tried my hoof at opening a locked ammo box I found, and instead of opening it I just lost my second to last bobby pin; not confident in my ability to do it with the last one but also unwilling to lose something potentially useful, I decided to just lug the heavy thing around until I found another pin to try with. I'd also listened to the holotape I'd found in the museum:

"I am recording this message for legal purposes. Until I receive a formal request from the mares of both the Ministry of Wartime Technology AND the Ministry of Arcane Sciences, in writing, I will not turn over our mineralogical collection to your office. I do not care how many times you appeal to 'the greater war effort', Miss Ebony. The museum is not a part of the ministries and the history of our collection began long before the war; the samples are not under your jurisdiction. Many pieces are unique. So please, end all requests for the collection, or I shall be forced to appeal to higher powers. Curator Buttercup," a mare said quite primly.

That hadn't been good enough for somepony. The museum had been attacked, and given that it was still locked down when I'd come across it, I could only imagine the attack had been on the day the bombs fe--... wait. There were a lot of bullets. That meant machinegun fire. I hadn't found any machineguns among the bones, though. *That* meant that the attackers had gotten out of the museum after they'd finished, but since the other bodies had just been left there... Whoever had attacked the

museum must have done so with just enough time to get in and get out before the bombs fell; any more, and the lockdown would have ended so that the bodies could be cleared away, but any less and the attackers would have been caught too. That was some freaky luck. Come to think of it, how had the attackers managed to get out while the museum was locked down? It didn't really matter; I doubted that the particulars of a two-hundred-year-old shooting at a museum would still be important.

I had quite a pleasant surprise when I got back: one of my friends had arrived while I was out. Okay, I wasn't quite sure that I had any right to call her that, but now that I was on my own I'd take even a friendly person as a friend. Sekashi sat in the middle of the post office, an enraptured audience in front of her as she told a tale with far more grace and amusement than I had at my 'interrogation' at the hooves of the Crusaders. Majina sat nearby, apparently unsure how to handle the attention from the several foals who were admiring her stripes.

"... and so that is how the first zebra got her stripes," Sekashi said with a broad smile, clearly in her element. When she spotted me her eyes brightened; returning her attention to the Crusaders, she said, "Ah, sweet Security has arrived. Please, let me speak with her, and when I return I will tell you why ponies come in so many colors." That offer seemed to mollify the Crusaders a bit, and they let her rise and walk to me. She gave my cheek a nuzzle before leading me outside.

"Sekashi, I am so glad to see you. Where are P-21 and Glory? What..." Then she turned around and gave me a wry smile. "Oh, right. You can't hear me."

"Sadly not. But Majina's hearing may recover. She is young and I have hope," she said as she walked to one of the houses and sat beneath the porch roof. The clouds overhead rumbled softly, reminding me that a lack of rain seemed to be the exception rather than the rule in Hoofington and prompting me to join her under cover. "Now, I know you have many questions about your friends."

"What happened? Where're P-21 and Glory?" I said, exaggerating my speech just a touch.

"Ah, that is a funny story. We were travelling along the rails towards the city. Your whining was quite impressive, whines to make the most savage hellhound cringe in terror. You did not like having nothing to do, and so it was suggested that you look into the other orb. This you did with some difficulty, scowling and swearing and insisting it was broken. Then there was a flash and you were out. It was quite a relief to the others.

"Soon we were not pulling up hills but fighting to go down them safely. We encountered a brown unicorn on the tracks. I set the brake, glad for a rest. Your friend seemed to know him. They talked. They argued. I could only see the brown one's words. He asked your friend to give you up. He asked your friend why he would travel with a mare from your stable. He was... not kind."

"What did he say?" I asked, finding myself whispering. I had to repeat myself so she could see the words formed by my lips.

"He asked if you still used your friend as reproductive equipment. Your friend was outraged, that I could see, but I fear he was hurt as well. The brown one asked your friend if he enjoyed being used. If you commanded him. If you cared at all about him. He asked your friend if you had apologized. I fear your friend was listening to his poisoned words." I swallowed. I hadn't apologized; instead, I'd insulted him at Brimstone's Fall and hadn't been able to make it right.

"After that, they tried to take you; numerous hunters waiting in the woods struck. The brown one used a spell, tying your blue friend head to hoof in straps and rope. They charged from all sides. Your winged friend did all she could alone, but she is not as ferocious a fighter as you. Then, from the sky came more pegasi. The fight was brutal, terrible, and fierce. I did not see how we could prevail. So Majina and I detached ourselves from the cart and released the brake. Then we fled, letting the cart roll away more swiftly than I had anticipated."

"What happened then? What happened to P-21 and Glory?"

"With their prize lost, the brown one took your blue friend south. The pegasi took your winged friend north. I could see both their struggles. I'm sorry, but I left them, hoping to find you. I did not imagine the downhill track would carry you so very far." She frowned and rubbed her chin with her hoof, saying, "Perhaps that story needs a bit more work to make it truly funny."

"I fell off at some point. I should be glad I didn't break my neck, I suppose." Especially given how weak I had been. I frowned, imagining the mine flatbeds rolling down the hill, going faster and faster towards tunnels filled with death and worse. How could I have survived falling off at those speeds? Was it really just luck? "Will you come with me?"

She started at my question and gave me a sad smile. "No, brave pony. I am not a fighter, or scholar, or healer. I am a teller of stories. I would not be able to help. Worse, I would fear for my daughter and you would fear for me. If you are to rescue your friends, you cannot worry about a silly storyteller and her child." She gave me a warm smile. "I will stay here for a time. I am sure these children might appreciate my tales, and there may be fresh stories to learn here."

"So close to Hoofington?" I asked in concern. I was astonished to see an almost... cheeky smile.

"Ah yes. Let me see the Wicked City," she said as she walked to the edge of the porch and looked out. "My, it certainly fits all the tales told. I can almost feel it sucking my soul and feeding on my blood." She glanced over at me and my stunned expression, and then laughed. "I am a storyteller. I can tell the threads of truth from the yarns of fancy."

