

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 14: Strength

"THAT was a truly feeble performance."

How had it gone so wrong? That was the question that kept bubbling up inside me. I'd come to Miramare expecting to find calm, reasonable, intelligent Morning Glory. I'd planned to talk with her about mending things with P-21. About that horrible recording and what it meant. She'd try to help me work through the thoughts niggling at the back of my mind, and I needed that help; those patches I'd welded across that door weren't holding as well as I'd like.

Now I was the one caring for Glory. The confession Operative Lighthooves had engineered from her own words was damning to anypony who didn't know her, and she seemed convinced of its impact. In her own way she'd been raped: not a violation of her body, but of her identity. Now, more than ever, I had to be the strong one. I had to be tough. Confident. Because if I wasn't then we'd be eaten alive by the Wasteland. So I threw some more Wonderglue on that door in the back of my mind, broke out the duct tape, and hoped it could hold for a little bit longer.

With the Enclave gone, we went in through the locker room. I tried to show her the Marauders' lockers, but she couldn't have been more disinterested. Apparently when they left, Sergeant Wind Whisper had pulled out some critical components. The lights were now dead, with the exception of the weak emergency lighting. The food was also gone, and many of the fine weapons had been carted away. Fortunately, there was still clean water for drinking and washing up. Glory found some bandages for her scarred flanks. I tried to explain to her how the Hoofington Enervation sapped healing magics. The old Glory would have been keen for details.

Now she simply nodded and, without another word, went looking for healing potions instead.

I really wanted Lighthooves dead. I wanted Deus dead. I wanted Usury dead. I wanted Lancer dead. I really hoped it was a side effect of the Stampede, Hydra, and Buck all wearing off at once. I felt my limbs shaking as I stood in the shower, letting the lukewarm water wash away the blood, grime, and gore that had accumulated on me. I tried holding up the barding to rinse off some of the larger stains. I wanted to find a bottle of Wild Pegasus, curl up, and sleep for a few days. I'd gone so long without sleep that I felt like I was floating.

I couldn't. No matter how much I wanted to, I couldn't. Don't think about it. I fought the shakes as best I could, breathing deeply. Don't think... *about Scoodle torn in two...* don't think... *about my guts trailing behind me...* don't think... *about Tumbleweed's head being blasted open...* don't think... *about the mine boss exploding...* I shook so badly that my legs collapsed beneath me. Not now! Not now! Don't think... *please, I don't want to do this...*

It took me a shot of Med-X and another of Steady to calm me down enough to stop wasting time worrying about myself and help the pony who deserved it. I went and got Glory, helped her out of her Enclave uniform, and started the water for her. "Blackjack?" she asked, barely audible above the water.

"Yeah?"

"Could you leave me alone for a little bit?"

"Yeah," I said as I left her there in the wan glow of the emergency light and tried to ignore her sobs. "I'll be..." I said as I glanced back at her, at those two burned lightning bolts where sunrises used to be, the only sunrises I'd ever seen with my own eyes... "I'll be..." *Useless. Pointless. Worthless.*

I sank down to my rump and leaned back against the wall. I couldn't cry; whatever part of me that enabled tears had been ripped out of me, as surely as whatever had powered the operations center had been ripped out. Glory finished her shower and stepped out, her wet gray flanks showing the burns in terrible relief; nothing else remained. Her sunrise had set forever. Together we went back upstairs. She never said a word, just covered herself in her blanket and sobbed for half an hour before she went to sleep. Me? I had another method for not feeling any pain.

Finding the bottle of Stalliongrad's Finest was the best thing that ever happened to me... well, since I'd gotten to Miramare. I unstopped the cap and took a gulp of the clean, biting vodka. My empty stomach clenched a little. I didn't care. I wanted to drink till I drowned all the thoughts and the terrors and the failure churning within me. I drank and drank till I went past doubts, fears, concerns, failures, and nightmares and plunged myself straight into merciful oblivion.

* * *

I awoke with my cheek in a pool of cold vomit. I couldn't tell if Glory was asleep or awake, but her back was turned to me. Hard to imagine that a day or so ago I'd felt on top of the world. Like maybe things were improving. I was such an idiot. I *am* such an idiot. I sat up as quietly as I could and finished off the last inch in the bottle. I had hoped for warmth in my gut, but apparently there wasn't any to be had in vodka. Just a sharp bite that dulled the hurt inside me. But my limbs stopped shaking, at least. Kind of.

I flipped the mattress over as quietly as I could to hide my mess--let some other bastard clean it up--and went down to wash my face. The water was nice and radioactive now that the Enclave had left. Good. I needed my eyes glowing right now. Before I'd gotten sidetracked playing liberator, I was sent to get some equipment from the base. When I selected the contract from my notes--and sweet Celestia, how the heck did this machine know what is supposed to be a note--a tag appeared on my E.F.S. I picked my way down to the room marked 'Command'. Thank Celestia there was enough power to open the electric door.

Inside, it was clear the Enclave had been busy. Planning biological extermination of the surface or just playing games? I didn't really care anymore. The best Enclave pony I knew had just gotten her cutie marks seared off; the other two were bastards. Wind Whisper might not have tried to blow my head off, but she hadn't raised a wing to help Glory. I poked around the technological remains of the command center and found the terminal for 'Air Navigation'.

I had to keep moving. I had to be strong. I couldn't let myself fall apart. I couldn't deal with all those thoughts fermenting in the back of my brain. Focusing on trying to magic out the screws in the side panel helped take my mind off things. I was a stupid pony. I shouldn't be thinking. Thinking is what got me in this mess in the first place.

'We do not always see the good we do.'

Yeah, Sekashi, but sometimes we don't see the evil we do either. The evil I did...

"Fuck!" I shouted and slammed my head against the side of the terminal. "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" I shouted over and over again. "Stop thinking! Stop thinking! Stop thinking!" I felt blood trickle down between my eyes from a nick beneath my horn. I hugged myself as I drew a slow, shaking breath. Dear Luna, was I losing my mind? Was this when the Wasteland broke me?

I couldn't do this now. Not now. But I could barely focus my magic to unscrew the rest of the screws in the side of the large terminal. I sighed, looking around with my amber vision before I spotted a side door. More desperate to act than genuinely curious, I rose and looked at the name over the doorway: 'Colonel Cupcake'. Cracking the door, I was greeted by the familiar smell of dust and decay. Clearly, the office of a long dead officer was not high on the Enclave's repair and cleaning priorities. Trash from the operations center had been tossed in one corner, and I had to step carefully over broken shelves, ruined manuals, and useless clipboards. In the far corner was the desk with the skeletal remains of Colonel Cupcake draped across it. His white uniform was now a soiled gray, but the brass buttons still seemed to shine.

Yellowed pictures lay haphazardly across the floor, shaken free from the walls by the balefire bomb. I levitated one up, looking at the fat brown pegasus with the white mane and tail and the cake cutie mark. Beside him loomed, with his easygoing smile, the image of Big Macintosh. A second picture showed the colonel in uniform facing a squad of ponies and saluting. The Marauders were right there in the front line, saluting back. They looked so clean. So eager to get into the fight. The third picture was of an incredibly skinny and thin blue pony holding up a tray of cupcakes. The colonel, wearing a golden helmet, grinned at the camera over a caption reading 'Guard cupcake eating champion ten years running.' The last was of a lime green pegasus wearing a string of pearls nuzzling up against him. The image was so... strange. So... not what I thought of when males and females were together.

Somehow, I didn't imagine an officer as being a cupcake eating champion. When I thought of officers from our lessons in 99 I always pictured grim-faced generals with tons of medals, eager to keep fighting. Carefully, I walked around behind his desk and saw his safe. I fished out the key I'd found in the office above and tried the lock. To my relief, it opened, and there wasn't a ton of papers in this one. I'd hoped to find another silver bullet; wouldn't that make my problems with Deus easier! Instead, I found two memory orbs, a revolver, some pre-war bits, a box of ammunition, and two folded pieces of paper. The revolver was for a much larger caliber of bullet than my automatics.

I opened up the first note, glad for the distraction exploration afforded.

