

## Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Sombra

### Chapter 15: Flank

*"That wasn't the doozy? How could that not be the doozy?!"*

Once upon a time, when I was just a filly, my flank was blank, and then one day it wasn't anymore. Rivets had inherited a deck of cards from her mother, and we were playing blackjack, the only card game my feeble math skills could handle. Rivets, Daisy, Marmalade, Hatches, and I were sitting around a table in a storeroom, drinking synthetic apple juice and betting impossible sums with nuts, bolts, screws, and the occasional actual old bit. We were having a great time.

Then Hatches had to go pee. The door of the storeroom was like most: a pair of metal plates slid up and down by an electric motor connected to a button. She'd pressed that and started through. There had been a short, and the door had closed on her, the large, heavy slab falling from above and the smaller sheet being pushed up from below, with her body in the middle. A horrible snapping sound, then the mechanism had caught and the door opened again. Over in a second. We'd just watched, stunned, as she kept walking on shaking limbs. She'd reached the stairs before she crumpled and died two minutes later. We still just watched, too shocked to even move.

Did I mention that we only started calling her Hatches after she was crushed?

I couldn't even remember her real name. I wished I could remember her name, because I now knew exactly how she felt walking down that long metal tunnel. My heart continued its rapid staccato as every step made my organs feel as if they were sloshing around inside me. Only the Buck kept me walking; we'd run out of Steady, and I was forced to walk between Glory and the curious Reaper that had saved our lives.

"I need a Fixer. Why can't I have a Fixer again?" I asked as I slumped against Rampage's polished metal armor. The articulated plates shifted under my thrashed barding.

"Fixer is not a cure. Fixer is an even worse drug than most of what you've been swallowing while my back was turned." Glory was decidedly snippy and had retracted her previous statement about my intelligence. Instead of lecturing me about how I'd screwed up so badly, she had decided to try and fix the problem by educating me about it. "Fixer's a psychoactive like Dash and Mint-als. It doesn't do anything for your actual symptoms but make them ignorable. You have been trotting around with your heart rate at over a hundred beats a minute when you should have been lying down, trying to metabolize the chemicals and recover."

"Besides, you ate the last tablet an hour ago," Rampage added with an amused snicker. In the few hours we'd been travelling together, I'd learned little from the strange pony with shining armor, who was still smeared with darkening gore. Her hoofclaws tapped the asphalt with a persistent metallic beat as we walked. I had, though, been able to see that her armor wasn't part of her body or something, like Deus's; it was just really good metal armor, and the pony under its bulk seemed not much larger than me. I'd also noticed that the few bits of coat the armor left exposed bore strange bright red markings in a pattern that looked almost like zebra stripes.

She also ate Mint-als like clockwork, taking out the white tablets and popping them in her mouth one by one. But did Glory give her a fifteen-minute lecture on the properties and perils of Mint-als? Nooo. Instead, I learned more about pharmacology than I ever cared to.

Steady, I discovered, caused nerve damage if used too frequently. Med-X could cause the mind to experience phantom pains. Buck was damaging my joints and muscles and doing a number on my reproductive system. But the real monster, apparently, was Hydra.

“Only unicorns can perform magical healing, and there are few who can perform the service. As a result, pegasi and earth ponies found a way to regenerate injuries using a hormonal extract of certain glands from hydras, hence the name. The harvesting is difficult enough, but the real peril is that the chemical suppresses normal recovery long after it wears off. Your body’s natural healing processes fail, and you die cell by cell.” She looked scared. “One Hydra is bad enough, but two or three... you can drop dead on your hooves.”

“And that’s not counting taking a stroll through some nice quiet E-fields,” interjected Rampage. “I’ve seen ponies liquefy from a combination of Hydra and a strong enough Enervation field. Kinda cool to watch, actually,” she said brightly, grinning at the sick look Glory and I shared. “Oh, what? You think that’s the worst way to die?”

“No,” I muttered. “I’ve seen worse.”

“Like what?” she asked with a mocking little smirk.

I really wasn’t in the mood for Reaper taunting. I looked at her flatly. “I fed a pony through a rock crusher once.” She blinked, looking speculative. “Tail first,” I added, and was rewarded with a small look of shock on her face. Now her pink eyes looked skeptical. “It’s true. It was the only way I could kill a pony monster named Gorgon.”

Rampage stopped in her tracks, and I slid off her side and fell flat on my face. “You really killed Gorgon?”

“At Brimstone’s Fall,” I answered as I tried to get my hooves to support me. “He was trying to kill me. He’d taken over the mine and I had to take him out.” Her wording hit me. “How did you...” I nervously started to ask.

Rampage gave me an even stare. “Gorgon is... was... I knew him.” I felt dread creep up my spine. If she decided to attack and avenge him, what could I do to stop it? My only chance was three magic bullets to the face, and even then I wasn’t sure I could pull it off. “And he was a friend,” she added, and I almost switched to S.A.T.S. right then. But instead of looking angry or upset... I couldn’t tell what that expression was. Was it happiness? “Lucky bastard.”

She bit the neck of my barding and hauled me to my hooves. “You aren’t mad?” I asked.

“Should I be?” she asked in return once I was standing.

Glory looked at her, as confused and wary as me. “He was your friend.”

She sighed. "There are worse things you could have done to him."

"But... who was he? What was he?" Glory asked.

"My friend the monster," was all she answered, and after a look at the scowl that accompanied it I nudged Glory and shook my head. Rampage was not a safe pony to press right now. Not till we knew more about her. She certainly wasn't the psychopath I'd envisioned... but that didn't mean she wasn't a psychopath I *hadn't* envisioned.

We walked along together for a bit in welcome silence. We were entering a small valley where the Sunset Highway crossed over another road from Hoofington before heading off to the southwest towards Fillydelphia. We'd been hit by raiders twice. Fortunately, I simply sat my butt down, floated the carbine over my head, and played gun turret while Rampage eagerly dismembered them. The white and red pony's serrated armor tore our attackers in half, and each kick of her hoofclaws shredded hide and armor alike. Watching her moves, I realized two things: I did not want to fight her, and I appreciated just how tough Reapers had to be.

Reapers... just like Deus.

"Have you ever heard of somepony named Sanguine?" I asked as we finished looting the second band of raiders. I wasn't finding any links to the Enclave on them, but paranoia was nibbling at my mane.

"Sure," Rampage replied. "He's a unicorn ghoul. Real nutcase too: drinks blood. Lots of business deals and a surprisingly snappy dresser. Used to be a doctor before the war, or so I heard." She looked down at me with a smirk. "And no, personally I don't do much business with him. He works out of Paradise, though; he's hoof in frigging hoof with Usury."

"Is there a way I can get in contact with him?"

"Why would you want to?"

I lifted my PipBuck. "He wants a file on this. He sent Deus to my stable, and I'm pretty sure he's why Deus is after me."

"Uh... no. Having a vagina and having shot at him with artillery is why Deus's after you. But yeah, he works a lot with Sanguine." She took a deep breath. "If you really want to hand the file over, he'd probably pay you and smooth things over with Deus and Usury. Maybe get you out of the Hoof. But if he wants that file, it's because somepony else wants it. Somepony with a lot of pull in the Hoof. I can only think of two or three with that kind of swing... four, if you throw in the Enclave," she added with a glance at Glory. "Big Daddy Reaper, Elder Crunchy Carrots, and King Awesome."

I couldn't have heard that right. "King... Awesome?" And here I thought calling myself Security was pretentious.

"He's the head of the Society," Rampage said and then snorted. "Hey, don't look at me. I didn't name him."

“And is he?” I asked with a wan grin. “Awesome, I mean?”

Rampage shrugged. “The Society is the biggest source of real food in the Hoof. King Awesome managed to get the plantations working, screwing over the Eggheads in the process. They charge a premium, but food is food.” She glanced at me. “Of course, they use slaves to farm it.”

Any affinity I had for Prince Splendid withered on the vine. “They what?” Rampage seemed amused by my anger.

“Sure. You don’t expect aristocrats to get their hooves dirty, do you? Until Red Eye came along, they were the premier slaveholders in the Hoof... heck, maybe in all of Equestria.” She frowned and rubbed her chin. “You know... I always wondered where Red Eye got the caps to pay for all those slaves he’s been funneling into Fillydelphia. Hmm.” She shrugged and looked at me again. “Anyway, the Society prefers to call them ‘serfs’ and ‘servants’, but it’s one pony wearing an explosive collar and another pony with their hoof on the trigger. So it sounds like slaves to me.”

Even feeling as lousy as I did and with everything churning in my brain, I somehow managed some fresh, smoldering anger. It was refreshing to have something wrong to focus against. I might not be able to do anything right now, but it was something to think about. I added it to my mental ‘things to do’ list somewhere underneath ‘Survive’ and above ‘Save Equestria’.

We arrived. The town filling most of the valley had evidently once been a major suburb of Hoofington. Several five and six-story buildings hunched sullenly together in the center of the ruins like brooding mares. We passed by a sign that read ‘Welcome to Flankfurt. Hope you like your stay.’ That warm greeting was marred by less charming messages like ‘DASH: 20% more fucked!’, ‘STELLA!’, ‘Fuck Caprice: 50 caps’, ‘Fried in ten seconds flat’, and ‘DIE ZEBRA DIE!’ There was a balefire crater to the north, but most of Flank appeared burned rather than blasted. A morass of ponds and muck lingered in and around the roofless remains of the houses, but I didn’t see one strand of swamp grass. Nothing grew in Flank.

Then I felt it. My heartbeat was becoming irregular and I staggered, my hooves falling out from under me. Blood was trickling down my nose and out of my ears. Tears much too thick to be simple salt water ran down my cheeks. I couldn’t seem to breathe as I feel flat on my face.

“Blackjack? Blackjack! What’s wrong?” Glory yelled as she turned me on my side.

“Enervation, probably. Flank is full of E-fields,” Rampage said in mild irritation. “Guess the Hydra weakened her body enough that she’s crashing.”

“Do something!” Glory said as she looked up at the Reaper, “Please!”

Rampage rolled her eyes and gave a dismissive snort, grabbed me, and dragged me several feet back. My heartbeat steadied as I lay there. Now, more than ever, I suddenly realized just how fucked up I was. I could have died! I could have liquefied... I...

It finally happened: I was afraid of dying. Not of dying personally; that was sort of a ‘well, it would suck if I did’ kind of concern. No, it was thinking about not resolving things with P-21. It was wondering what would happen to Glory if I died. Thinking of that, for the first time ever, I realized I was scared

shitless that I'd kick it and leave them to go on without me.