"You're not afraid," I said with a smile.

"It is a city. Stone and steel and machines and dark magics. Ugly, certainly. Dangerous, unquestionably. Yet, should I fear it for that? Should I act as if it is going to gobble me whole from here?" She snorted as she looked at it for another long moment. "Someday I would like to know its story, though I fear it will be quite a trick to make it happy."

"I just thought... you being a zebra..."

She arched a brow. "Oh ho. And being a zebra I what?"

"Well... I'd heard zebras thought Hoofington was cursed."

"Do you fear the city, pony?" Still she was smiling, and I admit I hadn't thought of it.

"A little... I guess. It's dangerous, but so is a gun or grenade." I cocked my head. "So what do you think about the Hoof if you're not scared? Angry?" Lancer certainly seemed that sort.

"No. I am sad. I pity such loss and pain. So much folly. But it is not a bad feeling, because it encourages me to learn from others. So I travel this place, seeking stories to share. It is odd, isn't it?" I could honestly think of worse things to do with one's life.

"It's the Wasteland," I said with a smile and shrug. "You should talk to Priest. He's got lots of stories to share. And I think he'll like talking with a zebra like you; he needs to smile more."

"Oh... oh ho!" Sekashi's eyes lit up as her lips curled in a wide grin. "A he is he? Perhaps you would better suited to make him smile, then? A foal I have already."

"I-- I don't have time for that!"

"Not now, but later... Or is there another buck you have your heart on? Perhaps some blue pony?" She arched a brow. This was ridiculous! I needed to get my stuff and get going, not answer questions about my... that! Besides I... he was... ugh... I didn't want to think about it.

"P-21 is my friend. He's smart and focused and..." Wraps explosive collars on ponies and gives me the button to push. And helps keep me together when I'm falling apart. And I need him and he needs me. "Ugh... things were just easier back in the stable. You put yourself on a male's breeding queue and waited for your turn. Easy." But now it was Sekashi who looked shocked.

"And these ponies... they could refuse?" There was a look in her eyes I didn't like.

Refuse? "Why would a male refuse? It's what they're for. I mean, all bucks like sex," I said with a small frown. Sekashi looked disappointed in me, even disturbed.

"And if a buck refused?"

"Well... they just don't. They don't want to refuse." Why didn't she get that? It was simple. It was just the way things were; there was nothing to think about. Males wanted sex because it felt good. It was what they were for. How they were wired. "Look, as interesting as your suggestion is, I need to get going. The sooner I find P-21 and Glory the better. Then I can get my caps and find out what's hiding out on my PipBuck."

Sekashi just looked at me in the strangest way. She smiled but looked like she wanted to cry. "I hope you find P-21 and Glory soon, Blackjack. And when you do, ask him about his life. And if he tells you, then please accept my apology."

And with that she turned and immediately walked away. I stared after her. Her apology? For what? "I tried asking him about what he was feeling and he told me he wanted to shoot me," I called after her as I rose to my hooves, but of course she didn't hear. I'd tried to understand him. I had. I'd tried to be nice and then he pulled that stunt with the collars. He'd hissed about the need for justice, as if the mine boss had wronged him or something. The way he'd looked at me...

I couldn't think about that now. I had to get going. I stepped off the porch and started across the

road to the post office where I'd left my things, but stopped when I saw Priest quietly walking up the road from the chapel. Our eyes met. He had the lightest golden eyes. He smiled wistfully. "You're leaving?"

"I ran into one of my companions. She told me what happened and where to start looking," I said awkwardly. "I... sorry. For what I said on the bridge. I know that you care. I just can't think of doing nothing. Of just letting them die."

"I know you can't, Blackjack. You act. You do. But sometimes the best action is no action," he said quietly. "I know you can't agree." He was right, I couldn't. "Good luck with finding your friends."

"Thanks. You should talk to Sekashi. Can't miss her with her stripes," I said with a smile and added with emphasis, "She's not here as a pilgrim." That definitely lifted his spirits.

"Celestia protect you and Luna defend you," he said quietly as he bowed his head towards me.

"Take care," I muttered awkwardly. I wanted to... ugh, what did I want? Apologize? Feel that calm he radiated? Jump him? Well... that last one certainly; it'd been a week since anything had gotten betwixt my nethers. Instead I just smiled like a moron, turned, and walked away. Damn it, why couldn't I be a smart pony and figure this shit out?! I was missing something, but I just couldn't tell what.

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With my gear stowed, I was on my way back to the rail line; from what Sekashi had said, I could reach it more quickly than I'd thought by simply going straight west overland. I'd traded most of the weapons to the cap fiend (I'd gotten her name, but I simply refused to call her 'Charity'.) for whatever fresh medical supplies she possessed, but I'd kept one of the carbines, now repaired to some state of decency, for some longer-ranged ordinance. I had my automatic pistol for close-in work, and I'd fixed up my drum-fed assault shotgun with whatever parts I could get from the museum's salvage. I'd cleaned out my bags, amazed at the mass of junk within.

I turned on DJ Pon3 as I walked, keeping up a brisk pace that ate the distance under my hooves. For once, I wasn't shot up, my back injury was only a distant ache, and I felt fairly good. Sekashi's suggestion slithered around in the back of my head, but I just shut that door, locked it, dropped the key into the toilet, and flushed it away. Then, for safety, I welded the door shut and stacked some barrels of magical radioactive waste in front of it. I didn't need to think about that now.

I was keeping my eyes up and looking for any threats on my E.F.S. Bloatsprites. A radhog. For once my passage was relatively danger-free. I kept the carbine out to get some practice with a longer-ranged weapon. Shotguns and automatics were what I'd trained with, but the practice of sighting and leading was a new one to me. There was nothing more embarrassing than taking six shots to kill one bloatsprite.