Dear Director,

You can take your request and shove it up your tail sideways. I don't care what 'investments' you made in the Marauders, the buck was a patriot and a saint who gave everything for his country. His funeral will be at the Ministry Walk in Canterlot. I will be there personally, armed, and will blow your damned head off if you set one hoof at the funeral.

Sincerely, one pissed off Cupcake.

Underneath it was scribbled: *'Not bad for a rough draft. Now to write something I can actually send.'* I laughed. Despite how rotten I felt inside and out, I laughed. I wished I'd known Colonel Cupcake. He seemed like a decent buck. I opened the second.

To whom it may concern,

I am writing this letter stating my intent to resign from the Equestrian Army immediately. As per terms of service 2355.221J and article 12.1 of the Equestria Enlistment Act, I have put in an excess of ten years of combat service and am entitled to immediate release from active duty. I wish to thank the Army for its support and diligence, but I can no longer participate in its operations.

Big Macintosh. SN# 23-110019-E.

A smaller piece of paper was stapled to it: *'Thanks for helping with the legal parts, Cupcake. Hold on to this for me till I get back from Shattered Hoof Ridge.'*

I wondered if the rest of the Marauders had known.

Suddenly I heard my name called in a rather frantic voice from the hallway, saving me from thinking about the idea of a male giving up his role for his own interests. "I'm here, Glory!" I yelled as I rose quickly, then grabbed the memory orbs with my mouth rather than risk a trip down memory lane. I scrambled for the door, slipping and sliding on the trash underhoof as I moved into the command center and then out into the hall. "I'm here! What is it? Raiders? Enclave? Ghouls?" Crap, where had I left my guns and barding?!

She stared around her and looked right at me. Then I recalled she couldn't see in the dark. I activated my PipBuck light. "I'm here. What's going on?"

She stared at me as she shook and rubbed her nose. "I... I woke up and you were gone. I didn't know if I was dreaming," she said, her eyes bright and wet in the glow of my light. "This isn't a dream, is it?" I hated that tiny catch of hope in her voice. Almost as much as I hated smothering it.

"I'm afraid not, Glory," I said, and saw that little flicker die in her eyes.

"Oh. I guess you can't ask if you're dreaming in a dream, can you? And dreams don't hurt."

"Yeah. If it sucks, you're probably awake," I said, trying to get a smile from her. It wasn't happening.

Her lavender eyes looked at me in the wan light of the PipBuck. "You look really bad. Are you okay?"

She'd just had her cutie mark burned off and she was asking me if I was okay. I had to focus on the throbbing in my forehead to keep from bursting into tears right then. "Yeah, sure. I'm aces." Did I just refer to my own cutie mark? I deserved a few hours of intimate time with Deus. "Are you okay?"

"No," she replied quietly. Make that a few days with Deus. "But thank you for asking. What are

you doing down here?"

"Work... well, actually snooping around. Seeing what was left that we can salvage. There's that job about those electronic parts." I looked over at the partially-disassembled terminal. "But I'm all hoof here. Can you get these parts out? I'm pretty sure that we're not getting paid by the pound."

"Wouldn't that be nice," she said as a touch of the old spark returned. She pulled a screwdriver from her Enclave uniform. I sat down beside her, giving her illumination. She took out one screw, then looked at me and put the screwdriver down. "What was your father like, Blackjack? Did he teach you cards?"

I moved my mouth like a mute idiot. Of all the things she had to ask, why that? It was like trying to talk with my heart on a spit. Finally I choked out, "N... no. I never knew my... my father." Father was a word in stories for a buck who was a mare's permanently devoted breeding partner. Somehow, I severely doubted that that was what she meant.

"Oh, I'm sorry. How did you lose him?" she replied quietly as she opened the door.

Some mare had taken him to medical, given him his twenty-first dot, and stuck a needle full of drugs in his neck. Then he was tossed into a machine that 'recycled' him into protein mixed with algae and fungus. And then we ate him. I jerked and slammed the back of my head against the terminal so hard that I thought I'd black out for a second. I wanted to black out. Glory jumped back, her eyes wide.

"I don't remember," I muttered, lying through my teeth. "Sorry Glory. I really don't want to think about Stable 99."

"I'm sorry. I thought it was your home," she said as she removed the panels.

"It is. It's just... not what I thought it was," I muttered and then stood. "I... do you have enough light to finish? I need... there's something I... I just need to go." Because I thought that if I didn't, I was going to explode, and she didn't need to see me melt down now. My heart beat so hard in my chest that it was getting hard to hear her quiet voice.

"Yes... and... I'm sorry, Blackjack," she said softly. "If I'd listened to you... maybe things would have been different."

'Yeah, they would.' I wanted to tear out whatever part of my brain had just thought that petty, snide, hateful thought. How could I think that? "Don't worry about it. I'm fine. I'll meet you upstairs when you're done. Alright?" I walked away without waiting for her answer. I couldn't stop shaking. I couldn't slow my heart down. My breathing was turning into choking gasps. My legs were so unsteady that I staggered into things, despite seeing everything in my piss-yellow gaze.

I wasn't fine. I wasn't near fine. I was fucked up bad. Dying of radsickness bad. But Glory was worse, and so I'd have to be better. Do better. That's what Fluttershy said. That's what... where the fuck was I? Where had I been going? I rubbed my eyes hard, trying to focus and setting the world spinning. I sat hard, my rump landing on a layer of thick, dried blood. My eyes saw the bars. The bodies within. The raiders. I sucked in breaths still reeking of fetid air, waste, and rot.

I saw Minty Fresh's headless corpse... what hadn't been pulled inside. I saw the raider with the burst belly, her face frozen in a rictus grin. The dead Dashite whose name I'd never known. I'd have vomited again, but I couldn't move and had nothing to bring up anyway. At the rear of one cell were the bones of a pony: a unicorn, blackened and twisted like melted wax. His mouth wide in a scream, a hole through his skull. How could he scream like that? How could he look like that? I could imagine my bones melting and twisting inside me.

"No... no... no... I'm not you. I'm not dead. I'm not walking down that bridge yet," I whispered into the still room to the motherfucker with the cards as tears ran down my cheeks. "Glory needs me. And I need to talk to P-21. After that... fucking after... then you can take me. Not before... You hear me? Not before." I couldn't walk, so I'd crawl. I did everything I could to force myself to my hooves.

I made my way to the infirmary, but I doubted that healing potions or the like would do me any good. Then I found a little tin marked 'Fixer -- for those next day regrets' tucked away in a drawer. It was either a painkiller or a contraceptive. Either way, what could it hurt? I had to lick up two of the tablets because my magic focus was shit. I chewed. I swallowed. I prayed.

Bit by bit the trembles stopped. My racing heart calmed its pace. I took a few deep breaths that didn't feel like I was drowning. I lay on the floor of the infirmary, praying that Glory didn't find me like this. The cool tiles were nice under my cheek. I heard dusty cards being shuffled as I closed my eyes. "Go away. I am not in a 'happy crazy' mood right now, and you're not real." This was definitely more of a 'fucked-up crazy' state I was in.

The old buck shuffled the cards deftly in his hooves as he sat on the examination table. His cobweb-gray mane and blanched coat were a small improvement on the bones. His raggedy hat looked like Applejack's after it'd been run over by a mutant dragon. He just looked at me with the softest of smiles. "Oh, well then. I'll just come back at a better time. How's four-thirty for you?"

I lay there and damn me, I chuckled. "I didn't expect my crazy to be funny. Now go away. I'm trying to pull myself together."

"Yeah, I noticed that," he rasped in his feathery voice. "Not having the best of luck with that, are ya?"

"Too many chems... too much stress... not enough sleep," I muttered, feeling... less bad as the Fixer worked its magic on me. The chems seemed much more resilient to Enervation than the healing potions. "Any second now you're going to go away. Then I can get Glory and we can get the hell away from this place."

"Well then, I won't keep you," he said as he tugged his ratty cowpony hat over his eyes. "Just wanted to let you know... you're going to have to think about it. And... just my advice... you're going to have to listen to those last two recordings before you meet him."

I closed my eyes. "There's no point. I already know what I did to him. I know he'll never forgive me for it."

"No doubt. But what exactly is he going to not forgive?" He chuckled, and I looked up at the empty table. Deus, bounty hunters, radiation, ghouls... right now I'd be glad to lose my life to the

Wasteland. The last thing I ever expected to lose was my mind.