I was such a stupid pony that I had to bleed from my tear ducts before I could see that.

I don't know what Glory was doing; injecting me with the very chems that had deteriorated my body, I supposed. She gave me a healing potion that tasted like ass, but I couldn't even throw it up. "We have to get her to Flank's doctor now," Glory said desperately as she looked down the highway at the distant gates. It was at least a mile or two. Maybe more.

"Give her some Dash," Rampage said as she eyed the ruins around us.

"Oh, pop another Mint-all!" Glory snapped back.

"She's this close to dying anyway," Rampage said as she took out the tin and licked up one of the tablets, chewing. "If she can make the run, maybe Scalpel can get her in the auto-doc fast enough to do something. Otherwise, she's a corpse." She frowned. "And in case you missed it... we got scavengers coming."

I saw them creeping out of the burned-out ruins. Naked and emaciated or wearing the thinnest rags. Bloodshot and yellowed eyes. Slat-sided ponies, poor and desperate, crept slowly closer and closer. They all looked just as wrecked as I was, but there were a lot more of them than of me. "Give it to me," I wheezed.

"Oh dear Luna, I can't believe I'm doing this," Glory groaned and took out a red cartridge with a mouth tube attached. She put it to my lips. "Breathe in as deeply as you can..." she muttered as her hooves compressed the cartridge and I felt a hot, stinging gas fill my lungs.

Funny. I didn't notice much difference. What was the big deal? I stood up and shook myself off as I grinned at all the gaunt ponies starting to surround us. Heh. They were all staring at me, which made sense. I'm Security. The bad ass. The mare with the hundred thousand cap bounty! In one puff I'd gone from dying to amazing in ten seconds flat. Glory just looked at me like she was going to cry; why? I felt great! I was great! I think I just felt an orgasm, yeah!

"Hey, Blackjack, bet you can't beat me to the gate!" Rampage taunted as she started to run. Oh, miss Reaper thought she could beat me? Nothing could beat me! I could fly right now. And I was going to prove it as I started to run. I was so badass I was drooling! Yeah! Badass! As we ran I felt all sickly, but freaky freaky magical fields can't touch Blackjack!

Everypony at the gates of Flank was staring and stepping aside. You bet they would. 'Cause Blackjack was in town! Look out Flank, I'm bringing the gun and the fun and the funktastica! I didn't even know what that word meant, but I was bringing it, because I'm Blackjack! The Security Mare. Awwwww yeah!

"We're walking!" Rampage said as she walked ahead of me. Oh, miss armored pony thought she was going to win? No way! 'Cause I am Blackjack, made of awesome. Bleeding awesome! Yeah! I couldn't really pay much attention because my eyes weren't working. That's 'cause I got freaky freaky mutant eyes. 'Cause I'm cool... and stuff...

It was getting kinda hard to walk. Rampage bit me by the neck of my barding and dragged me the last few feet into a building that smelled of blood. And piss. And shit. And blood. Oh, that must be me. Because I smell awesome. Once inside, she dropped me to the floor.

"Mom!" Rampage roared. "Warm up the autodoc, now!" It looked like some sort of doctor's office, like medical back in 99. A long counter ran across the middle of the room and four armored guards were rising to their hooves.

"Rampage?" An older lavender unicorn poked her head into the foyer and looked at me through thick, black-framed glasses. She wore a profound expression of disappointment. Her white labcoat was smeared with numerous stains. "Not another one, Rampage. I can't keep treating every poor thing you bring in. Just give it some Dash and let it die in peace."

"It's Security, Mom," Rampage said. Everything began to tumble away. "And I think her heart's stopped..."

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"So, who can name the six ministries established by Princess Luna to combat zebra aggression and save Equestria?" our teacher, Textbook, asked as she looked over all the attentive fillies and colts as we sat together in Stable 99's classroom. The projector showed cartoony pictures of six mares arranged around Princess Luna. A gray circle looped around them. The red mare lowered her glasses. "Blue?"

The young blue colt sitting ahead of me cleared his throat as he stood. "The six ministries were Awesome, Arcane Sciences, Wartime Technology, Image, Morale, and... Peace!"

"Very good, Blue," she praised the young colt.

"Wasn't there a seventh ministry?" Daisy asked, the shy little earth pony jumping when a colt glanced her way.

"That's a good question," Textbook said as she changed to the next slide, a flow chart. "There certainly was more to Equestria than just the ministries, though the ministries did revolutionize Equestria in a very short time. There was Luna's government, which was responsible for enforcing Luna's decrees and laws with the common pony. There was the military, which operated independently of the ministries, but worked with all of them. There were also private businesses, many of which worked with the ministries."

I kept dozing off, and my eyes were drawn to the gaps between the bubbles on the flow chart.

"So can you tell me the responsibilities of the O.I.A., Go Fish?" Textbook asked.

I shot upright in my seat and shouted, "Blackjack! My name is Blackjack!"

Giggles filled the classroom. Blue looked back at me with a warm smile. He was my best friend and...

The sound of cards being shuffled filled the room like static. Everything turned gray and fuzzy.

When focus returned, the colts were gone, as were all the bright colors. Everything was now mixed with gray. Daisy smirked back at me; she was my best friend... if that was what a friend was. Duct Tape cringed from the snide smirk of Marmalade. Only Rivets didn't put up with our shit. Textbook no longer smiled, instead talking with the apathetic boredom that came with rote instruction. "Go Fish. Blackjack. Whatever."

"The O.I.A.... I don't think this was in the book, teacher," I protested.

"Nevertheless, it's something you should know," she said with a bored, disinterested sigh. "So can you answer or... ugh... nevermind."

I snorted as I folded my hooves on the desk and rested my chin atop them. Who cared who some dumb O.I.A. was, anyway? The ministries were the ones who ran Equestria. And Luna. They were all blown up centuries ago. I raised my hoof. "Teacher, I need to take a leak."

"Uh-huh..." She waved her hoof at me and I stepped out of my desk and trotted to the door. I was in security. It didn't matter if I knew history, just so long as I could shoot a gun or swing a baton.

Outside the classroom, the colors were bright and cheery. Bucks and mares talked as they strolled along, discussing their jobs and what was needed in the stable. Blue sat outside the classroom, the young colt listening in. "Oh hey, Go--" he began when he caught my look and gave me a sheepish grin. "Blackjack! Much better name."

"Hey Blue. I had to get out of there." I smiled brightly at him. "Say, wanna sneak down to maintenance? I can help you with your reading and we can..."

The purr of cards plunged the world into gray hues. Mares walked along in isolation and talked in low, soft voices. The colt cowered behind metal crates, listening in. "...take you back to medical. You're not supposed to be out here. You're a colt."

"Please," he stammered. "I was just listening."

"You're a colt. That means you have to stay with the colts till a filly wants you." Why a filly would want a colt for anything was beyond me. Colts didn't actually do anything in the stable. They didn't work. They didn't study. They just ate food and did... whatever they did.

"I don't want to go back..." he said quietly as he peeked through the crack at the teacher droning on and on about how wonderful the ministries were. "Can't I listen? I want to find out about all this stuff."

"No. You're a boy. You should go to boy school. This is a school for fillies," I said and stomped my hoof. "Anyway I'm in security. So I gotta take you back. That's what Momma would want." I kicked his flank. "Now march."

A flicker of color. Maybe I was going to kiss his booboo. Maybe I was going to ask him his name. But the purr of the shuffling cards kept all the colors dull.

We got to medical and instantly the colors returned. The nurses and doctor were very thankful to me for finding Blue and gave us each a peppermint stick. I watched as he was escorted through to the

colts' school, where two dozen foals and colts sat in desks listening to a much better lesson on rainbows and why rainbows were awesome. I wanted to ask if I could be allowed to stay, even if I was a filly.

A sigh. A shuffle of the cards. The colors drained away. There was no school. No rainbows. No lesson. Just rows and rows of bunk beds on which curled the colts of Stable 99. Their toys were broken things, things that fillies didn't want any more. They were all so... small. Such a little space to live in. The nurses kicked him back into the room, demanding to know how he'd gotten out. The head doctor scowled at me and suggested I go back to class.

Then Big Macintosh strode in through the doors with all the Marauders in a burst of pure awesome! "Alright. We're shutting you down. This has gone on long enough."

"May Celestia forgive you for what you have done here," Psalm intoned gravely.

Fluttershy flew in and guided the colts out, with Pinkie Pie giving them all a cake and Rainbow Dash making them grin just by being Rainbow Dash.

A sigh. A shuffle. Macintosh's Marauders were long gone; Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie, and Rainbow Dash too. Everything that had once been glorious and good and bright was just a dream. No pony stopped the screams coming from the colt as he was shocked again and again as they demanded he tell them how he'd escaped.

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So, still not dead. I was lying on a bed next to a machine full of strange glowing tubes, jars of fluid, and glowing magical gems. I felt... better. Not like I had after Priest had finished with me, but definitely better. My legs were only a little twitchy. My heartbeat had dropped to rates below 'running for my life'. I had a brand new pair of puckered scars, one to the left of the middle of my chest and the other halfway down my left side; entry and exit wounds for a beam of energy.

The dingy room had a glass-fronted cabinet full of chems. I looked at the red Dash inhalers with surprising longing, remembering just how great I'd felt. Still, if it wouldn't help me help Glory, I didn't care. The injectors of Stampede were a much larger draw.

"Don't even think about it," the middle-aged lavender pony said gruffly as she walked in, her tired purple eyes watching me sharply. "I've developed a sixth sense for when a patient is up and eying my stocks." Her mane had gone prematurely white; I could still see hints of purple. A pair of crossed scalpels decorated her flank. "You're lucky. If it hadn't been for that friend of yours, I wouldn't have even bothered. She knows how to use an auto-doc as well as I do. In case introductions weren't made while you were choking on your own bloody froth, I'm Scalpel."

"Blackjack," I replied, trying not to eye the chems. "Sorry about that... nearly dying thing. Thanks for patching me up."

"Oh, you're not out of the woods yet," she replied as she walked over to the auto-doc. "This is a machine that, with enough time, skill, and healing magic, can restore almost any injury. It can analyze, diagnose, repair, and regenerate just short of a megaspell-level super restoration. There's only two things it can't cure or heal. One's death, the other's taint," she said as she worked the controls and a

cartoon image of a frowning pony appeared on the machine's screen. There were all kinds of cute icons showing bloody lungs, a leaking heart, black guts, and broken bones.

"And since I'm not dead," I said, closing my eyes. "Let me guess..."