Why did P-21 want to kill me? My mind dug the key out of the waste processor and turned it over and over. Don't think about it. Safer and easier. He'd been mad because I'd been the one to find him. 'If you give me a gun, I might shoot you,' his voice whispered from behind the door. I'd just spoiled whatever plan he'd had for his own escape.

The mare singing her indifference to the world trailed off her last glorious notes and DJ Pon3

gave a long, soft sigh. “Ah, there’s nothing like Sapphire Shores to make a pony strut their stuff. That was ‘Fearless’, and for me it brings to mind some interesting things I’ve heard coming from out east. Now, I’m sure you remember Security’s bold declaration against the slavers operating from Paradise. Well, Paradise and Reaper Deus teamed up to lay a record bounty on Security. Sadly, ponies hither and yon have got into a bit of a frenzy for the elusive mare around the Hoofington region.

“Now you’d think forcing a change in management at the Brimstone’s Fall jewel mine would convince some ponies to come to their senses about hunting a mare who is working for the freedom of everypony. But no! Some have still taken it upon themselves to give her some grief. Well, I have a special recording from two of these would-be bounty hunters about their run-in with Miss Security. Let’s play the tape.”

There was a burst of static. Then Busted Legs’s trembling voice stammered, “There... there were eleven of us... we spotted her alone... she was unarmed... unarmored... we had her cornered in the museum. She busted necks, smashed in heads, broke my legs...” I heard a snuffling in the recording. “She got our guns and just... just... blew us to pieces. And she was drunk. Drunk! And singing like a demon mare in heat!”

A mare then asked, “What happened to *you*, sir?”

There was a snuffle and stammer, and then Nicked Jewels wailed, “She fuckin’ gelded me!”

DJ Pon3 coughed, then chuckled, “There you have it. You bucks might be happy to risk your lives for the bounty, but are you prepared to risk *that*? And Security, when you’re done fixing the slavers in Paradise, how about a recording or two?”

I winced, feeling a little guilty as the next song wound up. I hadn’t really wanted to cut him *there*. In fact, I hadn’t been completely sure I’d done that until now, thanks to the hangover and all. Well, any deterrent was a welcome deterrent, right? I levitated out a box of Caramel’s Corn Crispies and shook it into my open mouth. Sweet and crunchy good--

I tripped and landed flat on my face. That I tripped wasn’t special; it could happen to anypony.

That I tripped over a fresh corpse: only *my* luck could be *that* bad.

The poor mare hadn’t just been killed. Whatever had done it had torn massive rents in her sides, cleaving right through her ribcage and spilling her organs across the field. I felt my pulse start to pound and backed away, clenching my eyes and fighting to slow my breathing. I could feel the incision in my gut being snapped open. Then I felt one of my rear hooves land in something.

Oh please don’t tell me I stepped in what I think I stepped in.

I glanced back to see the hoof lodged in the splayed chest cavity of an earth pony buck. The gore on my hoof was still lukewarm. I fought to keep the corn in my stomach as I wiped the bloody smears off the end of my leg. Carefully I looked around, working to keep my breathing slow and level. It was half a dozen ponies, all of them armed with rifles; from the ratty clothes they wore, though, I doubted that fighting was their main occupation. The dead bushes had concealed them in death.

I looked in the direction from which I'd been walking to this little copse of trees and bushes. They'd have had a nice shot, and could I have taken them out if hit by surprise from a distance, especially considering that they had cover? Something had gotten them first, and it hadn't just killed these poor bastards. They were dismembered and their bodies crushed in, every weapon smashed in two. The only things intact were their ammunition, their caps, and two burlap bags containing some meager foodstuffs and bottles of rainwater.

Something had just done me a favor, and I didn't like it. I didn't like it at all.

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Reaching the rail line, I picked up the pace a little. Running for more than short sprints wasn't something I was very used to, but right now I had plenty of incentive to try. The slaughtered ponies in that camp reminded me that I still had a price on my head. I noticed how much of the grade behind me was downhill; I could only imagine how I'd fallen off the cart in my crippled state without dying. If my luck was that good, I shouldn't have gotten shot in the first place.

My thoughts went back to my... helper. I didn't like somepony helping me all sneaky like, but I had to admit it was better than shooting me in the back. On the other hoof, though, I *really* didn't care for their methods. At all. Anypony that tore other ponies to pieces wasn't exactly what I'd call an ally. The idea of anypony who could even *do* that didn't sit well with me. Still, at the moment I had other problems that sent me ducking down.

Crouching, in my amber vision I could see the turned-over mine flatcar. I could also see a camp made beside it. There was a crude barricade built around the area, and a campfire made my mutant night vision flare and fight with my normal sight. There were four yellow bars and a number of red bars inside. I frowned, rubbing my muzzle with my hoof. Slavers? Hunters? It couldn't be a coincidence that they were right at the flipped cart, could it? I could make out the four ponies, weapons pointed outward. Waiting.

"Great," I sighed as I floated out my carbine and focused down the barrel. Definitely not my weapon of choice. I saw the little twitches as the amber and red bars moved. Just pull the trigger and make your life easier, Blackjack. I kept the sights lined up perfectly. Pull the trigger. Pull... the... trigger...

"I really wouldn't have minded if Celestia gave me a few more brains," I said as I stood. "This is gonna get me shot." I kept the assault carbine up and advanced towards the camp, saying loudly and cheerfully, "I'd really love to avoid a wholesale slaughter, so if you folk would keep things cool I'd be much obliged!" I added the biggest, widest... possibly psychoest grin I could.

No shots, not that I minded not getting shot at. It was refreshing, actually. It was also driving my mane crazy. The fires turned the ponies into silhouettes. No replies. No warnings. Threats? Just red and yellow bars. I'm not a sneaky pony. Oh, I try. You'd think moving quietly would be a simple thing. Just don't step on anything noisy! Usually, though, there just seemed to be something noisy that I somehow missed. So the fact I reached the low barricade of desiccated tree limbs without getting shot gave me just a touch of confidence... until I got a good look at the inside.

There was a good explanation for why these ponies weren't shooting at me: they were all tied up!