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We finished looting everything that I could carry that might be valuable. I searched the medical bay for more Fixer, but there was none to be found. While Wind Whisper had taken the guns, she'd left some ammunition; I was able to replenish my supply of buckshot. We found Glory's Enclave uniform and battle harness in her room, and I admit I was surprised to see her put both on. "You're still an Enclave pony?" I asked as I cinched down my own barding.

She closed her eyes as she straightened the black uniform. "It's all I know. They might have put a brand on me, but I don't know what it means to be a Dashite," she said softly as she turned and loaded cartridges for the beam pistol and disintegration pistol into the cartridge slots along her back. "I still believe in the Enclave," she said simply as she finished loading her pockets with the cartridges, saving her saddlebags for larger salvage.

"How can you, after what they did to you?" I asked as we left through the side door in the locker room.

"Because if I don't believe in them, then I don't believe in anything," she said with that hurting smile. I just wanted to hug her then and there. I didn't know how she could do it, but somehow she was holding together better than me. Then I saw the tears in her eyes, caught the soft catch in her throat, and I knew exactly how: layers of denial and pain. I put my hooves around her, holding her till she calmed.

Broken wares and damaged goods: some terrors of the Wasteland we were.

Finally, though, we were back on the Sunset Highway, and I had to admit I felt better. Sure, there was still P-21 to rescue in Flank, Deus to avoid, bounty hunters on my tail, and EC-1101 to unravel, but it felt good to be going somewhere. The rain had even stopped for a bit, though every now and then it threatened a drizzle. We were actually just north of the strip mall where I'd met Dusty, and could see Brimstone's Fall.

It was clear that, sometime in the last few days, Sidewinder had arrived and tried to storm the mine. There were a lot of bodies around those towers, and the bloatsprites and radscorpions were having a banquet on the carrion. Now I could spot a dozen camps around the mine. It looked like Sidewinder had gone from an attack to a siege, and I wondered if I'd left just to doom Dusty and the miners to a slow death by starvation.

Then, to my amazement, I saw a winged pony fly almost vertically out of the center of the camp, pulling a small sky cart. A few feeble potshots rang out, but the pegasus was well out of range and flying west towards the rest of Equestria. Maybe it was just my mutant eyes, but there seemed to be something wrong with her wings. From this distance they appeared almost... skeletal.

Lying on our stomachs, watching, I noticed something that hadn't been at the strip mall before: boxes. Lots of wooden crates that seemed to hold most of Sidewinder's supplies were surrounded by a simple barbed wire topped chain link fence. I smiled as I levitated out my carbine. "What are you doing?" Glory asked as her eyes went round.

"Better," I replied, slapping in a freshly loaded magazine of bright red rounds. I sighted the boxes and with a certain smile started to fire the rounds into the crates. Even though the boxes were wet, eventually the fires started to catch. The final touch was a crate marked with three X's, which exploded! "That ought to help Dusty Trails out."

Shouts rang out from the bar and cowpony livery store as a dozen or so Pecos began milling about. It only took a few seconds for them to spot the pair of us on the highway, and with a yell they raced towards us.

Glory just looked at me, smiled, and shook her head. "What?" I asked with a crooked smile as I loaded a fresh magazine and raised the carbine. Damn, but it felt good to be in an honest-to-goodness fight. Now I could really practice my rifle work. I slipped into S.A.T.S. and used the magic to assist me in taking out the leader.

A pegasus's head exploded a foot from my face.

I swallowed as the rifle spat again and again while the spell reloaded. Morning Glory waited for them to climb the highway embankment before firing alternating red beams and pink bolts of magical energy. One Pecos ignited as the energy slowly transformed him into a crumbling cascade of ash.

Her smile was the last to go.

My legs staggered as my heart began to pound. I had to keep moving back. I did not want three Pecos beating on me with sharpened shovels and baseball bats; I didn't care how tough my barding was. The only problem was that my legs weren't working right. The shaking was getting so bad I almost couldn't move. I levitated out some Steady and felt my jerking muscles relax as I swapped out the carbine for the shotgun.

I watched a raider's head disintegrate into bloody chunks as I fled through the tunnel from Stable
99.

A Pecos whirled and slammed both rear hooves into my face. I was knocked flying and landed on my back. His sharpened shovel rose up as he reared above me. I stared as my horn pulled out the dragon claw. The six-inch curved claw slashed diagonally across his belly and my horn glowed and I yanked out his viscera. He fell back, screaming for his mother as I stood and just stared at the bloody gray lengths around my hooves. Glory's beam silenced his screaming as my focus was lost and the claw clattered to the ground beside me.

"Blackjack?" Glory asked in concern. I was losing it. I had lost it, and there were four more still attacking.

"I'm fine," I lied. I had to be strong. She was trying to be strong. I couldn't think about it.

I could feel the cuts across my middle. Snip. Snip. Snip.

I levitated up the shotgun and swapped in flechettes. The big guy in the back reached into a burlap sack and started to toss sticks of dynamite as the other three used saddles armed with shotguns. The pump action shotguns were larger than my own drum-fed model and they had me skidding across

the asphalt as my barding absorbed most of their impacts. "Fly, Glory!" I shouted as the red sticks started to explode.

"Yee haw! I'm gonna blow you into chili!" the buck shouted as we fell back. Glory, however, remained grounded and tried to keep back from the worst of the buckshot. Her black Enclave uniform didn't offer her nearly the protection my reinforced barding did.

"Eat this!" I shouted as my magic gripped the next tossed stick of dynamite and floated it right over to one of the gunponies' heads. He leapt aside as it blew and it knocked him off his hooves. I walked over, feeling my legs shaking despite the Steady I'd taken, and saw I'd transformed his head into paste.

I sat coated head to hoof in the blood and gore of three ponies.

My shotgun fell to the ground as I staggered. The three were now focusing all their attacks on me, and only the metal plates in my armor were keeping me from getting pulped. Fortunately, the boss had opted against throwing more dynamite my way; more's the pity.

There wasn't anything for it. I chewed down another Buck and injected myself with more Med-X and Steady, trying to get some control over my own body. My head... maybe Dash or a Mint-al? No time to experiment now. Not with my heart slamming in my chest and the Pecos' shotgun shells doing all they could to pound me into goo. I got my hooves under me and put some more space between us, letting the pellet spread dilute their firepower while I went back to the carbine. S.A.T.S. was up. I queued two bursts at one of their heads and was rewarded with the gunpony dropping in their tracks.

Glory's magical energy weapons finally liquefied the third. Boss ducked his head and turned, racing back towards the nearest camp and shouting for help. I got a few rounds in his rump, but I really wasn't in much of a state to chase him down. My heartbeat thundered so hard it felt like tiny explosions in my ears.

"Are you all right?" Glory asked, wide-eyed. I grit my teeth together. I forced a grin... smile, damn it!

"Yeah. Sure. Those shotguns pack a wallop though," I said, grinning like an idiot as I sat on my rump. The supplies were cooking nicely, and while I'd have liked to loot some of it for myself, I was glad not to be keeling over. "Think you can get those shotguns off their battle saddles? I'd like that kind of firepower." She frowned at me but then nodded and rushed to the two guns that were still intact. I closed my eyes, breathing deeply as my heart pounded and pounded. I shook out two more Fixers and popped them in my mouth, chewing and breathing and recovering. They seemed to help. I might have taken a beating, but at least I was still able to walk. Among the three chems I was finally able to relax enough to examine the firearms.

She returned with the two pump action shotguns, similar in design to the ones I'd used in the stable but of a larger gauge shell. "Nice. Well, we should probably get going. I think Mr. Sidewinder is going to be put out with me for burning up his things." Glory was still looking at me funny, but I think I put on a convincing enough act to reassure her. She returned my smile, at least.

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The Sunset Highway turned sharply east past the strip mall. On my right, the badlands stretched to the south: red rock and scrubland. To my left were the tangled weeds and dead trees around Hoofington. The terrain was much more hilly, and soon we'd lost sight of the bonfire beside the mini-mall. The Fixer was wearing off and I could feel my heart pounding again. "So, why did you stay grounded that fight, Glory?" I asked to distract myself from the increasing pain in my chest.