"Mhmmm," Scalpel said with a little sigh. "Sometime in the last few days, you were exposed to it. I already checked your friend; she's clean," she added at once as I opened my mouth and closed it again. "If it hadn't been for the taint, I think you probably would have pulled through on your own, at least well enough to reach here without your heart exploding. That taint interacted with the chems, making for a doozy of a mess. You're going to need at least two more treatments to reverse most of the damage."

"Radiation, Enervation, and now taint. Is there any other mysterious and lethal aspect of Hoofington I should know about? Ghosts, maybe? Death beams from the clouds?" I said as I rubbed my head between my hooves. I'd read the entry on taint in the Wasteland Survival Guide. No pony knew what it was or what caused it, but if it got inside you then it would slowly mutate and corrupt your mind and body. A lot of the wildlife had been horribly mutated by just a little of it. Knowing my luck, I'd gotten a lot more than a little. "So, am I going to grow tentacles? A third eye? A penis? Eye tentacle penises?"

"Probably not. There's no surefire way to measure just how much you were exposed to." She pointed at the display with her hoof. "Major trauma to the heart. Some damage to your lungs. Your brain... eh, who knows?" She looked at me with a little tilt of her head. "You seem to be taking this pretty well, all things considered."

I laughed; I couldn't help it. "I've got a doozy of a bounty on my head. I've got the Reaper Deus after me. My one friend thinks I'm a drug fiend, my other..." I felt the shakes starting and took a deep breath. "I don't suppose you moonlight as a therapist, do you?"

She sighed and lifted her scratched glasses off the end of her muzzle. "Well, I am charging you thirty times my normal price, so I'm probably in the therapist ballpark. What's on your mind?"

I took a deep breath, wondering how I could admit it... "I raped somepony." There. I said it. Just like that. I'd expected I'd have to fight it. Choke it out. Dance around the confession. Instead it slipped out of me as easily as bleeding. "I raped a buck in my stable."

She looked at me oddly. "Okay. And?"

'And?' What the fuck did she mean, 'and?' "And it was fucking wrong!"

She just sat on her haunches, looking at me as if mildly baffled. "Huh... well that's novel."

"What is?"

"Guilt," she replied as she walked over to the locker and lifted a key from her pocket. She brought out a bottle of Wild Pegasus and two shot glasses. Locking the door again, she trotted to a little table beside the auto-doc. "It's a pretty rare condition in the wastelands. Results from either an overabundance of morality or getting kicked in the head too often," she said quietly as she poured two shots.

I looked at the nearest shot skeptically, licking my lips. "You're treating me for chem damage; are you really supposed to be giving me alcohol?"

"I can drink both if you'd prefer?" she asked with a lazy smile as she lifted a shot.

"Well, I don't want my doctor too drunk," I rationalized, and took my shot with glee.

She chuckled. "Oh trust me, it'd take far more than two little shots to get me drunk," she said, smiling mirthlessly as she looked at me. "In the great hierarchy of the shit messed up in your life, the booze is pretty low." She downed her own drink, gave a shiver and smiled. "If you're feeling guilty about this rape you did, then there's a reason for it."

"Because it was wrong," I muttered.

"Why?" she asked, and she was still smiling!

"What do you mean why? Are you telling me rape is okay?!"

"Considering the number of mares I've treated over the years, apparently," she said with a small shrug. "I've heard males brag about raping mares, mares brag about 'seducing' bucks, bucks crowin' about bugging colts and fillies laughing about breaking fillies. You say it's wrong and I'm not disagreeing with you. I'm asking you why."

I clenched my eyes shut. "Because I wouldn't want that to happen to me. If our places had been swapped then I would have... I don't think I would have survived."

"Oh, well, that's the easy bullshit answer," she said as she poured two more shots. "Do unto others as I'd have them do unto me. Till you have to kill. Till you kill somepony who deserves it. Till you fuck somepony that doesn't want it. Take what isn't yours. If I accept that other people will rape me, does that make it okay and right for me to rape others?" She put the cap on the bottle.

Was that true? It was, but only up to a point. If I was okay with somepony putting me down, was it right for me to kill everypony I wanted? No.

"He... he's my friend. Though I can't be sure of that anymore."

"So, when he wasn't your friend it was sex, but when you cared about him suddenly it was rape? Simple solution. Shoot him in the leg and it'll be sex again," Scalpel said with a chuckle as she took off her glasses and rubbed a hoof across her bloodshot eyes. "That's an even lamer excuse than the previous one. Why is this problem for you, Blackjack?"

"Because I want to be good, all right?" I yelled at her, glad I had recovered enough to shout. "I don't want to be fucked up! Everything is fucked up. You're fucked up! Everything I see is one pile of shit after the other and it's looking more and more like the only way to be good is to die!" I shouted at her, knocking the shot glasses and bottle of whiskey away with a sweep of my hoof. "I'm sick of seeing everything fucked up and wrong. I was happy when I didn't have a clue how fucked up the world is. That I was making it more fucked up! That I am still fucking it up, even after the shit I've gone through," I said as I sat back down. "I raped P-21 and didn't even realize it was wrong. I couldn't save Glory from fuckers

I knew were bad news. And it seems like the only way for anypony to survive is to become like Deus and kill everypony and anypony that they want.”

Shit. Here I was, crying again. My stupid tainted brain and wicked tainted heart throbbed as I lay down on the ground, hiding my face under my hooves. There. I’d finally thought about it. The Wasteland was fucked up, and so was I. Strip away my good intentions and I was just as sick as the raiders and slavers I’d killed. Was it too much to simply want to be good?

“I want to be good too,” Scalpel said quietly. I peeked up at her tired smile and sad eyes. “Some days more than others. Month after month I see ponies chewed up by addiction, injury, and hopelessness. More than any other part of Equestria. I deliver stillborn foals because their mothers can’t get out of the Enervation fields. I try to keep Dash addicts from huffing brahmin dung because the act of living hurts. I sew them up, heal their hurts, numb their pain, and send them back out into this fucked up world. And I’m usually the last one who sees them before they kick it. And damn me, I still care, even knowing that they’re destroying their lives. Because I can. Because I don’t want to be another heartless doctor handing out healing like I’m an auto-doc. Because that’s the only difference between me and the fuckers that cause the hurt. I care. And caring hurts, no matter how you fucking slice it.”

“Blackjack?” Glory said from the doorway. I stared at her in horror and saw the expression mirrored back at me. I clenched my eyes shut, feeling the shakes start. “Did... is what you said... did you really...” she asked in a tiny voice. I’d been so focused on Scalpel that I hadn’t heard the door open.

“Yes!” I said, unable to look at her. “Stable 99 is nothing more than just one great big rape factory. And I was a part of it. I didn’t know better... I should have... I’m sorry, Glory.” And now she knew who I really was. I wasn’t strong. I wasn’t good. I certainly wasn’t smart. And if she had sense at all, she’d leave me before I did the same or worse to her. Trying and wanting to be good wasn’t enough.

“Blackjack,” she started as I shook more and more. “How...”

“Because I’m not a good pony. So just leave, Glory. Staying with me cost you your cutie mark. It’s just going to cost you more and more.” And now I was tainted, too. Contaminated. Would it drive me crazy, like the raider sickness? Twist my body till I was grotesque and mutated beyond recognition? I suddenly had an image of Gorgon. Would that be me, eventually? Would Glory someday smile when she heard I’d been fed through a rock crusher? “So just go and find somepony better than...”

Then I felt her hooves gently reach around me and hold me as she pressed her face underneath my jaw. I couldn’t move. I could only shake as I returned the gesture. “I’ve spent my whole life working for ponies that betrayed me and branded *me* a traitor. For all I know, I could have helped them with their plans against the surface and not had a clue,” she whispered softly. “I think about every raider we’ve run across and wonder ‘did I have a part in that?’ No matter how remote that possibility may be, I still can’t help but feel like I am to blame. You’re a good pony, Blackjack. You keep trying and you never give up, no matter what you have to do.”

I fell apart at that point, and Glory did too. I think we both needed to just give in a little and hurt.

Because caring hurts, no matter how you slice it.

\* \* \*

Two hours later, I was back in the auto-doc frame. Scalpel's horn glowed as the machine whirred and chirped and did whatever it did to put me back together again. There were tubes of nasty gray, maroon, and yellow feeding into collection jars as she tried to remove as much damaged tissue, and hopefully the taint along with it, as possible. I spent most of the time explaining the fine nuances of Stable 99's fucked up society to Glory.

Glory listened as she fiddled with Leo's broken beam rifle. I personally thought it was a lost cause, but right now I wasn't going to begrudge her. Still, just standing here was boring, and I certainly didn't want to pay attention to what was being removed from me by the auto-doc. "Glory. Could you come here and play an audio file on my PipBuck?"

I glanced at Scalpel, who returned the look with an indifferent shrug. Glory trotted over and sat down. With my limb restrained by the auto-doc, she had to operate my PipBuck for me. "Which one?"

"P-21's auto-files. You need BJ#3." I sighed as I looked at her. "I may as well. It's not like it can get worse than raping him and neglecting him, right?" Glory gave me a troubled look. Yes, I was going to keep beating myself up with that till we resolved things with P-21. She worked the controls deftly and then there was a crackle.

*"We're safe here, U-20. They can't track us down here. A security mare told me so."* P-21's voice was soft and rushed. Panting desperately.

*"P-17... we can't stay down here forever. This is a stable. There's nowhere we can go. Eventually they'll come down here and check all the places they can't track."* Soft noises of nuzzlings and quiet little sobs.

*"You stay here, then. I'll find whoever's going to be the next U-1 and kill them. I just need a little more time!"* P-21 said desperately. *"I've got a mare teaching me how to access the Overmare's terminals and get her override commands. We can sneak out together."*

*"No, P-17. No. You're not going to kill a colt for me."*

*"I've done it before,"* P-21 whispered. *"You've done it before."*

*"And you'll never do it again. Even if I have to turn myself in right now,"* the soft voice of U-20 said firmly, bringing more tears from P-21. *"Us killing our own is what the mares want. Takes the blood off their hooves and puts it on ours."*

*"I love you. I don't want to lose you,"* P-21 whispered.

*"You knew you would,"* U-20 said quietly. Soft noises of kisses and quiet strangled sobs.

Then I heard my voice echoing in the tunnels. *"They've got to be down here. Somewhere near the spark generators, I think."*

*"See? That didn't take them long."* U-20's voice was quiet and resigned. *"You stay here. Keep out of sight. They just want me."*

*"No! Please, no!"* P-21 sobbed.

*"I think I hear them,"* I said. Then a pause. *"There you are. U-20, as per Stable 99's bylaws, you are required to come with me to security for your removal from the unicorn breeding population."* I'd never realized how bored I sounded when telling a pony they were about to die.