Their rifles had to be the flimsiest varmint rifles I'd ever seen, and were lashed to their hooves. On each pony's back was a sack that jerked and hissed with insect fury: radroaches. In the middle was a large metal box with a terminal on it.

Suddenly, floodlights illuminated the barricade from all sides and a ring of red bars appeared around me. The terminal flickered and flashed to life, and a mare spoke out in a staticky tone of glee. "I have you now, Security! You have fallen into the brilliant trap of Virgo Zodiac, seventh daughter of the Zodiac family!" I looked at the five bound ponies and then out into the glare of the floodlights. "Your capture will earn me an impressive fortune for my research. Surrender in the name of arcane science!"

"Oh, really? And what kind of research are you doing?" I shouted, not sure if she could see or hear me through the terminal. I pulled off the bags with the radroaches and yanked out the dragon claw. A few dead bugs later and the four hostages relaxed a bit.

There was a stunned silence. "Oh! You mean... you really want to know? I'm trying to unlock the secrets of PipBuck manufacturing! They truly are a marvel of ancient magical technology. I've been able to repair one or two, but the arcane matrices are so complex and difficult that components are dreadfully expensive!"

"Uhuh. Gotta say you got a good notion there. I'd have been dead long ago if it weren't for mine," I said, then pulled the head of the closest hostage to me and whispered, "Don't run just yet." He swallowed, staring into my amber-glowing eyes and nodding. I sliced his gag and then his bonds, moving to the next. "Well, I gotta say I'm pretty embarrassed at getting caught at all. You must be the smartest of... what was it again? The Zodiac family?"

"Yes! The Zodiac family is the greatest family of bounty hunters in all of Equestria. Granted, I haven't gotten far from Hoofington... experiments and all... but I am sure this is going to cement my fame with my siblings," she said in a rush as I cut one pony after the next free.

"So... Virgo. Care to explain this trap to me? I've got to admit that I'm not the smartest pony. I'm guessing there's something in the box?" I said loudly as I hunkered down. I could make out floating spiderbots, similar to Dean Hardy at Roosehoof Academy, surrounding the camp.

"Ah, yes. It took me days of planning to come up with it and hours to set it all up. See, I thought I'd lure you in with the hostages. Actually, I thought you'd just shoot them and go running in to loot the bodies. That's what most ponies do... I wonder why. Anyway! Inside that box is a deadly neurotoxin specially devised to knock you unconscious in a matter of seconds... maybe minutes. It shouldn't be more than that. There are landmines activated to keep you put until then. If you try get close enough to deactivate one, the others will get you. And finally, I have my sentry drones ready to finish you off if you somehow get past the mines," she concluded, then broke into hysterical laughter, then broke into a fit of coughing and wheezing.

I looked at the monitor. If somepony was going to watch my butt, why couldn't they have dealt with this piece of work? I looked around at the others and mouthed 'any ideas?' but there were only blank looks in return. Well, time for my standby. It'd probably get us all dead. "Yup. Just two little questions, if you don't mind. One, are those robots the kind that'll just swarm in and blast a pony to pieces if you shoot at them?"

"Yes, and they're on a hair trigger. So I warn you now, don't you dare think of trying to shoot them, or they'll all be on top of you! Besides, do you have any idea how expensive sentry robots are? Really. They charge a hoof and a leg over at Scrapyard," she said in a wounded voice, then whined, "You'd think they could give me a discount for being a loyal buyer, but nooo. Everypony's just in it for the caps. Never knowledge!"

"Yeah, the world's unfair like that. One last question: why do you call it deadly neurotoxin if it's supposed to put us to sleep?" I asked as I rose up and sighted the closest hovering spiderbot. A stunned silence answered me. "You know, why don't you think on that a bit?" And I took the shot.

"Better wiped than striped!", "Die you zebra commie!", "For the herd of the free and the home of the hay!" the robots shouted as they all advanced in unison. Pink bolts of disintegration energy lanced out from their spider legs.

"No! No! What are you doing?" There was a click and a hiss as a green gas started to seep from the metal box. However, the container wasn't exactly what I'd call heavy, nor was it anchored to anything. I kicked the terminal off the ground and into the air, sending it bouncing and rolling toward the minefield.

"Get down!" I shouted... a bit redundantly, really, given that they *already* had their heads down to avoid the flashing bolts of disintegrating magic. Then a mine exploded with a resounding 'crak'. This set off the three closest to it. And those set off the next, and the next, and the next... Within a second the entire minefield had detonated in a ring of shrapnel destruction, the sentry bots lying in sparking heaps. The floodlights fell over, their magical bulbs breaking and cutting off the harsh glare.

Something hot whooshed past less than an inch from my eyes, smashing my glasses off and singeing my mane. I blinked, then, in the thunderous silence (if you didn't count the ringing in my ears) left in the wake of the world exploding, carefully felt around with a hoof to be sure that my face was still attached; somehow, it was. I looked at the four prisoners, who were now staring at my amber gaze in terror, and grinned sheepishly. "Wow, close, huh?" The four looked as if they wished it'd been just a touch closer.

"My... my trap... you... oh, this is so not fair!" a voice--Virgo, I realized, but quieter and without the static--whined. "Daddy's gonna be so mad at me!"

"Oh... I don't think you have to worry about that," I said as I aimed the rifle at the sole remaining red bar on my E.F.S. I sighted right at the pink unicorn pony's skull... and then sighed. I swapped targets. "Now, you and your family leave me alone," I told her just before I fired.

"Yipe!" she shrieked as she rose, reaching back to grab her rump as my bullet grazed it. The red turned to yellow as she ran off, calling faintly, "You're gonna be in so much trouble when I tell my daddy about this!"

I let out a sigh as I flopped back behind the barricade. "Wow... that was dumb of me... wandering into a trap like that," I said, grinning at the other four ponies. The mares and bucks just stared back in amazement. "Um... are you okay?"

