

## Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

### Chapter 16: Walk the Hard Road

*"What are we gonna do?"*

*"We're... gonna... run!"*

P-21 was alive? P-21 was alive! He was pissed, but he was alive. No bomb around his neck. No bruises or bloody marks. No burns or bullet holes. He was alive, okay, and pissed off at little old me! I laughed as I scrambled off the bed, startling the pair of them as I hugged him happily. "You're alive! Oh thank Celestia!"

"Get... get off me! Blackjack!" He scowled as he kicked at me. I licked his cheek and his scowling face snapped to an expression of shock! "Ew! Blackjack. Stop it!" I fell back on the ground, laughing like I hadn't laughed... well... ever. He frowned down at me, wiping his cheek as I lay back on the carpeting. "You are so... random." For some reason that made me laugh even harder. I had tears in my eyes from laughing so hard!

U-21, the scrawny brown unicorn buck -- scrawny from years of being locked up in a room by mares, I reminded myself -- watched the display with utter bafflement. "Now, if you'll be a good little mare..." I wasn't paying much attention. He was alive. P-21 was probably going to kill me, but at least I'd be able to do what was right. To do better! "Ahem! We're going to step outside and..." His tan eyes twitched and he stomped his hooves. "Will you stop laughing! I have a detonator, you know."

I stopped laughing, but not smiling, as I looked up at U-21. The brown unicorn resumed his nasty smile. "Now, you're going to walk nice and easy along the Sunset Highway till we meet up with Deus. If you try anything... anything at all... I'll blow your head off. And this detonator's a deadpony's trigger. I let go for any reason and you're a headless horse." He rose and started for the door. Distantly, I heard the rain start to pour again; good old soggy Hoofington.

And just like that I thought about his demand, his collar, and his detonator and just cackled. "Oh don't be stupid. I'm not going anywhere with you," I said as I wiped my tears, still hiccupping with the occasional laugh.

U-21 stared at me. "Cunt! You've got a bomb around your neck and I've got my hoof on the trigger. You're going to do exactly what I say or--"

Maybe it was the word. Maybe it was the rush I was feeling from seeing P-21 again. Could have been that a few hours ago I was inches away from being eaten by a giant tainted abomination, that a few hours before that my heart had stopped, or that a few hours before THAT I'd been shot through the left side of my chest by a beam weapon. Regardless, I felt a dangerous little lucidity that brought U-21 and his detonator into my complete attention.

"Or fucking what? You're going to kill me?" I rolled to my hooves, laughing at this as well. "Maybe you didn't get the memo, but I'm dead already. All you'd be doing is saving me from the discomfort of mutating into some freak before dying of taint."

P-21's eyes widened as U-21's jaw dropped open. "You suicidal m- moron," the unicorn started to stammer as I grinned at him.

"And now that I think of it, blowing my head off might *kill* me, but it would completely *fuck* you. You work for Deus, right? Deus, the Reaper I shot with artillery? Deus, the Reaper that wants to invent

whole new methods of mayhem to try out on me? I would just love to see what he does to you when you tell him that you cheated him out of his revenge!" I said with glee.

"I... that's not... he wouldn't..." U-21 muttered as he stared from me to P-21 and back again. "You're insane!"

I laughed again. "I'm insane? Trust me, you have no idea." I snickered and rubbed my chin with my hoof before pointing it at him. "Come to think of it, Deus wouldn't be the only pony pissed to not kill me. I got an entire family of bounty hunters after me. Ever hear of them? The Zodiac family? And I just know that there'd be hordes of bounty hunters all over the Hoof who'd be mighty put out with a brown unicorn cheating them of their hopes and dreams." I stomped a hoof, making him jump. "*Especialy* if you actually collected on the bounties and had thousands and thousands of caps in your pockets!"

P-21 looked on in worry as the brown unicorn waved the detonator in my face like it was some kind of magic charm to drive me off. I pushed it aside, moving my grinning face even closer to his. "You're wearing a bomb! That's... that's... crazy. You're crazy." He sat down on his rump, his weak focus making the detonator shake.

"Crazy?" I threw back my head, cackling. "I've been passed beer by frigging hallucinations, don't you tell me what crazy is!" I laughed, definitely feeling past the edge. "The Enclave might be okay with you killing me, but after what I did to their Vertibuck, I'm pretty sure they'd be pissed at you for cheating them of their chance to interrogate me with their newest death plague, or the chance to feed me limb by limb to a bunch of raiders," I said as I stepped even closer to him, my eyes wide and staring. Oh, if only I had some rad poisoning right now! Though I imagined my natural red eyes were bright enough.

U-21 was shaking head to hoof and was apparently so unsure of his telekinesis that he'd transferred the detonator to his hooves to keep the trigger down. "I... you..."