*"I understand. I'm ready,"* U-20 said.

*"No!"* yelled P-21. A thump, and then the sharp crack of a baton striking skull.

*"What the heck has gotten into you, P-17?"* A thump. Another thump. I could hear my heart rate increase on the auto-doc monitor.

*"Please, stop!"* yelled U-20. And there was the sound of a shove. Another sharp crack. Deeper. Wetter. A yell from me and another crack. And another. And another. Another. And then the thud of a body hitting the floor of the concrete tunnel. Another. Another... then a sickening quiet, punctuated by P-21 sobbing brokenly as I cursed about stupid crazy males.

*"Don't cry."* I heard U-20's softest whisper. It could have only been caught if P-21's microphone had been at his mouth by cradling his head.

*"I love you. I love you."*

More hooves echoing in the tunnel. *"Whoa, Blackjack? Is he dead?"* Daisy's voice, sounding impressed. I wanted to puke.

*"Yeah. I think so. Fuck, I'm going to get in so much trouble for breaking procedure."*

*"You okay? Going to off the blue one too? Can I watch?"*

*"I already fucked up once today. I'm not going to make it twice. Can you girls haul the body up to security? Go through the motions?"*

*"Yeah, sure. Come on, Marmalade, lift your end."* The sound of a dead unicorn being hefted on to Daisy's back followed, and then hoofsteps receding.

P-21 wept with horrified little sobs.

*"So. Here's the plan, P-17. We're going up to medical and they can give you a shot to calm the fuck down or something. Okay? Okay."*

*"Kill me,"* P-21 said between shaky, gasping breaths.

*"What was that?"*

*"Kill me right the fuck now. Or I swear by Celestia and Luna, I will end you."*

*"Right. You're upset. I can see that. Males are always so overemotional. But those are the rules. Take it up with the Overmare if you want, but I'm not your executioner."*

*"Why?"* He broke down sobbing again. *"Why kill him and not me?"*

*"That was an accident..."* Yeah. My baton accidentally beat him to death.

*"Not that! You're going to kill me anyway in a few months. A year at the most. So get it over with!"*

*"I can't. It'd be wrong."* The sounds of me making him stand. *"Come on... don't think about it."*

The tape cut out.

*'I mean that if I have a weapon I might kill you.'*

Not because I was a mare, but because I murdered the buck he'd loved.

*'Do you know what fucking justice is? It's giving to others as is given to you.'*

I'd remembered that; tracking down U-20. He was a good male. Give you a rutting and then you could talk and he'd listen and nod like he really cared. I'd been honestly bummed that he was being taken out of rotation. Only he'd disappeared from tracking. That had been unusual because most males never went down to maintenance, so how could he know where tracking was scrambled? But I knew. I knew all the spots. And I'd found him together with a blue earth pony that was only barely familiar.

He'd been upset and I'd assumed it was 'normal' male hysteria. He'd attacked me with my guard down and I'd used my baton. I admit, I was a little panicked. I'd never been attacked by a male pony before. U-20 had come to his rescue, shoving me away with his magic. I'd thought they were both going to attack me.

I beat him to death.

At the time, I thought I'd caught hell. Double work shifts. My position on the breeding queue was revoked. I was even under lockdown for a month. But the rule of 99 was 'don't think about it', and eventually everything went back to normal.

I felt strangely calm. My limbs weren't shaking. My heart was beating steadily.

"Blackjack?" Glory asked as she looked up at me. "Are you... are you okay?"

"Yeah. Sure. Don't worry about it." I wasn't. Because I knew exactly what I needed to do.

I needed to give P-21 a gun.

\* \* \*

Three hours later, Scalpel had restored me as much as the taint allowed. The old lavender pony simply scowled at a display that refused to change any further for the better. When I would get worse and

how I would get worse remained to be seen. Scalpel had been surprisingly mute on the subject of magical chems. "Some folks handle them just fine. Some folks don't. If I were you, I'd avoid 'em, but I'm not you." That was much better than Glory, who seemed ready to bludgeon me into senselessness with big egghead words.

My barding was far less effective since the sniper beam had punched a hole clear through the front and left side. The thought of the cost of repairs made my withers quake. That was after the fifteen hundred cap fee paid out to Scalpel. I didn't even try and haggle with her. I could see just how badly she needed the caps. With my barding rolled up, I felt decidedly exposed stepping out into Flank.

I needn't have been concerned. Flank was the first true pony town I'd seen in the Wasteland. Little villages like Chapel and Stockyard, and, I hated to admit, Megamart, had nothing on Flank. Six large buildings filled a block of four-lane street. While the top floors were uninhabitable, light still glowed in the bottom floors. Strings of lights stretched back and forth across the street, and flashing neon signs constantly bathed the visitors in their colorful glow. The bland sign of 'Helpinghoof Qwik-Kare' was hardly helped by the addicts lingering about outside the doors.

Across from the clinic was the Exchange, a bank partially converted into a market. Quality vendors had booths set up, and while I saw lots of weapons and chems for sale, there wasn't a lot of the extra material stacked on pallets like in Megamart. After selling our salvage, I'd inquired about getting my barding repaired. The price the vendor quoted made a liar of Bottlecap: the simple patching of holes in armor was apparently infinitely more expensive than data analysis. I bought a Stable 89 utility harness; hopefully Glory would work some of her repair magic.

Outside the Exchange, we saw Mixers and the Trough. Mixers was a shop, one that peddled chems exclusively. It was also a club of sorts, but the music was certainly nothing like I'd heard on DJ Pon3. It was all beat, and so fast that I supposed you'd have to be high on Dash to really enjoy it. Mixers seemed to take chems to a whole new level; Stampede was one thing, but what was Rainboom? Or Filly Flash?

The Trough surprised me; I hadn't ever seen a place devoted solely to food. In the first floor of an office building were a half-dozen little shops and restaurants catering to the inhabitants and visitors of Flank. I had to admit, I choked up a little at the sight a store named '200 Years Fresh' that seemed devoted to salvaged food. The sight of box after box of Sugar Apple Bombs made my mouth water. There was a butcher shop that definitely had me a bit nervous; all meat looked the same chopped up.

And there was an Enclave shop in the Trough. It was called 'Cloud Fresh'; outside were two pegasus mares in less severe looking uniforms than what I was familiar with. In fact, with the amount of flank they showed, it was hard to determine if they were wearing clothes or lingerie. There were bright, colorful banners showing apple trees growing amidst the clouds. 'Volunteer Corps: Let Us Help!' Their produce was certainly fresh, packed on ice or in trays, and cheaper than the produce being offered by the Society ponies.

*'Wonder how much of it will turn you into a raider?'* I could still see Tumbleweed's head coming apart from my telekinetic bullet spell.

The two mares took one look at Glory and immediately closed for cleaning. They didn't even bother to hide their expressions of contempt for her fresh pink Dashite brands. Scalpel had healed the

injury, but the scars from the chemicals used to burn away her cutie mark were permanent, even with magic. I supposed it would take a megaspell to restore her cutie mark.

Gee; slave-grown produce from the Society, or Enclave produce that could turn you into a cannibalistic psychopath? I chewed my two-century-old apple cereal with a bit more satisfaction.

'Rooms' was simply that: a hotel with rooms ranging from a mattress in the lobby to private suites.

That left Stable 69.

The parking garage was certainly nothing impressive on its own, but it had been draped in neon lights that proclaimed 'Finest Flank in Equestria'. A two-story-high pink neon mare winked suggestively out at the street next to a ridiculously endowed blue stallion. "Oh my..." I muttered, going a touch pink myself.

"Eh, I've seen bigger," Rampage snorted as she squinted up at the stallion, chewing another Mint-al.

"Aren't you eating a lot of those?" Glory asked, tapping her hooves together nervously. Rampage's pink eyes glared at her and she gave a little squeak, jumping behind me.

"They calm me down and keep me from killing ponies that criticize my choice of mood improving chemicals," she growled softly. "So aren't you glad I've got a lot of them?"

"So aren't you eating a lot of those?" I asked now, coolly. I wasn't going to jump, no matter how she glared. "Don't threaten her, Rampage. She's just concerned."

"She doesn't have to bother," she said with a little snort. "I've survived a lot worse than Mint-als."

I took a deep breath. "All right. Well we need to keep an eye open for P-21 or U-21. It took us two days to get here, so we might have gotten here first. I also need to cash in these contracts for the Finders." I looked at the entrance to Stable 69. "Which means I need to go in there."

"I need to find parts for this beam rifle," Glory said as she twisted and pulled out Leo's magical beam weapon, setting it between her hooves. The internal workings tinkled ominously as she turned it upright. The barrel had an obvious bend in the middle.

"You're seriously going to try and fix that piece of junk?" Rampage asked as she tapped her hoofclaws against the metal housing. Was it just me, or did something new break just from that contact?

"Junk?" Glory bristled. "Do you have any idea what this is?"

"Do you have any idea how little I care?" Rampage replied dully as she leaned back.

"This was an AER-14 prototype, one of a limited run that was developed to replace the Novasurge rifle! Only twenty were produced before research was cancelled due to... well... the balefire megaspells." She lifted it in her hooves. "And look! It has an emerald refocusing crystal instead of the standard ruby. And a type D spark capacitor! A type D! I've only seen them in books." She glared at

Rampage. "And you broke it..."

Rampage just sat there a moment and then smacked the wrecked weapon once more with her hoof, denting the casing. Glory hugged the barrel to her chest with a whimper. "You... you... barbarian!" she gasped as the striped Reaper grinned at her.

"Why, thank you!" she replied with a grin. "Well since you two have your plans, I'm gonna go get ploughed. Mmmm... see you later," she said as she trotted away eagerly, swaying her hips and making her metal plates rattle as she danced her way into Stable 69.

"She's terrible. Why don't we just leave her once we have P-21?" Glory asked with a little frown.

"We owe her," I said with a shrug. "She's also one of the few ponies I can think of that really doesn't care about the bounty on my head. Plus, I'd rather not have her prowling around behind me."

"She's still terrible. And she's always eating those Mint-als. I have to wonder how bad she is when she's off them," she said as she stowed the ruined rifle between her wings. "I'll head over to the Exchange and see if I can find anything out about P-21."

"Are you sure you'll be okay?"

"Are you sure you'll be?" Glory countered, looking at the brothel behind me. "I know you're not in uniform and that Flank has a neutral ground policy, but what if somepony tries something?"

"Well, then I'll do something stupid," I replied with a smile. "I'm good at that." Glory winced.