She started with a little gasp, looking up at me with her wide lavender eyes before looking away again, her purple hair falling across her face as she hung her head. "I don't know. I just... couldn't. I wanted to. I tried. But I couldn't get my hooves off the ground." She gave me a worried glance. "What about you, Blackjack? You look... terrible."

"Yeah, Mom said the same thing when I was born. She told the doc to put that bun back in the oven; it wasn't quite done yet."

Glory looked skeptical. "I don't think they can push a premature foal back in, Blackjack. There's muscle contractions that..." She caught my cool 'you are missing the joke' look and flushed, looking... ashamed? "I'm sorry. I wish I was smarter like you."

"What?" I turned to face her... and the world kept turning. I sat hard on my ass so I wouldn't fall on my face. "Why would you call me smart? I'm so clueless I let a little capmonger charge me double just because she knew I had the caps. And let's not go into my tactical 'shoot, shoot, and shoot some more' methods! And if I even look at a terminal it breaks."

"You knew that the operative was up to no good," she said quietly. "I didn't. I actually thought you were a little jealous of him. You were completely right and I was completely wrong. I--" I silenced her by pressing my hoof gently to her lips.

"If I was right, it was only by accident. I am not a smart pony. I'm lucky to remember which end of my gun goes bang," I said as I brushed her mane out of her eyes. "Your kind of smarts actually helps ponies. You got through school. You're a prodigy, so you're not so good with reading people. Your brain could kick my brain's butt with a brainy hoof tied behind its back." Then I frowned and rubbed my chin. "Or maybe my brain could win; I mean, it's got to be as hard as a rock."

"You're a good pony."

I felt a cold chill rush through me as my stomach clenched. "No, Glory. I really don't think I am."

"How can you say that? You're brave..."

"Glory..."

"Courageous, clever..."

"Glory."

"Steadfast, loyal, compassionate..."

"Glory! That's enough!" I snapped, and she jerked back looking scared and a little concerned. I sighed softly, hanging my head. "I did something terrible back in Stable 99. I didn't... I didn't know it was bad then. I barely remembered even doing it until now. But..." Say it. Just spit it out! Tell her and get it out of you. But what if she left? She'd be killed. What if she hated me? Right now, I could hardly stand. I let out my breath, looking away. "Sorry. Never mind. I'm just being stupid."

I started to move, but my legs didn't quite get the message and I staggered, tripped, and landed on my face. I groaned, and then there was a green line of energy cutting through where I'd stood only moments before.

"Get off the road, Glory!" I shouted as adrenaline helped me move my shaky limbs into the ditch on the southern side of the road. Three more shots lanced out from the hillside ahead of us, but I couldn't see the shooter on my E.F.S.; either they were invisible, or that was one hell of a sniper! Lying there in the dirt, I heard a soft blip of a landmark being marked on my navigation program. Normally I wouldn't have cared... but the mark said 'Stable 90'.

And if the ponies there were just as fucked up as in 99...

A stable? Here? Realistically, I knew the odds of there being a stable we could get into should be minimal, but I'd take them over being stuck out in the open with my legs shaking, my heart hammering, and my head spinning while some possibly invisible pony took shots at me with a long-range magic beam rifle! "Glory, this way!" I said as I tried to run south towards the broken rocks that might offer some cover.

If it hadn't been for my PipBuck, I never would have found it. The tunnel entrance was wedged between two heaps of stone, looking like an abandoned mine. Two heavy-duty rails ran underneath the door. Fortunately, it wasn't locked, and I pulled it open and stepped through. Once inside, I turned on my lamp to illuminate the tunnel. And the bones. Lots of bones. Twice I was sent sliding when a heap of bones shifted underneath me. Finally, we got through to the stable door. A huge '90' in the middle of a great round gear-toothed hulk of metal. "So... ah... how do we open it?"

Glory examined the controls next to the door, then rolled onto her back and started to dig at the underside of the control panels. She pulled out some scrap electronics, duct tape, and a spark battery. Once wired in place, the console lit up. "Well, it's got power. Try transmitting your overmare's access command?"

I frowned and dug through the files I'd taken from the Overmare's office. Glory actually had to pick it out from the list. It transmitted, and the light on the control flashed from red to green. There was a loud click... and then... nothing. "Well, it's unlocked at--"

The door slowly started tilting inward. With a resounding bang that made my teeth rattle, the heavy door fell flat on its back inside the stable. Within lay only darkness and silence and bones. Again, lots of them. The air was strangely hard to breathe, but that may have just been my own body. Step after step we walked into the empty space. The reason the door had fallen had been simple: the hydraulic mechanism that moved and closed it was gone.

This stable wasn't finished. As we walked into the atrium, what I saw were the barest bones of a stable--walls, floor, ceiling, the balconies--but everything else was missing. Yet there were signs of ponies once living here. Two huge piles were formed: one of scraps of clothing and luggage. The other...

bones. Of course.

"Why would they all come here if the stable wasn't finished?" Glory whispered, walking so close to me our shoulders brushed together.

I couldn't imagine... wait... "They didn't know it wasn't finished." No terminals. No wires or pipes or equipment. No water talisman or air purification talismans. Nothing but bare metal. I could see only one door, and it was to the overmare's office. We picked our way up the stairs to the balcony and to the office door. 'Murderer', 'Cunt', 'Motherfucker', and other epithets were written across its scratched and dinged surface.

Sure enough, it was locked, and I didn't have any bobby pins with me. I glanced at Glory, sighed, and pressed my horn to the lock. Twisting... twisting... Tears ran down my face, and then there was a snap. The door handle came right off! I beat on the door, but it was no less locked.

"Great. Now what?" I muttered.

Glory stepped back and looked above the door, at a gap between the structure and the armored ceiling of the stable. "Can you give me a boost?" she asked, her wings pressed firmly to her sides. It looked like she still wasn't quite able to fly. I helped push her up to the space and there were little metal clops as she walked over to the empty round window of the office. They were followed by the noises of Glory slipping through the window, and then there was a click as she unlocked the door from the other side.

"Wow... I can't believe that worked," I muttered as I pushed the door open. The contents of the overmare's office consisted of the overmare's desk, a single set of bones, a suitcase, and several empty Sparkle-Cola bottles and Fancy Buck Cake wrappers. Cavities meant for terminals gaped in the walls. There wasn't even a window in place.

I noticed the wrappers had writing on the inside. I carefully smoothed them out and started to read.

Day 1: Hello. My name is Buttercup, appointed overmare of Stable 90. If somepony is actually reading this, yeah... we're fucked. Sweet sweet Celestia are we fucked. I was notified by Stable-Tec that the real overmare died in a skywagon accident three days ago. I'd been told the stable was finished, furnished and ready to go. I was even going to get a tour and inspection next week and do our practice drills. I got the memo from the president of Stable-Tec telling me how Stable 90 was supposed to be some sort of tech experiment. Newest Pip-Bucks and terminals for everything. Then we got here and... nothing. We had to push the door open and closed again. The locks are the only thing holding it on, I think. There's no power. No water. No air. Yeah. Did I mention we're fucked?

Day 2: Things are getting ugly down there. Folks are screaming for my head. Anypony that had food and water has probably had it taken from them. There's been fights over bottles of Sunrise Sarsaparilla and Sparkle-Cola. Goddesses, if they knew I'd brought a twelve pack with me and some snacks... I guess the radiation shielding is working because nopony has died... yet.

Day 3: Yet has arrived. The old and anypony who's sick. They're now yelling for me to come down and open the lock, but I know better. I go down there and I might as well slit my own throat.

There's water, if you want to call it that, from the sumps and lowest places in the stable. I wish it were bone dry. I know what's coming.

Day 5: A mother begged me to let her and her daughter out. I told her plainly and simply that she could die in here or out there. She wasn't happy. Oh Celestia was she not happy. I keep thinking about all the work I didn't get finished, like it matters now. We were supposed to have a visit from the VP looking at the new tech coming out of our office. The best of it is probably going in 98, 99, and 101. Unless they got screwed too.

Day 7: I'd guess a quarter of the ponies are dead. They've made two piles: one of belongings and the other of the dead. Too bad they're not thinking clearly. If they heaped the dead on this side, then some of them would get the chance to climb up and kill me.