"And that's not mentioning what my *friends* would do to you. I have helped a few ponies in the Hoof, and I'm pretty sure that some of them wouldn't mind getting some payback on my behalf. Dusty Trails, Bottlecap, and potentially every colt and filly you pass might want to put a bullet in you. Then there's Rampage. Has Deus mentioned Rampage? Fellow Reaper? Actually wants me alive for her own plot or scheme or amusement? And if she doesn't, you can spend every second of the rest of your life wondering when Morning Glory is going to vaporize you from above at the speed of light. Have you ever been sniped with a beam rifle? Have you?" I shouted as I yanked open my barding to show the puckered scar. "Cause I have!"

"Blackjack..." P-21 said in a warning tone as U-21 shrank back against the wall.

"But what's really funny to me... really really funny... is that P-21 would put a bomb on me and hand you the button. 'Cause if there's going to be any pony in all of Equestria -- in all the bloody, fucked-up world! -- that has a Goddess-given right to blow my head off, it would be *him*!" And I magically seized the detonator and yanked it into the air, shaking it at him. "See this? This does nothing! P-21's too smart to give you the real trigger!"

"Blackjack, that IS the detonator," P-21 shouted in alarm.

I blinked, looking at him and the hovering trigger before me. "It is?" That brought be back down to earth... well, closer anyway. "Well, I hadn't expected that." I sat down hard, looking at the mechanism that could take my head off with the release of the trigger. I scratched my mane vigorously as I looked at him. "Um... oopsy on that last one."

"We only had one detonator," P-21 said with a sigh, rubbing the back of his head. U-21 had decayed into a hiccupping fit, and by the smell coming from him I knew that housekeeping wouldn't be

happy with me. "And it's hard to read a magazine and keep that little tab held down all the time."

"Huh," I said as I trotted over to my bags, dug out my roll of duct tape, and taped the trigger down. Then I tossed it to the blue pony. "There you go. You can pull the tape off later, if you want," I said.

"You *are* crazy," U-21 muttered in shock.

"Probably," I chuckled. Still smiling, I rummaged a bit more and pulled out a bottle of Wild Pegasus. I looked around the suite and found three coffee cups. Okay, they weren't shot glasses, but they were better than nothing. I poured two, and then looked at P-21 as he watched me, a touch wary. "Want one?"

He put the detonator on the table beside him, shaking his head. He looked... conflicted. Could I blame him? I levitated one cup over to U-21. "Here. Have a drink, then go in the bathroom and clean yourself up. Then we'll talk." The cup shook between his hooves as he gaped up at me. I took a drink as I looked at him with a smile. Now that he wasn't making stupid demands, I felt a little bad for the brown unicorn. I was responsible for some shit in his life one way or another.

He took his cup into the bathroom and closed the door behind him. I glanced at the stain and wrinkled my nose a little. "Was I that scary?"

"A little bit. Yeah. Didn't help that he was so sure the collar threat would work," P-21 said evenly as he looked at me. "You seem..." I twitched my ear, wondering if I was better or worse. "Different," he concluded, looking at my chest wound. "You've been through a lot while we were separated."

I sighed and took another drink. I couldn't stop smiling. I should be sobbing and hugging his hooves, begging him for forgiveness. "Not just me. Glory too. The Enclave betrayed her. Branded her a Dashite to discredit her when we found out they were making some plague weapon."

"Goddesses..." P-21 shook his head. "When you went rolling away after that little speech at the mine... I wasn't sure you'd come looking for me."

"You're my friend," I replied with a smile. A friend who had every right to kill me. "I think it's a rule: if you get separated from a friend, you have to move hell and high water to get back to them."

"I wasn't sure I still was after what I pulled," he replied. "At the mine, I mean."

"I know why you did," I said softly as I looked into the cup and felt some tears start to creep. "Justice. I just didn't think about what that meant." I finished off my cupful with a sad smile so I wouldn't have to see that look on my face. "I've been doing a lot of that lately. Thinking, I mean."

"Must have hurt," he said with a snort, but his hard look softened as I smiled at him. I hoped it reached my eyes.

"It did. A lot. If you'd tried this a few hours ago I probably would have cut off my own head to save you the trouble." I told him about going to Chapel, waiting for them to arrive, then Sekashi's arrival and the encounter with Virgo. "I got to where you two were attacked and knew I needed Glory. I can't figure out a rescue to save my life... or save a cutie mark."

He looked at me in confusion when the bathroom door opened and U-21 stepped out. He looked at me as if fearing I'd bite him or something. A few minutes ago I might have. "Hey. Want some more?" I asked, lifting the bottle of whiskey and swirling it.

His eyes flickered from P-21 to me and then back again. "What is the matter with her? Why is

she being nice? What kind of sick game is this?" he demanded as he pointed a hoof at me.