The wrecked wagons inside the parking garage were stacked up in a corridor that funneled down towards an open service hatch. Pink lights gave the service tunnel a vaguely organic feel that made my limbs creep. Posters with mares on one side and bucks on the other advertised the selection to the clientele. Had I not been preoccupied by P-21 and what I'd done to him, I might have been in the mood for some enjoyment as well.

I reached the round door to the stable, surprised to see that instead of rolling, it was mounted on a swing arm. A huge pink 69 seemed to greet us, as did the handsome buck and cute mare standing in the entryway. I looked a little closer at the numbers, and saw the actual number of the stable had been 89, with part of the 8 painted over to resemble a 6.

After seeing Stable 90, I'd expected to walk into an atrium like in 99. Instead, we were threaded past a utility storage area. The doors were all locked, and it'd be a little conspicuous to fiddle with them with patrons passing me by. Finally, the hallway split with three arrows: 'Finders', 'Fun', and 'Future Employment'. As tempting as the second was, caps came first. The Finders office was also the overmare's. I had to admit, I wasn't too happy about that.

Something else I found unnerving: no guards. No turrets. I couldn't believe that nothing was protecting the stable. I walked to the overmare's door with a sigh and a frown. I guessed it was time to do business with Bottlecap's sister...

*'Out to Lunch. Be back whenever.'*

...or not. Great. I hate waiting.

Since 'Future Employment' was not interesting to me, I followed the majority of the ponies in the direction of 'Fun'. Finally, we reached the atrium, and I found myself surrounded by a pinkgasm. The color was everywhere! Couches and pillows were arranged around little tables as bucks and mares circulated with suggestive smiles and strange, elaborate and kinky outfits. Given that ponies have no problem trotting around naked, covering up in feathers, lace, furs, or in strange outfits was one of the kinkier things I'd seen. In fact, I couldn't see the goods of a single mare or buck.

Rampage was nowhere in sight, so I figured she'd already snagged her victim. I had visions of orgiastic excess, which showed just how off my mind was. There were a number of bucks who seemed drugged out of their skulls as they sat around smiling pleasantly at everyone. Dash inhalers were everywhere. Me, I stuck with Wild Pegasus.

"You don't look like you're having fun," a peach-colored mare observed from behind the bar as she poured my second shot. Purple hair fell across her eyes a little as she gave me a friendly smile. "Is it the drinks? The company? Do you need a hit?"

"I'm just waiting for Caprice to get back to her office." The little earth pony gave me a worried little frown. "It's not you or this place. The whiskey's good, and I don't mind the decoration. It's just that there's a lot on my mind right now."

"Oooh, a lot on the mind. Yeah, I hear that a lot," the barpony said with a sympathetic nod. "Still, if you can have fun, you should. Sitting there all sour doesn't do you any good." She immediately perked up. "I know. Let me make you something special."

"You don't have to..." I started, but she was already diving into the refrigerator and pulling out various bottles. I wasn't sure if she was doing cooking or chemistry with what was going in that shaker. She sat up, shaking the metal cups briskly, and then poured something yellow into a glass.

"Here. This should make you smile," she said as she pushed the glass to me. I glanced at it skeptically, but she seemed too earnest for me not to try it. '*Well, here's hoping it's not drugged or something,*' I thought, and took a drink. Instantly, sweet tartness splashed across my tongue, and I swallowed in surprise. The sour tang lingered for just a bit, and then it was replaced by a slight alcoholic burn that made quick friends with the whiskey I'd drunk before. I smiled, despite my mood, and drank the other half.

"That's... really good. Thank you," I said as I looked her up and down. "I'm Blackjack."

"I figured. That one's on the house. You looked like you needed it," she said as she looked at my cutie mark. "You know, there's gambling over at Rooms. Cards. Dice. Roulette. You might have some fun there."

"You seem to be a bit fixated on my entertainment," I observed with a smile.

"Is that so bad?" she said as she took off her apron and handed it to one of the other mares behind the bar. "I mean, everything in the Hoof is so terrible, so why not a place you can enjoy yourself?"

We have ponies from all over come here to unwind. Dance. Get high. Have sex. Pay for the pleasure and go home with a smile,” she said as she trotted out from behind the counter.

“Yeah. Sounds great in theory. But then you look at all the blasted ponies hanging out around the Quik-Kare and the price gets a little steep. Caprice makes money off misery.”

She cocked her head and looked at me sadly. “You really think so?”

“I don’t know. I don’t understand it. How does she live with making money off selling chems to addicts?”

“Believe it or not, Flank isn’t in the policy of stringing ponies out till they’re falling apart. The original stable was a chemist’s dream come true. There were chemicals stored here that had names so long you’d have to take a breath, or two, to name them. Unfortunately, the place was also lacking in entertainment, so some enterprising pony mixed up something fun. Then another did. Then another.” The peach mare sighed, rolling her eyes a little. “Eventually, the party ran out because somepony mixed up a nerve gas and released it into the ventilation systems.”

“Whoops,” I muttered. Had the stables been designed to self-destruct? Had Stable-Tec been some sick experimental dream?

“Pretty much. The survivors got out and fortunately ran into Keeper. The original Flank was a mess of drug dens and brothels. It’s only been cleaned up in the last couple years. Still, there’s all kinds of secondary dealers who couldn’t care less who they sell to. They keep the scavengers picking over for anything valuable in the ruins. The secondary dealers sell that in the exchange, buy more Dash, and the cycle continues.”

“So why doesn’t Caprice stop it?”

“How? Dash is easy to make and there’re caches of materials all across Flank. If it were banned, then the buyers with real money would just go straight to the dealers and all control would be lost. It’s better for some wealthy Society aristopony to get high than a starving addict looking for a fix.”

“So if somepony took out these dealers, what would happen?”

“Well, I know Flank would be grateful. Since Mixers doesn’t sell samples, the addicts would have more incentive to go to Qwik-Care. It would raise prices, making treatment easier than another high. Of course, Scalpel would probably complain about all the extra work...”

I frowned. I knew I should be looking for Caprice and P-21. I knew I shouldn’t be looking for trouble. But I also remembered how I had felt, my body dying, craving more Buck, more Steady, more Hydra. How much it’d hurt. Maybe it was the drinks, or maybe it was thinking about what I’d said to Scalpel. I looked at the peach pony and then smiled, “And where would a pony find these dealers?”

\* \* \*

“Are you sure about this idea?” Glory whispered as we looked at the factory and storage tanks a mile north or so of Flank. Once I’d found her and explained my plan, she’d been skeptical, but she came

with me after using the 89 barding to patch up my security gear. It might not be much right now, but I just felt better with it on.

"Of course. It's my idea. I'm sure all my ideas are bad," I replied, as we looked over the warehouse.

"Well then why--" she began and then she saw my smile and flushed. "Blackjack humor. Sorry."

The first dealer had been a simple affair: one mare working out of the back of a wagon with two bucks guarding her. All it had taken was the look and a suggestion that she sell me her entire stock of Dash and get out of Flank now. I suggested Brimstone's Fall. I only hoped that she'd make the trip.

The second dealer had been a larger operation: a half-dozen ponies working out of a gas station. That fight had been messy but not particularly difficult. I'd used the pump action shotgun loaded with flechette rounds; only one pony had enough armor to require the heavy revolver from the airbase. Not only did we secure their drug stash, we also greatly improved our own goods with their weapons and stockpiled wares.

This dealer was different. I wasn't looking forward to fighting off two dozen guards. On top of the two-story building was a large sign that read 'BOOM Inc' in letters surrounded by fireworks. From all the empty barrels outside, I suspected they weren't just reselling drugs from Flank; they were manufacturing their own, too. There were wagons just waiting to be loaded; this wasn't just some little side operation. This was a full-on competitor.

Rampage gave a great yawn as she shook herself. "So you want me to just go over there and kill them all?" she asked as she narrowed her eyes at the building.

"No," I replied with a frown. My mane was itching like mad as I watched them roll a barrel of magical waste into the building. What the hell were they putting in these drugs? "First, because I don't know if you can." She looked vaguely insulted. "Secondly, I don't want to kill the guards and let whoever's running the show slip out the back."

"Ugh. Fine. So if we're not going to just charge in all nice and sensible, then what?"

I admitted I wasn't entirely sure. We circled around to the side, but the back of the warehouse was completely sealed up. A large, round water tank rose up behind the building with a bridge of pipes connecting one to the other. I couldn't exactly see how we could get up on the water tank. I looked at Glory. "Are you sure you can't fly?"

The gray pegasus looked pained as she looked back at her wings. She bit her lip and started to flap, clenching her eyes shut. Her hooves rose from the ground, but then she jerked and flopped over on her back. She sniffed and rubbed her eyes. "Sorry, Blackjack."

"Don't worry about it." It looked like we were going to have to go in shooting. Then I noticed the metal stairs going up to a second story door. They looked pretty rickety, but it was them or go in guns blazing and hope for the best. After getting a hole punched through me by Leo, I wanted to save that for a plan B. Ugh, I must be getting old.

We picked our way around to the side of the warehouse and then made our way up step after step. I made sure Rampage waited till we were up. The door was locked, but I thought I might get lucky. I screwed my face up, sticking my tongue to the side as I lamented yet again P-21's absence. Two pins later, I found the sweet spot and twisted. There had to be an easier way to open locks...

Moving inside the second floor of the BOOM fireworks factory, I was struck by the cobwebs and debris strewn across the floor. Clearly, this wasn't a part of the factory that was in use. I made my way through a few offices, but aside from a dozen or so caps in a drawer, there wasn't much of interest. Faded pictures decorated the halls, many showing elaborate fireworks over a shining white palace. Pinkie Pie danced with a sparkler in each hoof under a sky filled with fireworks, underneath a caption that read 'Explosions are fun... in the sky! Safety first!' We found one room loaded with boxes and boxes of fireworks and rockets.

Yes, Pinkie Pie. Explosions are fun...

We found another office with a large poster of Pinkie Pie shaking hooves with a black pegasus with, of course, a firework explosion cutie mark. Carefully nudging aside the rag-wearing bones behind the desk, I noticed his terminal was still on and logged in. I wiped away the dust on the screen.