Day 10: I'm thinking of killing myself. That'd be just, right? I don't know what went wrong; communication screw up? Willful fuckery on the part of Stable-Tec? I think the only reason I don't is because I deserve to be the last pony who dies, so I can see this. I don't know if I'm responsible or not. I just know I feel responsible. I was with Stable-Tec. The paperwork said 90 was finished. I toured 89 just to the east of here. What the fuck went wrong?

Day 12: They've figured it out. Took them long enough. They've started to eat the dead. Goddesses, the smell; everything here smells of rot and decay. Some of them are throwing body parts up here to fuck with me. I throw them back. There's an insanity here. Something's snapped inside almost everypony. As we slowly starve, all the rules have broken down. It's not enough that we're starving; some of us have to kill.

Day 15: My last Fancy Buck Cake. It's banana. I hate banana. Funny, huh? I think it's funny. The survivors have a purpose: kill me. Or rape me and kill me, I'm not sure which. They howl for hours about what they're going to do when they catch me. The air's going bad though. Funny. We might suffocate before we all starve to death. Won't that be lovely? I've stopped throwing the body parts out. I might need them before this is done.

Day 18: The cannibals are now eating their own. The corpses are spoiling faster than they can be eaten. The air is simply foul. Every breath tastes like shit. It won't be long now. I'm out of Sparkle-Cola. I wonder what's left of the Hoof. I mean, I've heard Apple Bloom say that the Hoof is so overbuilt that nothing could take it out. I hope that's true. I hope we have one city left as a great 'Fuck You' to those zebra bastards.

Day 22: I watched the last two fight to the death. They're not eating each other anymore. I think they're just... ending it. When it was over, the one survivor just looked at me like he'd lost. Just looked at me. For hours and hours. Finally he said, "My name is Muddy." And that was it. He just lay down and never got up again.

Day 24: Done. I'm done. Stable 90: Shortest-lived stable in Equestria. Thought of ending it... don't deserve the quick end. This is Buttercup, acting overmare of Stable 90, and these are my last words: fuck Stable-Tec. Our stables suck. No. Those aren't my last words. I wanted to say

I put the notes back together again, carefully, and tucked them under Buttercup's bony hoof. I couldn't have imagined: these ponies had no more choice of whether to live or die than the ones who'd

been trapped outside the stable door... No, they'd had a choice: how to die. Priest had tried to explain that to me, that how we choose to meet our end was a choice he couldn't take away. Buttercup had chosen to delay her death and bear witness to the end of a stable.

Glory was looking at me funny. "Blackjack, when was the last time you ate something?"

"Huh? I'm not hungry." Especially not here and now. Actually, even after walking all day, I still wasn't hungry. My appetite was just gone. "Why don't you eat and rest?" I suggested with a grin. "I can take first watch. If that sniper finds this place, they won't be able to hide from my E.F.S." Then I looked at her burns and my smile became even more forced. "You need to take care of yourself, Glory. You don't want to get an infection on top of everything else." She looked at me in worry and then walked over to a small heap of Buttercup's clothes: a meager bed, but the best in this stable.

"Wake me in two hours, alright?" she asked quietly.

"Sure," I lied with an easy smile. She could use the rest. I knew I wasn't going to be sleeping. Not without some severe assistance from alcohol.

She gave me one last lingering look. "Alright, but eat something, please. You look terrible."

"Yes, Mom," I said sarcastically, but the concern in her eyes didn't fade like I'd hoped. She lowered her head and in a few minutes drifted off. She must have been exhausted.

I wasn't much better off. I sat down next to Buttercup as the time crawled by. The shaking had returned. My heart still hadn't slowed down, though at least it wasn't beating so loudly that I couldn't hear. A Sparkle-Cola was enough for me; I really didn't need much more than that right now. Sugar to keep me awake, water to keep me from getting thirsty, and I was good. Well, good enough.

I looked around the room for something to stop my mind from wandering. An old newspaper talking about a scandal at the Ministry of Peace; apparently some strings had gotten pulled and some ponies were still sore about it. There was even an investigation underway. The world falling apart with half-finished stables, and they were worried about mares calling in favors to be the first in a rocket ship. Small wonder everything blew to hell and stayed there.

"You look terrible," rasped the old buck beside me as he fanned out the cards between his hooves.

"I feel terrible, so it's appropriate," I muttered softly, not looking at somepony who wasn't there. "Actually, I am terrible. Why beat around the bush?" I glanced out the window into the atrium, seeing the heaped-up bones in the far corner of the room. "Do you like doing all this?"

"Asking questions of your hallucinations is a bad sign," he warned softly.

"I've got to talk to somepony," I whispered.

"I didn't do this," he said with a leathery sigh. "I didn't make ponies and zebras go to war. I didn't make them lose their senses. I didn't make them blow the world to hell. You folks did that all on your own. You created me. And now, for whatever reason, you folks just insist on perpetuating me. I can

count the number of ponies really trying to end me on one set of hooves. The others fighting me are just being pulled along, and there aren't even many of *them*." He stopped shuffling and looked up at me from under his hat. "Oh, and in case you were wondering, I didn't make those bastards burn her, or make you lie to your friend."

Glory shifted in her sleep, hiding her face in her hooves as she gave a soft whimper. Then, with tiny little sobs, she started to weep. She shook, and quietly I forced myself to my hooves and walked to her. As carefully as I could, I tried to hold her without shaking her awake. Fortunately, my limbs decided to listen to my damaged brain as I held her. "No..." she whimpered softly, "Mommy... no... please..."

The old buck looked at me with tired eyes as she gradually stilled; her breathing slowed and she eventually relaxed. I sighed softly, stroking her mane as he muttered gruffly, "I didn't do that either."

"No. But somepony did," I whispered. "They should pay for it."

"So you're saying now you'd push the button? Damn, if you'd done that back at the mine you might have gotten a chance to sleep in a nice bed tonight." He reached over and picked up a beer (with his hoof, somehow, but of course it was all a hallucination anyway), taking a sip as he watched me move away from the now quiet Glory. "So is this it then? Are you a killer?" He waved his hoof slowly in front of him. "Blackjack, executioner of the wastelands?"

"No. I'm not an executioner," I replied quietly.

"Well then, I'd suggest you figure out what you really are while you can hold on to it," he said as he held the beer out to me. "While there's still something to save."

"There's nothing in me worth saving. I've just got to take care of her and talk to P-21," I muttered, bringing the... empty Sparkle-Cola bottle to my lips. I looked at the little purple cartoon unicorn on the label and sighed softly before walking towards the door. "I really could have used a beer, too."

I made my way to the fallen stable door. I might have been in a body that was falling apart with a brain that was having conversations with hallucinations while my psychology frayed like a cheap saddle blanket, but I didn't need to spend my night breathing stinky air. I looked at the remains of the desperate ponies trying to get in and those of the ponies who'd been desperate to get out. I reached out with my magic and levitated a little stuffed unicorn from inside the stable and set it on the door with me. I'd had a unicorn like this when I was a foal. Like everything in 99, it'd been passed down from my mother and grandmother, only mine was purple and this one was purple and white.

The old bastard was right, though: I had a lot of hate in me. I wanted somepony to blame for this. Something that I could direct all my hate at so that it wasn't eating me up inside. Something I could point at and go 'There! There is the motherfucker responsible! Deal with him and everything will be fine!' But the ponies who had been the cause of this were long gone. I rolled onto my back, feeling my spine straighten and groaning as I hugged the little stuffed unicorn.

"I can count the number of ponies trying to stop me on four hooves," I muttered, wondering if my mind wasn't trying to send me a hint. The Stable Dweller was clearly one. That pony was fighting with every inch of her hooves to save the Wasteland. She'd never lie around and mope like this. I bet she'd get on her hooves and kick her way through all this mess! Maybe DJ Pon3 too, in his own weird way. I'd

listened to his broadcast earlier on radiation and taint; I supposed Enervation was a Hoofington problem. He might not have had a shotgun like the Stable Dweller, but he was at least trying to help.

That made me think of Bottlecap and what she had said. I hadn't really thought about it, given that I wasn't a smart pony, but I think she was trying to end the Wasteland too. She saw a way for trade to curb the impulses that tore down society. She might have been a businessmare with an eye for profit, but business was a means to an end, and that end was everypony getting what they needed.