I chuckled, and made him wince. "Let's just say you caught me in a really good mood. If you want to go, though, I won't stop you." I poured a little more whiskey into my cup, and after a moment of hesitation U-21 nodded for a refill as well. "If you don't mind my asking, what happened after you were taken?" I asked P-21.

"Don't tell her. It's a sneaky trick," U-21 muttered as he flushed.

But P-21 just shook his head. "She's not capable of sneaky tricks." He sighed and looked out the window. "When the Enclave attacked, we ran. They didn't pursue. There was some talk of trying to find Sekashi, following the rail lines, or trying to intercept you between the tracks and Flank." He gave a crooked grin as he looked at the brown unicorn. "I might have mentioned that it'd be a very bad idea to follow you, given you'd be in a bad mood when we found you."

"You're right," I replied as my maudlin feelings spread. "And I never would have had the time to think about things if you had." I would have continued on like an idiot, ignorant of my crimes against him.

"Finally, we made our way here to meet up with Deus and the rest of the hunting parties. Since there were ten of us, it took a lot longer than I'd expected. He's been rounding up bounty hunters for his band. Meanwhile, U-21 here," he said with an even stare at the brown unicorn, "spent every free minute trying to remind me of everything I wanted to forget. We arrived just after you torched that factory, then we followed you up here. I heard you mention an orb, and we waited a bit, knocked, and picked the lock when you were out of it." Smirking a little, he added, "It was a pretty good lock, but not good enough."

"I gotta know, what was the plan if I didn't have an orb?"

"We were gonna all ponypile in and tackle you," U-21 muttered into his coffee cup. "Use my rope trick to tie you up and throw on the collar."

I winced. "Do you have any idea how bad I'd have hurt you?" I suspected they didn't know about my 'look at you and explode your unarmored face' trick.

"It doesn't matter anymore!" he slurred, "Deus is done with me. When he thought I might be able to lead him to you, then I had a little protection... but I'm done now! This was my last chance!" He fell on his face, burying it in his hooves. "I am so fucked. I am so sick of getting fucked over by everypony."

"Join the club," I said softly, feeling that warm buzz slowly cooking my brain. "For what it's worth, U-21, I'm sorry."

"Huh?" He sniffed, rubbing his eyes.

"For what happened in Stable 99. I used you, and I did you a wrong. I'm sorry for that." I sighed, closing my eyes as I leaned backwards on my rump and pressed myself against the mattress, head tilted back. "I am so tired of feeling guilty all the time. Most of it I can live with, but every time I think back to Stable 99 I just... hate myself. Worse than Deus or the Overmare or anypony. And it doesn't matter that the rules said it was okay. A part of me knew it was wrong. Always did. I guess I forgot to remember to not think about it."

U-21 looked at me in amazement. He probably never expected to hear those words. He looked down at his hooves. "I... sorry. Ever since I left 99..."

I rocked forward with a curious frown. "What did happen when you left 99?" I asked, feeling giddy thoughts churning around with simple curiosity and the knowledge that soon I'd have to talk with P-21

about what I'd done. "How'd you run into Deus? Did you meet Sanguine?" I asked as I scratched my itchy mane.

"I..." he began when there was a knock on the door. We looked cluelessly at each other.

"Yes? Who is it?" I shouted.

"Room service. We have a gift for Security from Caprice," a young mare said brightly from the other side of the door.

I sighed and shook my head, scratching my mane vigorously in annoyance. "Probably a fruit basket full of Dash," I muttered as I stood.

"Wait. It might be Deus's ponies. We left them outside town," U-21 said as he walked to the door. I stepped aside, levitating out the twelve gauge and loading it as I stepped back. Why hadn't I picked up more ammo at the Exchange, or fresh healing potions from Scalpel? The brown unicorn glanced at me and then slowly pulled the door open, peeking through. He relaxed and opened the door fully. Two young white unicorns stood behind a food cart loaded with fresh, delectable treats. It must have cost a few hundred caps at least. "Wow, that looks good," U-21 muttered.

The unicorns were identical twins, brilliant white with deep red eyes; they had the absolute cutest smiles and wore the faded hotel uniform I'd seen below. Their horns glowed as they pushed the cart in. "Courtesy of Caprice," they said.

U-21 was looking at the fresh apples. I was looking at the mares' eyes. Those weren't the eyes of innocents, and the cart wasn't glowing.

"Get down!" I shouted as two SMGs floated up from behind the food cart and strafed the room in a full storm of automatic fire. I jumped forward, sliding across the carpet and slamming my hooves into the food cart. It hurtled towards the twins... as their uniforms dropped through them? What? I watched in amazement as the cart passed right through the unicorns and back into the hallway, slamming against a green buck who was readying a large rifle. He carried a large duffel bag draped across his back.