*Memo #34: Hey, Sparkler! I couldn't help but notice that the latest batch of fireworks was a lot less fwoosh and woosh and a lot more fizzle and pizzle. It's just not a party if folks see a little pop and then nothing. So could you please do me an itsy bitzy teeny weenie favor and up the bang a little? Pretty please with sprinkles on top? P.P.*

*Memo #35: Howdy Sparkler. Got to say I'm a mite distressed. I got folks wondering where our whole shipment of ammonium perchlorate went and I'm a mite curious myself. So I'd be one grateful pony if you could make sure your next batch of the stuff gets to my munitions plants. Can't fight zebras without the stuff what goes boom! Braeburn.*

*Memo#38: Ugh, Sparkler! Where did that AP go? I got MoM and MWT up in my mane and I don't know what to tell them. I'm sending you some more materials so try and catch up. Who's our liaison with the O.I.A.? Onyx? Or is it Emerald? Do THEY know where it went? Prez Boomer.*

Unfortunately, the rest of the terminal was corrupted gibberish. I looked at the indolent expression on Rampage's face as she asked sardonically, "Find anything useful?"

"Nope, but you never know," I replied as we returned back into the hall. A few more bobby pins later and the door at the end of the hall was unlocked as well. Pulling open the door, I saw a long catwalk stretching out over a production floor. Hundreds of barrels were stacked on pallets, and many of them had fallen over and spilled heaps of white powder. In the middle were a dozen chemistry sets and a trio of cooks busy making... something. Dash? Yes, I saw the empty inhalers in a bin next to one workstation, but they were also making something else. Those ampules were familiar.

What was glaringly out of place was a pen near a hatch on the second story; it was full of filthy and destitute scavengers. Were these dealers accepting slaves as payment? There were also a lot of guards... and automatic turrets watching the doors. I looked at Rampage and all that noisy, clangy metal. Even with the radio blaring Redbeard's bluster down by the cooks, I couldn't imagine that the ponies below would miss that racket.

The radio host's rusty voice boomed in the cavernous production space over the hiss of hotplates and bubbling equipment. "Now, I like to keep my ears open. Like to be a pony of the people. So eventually I'm going to hear some kind of brahmin shit about Security. Well guess what, folks? Looks like Security is a tried and true devotee of the Slut of Flank after all. I heard it on very good authority that Security charged into Flank this afternoon foaming at the mouth and grinning like a Dash-head in heat. So you heard it here first, folks. Security: big tweaker."

Rampage snickered softly, and I gave her a look. "What?" she asked defensively. Then my lips curled as I glanced at her hoofclaws. "What..." she muttered, now worried. A minute later she sulked out of the office with strips of Sparkler's rags wrapped around each hoof like booties. "This is humiliating."

"Shhhh..." I warned her, and Glory, bringing up the rear, struggled to not laugh at the sight.

"Hey! We need more juice! Crowbar!" one of the cooks shouted up to the balcony.

"Yeah! On it!" a unicorn buck in leather barding yelled back as he walked to a crate and lifted some Dash inhalers. Another guard opened the doors of the pen and let out a slow stream of ponies. "Come on, folks. We promised you Dash, and you're gonna get Dash..." There was something decidedly creepy in his tone and grin as he bobbed the inhalers above their heads, leading them out the door. When fourteen or fifteen were out, the doors were closed in the face of the next pony and the other guard brought up the rear of the addicts.

I raised a hoof to my lips as we followed the catwalk towards the balcony. There were still two guards remaining, and right now I found myself really wishing that I had Minty Fresh's silenced pistol. Fortunately, Luna does provide the occasional blessing, such as a wooden baseball bat lying on a table next to some very dated copies of Playbuck and Ponylife.

"Dash... ya gonna gimme Dash?" one of the prisoners mumbled.

The guard turned, spotted me and my barding, and took a deep breath. That was as far as his shout got as I swung with all my horn's strength and crushed his windpipe with a meaty thud. His mouth worked, forehooves scrabbling at the indentation in his throat. The bat came around and knocked his rear hooves out from under him. As his face blackened and I kept him pinned, I heard a crack and thump from the direction of where the other guard wa--had been.

Apparently cloth booties were little protection against a mare that could kick your head so hard that it'd flop around like a horn puppet.

"Come on," I whispered as we moved along the balcony towards the open door. A few of the ponies in the cage looked at me dully. One called out to ask if I had any Dash, but the ponies below ignored the noise. The door led to the bridge connecting to the large, cracked concrete water tank outside. From above, we could see that the dome atop the tank was busted and four large cages were bolted to the top of the tank around the rim. Yellow hazardous waste containers were strewn around the edges. For the moment, though, I was focused on the ponies loading the cages with addicts.

"What are they doing?" Glory asked softly.

"Can we just kill them all and not care?" Ramage replied, munching down another Mint-al.

"Not yet." I glanced at the box of Dash inhalers and lifted it to us. "I want you two to get those prisoners out through the offices. Get them clear and make sure they're quiet."

"You're saving Dash-heads?"

"I'm saving ponies, Ramage. You can leave if you don't like it."

She looked at me levelly, then sighed and shook her head with a smile. "Fine. I can play white hat. Best have her do the talking, though." I was surprised by that.

"When the rest are clear, I'm going to start lighting up crates. I dunno if they'll explode, but there's got to be enough fireworks around here for something to go up. If not... well... do something smarter than what I'd do. Now get them out of here quietly," I said as I nodded to the cage. Glory approached with soothing words as Ramage brought the box of Dash inhalers.

That left me with the other prisoners. Carefully I stepped out onto the bridge that ran atop pipes stretching from the fireworks factory to the water storage tank. Fortunately my luck seemed to be changing. Everypony with a gun was loading the addicts into the heavy-duty cages running around the edge of the collapsed roof of the water tank. I moved as nonchalantly as possible, carbine loaded with standard rounds. Of course, one look at me and the party would start. There were lots of crates and empty waste barrels stacked along the bridge that I hung close to as I approached.

"It's getting too big, Domino. Too damn big!" I caught the voice of the unicorn buck that had led the addicts out onto the water tank. Crowbar watched as the addled unicorns were loaded up. "We keep putting the barrels down there like he said but it's not working."

"Bigger is better. We're making caps horn over hoof. All we need is a few dozen more lab rats and we'll have product better than anything Mixers can offer," said a unicorn with the strangest mottled black and white coat. She had an odd white mask for her cutie mark. "Ring the bell."

Crowbar levitated a crowbar from his belt and rapped it hard against an empty barrel. The guards shoved one pony into the tank with a yell that cut off with a splash. Then a deep growl filled the air.

A serpentine head rose slowly above the edge of the hole and opened its mouth to let out a shriek. Even in severe Dash withdrawal, the prisoners began to scream. A chain opened a door on the far side of one of the cages, and the head slipped into the hole and started to munch. The chain dropped and the heavy door closed, trapping it inside with its meal. A unicorn plunged a sharpened pipe into a pink, pulsating knot of flesh on the neck, and brownish-red sludge poured out into a barrel.

Suddenly I knew exactly where Hydra came from. Just as suddenly, I knew I never, ever, wanted to take Hydra again.

"Show is fucking over! Let them out!" I yelled as I stepped around a stack of pipes. The trapped hydra head began to jerk at its bonds now that there were no pony treats within to savor.

"You!" the dapple-coated mare exclaimed as she backed away. "Kill her quickly! Before the

others arrive!"

Ante up. Crowbar wasted no time swinging his length of steel at my head, and I had little time to waste as I danced back and hit S.A.T.S. just as he jammed something into his thigh. Then, to my amazement, he started to actually move! The potion he'd injected accelerated him to the point that he crept closer in my vision. I toggled for four shots to his head, and released the spell.

This time, S.A.T.S. wasn't fast enough. Crowbar moved inside the range of my carbine barrel and slammed into me as the guards left their positions near the cages and ran around the edge of the water tank. As I came out of the S.A.T.S. spell I found myself on my back with the rust-colored pony atop me. Then his horn glowed as the crowbar smashed across my face with such force that my next shots with the carbine went wide. I just needed a few seconds to focus. Just a few seconds.

"Pity to smash such a pretty face," he taunted, bringing the bar down right at my face as I struggled to control the gun. Then I opened my mouth wide, and the steel bar slammed right between my jaws. I felt enamel crack under the impact, but living in a stable had given me an unexpected advantage: healthy teeth. My jaws clenched down, and I grinned around the bar as he tried to yank it free. The carbine steadied and unloaded six rounds into his back. Screaming in pain, he rolled off me to get away.

Then I realized why there were four cages as a second head rose above the edge of the tank, dripping rainbow-tinted water. And a third. And a fourth. Smaller vestigial heads snapped at the air like hungry pustules. Clearly, it had risen in the anticipation of a meal and was not happy to find the cages closed. Brown and twisted teeth snapped at the heavy metal bars ironically now protecting the addicts inside. The practical beast began to strike at the guards instead.

"Kill her! Kill it! Kill something!" Domino shrieked as she levitated a sleek black automatic from her holster and began to fire. I rolled to my feet, feeling the impact on my plates. I ran for the nearest cage, narrowing my eyes to cut down the nearest guard with some well-placed headshots. I slid behind the heavy metal just as one head snapped at me, moments too late. My horn flipped the carbine and emptied the remainder of the clip into the head. Annoying to the mutated behemoth, no doubt, but satisfying.

Domino and the guards were for the moment occupied with the other angry heads. The trapped head was now jerking with such force that I could hear the metal groaning and twisting. I looked at the lock. No time for bobby pins! I grabbed it with my magic and twisted. Slowly, the tumbler rotated bit by bit. Almost... almost...

Snap, and the lock broke. Really, Celestia? I mean, *really*? I looked at the old padlock. Well, I may not have been able to open the lock, but I still had a crowbar. I jammed the prybar in and put all my weight upon it. I even tried to bounce a little. Then the lock snapped open and I fell flat on my face. Oh, that was a tooth missing, all right.

Getting to my hooves, I swapped out for the twelve gauge pump action. "Get ready to run!" I shouted at them. "Follow the catwalk through the offices! You'll find Dash outside!" Okay, drug craving plus survival instinct trumped their brain addled wits. "Go!" I shouted as I jumped out from behind the cover of the cage, firing as fast as I could and screaming like a maniac.

One hydra head looked over at a portion of its buffet out in the open; three of the ponies were

sickly and easy targets, but I was the one dancing around like an idiot with a shotgun. It snapped as I dove to the side. My shotgun blasted three solid hits to its skull as its deformed jaws snapped where I'd stood a second ago. Scrambling, I kept running as Domino backed around behind the cage with the trapped head.

A guard charged towards me... or maybe he was running for his life, I dunno which. I hooked my front hooves into the bars and swung my entire body around, slamming him back. He staggered, staring at me in fury as he drew a machete from his belt. Then a hydra mouth grabbed him and yanked him upwards. The mouth released him, flinging him screaming into the air. Another mouth grabbed his head, a third his haunches, and together they tore him in two.