Priest had to be the last. Not me. He was trying to end the Wasteland one soul at a time. He gave young ponies a home and a place to belong with the Crusaders; he cared. He genuinely cared for ponies whether he knew them or not. How could he go on caring day after day for ponies who he knew would eventually be gone? What kind of pony did that? While a dark and cynical part of my mind snickered 'Masochist', I had to admit I couldn't do it. I was lucky enough to care about Glory.

Slowly, I sat up again and looked at the stuffed unicorn. "The Stable Dweller wouldn't be afraid to listen to a recording," I muttered to the toy -- and if it started talking back to me, that was it! Get me a straightjacket. Talking toys was where I draw the line! I sighed and selected the recording 'BJ #2' on my PipBuck. I closed my eyes, getting ready for a kick to the gut.

I heard the sound of unsteady footsteps and ragged breathing. From the echoes and the whirr and gurgle of ventilation and pipes he had to be in the maintenance halls. Suddenly there was a rapid tap of hooves, an 'oomph', and a sound of two ponies sprawling. "*Hey! What... wait, what's a male doing down here?*" I heard my voice say. I couldn't remember this one, either. I was stationed down in the maintenance level due to my frequent slips in discipline. "*P... 13?*"

"Please... please..." he begged me softly.

"Sweet Celestia, what happened to you?" I heard myself mutter.

There came a distant shouting. "*Hey! Where the fuck are you, you blue cock?*" Daisy's voice; I'd know it anywhere. "*I still got an hour! Get the fuck out here!*" Her yells echoed off the concrete tunnels.

"Shit. Come on... hurry. She's tracking your PipBuck." My low voice was followed by the sounds of hooves on the concrete. I knew the maintenance tunnels. Daisy didn't. I knew where the generators futzed up tracking, all the good hiding places. "*Okay. Here's the plan. We wait here for her to go, wait for the hour, and then I'll get you up to medical.*"

"Why are you helping me?" he whispered.

"Huh?"

"Why are you helping me? You're a mare."

"So what? I'd help anypony get away from Daisy. Besides, it looks like she tried to kick your head off. What did you do?"

"She didn't... climax," he muttered.

"What a cunt," I grumbled in return. *"No excuse to go damaging stable property just because she can't get off."* As I listened to myself I clenched my teeth and squeezed my eyes shut. Damaging property, because I couldn't figure out then that he wasn't property, he was a person! A person getting beaten because he didn't push Daisy's buttons right.

There was a soft pause. *"No. No excuse for that."*

"It's not like bucks don't try to make it nice..." I said in annoyance. Was I always this fucking chatty when hiding?

"We have to..."

"What?"

"We have to... if we don't... in medical... they give us the shock."

"The what?"

"A shock. Till we can. Or drugs. Or they beat us. Or just retire us..."

An awkward silence. *"Oh... well... I get double shifts if I slack off. We all have to do our job, right?"* I bit the stuffed unicorn to keep from screaming at myself. I had to work a double shift if I was bad. He was electrocuted or beaten or killed if he didn't please his rapists!

"...right..." I could barely hear him over Daisy's shouting.

"Shit. She's coming this way. Look, I'll lead her off. Have her talk to Rivets if she's seen you. Just stay out of sight."

"Thank you."

"Don't worry. It's the least I can do."

There was the noise of me greeting Daisy and receiving a slew of profanity in return. Then the noise of our voices retreating as we commiserated on 'fucking males'.

"Yeah... it is..."

The least I could do. More because I was interested in pissing off Daisy than in actually helping the 'damaged property'. Because once he'd gotten back to medical they would have patched him up and then punished him for skipping out on his duties. I never got shocked no matter how much I screwed up. Mom never beat me with a stick... although she should have. And while some ponies threatened to kill me, I never really took it seriously.

But now that I was thinking about it, males were retired all the time. Not just for becoming the newest 21. You'd hear about some mare flipping out and damaging 'breeding equipment'. You'd be mad, not because some poor buck had been smashed, but because you might be pushed back in the breeding rotation. If a female died, everypony knew. When a male died, it was barely even mentioned.

The least I could do. What could I have done? I could have put the beat down on Daisy; she was bigger and stronger than me, but I could have at least tried. I could have talked to medical; the ponies there freaked me out, but they might listen to me. Fuck, I could have talked to Mom. She was head of security! Certainly something about that fucked-up stable could be fixed. Or I could have gotten a gun, killed the Overmare, and ended the whole sick game.

I'm not an executioner.

I slowly opened my eyes, looked at the stuffed unicorn with her fabulous purple mane. Right now, honestly, I wouldn't mind some advice, even from a toy. Still, I doubted it would be of much help. Crazy hallucinations or not, they came from my crazy brain.

* * *

I awoke to the unfamiliar sensation of clothes draped over me. My eyes popped open to the furious beating in my chest. I flopped spastically, then rolled to my feet. "I'm up! I'm up!" I quickly looked around the entrance to the stable. "Glory? Glory!" I shouted as adrenaline rushed through me. I took another step and my legs buckled, sending me sprawling on my face. "Ow..." I muttered, lying there.

"I'm over here, Blackjack," she said, waving from the stack of clothes and suitcases. An old spark lantern flickered beside her. "I'm glad you got some sleep," she said as she opened a suitcase and rifled through it. I fumbled with my pack for the tin of Fixers and chewed one down before the shakes began.

"Sorry I fell asleep," I muttered, finally able to sit up and trot over to her.

"You needed it," she replied with a smile, then looked at me critically. "Come to think of it, you look like you still need it."

"It's not that bad," I insisted and rifled through my saddlebags for a bottle of Sparkle-Cola.

"You need food. Not sugar."

"I'm fine," I insisted. "I'm just having trouble sleeping." Not last night though. I think I must have passed out. I sat down and watched her dig through the suitcases with a small smile. "Find anything good?"

"Mmmm... yes, actually," she said as she hopped down off the stack and nudged some magazines towards me. "There's an excellent Scientific Equestria here. A Big Book of Arcane Science. Even a Canterlot Journal of Medicine!" I couldn't... and really didn't bother... hiding my yawn. She sighed and then smiled. "I also found an Ironshod Firearms catalogue."

"Oooh, Gimme!" I said with a grin.

"Only if you eat," she said firmly, pressing both forehooves down on the magazine. "I don't care what, but eat something. Then you can read up on your guns."

"Ugh... fine." My ears drooped as I rifled through my bags and came up with a Fancy Buck Cake.

I could imagine the old bastard laughing. Instead I settled for Carrot Crunchies. She gave me the magazine and I couldn't help but grin as I buried my muzzle in the box while reading over the top.

"Lots of photographs and letters, too. I don't think they had a fire; good thing or they would have smothered." I gave a general grunt as I looked over the spectacular firearms in the catalogue. And they were all new! "Look, here's a photo of Fluttershy," Glory's comment made me pause.

I swallowed and lifted my eyes from the page. She'd found one of the few things that could have broken my attention from the shiny bang sticks. With orange crumbly bits stuck to my mouth, I trotted over and looked at the photograph.

She was beautiful. Maybe that was a strange thought to have, but at least the cynical part of my brain silently agreed. She had a strange, wholesome appearance that simply made me feel good. She wasn't like the white unicorn beside her with the purple mane. She reminded me more of Midnight, so I guessed that the unicorn kept her appearance through painstaking effort. Beyond them was the familiar image of my orange figurine. Applejack. I tapped a hoof at the unicorn. "That's... Rarity?"

"Mhmmm."

"She looked different in my textbooks," I said as I glanced at them. The Ministry of Wartime Technology was pretty cut and dry: they made guns. I had to admit though, Applejack didn't look nearly as thrilled to be in front of the audience. It looked like Rarity was practically thrusting both of them into the spotlight. "What did her Ministry do again?"

Glory reached over and bit the corner of my box of Carrot Crunchies, passing them to me before answering, "The Ministry of Image was... well, actually, I'm really not sure. They just did stuff for the other ministries. Printed books. Arranged events." I continued eating as I flipped through some more pictures in the stack Glory had found; they were obviously professionally done. I saw the cavernous atrium of the Fluttershy Medical Center in all its beauty, so I guessed that whoever took these had to be a photographer. One picture showed Applejack next to a green earth pony buck, her large hat blocking my view of his face. Still, he was standing awfully close in most of these pictures.