"Y... yeah," a pale purple mare with a pitchfork cutie mark stammered. "Um... I suppose we

should thank you? Yeah. Thank you.”

“Sure.” I thought about asking them if they had any caps they could spare for my saving hostages fund, but figured that that would be a little bit crude. “Hey, look. I’m looking for two ponies. One was taken north by pegasi and the other south by a brown unicorn with lots of dots under his cutie mark. You see either of them?”

They looked at one another and tan buck muttered, “Well, my brother said he thinks there’s them Enclave ponies holed up in the Miramare Air Station up north.”

“Thanks.” It was the best lead I had, and once I had Glory’s brains helping me I’d be able to avoid traps like this and save some time. “Well, you four take care of yourselves, alright?” I said. They nodded slowly and I hopped over the barricade to start on my way north.

“So, are we gonna jump her now? She’s getting away,” one of the bucks asked dully just as I left earshot. The sound of hooves against his butt was answer enough.

* * *

It’d been a great night! So far, I hadn’t had to kill anypony, and while falling into Virgo Zodiac’s trap had been annoying, I had to admit it’d turned out more or less for the best. I was on my way to find one of my friends. The rain had even decided to let things dry out a little. All in all, things were looking up! I *had* been walking for hours, though, and my legs were starting to feel a bit wobbly. Time for a snack and a nap.

Of course, finding the right place wasn’t easy, but eventually I happened across a ring of trailers at an old campsite. The first trailer I tried didn’t have much in it save for a mattress, but that was good enough for me. I sank down onto the soft (compared to the ground, at least) surface with a sigh. A few hours’ rest and I should be ready to go. Just needed to nod off. Relax... relaxing... any second now... come on. Re...lax...

Fuck.

I was tired, but I just couldn’t get my brain to turn off. I kept thinking about the day: that horrible bridge, the wonderful singing and music, that terrible scene of slaughter, and that curious encounter with Virgo. Maybe I should have put the bullet in her head, but she’d been interesting at least. She’d nearly gotten me. If I hadn’t been lucky, she would have.

The night was just full of dripping noises and silence. I lay on my stomach with a sigh, pulled my PipBuck in front of me, and started fiddling with it. I hated being bored. It was right up there with waiting. I brought up EC-1101 in the hope that it’d gotten bored too and decided to save me trouble and caps by decoding itself. Of course, no such luck. Then I noticed the file directly above EC-1101.

‘PipBuck #214: P-21 audio files’. I slowly moved the cursor up one space and just stared at the highlighted entry. Maybe what I needed was a little bit of... *entertainment* to get me to sleep. It wasn’t like it was invasive or anything. I knew what P-21 had done in the stable, and I wouldn’t see another mare from there again. So what was wrong with listening to some bumping flanks while I gave myself a good rubbing? The naughty idea took root, and I gave a nicker as I opened the audio files. Most of the

mares' names were acronyms anyway.

OM... no thanks. I'd heard enough of that little sociopath to last me a lifetime. DT's were cute, but I needed something new. GR? If that was who I thought it was, no thank you. RIV? Two weeks ago I'd have killed for this file. MID? I guessed that over ten years P-21 had really gotten around.

...BJ?

I blinked at the three entries. I only knew one mare in 99 who'd use those two letters: me. When had I ever been around P-21 to be recorded? Granted, I'd been around a lot of males. When you were born in 99, they gave you a sterility implant until your mother passed away. Then the implant was removed, and simple habitual breeding would usually result in a foal. Implant back in. Simple. You did your job and enjoyed what fun you could. If a mare died without producing a replacement (usually because of an accident... or, well, suicide *did* happen occasionally, but the perpetrators were even more thoroughly forgotten than the normal 99 dead), then the Overmare would allow an extra mare to be bred.

I swallowed as I moved the cursor over the first entry with my acronym. I felt a squirm in my gut. It was in the past. What could it hurt? Don't think about it.

The sound of stable-approved recreational music in the atrium. The babble of many voices echoing. There were only three kinds of large celebrations in 99: a cute-ceañera, which marked when a mare could start performing duties for the stable, the birth of a foal (but that was usually a smaller affair in the cafeteria), and the Overmare's birthday. Since the music wasn't blaring about how wise and kind the Overmare was, I guessed the event was an example of the first one. My pulse calmed.

Nothing special had happened that day. There were six of us celebrating at once. Daisy and I were going into security. Midnight was going into her tech work. The others escaped me. There'd been green cake made, and a sort of punch that was supposed to be mildly alcoholic, but wasn't. Yeah, parties in 99 were pretty lame, but any sort of fun was craved. Even the Overmare's birthday.

"Let's go play with the bucks," I heard Daisy shriek. *"Dibs on the unicorn!"*

"Daisy! At least give me the unicorn. You take the blue one," I heard myself whine, my voice growing clearer. *"I mean look at him. He looks defective. And he's just P-1."*

"Too bad. I called the unicorn," she laughed, and I heard hoofsteps receding into the distance.

"Ugh, mule..." my petulant voice whined in my ears. *"Well, come on, you."*

"Please..." P-21 whispered softly, audible only to his own PipBuck. The sounds of the party dimmed. A door closed.

"Help me get out of this party dress. I don't want a work detail to cover a stain." Party clothes were passed from filly to filly each cute-ceañera. No pony owned fancy clothes, except for the Overmare.

"I..." P-21 stammered in a tiny, terrified voice.

"Huh?"

"I don't want to do this... please don't make me do this..." he whimpered.

"Ugh, are you actually talking?"

"I..."

"Look! Here's the plan. You're going to make me feel good. That's your job. If you can't do that, then get to medical and have them fix you till you can." I gave a little annoyed sigh. *"You don't actually do anything here except breed, so the least you should do is be happy about it--"*

I cut the feed. It'd been a horrible party. Daisy had gotten the unicorn buck. That was all I'd remembered. I'd gotten the P-1. The whiny one. The one who'd cried... the... whole... time... That'd been him, and I hadn't even remembered. I hugged my head, my mind trying to process this. Trying to find some way to accept what I'd heard. I'd been young. I'd been following the rules. It was Stable 99's fault. It wasn't *mine*.