*Don't start!* I warned my brain, smacking my forehead against the steel. For once my subconscious seemed to be cutting me some slack. I looked at the lock. Focused. Twisted... and... snap!

"Luna piss on you and all locks, you rusty piece of shit!" I screamed at the indifferent inanimate object. I jammed the crowbar in and put my weight on it again. I even tried to use my horn to add the last little bits of force. The crowbar bent... then the lock broke. "Through the..." I started, but the three ponies inside bolted as soon as the door opened. One hydra head snapped out, catching the leg of a mare.

I screamed, running towards the head before it could get a better bite. I blew out one of the five eyes with one shot, and then jammed the barrel into the oozing cavity for a second shot. Gore splattered me. For all I knew I was adding to my taint total, but that didn't matter right now. My shots worked; I managed to get its attention in a big way. The mare limped for her life as the wounded head reared back.

The trapped head twisted and thrashed, pulling and pulling, and the whole wall of the water tank began to crumple. I ran around towards where the last cage perched, and suddenly the ledge gave way. The cage fell into the scummy rainbow-slicked water along with the cage holding the hydra head. Water began to pour out of the breach as the trapped head worked itself free. The edge of the water tank crumbled under the dapple-hided unicorn, and with a scream Domino tumbled into the water and disappeared from sight. Small favors...

That was it, then. No more reason for me to stay here. I stood and started back for the bridge when Crowbar slammed into me like a rabid dragon. We went rolling, my shotgun skittering out of range. He laughed hysterically as he kicked and stomped like a maniac. The bullet holes weren't slowing him down at all, and I could see why. From all the empty ampules and needles scattered about, he'd dosed himself with the entire medicine cabinet.

The hydra began to pull itself free, but Crowbar had only eyes for me as he grabbed my ear in his teeth and pulled me over off my hooves. "Gonna smash you! Gonna smash you good!" he screamed. I struggled to push him off, but it was no good. I raised my rear hoof and slammed his nuts with all my might. He didn't even feel it. I hit S.A.T.S and toggled three telekinetic blasts to his face. The first smashed his eye like a hammer, but he jerked his head and the last two did far less damage. In fact, as I watched, his eye was regenerating!

"Gonna kill you! 'Cause I'm stronger! I'm stronger!" he screamed as he pressed his hooves to my skull and started to squeeze. I felt ominous noises. The chems had made him stronger... tougher... regenerating... but then I looked at the oozing gray flesh. It was time to raise or fold.

"Yeah! But you're not... heavier!" I shouted as I braced my limbs and lifted for all I was worth.

The hydra's head came down, bit into his back, and lifted him into the air. His death grip on my head was so tight that it yanked me into the air after him. Another head lunged for me, a tasty helpless snack, when I slipped free and fell to the metal planking. Two bites and Crowbar was gone. I prayed it was just my imagination that I was hearing him scream as he slid down the monster's gullet.

I got on my hooves and ran for my life. The entire bridge shook and suddenly slanted up as it crumpled under the hydra's weight. My hooves scrambled for purchase on the metal as the monster crawled out of its tank after the next morsel in sight; me. For once, I'd gotten lucky; the garbage stacked on the leaning bridge thumped into the hydra more than it did me, and I pulled myself up, firing blindly behind me. When the shotgun was empty, I swapped to the carbine again.

Inside the factory, Glory stood on the catwalk strafing enemies while Rampage engaged half a dozen as a screaming, thrashing madmare. The turrets were smoking wrecks, but there were more than a dozen cooks and guards firing at the pair. I ran to the rail and screamed at the top of my lungs, "Run!"

Glory stopped raining magical beams on the enemy. The guards stared up at me in shock. Rampage clutched a pony in her hooves, mindlessly chewing on one ear. For a second I was sure that they would all flee...

Then, "Kill her!" And now they were firing at me *and* Glory, and had resumed dogpiling on Rampage. I screamed in frustration as I ducked for cover.

Then four hydra heads roared with hunger and once more the shooting stopped. The four heads slammed through the open door behind me, snapping at me as the monster's incredible bulk tore the wall apart. The balcony collapsed with the wall behind me, slumping down into the floor below as the catwalks collapsed. Glory yelped as she scrambled back into the offices. Rampage snapped the neck of her pony, then looked at the hydra with a whoop.

"All right! Now that's something to fight!" she said as she tossed the body aside and leaped to her hooves.

"Run, you idiot!" I said as I picked myself up, facing the monster as it crawled through the hole after its lunch.

"Run?" She looked positively incensed. "Run?! I'm a Reaper. We don't do run!" she yelled as she charged at the hydra. One mouth bit down on her steel-plated ass, another grabbed her head and lifted her into the air, pulling and twisting. Rampage laughed in glee, twisting and kicking whatever she could as her bladed armor cut into the monster's mouths. "Yeah! You like that?! I'll tear you apart from the inside out!"

She might be psychotic, but she did give everypony a chance to get out of there. Unfortunately, I couldn't imagine that even she'd be enough to *stop* the thing! For not the first time, I lamented my lack of heavy weaponry. Even a grenade would be... wait. Boxes of strange and hazardous chemicals? Drums of older strange and hazardous chemicals? More boxes thrown off to the sides and full of fireworks? And me with lots of incendiary bullets.

Stupid, crazy, and liable to get me killed. What was I waiting for? My telekinesis loaded the carbine with red incendiary rifle rounds and I raced across the factory, shooting anything that looked remotely flammable. The beakers and chemistry sets in the middle of the room started burning quite readily, but they didn't have the force I needed. The two free heads of the hydra continued snapping after me as the other pair continued to break their teeth on Rampage's armor.

I focused on any crate marked 'BOOM', guessing the fireworks were my best bet. One crate started to smoke... fizzle... and then there was a pop. That was it. "Oh come on! What kind of fireworks don't explode?"

The hydra had had enough of the Reaper. With a snap of its heads, it threw her with such force that she shattered the reinforced glass in a window and went flying out. Now there was just one edible morsel and four hungry heads. And after it ate me, would it eventually wander to Flank? I backed towards the door behind me and took aim at the metal barrels across the room marked Ammonium something or other. Three burning rounds punched through the metal.

There was a hiss. A pop. Then a flame so bright it nearly blinded me jetted out from the metal drum and sprayed across the back of the hydra. The fire spread to the rest of the stack...

I really wished I had one of Crowbar's acceleration potions as I ran for the door.

There wasn't a boom so much as a roar that built and built. A great wind lifted me up and threw me through the door like a bullet as a chemical sun dawned in the Wasteland. I rolled across the parking lot and landed sitting in a heap.

*Then* the factory exploded.

The BOOM Inc. factory lived up to its namesake as the walls disintegrated in a detonation that slammed me flat on my back. Any Hydra that might have remained inside was vaporized, and the shockwave drained what remained in the water tank. The deluge put out most of the fire; though not much remained after that explosion.

I picked myself up, slung the carbine around my neck, and walked to where the remaining guards and freed ponies watched in amazement. I looked at them, grinned at the lot -- minus one tooth, damn it -- and said, "Pinkie Pie was right. Explosions are fun." Then my eyes rolled up in my sockets as I crashed face first into the ground.

\* \* \*

Apparently me blowing up a factory and monster in one go was enough of a spectacle that none of the survivors thought to cut my head off while I was out. Glory, who'd had the common sense to flee, and Rampage, who'd been ejected for being indigestible, had reinforced how that would be a bad idea, and so I came to once again in the auto-doc. Apparently shockwaves are bad for the brain, particularly when you just recovered from a near death experience less than a day prior.

"You stay here another week and I'll be able to retire to Tenpony Tower," Scalpel said with a dry chuckle as I emerged from the machine a fourth time. Then she shook her head a bit sadly. "Never seen

a pony so set on getting herself blown up.” Her eyes peered up at me, as if searching for something. “So, you did good?”

I stretched and shook myself, then brushed my black and red hair out of my face. “You tell me.”

The mature lavender mare shrugged. “I got thirty or so ponies lining up to start detox. It’s a lot harder for scavengers to get cheap Dash. And I heard that Caprice is plenty happy somepony finally took care of that operation over in the fireworks factory. So yeah, I’d say you done good.”

I sighed as I sat. “Still not enough, though.”

Scalpel shook her head. “You’ve done more in a night for folks than anypony ever did. How can you not be square after that?”

I sighed as I closed my eyes. “You do everything you can to make up for it, knowing that you’ll never succeed in getting rid of the guilt. You devote yourself to spending every second trying to do better despite the fact that it will never be enough. And you pray with every single good act you do that somehow, when your life is over, that your lifetime will come close to making up for the wrongs you committed.”

Scalpel stared in shock. “What was all that?”

“Something somepony told me to make up for a wrong I did. I thought it was my first. It wasn’t. It wasn’t even my worst wrong,” I said quietly, still smiling. “It’s why it’ll never be square. It’s why I’ve always got to keep trying to make it square. And I’ll always lose.” I sighed. “There were three ponies who died in a cage... maybe I could have saved them if I’d tried harder. I don’t know...”

Scalpel looked at me for one more moment then grumbled, “You’re an idiot.” Then she put her hooves around me in a brief, tight hug before releasing me. “Bravest, boldest damn idiot in the Wasteland, but still an idiot,” she muttered as she stood and walked to the door. “Now if you don’t mind, I’ve got a whole waiting room of Dash-heads wanting to try and kick their fix. So if you’ll excuse me, I’m pretty sure Caprice got you a place to stay at Rooms.”

To be honest, I was pretty tired. Glory was looking for P-21 again. Rampage was... doing whatever it was she did. I just wanted to buy something to eat at the Trough and sleep till I woke naturally. No explosions. No horrors. Nothing. I passed on some fresh apples from the Society, even though they were offered at a discount. I’d take two-century-old food over the product of slave labor. Then I trotted to the hotel to find that a room had been booked for me. Very nice. Quiet. Third floor.

I had to admit, of all the places in Equestria, the suite sure fit the bill. The room smelled only a little bit of mold and the water stains on the ceiling weren’t super huge. I locked the door and sat back to read the hoof to hoof book that I’d found in Miramare’s locker room. Thank Celestia for the big pictures. I read about a style of fighting called ‘Fallen Caesar’ that reminded me of the zebras in No Pony’s Land charging the Marauders. It looked... terrifying, to be honest. Doombunny technique sounded even worse; martial arts with Stampede could not be pretty. The entry marked ‘Fool’s Gambit’ made me chuckle. Who ever heard of a fighting style based entirely on moment to moment improvisation?

Unfortunately, while I could really use a nap, my brain still wasn’t making it any easier for me to

get one. I kept playing back the fight with the hydra. I kept looking at that cage full of ponies falling into the rainbow water. Could I have jumped in and saved them? Had that been an option I missed?