Then I saw a picture that just... confused me. It was of Rarity standing in a niche off to one side, talking to some buck. He faced away from the camera, and all I could see of him was a white coat and a golden mane. What confused me was the look on her face, like it was midway between shifting expressions from anger to something else. Fear... and she did not strike me as a pony that showed fear lightly. Unfortunately, I didn't see any other pictures of the buck Rarity'd been talking with.

As interesting as the pictures were, I didn't see them as being particularly valuable. All they really seemed to do for me was remind me that once upon a time life had been better. I gave Glory one more hour to pick through the contents of the suitcases as I finished browsing the articles in the front of the Ironshod catalogue, watching her from the corner of my eye. I took another Buck and Steady while she had her head in the pile, and then finished it off with another Fixer tablet. I felt like I was almost approaching normal.

With her bags full we carefully picked our way back up to the surface. No long-range beams of death; good. Instead of going straight towards Flank, we moved overland along the edge of the badlands. The broken terrain was a pain to navigate, but offered much more cover in the long run. Unfortunately,

we'd barely been travelling for an hour when the Fixer wore off. It'd been growing more and more abrupt each time it stopped working.

My legs gave out beneath me and my hooves scrambled for purchase on the slope. Grit and gravel popped under my feet as I went over the edge and tumbled down the rocks. I crashed at the bottom and lay there. My PipBuck flashed warnings of a little unicorn with her limbs and chest bright red. I clenched my eyes shut as I first took a Med-X for the pain, and then another Hydra. I felt the fractures in my crippled limbs slowly healing, and I could see the bars slowly fill. I was finally able to choke down a tablet of Fixer to calm my beating heart.

"Blackjack!" Glory called from above. For once I was glad she wasn't flying. Limping on broken legs, I picked my way along the base of the slope till we met. "Are you okay?"

"Sure," I smiled. "You've seen me. It'd take more than just a tumble like that to slow me down." I couldn't be weak. I couldn't. "I got a peek over the edge and... well... got dizzy, I guess."

"We should head back to the road," Glory said as she looked at the next ridge. It was even higher and steeper than the one I'd rolled down. I couldn't argue. Right now I was feeling delightfully numb as I was spared the discomfort of two broken legs and a busted set of ribs. If I'd had some Hydra on me when fleeing Stable 99, P-21 wouldn't have his limp.

If I just had a steady supply of Fixer, this wouldn't be a problem.

Making our way north towards the highway, we were lucky enough to come across a rusty, mineral-encrusted piece of equipment that hissed steam and dripped hot water. 'Well #33', my PipBuck said. Pipes from the equipment ran up and over the ridge to the east. I was more interested in the two dead Steel Rangers; well, actually, I was more interested in their weapons and ammunition. If the value listed on my PipBuck was any indication, it'd help our profits immensely. Still... *something* had to have killed them.

"What the heck is it?" I asked, gesturing at the steaming mound of metal. Glory knew more about machines than I did, unless it was a machine that went bang.

"A geothermal wellhead. Um... a hot spring?" Glory quickly amended. "It pipes hot groundwater to a town or building." She smiled up at it. "I was reading about them in Scientific Equestria. Hoofington experimented with all kinds of alternative power sources. Geothermal, hydroelectric, arcane spark reactors... things that might have ended Equestria's need for zebra coal."

"Huh..." I said as I looked at all the pipes and valves, pretending that I understood half of what she had said. It had more than a healthy amount of rust and minerals, but it still seemed intact. Pretty impressive for--

The green energy beam punched right through my barding... my chest... and my barding. Again.

'*Ohshitshitohshitshit...*' was all that went through my mind as my chest filled with fire. Falling behind the remains of the Steel Rangers, I was surprised at how little the injury hurt. Maybe it was the Med-X, the regeneration from the Hydra, or the fortifying effects of Buck, but I wasn't *quite* dead. However, I certainly wasn't going to be moving for a bit... quite a bit, probably, since I now had a

pencil-thick hole lined with cooked meat running all the way through my body.

Glory darted beside me, crouching behind the armor as she turned me on my side and started pouring every healing potion she had into the hole. “Don’t move. Don’t die. Don’t move. Don’t die,” she repeated over and over as I felt my body drag itself back from the edge. She looked at the hole and muttered, “Shit... I don’t want to use this, but...” and pulled out an ampule of Hydra. Why she wouldn’t use it first, I had no idea. I nodded and she pumped the wonderful regenerative chem into my chest. My heart and head started to pound as the magic repaired the most critical damage. But I couldn’t slow my breathing as adrenaline coursed through me.

“Okay. I’m good,” I groaned. I was a long way from good, but I had just crossed into ‘shooting this fucker many many times’ territory.

“You are not good. I just injected you with Hydra. When it wears off, your heart could stop.” Excuse me? Cardiac arrest was not on the list of possible side effects! Actually, I wasn’t sure. Had there been a list of side effects? She dug in her uniform’s pockets for a Buck tablet. “I hate to do this but... eat this.”

“Yeah. Good idea,” I muttered. “And then let me have a tablet of Fixer... slow my heart down before I pass out.”

“Slow your heart rate? Fixer wouldn’t do that. It’d make a heart attack more likely. Put you in shock.”

I saw the red bars appearing one after another. “That’s all mights and maybes. They’re coming, and that sniper will kill me, and maybe you, if they get another shot,” I said as I dug out my own tablets from the infirmary and swallowed one down. I fumbled for some Steady, and then kicked myself when I realized I was out of that particular chem. “Now I need some Steady... and a plan.”

“Blackjack! You’ve taken Hydra, Buck, Fixer, and you want to take Steady too? Why not add some Rage and Dash and complete the set? Are you trying to kill yourself with a pharmacological reaction?”

“Big words later, Steady now,” I said as my limbs spasmed. She looked more scared than me as she dug out her own supply of the chem and injected it. Fortunately, it had the effect I needed. I lay back behind the fallen armor. “Okay. Better now. Much better.” Enervation or not, enough magic and chems had been pumped into me to bring about my recovery. “Now for a...”

There was a sharp ping as a round ricocheted off the dead Ranger armor inches from my head.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” I muttered, imagining the gunponies advancing on our cover while the beam sniper readied a killing blow. But if we moved, odds were that one of us was going to get hit. I doubted I could survive a second hit from that gun. There were rocks further up the valley that might offer some cover... but we had no way to reach those. Then I looked back at the wellhead behind us. The hissing little streams of white...

“Glory?”

"Yeah?" she asked, peeking to the side.

"This hot spring thingy... it's got steam, right?"

She looked back behind us. "Yeah..."

"A lot of steam?"

"Maybe. I think so. Enough to cook us, yeah."

"Enough to hide us?"

She buried her face in her hooves and groaned. "Oh no."

I pulled out my carbine, looked at the mass of tubes and valves, and slapped in a magazine of armor piercing bullets. "Ante up!" I shouted as I took aim at the pipes and sprayed the magazine back and forth. Scalding water and jets of steam burst out with a cry like a possessed teakettle. Great plumes of steam erupted in white, sulfur-scented clouds that washed over us. My hide immediately began to scald as the white mist boiled past. It was now or never. I took the Pecos twelve gauge and raced out to the side, towards the first red bar on my E.F.S.

Maybe it was the chems or the hole that had just gone through me, or maybe my brain had finally cracked, but as I charged the bounty hunter who backed away from the swirling wall of steam rising before him, time seemed to slow. I heard a saxophone start to play, and Sapphire Shores was singing a sad, lonely tune...

*Toooooo-night, I feel your love has gone
I feel this same sad song
When I'm without you...*

I slid towards him as his rifle shots went high, my knees churning up the dirt as hot condensation and sweat dripped off my grinning lips. I pressed the barrel beneath his chin and removed his head. Grabbing his falling body with my hooves, I jerked it into the rain of fire that had followed me out of the swirling steam.