They don't want to refuse. All males want sex.

I looked at the remaining two files, feeling nauseous. There was no time to waste. There was no way I was going to be sleeping now. Or doing what I'd been about to do. Or taking the time to listen to... more...

I couldn't think about it.

* * *

Like just about every major building in the Wasteland, Miramare Air Station was an overengineered monstrosity, a black brick of a building topped by a tower. It was that overengineering that kept the building intact when almost every other structure was blasted away by the red-glowing crater on the east end of the runway. Armored sky chariots lay tumbled in heaps and piles. The hangars slumped in concave mounds where their roofs had collapsed. Ground carts had simply been reduced to scattered chassis, with the hulk of a tank the only recognizable vehicle.

It was also quiet. Too quiet. If there were pegasi here, they were being pretty sneaky about it. Not exactly the behavior I'd expected for a group trying to help the surface. I kept getting an impression of two personalities from the Enclave. The former was nice, idealistic, naive, and bumbling. Easy to trust. The latter had snuck into the Fluttershy clinic and ignored the psychological states of forty colts and fillies trapped in stasis. This place had entirely the second feeling to it: the Enclave here was up to no good.

Worse, there were red bars on my E.F.S., but I couldn't see anything ahead of me. The tarmac was empty except for scattered vehicles. My mane twitched like mad, suggesting this was the place. I just didn't know how to proceed. Traps? Invisible monsters? Pop-up turrets?

Well, when in doubt... if there was something here looking to eat me, I might as well ring the dinner bell. I strolled out towards the main building, whistling to myself as my eyes kept a watch for something shooty, pointy, or bitey as I made my stupid move. Then I spotted two ammo crates poking out from underneath an overturned wagon. Well, I supposed that technically none of this stuff was the

Enclave's. I didn't exactly see a flag planted, and... shit. Who was I kidding? Scavenge and pillage!

I turned sharply just as the crimson beam of an energy weapon popped the tarmac in front of me. Okay. Now that wagon took on a whole new importance as I dove beneath it, a trail of beam shots following in my wake. A quick look around. Nothing. Well, since I was down here I took the chance... to curse my inability to open the locks on these crates. Ugh. I really needed that blue pony!

So, there was somepony out there with either a beam rifle or a doozy of a beam pistol. I really did not want to end my days as a pile of smoldering ash. But where would the shooter be? Along the rooftop seemed natural. It's where I'd be if I were shooting somepony.

But the Enclave were pegasi.

They wouldn't be on a building. They'd be in the sky. Directly above me. No matter which way I went, they'd have my back torched. I looked up at the rusted metal overhead. It was intact, but it wasn't like it was an armored wagon bed. I brought out the shotgun and loaded one explosive round, clenched my eyes shut, and fired. The shot made both my ears ring. I looked around, but they were still taking their time. They had all the time in the world.

I rolled onto my back and looked up through the hoof-sized hole popped in the metal. There he... or she... I wasn't sure which... was. Clad in some sort of black armor and hovering with an automatic rifle on one side of their battle saddle and a beam weapon on the other. The carbine slid up through the hole. Then I took a deep breath and shouted at the top of my lungs. "Parley!" No response. "I really don't want to fight you!" Still no response. "Really!"

Fuck. Why was nothing ever easy?! I sighted up through the hole, hit S.A.T.S., and aimed for their hoof. Maybe if I winged them... so to speak... they'd be willing to talk. I had Deus, every slaver, and half the Wasteland after my head. I didn't want to add the Enclave as well!

I popped off the first burst, the second, and the third. As the last three rounds tore into the pegasus's limb, I watched it fall off! The pegasus swayed wildly, blood raining in spurts from the severed stump, and then started back toward the main building. They didn't get far before folding and crashing with a definite crunching noise a few dozen feet away. Necks were not supposed to bend like that. I crawled out and looked at the body and swore. "Damn it, you bony son of a bitch! I didn't want to kill him!" I shouted at that card-dealing bastard I'd come to view as personifying the Wasteland.

I was Security, the mare seemingly dead-set to piss off everypony in the Wasteland. Well, nothing to it now. The fall had bent the barrel of his automatic, but I got some parts off it to improve my carbine a hair. The beam rifle I detached, along with the spark drum that provided its ammo. Maybe Glory could use it, but I couldn't even figure out where the trigger was! Also, his armor, made of hard plates of something somehow melded with some sort of thick fabric, was surprisingly lightweight, but still far more resilient than the flimsy gear she'd worn before. Pity it didn't cover the legs or head, though. I rolled it up and stuck it in my bag.

I made my way to a side door and found it locked. Still, this was a pretty simple lock. Easier than those tiny little things on the ammo crates. I nudged the door open and then carefully stepped into a bathroom 200 years in need of a cleaning. There were a lot of red bars in here. Either I'd already pissed them off somehow (it happens; I seem to have a knack for it) or they were shooting anything without

wings. Well, one way or another, we'd get this dealt with. I switched from my carbine to my shotgun, loaded with standard buckshot for the moment, and moved past grime-encrusted toilets and chipped sinks.

The reek of mildew filled the air and glass from broken lights overhead ground against the concrete floor with each step. This was a locker room. I passed by the showers and walked silently by the rows and rows of lockers... okay, no, I silently checked the lockers for loot. There were a few that held useful things. A few caps here and there. A plastic jar of Buck. Some Med-X. Plenty of junk, too, most of which I skipped. I found book titled 'Martial Mayhem' and took it only because of the picture on the cover: a zebra kicking a head clean off!

I happened across a storage locker with some cleaning supplies and duct tape. Well, I could carry a little more, I figured. Into the bags they went. If nothing else, it would give me something to trade with the capmonger back in Chapel.