Ugh, why did my stupid brain never make anything easy?

Not being able to sleep bordered on boredom for me, and boredom was intolerable. I considered reading one of Glory's Scientific Equestrias, but half a paragraph about magical crystal reactors had me feeling stupid, not sleepy. I needed something else to do.

Well, I still had those two memory orbs from Miramare, the ones I'd found in Colonel Cupcake's office...

"No! No no no! The last time I was inside one of those things, I was captured by the Enclave. Before that, a magical trap in one shut my brain down," I muttered, but I dug out the orbs anyway. The door was locked; I was perfectly safe, right? It wasn't like I needed a guard while I was out. I looked skeptically at the two orbs and lifted one with my magic.

I felt the magical connection form. Then... nothing. Clearly this orb had been locked as well. Maybe it was some classified secret of Colonel Cupcake's? Maybe it was about the Marauders, or Vanity's little memory extraction of Jetstream? I wished that I could have another peek at Macintosh's Maripony and the stars--

oooOOOooo

Okay. Warning next time please! This memory seemed to have little to do with stars, however, as I found myself surrounded by a cacophony of noise and activity. Dust and smoke filled my lungs as I walked... no, not walked. I loomed. I rose above the milling crowd with slow, sure steps. Careful steps. A sprig of wheat dangled out my mouth. Big. Chewing on grass. Glimpses of red hide and brown mane? I had an inkling whose memory this was!

All around me I saw the reconstruction of Hoofington. A massive open pit in the north end of the island connected to train tunnels. As the train cars pulled through, teams of pegasi would fly down and attach hooks to the I-beams or sacks of concrete or whatever else they were unloading and lift them with cranes out of the pit and onto rail cars that ran along the city streets. Teams of earth ponies stood by, hauling their loads out into the city in a constant stream of activity. Everywhere I looked, ponies worked. Everywhere I looked, Hoofington rose.

Unfortunately, all the construction around the pit made it more than a little bit hazardous. Big Macintosh kept his eyes open, but the same could not be said about a light blue unicorn trotting along with her face in a map! "Now if this is north and that is east then I think I need to head this way..." she muttered as she peered at the map in her face.

"Miss?" Big Macintosh warned as she approached one of the rails. Six tough earth ponies were hauling a stack of metal rods along the rails down the middle of the street. The locals stopped well back of the supply line, but the blue unicorn didn't seem aware of how close she was to the rails.

"But I already *went* that way. Oh, confound it! Why can't anypony label anything in this city! It's crazy!"

“Miss!” Big Macintosh raised his voice a touch higher in concern as more ponies started to shove in behind her.

“Ugh, why can’t this place be more like Manehattan? I can at least see the Statue of Friendship in the harbor and...” There was a hard shove as three arguing ponies rammed into the blue unicorn, knocking her onto the rails.

“Get outta the way!” the pony leading the cart shouted in alarm. “We can’t stop!”

Big Macintosh didn’t hesitate. He dove towards the fallen unicorn as the lead ponies almost stomped her. “Don’t worry, miss! I got--”

She disappeared in a flash of purple magic.

“You?” Macintosh staggered forward onto the tracks. He looked at the oncoming train and jumped clear just in time. The pulling team shouted for him to go back to Ponyville. He sat down hard as the supply train passed, looking around. “Miss? Miss! You all right?”

“Over here,” the light blue unicorn said as she adjusted her thick glasses and then blinked. “Big Macintosh?” Her mane was a darker navy with a streak of electric blue in her tail and mane. I couldn’t make out her cutie mark; her saddlebags covered it up too well.

“Ayep. You know me, miss?” he said as he stood and walked towards her. As the supply train passed the crowd resumed their motions around the city.

“Ah...” Her blue eyes widened behind her glasses. “Um... Applejack! The Ministry Mare mentioned you. You’re her older brother.”

“Oh. You work for AJ, huh?” She smiled nervously and gave a hesitant little nod.

“Kind of. I’m actually with the Ministry of Arcane Sciences, though.”

“New to the Hoof?” he asked, his very presence making the crowd break around him like a river. I wondered if she appreciated it; she was kinda puny.

“Does it show that much?”

He chuckled softly. “Ayep. What’s your name, miss?” he asked with an easygoing smile. More impressive, he wasn’t checking her out. She had the cute librarian look down perfectly but his eyes stayed off her butt and on her face.

“Ah... my name? Is... ah... Mari...pony,” she stammered as she blushed and forced a grin. Oooh... somepony definitely liked Big Red. “Maripony. And actually I have an appointment at the Ministry of Arcane Sciences hub. Only...” She looked around. “I’m not really sure where that is. I have a map... had a... oh dear.” She found her map, ground and mangled to pulp between the tracks.

“Ministries are around the plaza pit. Gotta go towards Mt. Hoof,” he said, pointing up the street at

the knot of granite rising from the south end of the island. "I'll walk you," he offered with a casual smile.

"Oh no, you don't have to do that," she said with a blush.

"Ayup, don't have to, but I will anyway." Take him on his offer, Maripony! You won't regret it! Of course I guessed she probably accepted, given what I'd seen before. Though... maybe she did regret it... arrgh! Why did I have to think that? It was like I'd come across a juicy novel but had already read the last chapter! Such a spoiler...

Still, she finally accepted his offer and seemed to relax a bit. "So what's your business in the Hoof, if I may ask, Miss Maripony?" he asked as they walked along the busy streets. Many of the buildings were already ten stories tall and growing.

"Organizing this mess. Since the ministries were established, we've been running our tails off trying to get things organized. Pinkie Pie has it easy; it really doesn't matter if ponies are arranged in a department of amusement parks or the birthday cake corps. And Fluttershy's ministry is organizing itself for her, I think. But the M.A.S. and M.W.T. are a lot more complicated. The Office of Interministry Affairs is trying to sort it all out, but with the reconstruction and all, things in Hoofington are a little fuzzy."

"I see. So you're here for Twilight Sparkle trying to get this hub situated?"

She glanced at him and then gave a little nod. "Mhmm. Something like that. The Manehattan and Canterlot... and other hubs... are already well organized, but since Hoofington is all about interministry cooperation, this hub needs to be established from the ground up. So here I am."

"Surprised Twilight Sparkle didn't come herself," Big Macintosh said as they stepped aside for a wagon loaded with crates and boxes.

"Oh, she wanted to," Maripony replied with a grunt. "But one of the things about being a ministry mare is that you can't take two steps without everypony falling all over themselves trying to either suck up to you or trying to be genuinely helpful and doing everything for you."

They reached the edge of an enormous pit in the earth. Here the rails didn't just enter the bottom of the pit; they were actually on bridges spanning the gulf. More infrastructure was being built even further down in the pit. Maripony's eyes popped wide. "How in Equestria did something like this get dug out?"

Big Macintosh chuckled. "Sand dogs."

"Sand dogs?" Big Macintosh walked to the fence surrounding the pit and pointed a hoof down towards where several teams of canines were working. Their claws seemed to magically tear away the rock before them.

"Well, they used to call themselves diamond dogs. Then the war got started and their home was mined for gems for the war effort. Threw 'em out on their tails. So when reconstruction started, Gold went out and offered them all a job to dig out the tunnels under the city. They get paid in gems, have a place to live, and Hoofington rises. Most of 'em hope to return home someday."

“Oh. Well, I hope that’ll be possible, one day,” Maripony said softly. “Still, I’m glad somepony found a place for them.”

“Hoof has a place for everypony, long as you’re willing to work and you’re not striped. Folks around here have a particularly powerful dislike of the zebra folks.”

Maripony sighed. “But there’s not any evidence that the zebras even caused the fire!” The comment drew a lot of angry glances. If it hadn’t been for Big Macintosh, I suspected somepony might have tried something.

“Maybe. Maybe not. Hoofington rises all the same,” he replied, eyeing the crowd. “Anywho, this is Ministry Plaza. You want the purple one.”

Maripony seemed to balk at the sight of the buildings. “It’s... purple? Why purple?”

“Matches Twilight Sparkle.” Maripony gaped at him and he chuckled. “What? All the buildings are standardized. Gotta do something to make ‘em stand out. Blue for Awesome. White for Image. Pink for Morale. Orange for Tech. Yellow for Peace. Purple for Arcane Sciences.”

“I guess it does make sense,” she said with a sigh, looking over at the rising skyscraper covered in purple-colored stone. Even half finished, it was clear that it was already quite busy. Each ministry building filled up an entire face of the six-sided block around the pit, and they were built with bridges connecting each ministry to the ministry next to it. “That’s still a lot of purple...”

“Well, Miss Maripony. There’s your stop. I guess I’d best leave you to it.”

“I... yes. Thank you, Big Macintosh,” she stammered. He looked back at her with that easy, confident smile.

“No worries, miss. If you’re ever in Hoofington, let me know. I’m stationed over at Miramare. We can meet in a little town I know named Withers if you’d rather get away from all the noise. Got some kin that live up that way too.”

“I’d like that. Very much,” she said with a happy bob of her head. She was reluctant to turn away, but did so with notable awkwardness as she trotted towards the ministry building.

Big Macintosh chuckled as he turned as well. “Hmmm... Maripony, huh...?”

oooOOOooo

Coming out of the memory, I felt that familiar sense of disorientation; though really not as bad as leaving Stonewing’s memory.

So that was Macintosh’s first memory of Maripony. I wonder why he’d saved it. Maybe he’d planned to give it to her as a present, entrusting it to Colonel Cupcake... no. I sat up in the bed, looking at the little glowing orb with a small frown. “No... not for when he got back. He saved it in case he didn’t come home from Shattered Hoof Ridge.”

Maybe Maripony hadn't wanted it. Maybe Colonel Cupcake hadn't been able to find the blue unicorn.

Maybe I was wearing an explosive slave collar.

I rolled to my hooves, seeing the gray band tight against my throat in the cracked mirror. U-21 sat next to the door, a floated detonator beside him. "Ah ah ah... none of that now."

"Told you. Takes her forever to snap out of those things," a buck at the table said as he flipped through Glory's copy of Scientific Equestria. P-21 set the magazine aside, his blue eyes hard and dark as the deepest holes of Stable 99 as he smiled at me. "Evening, Blackjack. Miss me?"

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Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk Added: Hit the Deck -- You've been hit by one too many explosions. Perhaps it's time to consider a new career? +25 Damage Threshold against explosives.

(Always thanks for Kkat for creating FoE, and huge thanks to Hinds and Bronode for helping me edit this monster.)