*You saaaaaay our time has finally passed
You think this love can't last
But I'll prove you wrong...*

As I came around the rear of my shield, every thundering beat of my heart marked quarter seconds; each beat took an eternity as if I were swimming through S.A.T.S. The next two ponies turned, trying to bring their battle saddles around as I ran behind the pair, my floating pump action swinging to unload twelve gauge buckshot to the backs of their heads. One rolled, leaping wildly as the other fell in a more bloody fashion.

*Some ponies think... I'm a fool standing here
Expecting you to walk through that door.
Moonlight is shining... through the darkness of night*

And I know what's in stooooore...

There were more coming out of the rocks and shrubs. My barding took a pounding, the steel plates deflecting some of the fire, but not all. I kept moving, leaping at a unicorn floating an SMG towards me far more quickly than the others with their heavier saddles could turn. My magic reached out and precisely ejected the magazine as he fired. I wrapped my forehooves around his neck, stared into his eyes, and unloaded two telekinetic bullets into his face.

*I knooooooooow one day that you'll be back
One day you'll take the track
Back to my heaaaaaart...*

Blood spurted past my eyes as I pulled him around, throwing his body with all the force I could muster into the face of the next enemy. Steam and guns and so many red bars. Flashes of light told me that Glory still wasn't out of the fight. The saxophone and piano played on in my head as my vision started to darken. As the hunter tried to deflect the tossed cadaver, my shotgun tore great bleeding chunks in his leather armor.

*Toooooonight you might be long gone
But as I sing this song
I feel my love is strong
As I wait for... you... ...*

As I listened to the last chords of the piano, my body slowly crumpled beneath me and slammed into the dirt. Foam coated my lips as I gasped for air, my heart no longer individual beats but now almost a constant purr. Blood poured from my mouth and my eyes as I lay there choking, looking up at the gunners as they slowly moved in to finish me off. The final notes trailed off in my mind, finished by Sapphire Shores's saucy little 'oh yeah'.

The half-dozen or so remaining fighters slowly moved around me as I lay there, unable to even raise my head as my heart crashed inside my chest. I heard Glory struggle against two earth ponies who were practically atop her, holding her down. I heard one of them mutter about Paradise.

I'm so sorry, Glory.

From the middle of the hunters stepped an orange earth pony with a red mane and a lion cutie mark. He was dressed in one of the most elaborate battle saddles I'd ever seen. He wore a helmet with a pair of targeting goggles attached to the brim. His beam rifle showed heavy modifications that I could only guess were what had allowed him to shoot through me. "Well now. Looks like old Leo Zodiac finally brought down Security, eh folks?" he said as he turned to the other hunters. "Told ya, didn't I, that I'd be the one to take her down?" He pointed with a hoof at my PipBuck. "Get that off her lickety split."

One voice rose above the babbled praise, dripping with contempt. "Oh yeah, Leo. You're such a badass," the mare said, and the cocky smirk vanished. Through the dust and smoky haze approached a pony shape that seemed made of jagged steel.

"We're done here, freak. We don't need your help after all," he said sharply, turning to point that gun as the newcomer slowly advanced. Something was definitely amiss, though; she didn't seem at all

worried, despite being outnumbered with a beam gun pointed at her. In fact, she looked as happy as me with a full bottle of Wild Pegasus.

As I saw more, I decided that that was the least odd thing about this mare. At first, I thought she wore magical power armor like the Steel Rangers. Instead, the polished steel plate formed a shining armor that covered not just her torso but the exterior of all her limbs, chest, and belly. Along her back rose a ridge of blades that slowly scissored with each step she took. The helmet that covered her face was topped with a wide, horn-like blade. Each hoof ended in curving metal claws attached to her horseshoes, and something woven into her red, braided tail gleamed. A number of blades were strapped to the outside of her armor.

This had to be a Reaper.

"Oh, Leo. I'm sorry I didn't make myself clearer earlier. When I said I was coming with you to find Security, I wasn't after the bounty. I don't do bounties," she said casually, walking in front of the ponies with a sure little smile. She stopped, standing right in front of me as she looked at the hunters.

"Right. Sorry. My mistake." And with those words the buck gestured with his head. Leo's beam rifle fired, striking her right in the side as all of the other guns roared, spraying the pale mare with a barrage that plinked and popped off her polished armor. She looked down at me gasping for air, and winked.

Then the gunfire stopped and she grinned at the hunters. "My turn!"

I could only imagine how much all that steel weighed. So when she crouched, I anticipated a charge. Instead, the pale mare jumped into the air in a glittering steel arc. Leo turned to run without another word, but everypony else just watched her. A second later, four bladed hoofclaws crushed one of the hunters like a baby radscorpion.

Things rapidly went downhill from there. I admit, I can get brutal in a fight, but I was as tame as a newborn foal compared to this. The pony in metal didn't fight; she annihilated all that came within reach of her hooves. I watched a hit from one of her hindhooves stave in the side of a mare. She reared and utterly pulverized the face of a buck with devastating rakes of those blades attached to her forelegs. When the rest got the clue to run, she didn't let them get far.

When she returned, she even carried Leo's twisted and broken beam rifle in her mouth. Spitting it aside, she sat on her rump, regarding me coolly as she dripped gore. Correction, dripped gore *happily*. A small but important and disturbing detail. "Hi. You really look a mess." She walked to one of the corpses and ripped open its saddlebag. After rooting for a bit, she pulled out a bottle of water, twisted, and removed the top. She spat the plastic cap into the brush. "Stampede and Hydra?" she asked in a strange, slightly slurring voice as her pink eyes looked down at me.

"Buck... s...Steady... Hydra..." I coughed.

"Wuss," she said with a snort as she held the water to my lips and carefully trickled it down my throat. Glory came limping out of the brush, her uniform glistening with blood. I started to try and rise, but she put a bloody hoof atop my head. "Stay down." She looked at Glory. "She'll live. Zodiac wasn't trying to hit anything major on your friend."

"Who are you?" Glory asked as she approached the armored mare.

"Somepony helping," she replied. "But most folks call me Rampage. It's that certain something that makes me special." She grinned at the pair of us. "Now, barring your heart exploding in the next fifteen minutes, you're going to lie there and breathe. If you try and get up, I'll sit on you."

"You know a lot about chems?" Glory asked, looking a little more sure.

"Through trial and error," she replied as she looked down at me. "Give her water if you've got it." Glory immediately started to dig through her bags as the armored mare grinned and looked down at me. "Could be worse, though. She could be strung out on Dash. That shit's fucking obnoxious. Or Mint-als: even worse than Dash."

"So. What's the plan? Help me recover and then trot me to Deus?" I rasped, not even bothering to try and stand. My nose bled from the thundering blood pressure.

"Oh, you think I'm after Deus's bounty?" she asked with a sneer, and stood. She turned sideways, dragging her hoofclaws through the dirt as she grinned at me like some horrid hybrid of dragon and pony. Her tail glistened from the razor wire woven into it. "Do I really look like a pony that gives a fuck about bottle caps?" I really couldn't say she did.

I carefully sipped the water for a second. "Why help us, then?"

"The kindness of my heart?" she suggested, pressing a hoof to her chest. I kept my look as level as I could manage. She snorted, "Well maybe not. Just be glad I want to help you."

"Not good enough," I said as I forced myself to sit up, even with my legs shaking so hard they threatened to buckle beneath me. "Last pony I trusted without finding out what they wanted ended up killing a whole lot of folks who didn't deserve it. Why?"

"I'm more curious what you think you're going to do if I don't answer. You can barely sit up," she said with a little smirk. I levitated the shotgun under her chin. To my consternation, she grinned. "Go ahead, do it." I almost did.

"I've had bad experiences with one Reaper already. And last time I trusted somepony to 'help' me, a lot of innocent zebras died. So, again... why?" I tried my best to keep my voice level. It took every bit of my focus to prevent the gun from shaking.

She looked sour a moment and then shrugged, her pink eyes staring into my red ones. "Big Daddy Reaper asked me to. Happy? If you want to know why, ask him." The Reaper gave me a grin I'd seen plenty of times before. All she needed was a deck of cards to shuffle.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk Added: Chemist - Chems you take now last twice as long.

Skill note: Guns (100)

(Huge thanks to Kkat for making FoE in the first place, to Hinds and Bronode for helping me brush out all the mistakes, and to readers for leaving comments!)