I'd almost slipped out when I noticed, on a bank of larger lockers, one tiny placard on the front: 'Stonewing'. These lockers didn't have the same degree of battering as the others. In fact, it looked almost as if they'd been kept polished and clean by the soldiers. I read the next one. Jetstream. Vanity. Twist. Doof. Echo. Psalm. A... something; somepony had purposefully defaced the name tag. Big Macintosh. I couldn't see any locks, but a tiny terminal glowed at the end of the row.

A prompt read, "Please specify locker." I entered 'Stonewing'. "Please specify password."

I looked at the terminal keys, frowning at them. Slowly I reached out with my magic and typed 'Rainbow Dash'. There was a soft click and the large locker door opened.

I don't know what I expected. There were a number of pictures glued to the inside of the locker. Stonewing grinning like an idiot as he shook the hoof of the rainbow-maned Ministry Mare. An autographed picture of Rainbow Dash giving a wink, with the writing 'Don't give up yet'. Some money I wasn't interested in taking. A photo of him with his squad. Another with Jetstream at a beach. Several pictures of him grinning happily.

The only thing that remained was a folded note. "Hey. If you're reading this, please get out of Stone's locker. I took his harness and put it where it's safe. And if it's you, Jet, it's in the place where he did that thing that one time. Pick it up whenever you're ready. Big Macintosh. P.S. Honestly, Stone? 'Rainbow Dash?' What were you thinking?"

I chuckled and closed the locker. Really, it hadn't been that much of a guess. Whatever had been important was gone and safe. I supposed that was all that mattered. Still, I have to admit I felt a bit of annoyance; something cool had been in here once. Unfortunately, none of my other guesses at the other lockers' passwords were any good, so I left the armored lockers and moved carefully out the only exit I could find and into some barracks. A few of the bunks had been cleaned up, but the majority were a mess. I carefully went from hooflocker to hooflocker, taking anything remotely valuable I could.

I stepped into the cafeteria, right in front of two pegasi who were busy eating. I had the shotgun raised, my amber eyes glaring at them. "Don't." They froze in place. "Take off your weapons," I said low and slow as I moved closer to the pair. They didn't blink as they pulled their pistols out of their holsters and tossed them onto the floor. "Ammo too." Their clips clattered to the linoleum. "Now, where is

Morning Glory?" I asked as I levitated the weapons and ammo into my bags.

"Find her yourself," the red-wine-coated buck said levelly.

"Fair enough," I said, and then levitated out the roll of tape. It was a bit tricky handling both, but I managed. As I started to tape down their wings, their eyes went wide. They looked indignant, but I just asked them softly, "Would you rather be shot?" That mollified them a little. Then I took out a bottle of Wonderglue and squeezed out two globs on the floor. "Sit."

They glared at me, then promptly put their butts in the hardening resin. Inside a minute it'd set. They'd have to be cut out of their uniforms to get free. I stretched out two last pieces of tape and covered their mouths. "If it's any consolation, I really wanted to avoid this."

The pegasus I found in the hallway a minute later hadn't been nearly so easy to manage. As she spotted me, she immediately turned, crouched, and opened fire with the automatic weapons on her battle saddle. She didn't seem to have much skill at hitting a moving target in a narrow hallway, but even those few impacts she managed stung like crazy! I dodged left and right as I closed the distance. She backed into the wall. Then she got a lead shower. With a cry, her guns went silent and she fell limp.

I took what I could and continued on, sweeping through the first floor. I found offices, record rooms, a gift shop, and a deli with some scrumptious Crispy Carrot Cakes. They were still fresh and went perfectly with a Sparkle-Cola. I also pocketed some pickle chips and Radish Surprise, and I found a new pair of aviator glasses. I grinned in the mirror. Oh yeah, freaky eyes hidden. That helped my mood a bit.

I found stairs up and stairs down. If I were a pony who could fly, would I want to be upstairs, where I could jump out a window, or downstairs, trapped in a hole? My money was on upstairs. Carefully, I made my way up step after step and pushed through the door at the top.

A veritable army of red dots appeared; something must have been shielding them from my E.F.S.! There had to be twenty at... then I heard the telltale scuttle. Radroaches? Well now, that was an indication that the pegasi weren't up here. Still, since I was, I might as well check out the place.

The roaches weren't hard to deal with. A broom handle and some focus took care of most of them. These rooms were mostly more offices, but of a nicer variety. There were terminals I couldn't touch and safes I could only look at with undisguised frustration as dreams of treasures danced in my mind. Still, I found a medkit with good drugs and worthless, spoiled healing potions. More Wonderglue. More duct tape. Some turpentine. Nothing special, but it might prove useful. In a break room I rescued a case of Bridle Buck Beer and decided that, well, being drunk hadn't made me lose last time! An open bottle floated beside me as I reached a door that led to a winding stairway up.

The stairs ended in the empty air traffic control tower. The terminals were all long dead. So were whatever operators were up here when the bomb went off. I looked at the scorched bones and blown-out windows. And... a memory orb? Yes, a memory orb, sitting out on the rail just outside the windows. I looked out and immediately got the sensation of everything spinning. Okay. Lots of nothing out there. Looking down was every bit as hard as looking up. I took a deep breath and then reached out with my magic.

"Careful... careful..." I muttered as I lifted and pulled the little glowing orb towards me. "Don't

want to drop it. Don't want to..."

oooOOOooo

Damn it...

Flying again, a pegasus, a mare this time. Thank goodness. How did bucks even walk with that thing tucked between their legs? She was flying up towards the clouds as the sun set and the stars came out. In perfect synchronization, the moon rose over the horizon. Seeing it for the first time, I felt a little of what I imagined Priest felt when looking at his windows: comfort in a higher power. Tears streaked down my host's cheeks as she landed on a small white cloud.

Then there was a green flash behind me. My lips curled in a little smile. "Checking up on me, 'morale officer'?"

"Well it's in the job description. You should see the manual. Grief counseling, interventions, M.o.P. procedures." Then Vanity walked... wait, walked?! Yup, the unicorn was standing right there on the fluffy clouds! I felt a little part of my brain twinge and snap at that sight! "None of which means a damn when it comes to actually doing the job," the white unicorn said calmly beside my host. His emerald mane looked perfectly styled, even in the camouflage uniform he wore. "Let me guess, Jetstream: from the note you wrote me, you're blaming yourself. Then I'm supposed to tell you it's not your fault. Then you argue that it was your fault. We yell at each other." He sighed. "Ugh, we're going to be at this for hours." My host glanced at him, but his smile was soft and sympathetic.

"Everyone's told me it's not my fault."

"Oh, good. That cuts through a whole chapter on addressing denial."

"They're wrong."

"Or not," the unicorn signed, patting her shoulder. "Go on."

"I saw him dealing with those griffins. I saw he was getting targeted by those snipers. If I'd given him more warning... taken the threat seriously..."

"Stonewing got shot all the time. You know this. We joked about it," he said quietly. "And you're not the only one. Twist is blaming herself for giving him the sweet, as if that did it. Psalm is having a crisis of faith. Big Macintosh is hurting and keeping it all inside. And of course it's the fault of all zebraki--"

"I was the one who flew with him."

Vanity let out a slow breath. "You were the one who loved him." She sniffed and looked at him and his easy smile. "Did you think I didn't know? That's in my job description too."

"I don't feel love. All I feel is hurt. It's eating me up inside. I just want to forget. I want to forget everything I felt for him." I rubbed my eyes. "This shouldn't have happened."

"You knew something like this could, Jetstream. It's war," he said softly, but firmly. "In fact, something like this was likely to happen. The Marauders have been together for years and we've been lucky. That luck had to run out."

"I know, Vanity. I know. Damn it," I said, falling back and looking up at the stars. It was a rare time when looking up didn't make my guts clench. "It's just... stupid."

"It's not stupid. What you're asking me to do is stupid. Jetstream, you loved him--" Vanity began, but my host gave a dismissive 'tch'.

"And he loved her. Just the way it all works out, isn't it? Rainbow Dash. Twenty percent cooler in ten seconds flat." Oh boy, bitter much? She sighed as she rubbed her face. "I doubt she even knew he existed. Or that he died trying to clear the way so she and the Shadowbolts could get a little more glory."

"She had losses too," Vanity said as he sat calmly on the cloud beside me.

"Yeah. I know. Sky Ramble and Streak. I went to their funerals. Stonewing didn't even get one. All he got was a memorial and a little plaque in Cloudsdale." She slammed her hoof against the clouds, getting a little rumble of thunder from within. "And how could the Ministry of Peace just lose him?! They ask us to fight and die for that damned city, and they can't even give us a decent burial when we bite it?!"

"Things have gotten tense. You'd think Brimstone's death would have been a deterrent, but the zebras are getting more dragons and griffins than ever. Mistakes happen," Vanity said as the gorgeous unicorn looked down into her eyes. "Like this. Asking me to take your memories so you don't have to feel pain isn't going to make you feel better, Jetstream."

She wept into her hooves and shook her head. "I keep seeing him fall. I keep seeing that bastard shooting him. I keep going back there, Vanity! To that second. And it's ripping my head apart!" She sniffed and then sat up, looking at him. "Do you know what that's like? To see something horrible again and again so you can't get it out of your head?"

I knew.

"We all have images like that. But I can tell you that this won't make you happier," Vanity said quietly. "You take a memory out and it might hurt less, but the hole will remain. It doesn't heal."

"He's gone. I don't plan on being happy ever again," she said as she looked at her hooves. "I just want to be able to do my job. I want to make sure that if one of us goes again, it's me."

"Are you sure? Because I really wouldn't mind it if Doof goes before you," Vanity chuckled. "We took a poll and I'm pretty sure he voted for himself."

She gave a soft, mirthless chuckle. "That idiot..." She looked down towards the setting sun. "So. Will you do it, Vanity?"

The green-maned unicorn sighed. "I'll be fed to an ursa major if it gets back to the Ministry I did this, but I'm supposed to be our squad's morale officer. Just try to remember that if you ever want them,

I'll give your memories back. I'm not going to throw them away. Deal?"

"Deal," she said as she closed her eyes. I felt his horn touch her forehead.

oooOOOooo

Big Macintosh and his Maripony. Now Stonewing and Jetstream. I had to wonder what it was like to love somepony but never feel it in return. Actually, I'd be happy just knowing what it was like to love someone. 'Jetstream, it's in that place where he did that thing that time.' Now she wouldn't even remember that.

I had to get Glory out of here. Once we were together, we could free P-21... and I could work stuff out. Glory might have been naive when it came to love, but she was a smarter muffin than me. Maybe she'd taken morale psycho-thinky classes like Vanity? I tried to pull my head together and draw a line between then and now.

Ugh, memory orbs. I didn't care what Priest said about them, they were just no good. I--oh. Hello, Enclave soldiers. I'd finally pulled my head together enough to notice that I wasn't in the air traffic control tower. Four of the grim-faced, black-combat-armored soldiers surrounded me in a stark cinder block room with my weapons gone and my hooves duct taped together. I looked from one scowling pegasus soldier to the next. Okay, this was tough, but I'd faced worse odds! At least I had a little buzz going.

"Sneaky trick with the memory orb. You guys put it up there, didn't you? Just knew I'd go after it." Okay, I'd have to magically take them all out with my telekinetic bullets, free my legs through sheer force of will, open a probably locked door, and take out the rest of the base with my bare hooves. I could handle this!

"Actually, I told them to put it there," a familiar mare said as the door opened. In stepped Morning Glory, wearing a freshly-laundered black uniform. Her lips smiled warmly. "Hello, Blackjack. Welcome to the Enclave."

Footnote: Level Up.

New perk added: Finesse - Your attacks show a lot of finesse... or maybe it's just dumb luck. Either way, you have a higher chance to score a critical hit.

Skill note: Speech (75)

(Huge thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, and massive thanks to Hinds for maximizing its potential. Feedback is adored.)