"Surprise," said one of the ghostly mares as the two brought their guns back to bear. Guns I couldn't see through. The frayed uniforms had been caught by the cart and dragged part of the way into the hall.

I slammed the door closed, knocking the twins' SMGs into the hallway. The mares might be intangible, but their weapons weren't! "No fair," they said, stepping--literally--back through the door.

"Is everypony alright?" I asked, looking at P-21 getting out from behind the bed. U-21... oh no...

He slumped, a line of red holes running between his neck and chest. "You... do have... a lot... of enemies..." He hiccupped and choked, blood dripping out of his mouth as I knelt and held him upright.

"Yeah, I do..." I said lamely, wishing that I could trade my bullet spell for something actually worth a damn.

His eyes stared at me as his chest bubbled with horrible sucking sounds. "Not... me... right?"

"No. Not you. I'm sorry, U-21."

"Not... your..." he began to say, then gritted his teeth as a spasm rocked his body. He looked sad, then his eyes went wide with panic. He opened his mouth, coughed a great deluge of blood, and

drew a raspy breath. "Pro...ject... Chi...mer...a..." And with that his body began to relax.

### *Project Chimera?*

"What did he say?" P-21 asked as looked over at the unicorn's limp form.

"Something mysterious that will probably nag at me for days," I said with a sigh. Then I looked at P-21 with a smile. "Assuming I live that long," I added.

A white mare's face poked through the wall! Her bright red eyes narrowed in glee as she grinned at me like a ghost. "Hi. Don't suppose you could hold still a second?" I raised the shotgun and blasted her smirking features. The wall behind her peppered with holes. She looked at me indolently. "Thanks."

P-21 charged at me and knocked me to the side as a hoof-sized hole appeared in the wall and a thunderous detonation came from the far side of the door. The little ghost head started trying to find a better firing position. "Ugh, stop moving around, please! It's actually very hard to aim through walls!"

"Who are these ponies?" P-21 asked as I tried shooting her in the face again. I hoped that I was at least distracting her, a hope that grew a bit when the next blast was not accompanied by me or P-21 exploding.

"Who are you? Are you with Deus? Enclave? Is there somepony *e/se* after my head?!" I shouted as another round cut through the wall, missing me by inches.

"Gemini Zodiac, at your service. I'm Gem. That's my sister Mini." There was another shot through the wall; another near miss. She rolled her eyes. "And that is our brother Taurus. Pleased to meet you." She gave me an apologetic look. "I'm very sorry about all this, but *p/lease* stop moving around. This'll be much more pleasant for everypony involved if you stop."

The other unicorn stepped halfway through the wall as well. "Will you hurry up? Flank's security is already on its way." She looked at me, wearing an expression identical to that on her sister's face. "Sorry about killing you, but really, you should have just given your PipBuck to Leo."

"Should have... he ambushed me! And shot through me! And set a small army on me!" I shouted as the second intangible pony proved as bullet-immune as the first. Two more high-powered rounds punched through the faces of the ponies as they kept following my movements with their heads.

"This is taking way too long." The second stepped back through the wall. "Taurus. Plan Boom." The other sister's eyes opened wide, and she too disappeared.

"Did she say Plan B or plan Boom?" I asked P-21. His look confirmed my fears. We grabbed our bags. We ran to the bathroom. The cast iron tub was half full of tepid water. We jumped in the large basin and pulled our bags atop us.

Plan Boom went boom as a missile punched through the hole that one of the shots had blasted through the door. The boarded-over windows blew out as shrapnel and debris tore through the small suite. The shockwave made the tub break free of its fittings, and the busted pipes began to spray water. I looked down at P-21 and muttered, "You know, when I imagined this reunion, there were a lot more tears and a lot fewer explosions."

"I'll bet. Is there a plan?"

"I'm not sure," I muttered, then rocked the tub. "You got grenades, right?"

"U-21 and the others didn't exactly trust me enough to let me walk around with a lot of high explosives," he replied. Then he reached under his brushy tail and pulled out a metal apple with a bright green stripe around it.

"I don't want to know how you hide stuff back there," I said, but at this point I wasn't complaining.

A mare poked her head through the door. "Oh. Shoot. Sorry about that. Thought we'd get you with one shot. Hold on a second." And she disappeared again. "Taurus, hit the bathroom," she called out. I grabbed the edge of the tub and flipped it over, pulling P-21 underneath and pulling down with as much magic as I could manage. The entire tub rang like a bell, a dent bending the middle of it. I had no idea what green meant. "Think we got 'em? I sure hope the PipBuck's intact," she said from outside.

"Yeah. Those things are indestructible..." the other replied, her voice trailing off. "Are they hiding under the tub?"

P-21 lifted the edge as I looked out at two pairs of ghostly hooves and tossed out the grenade.

"She doesn't learn--" one began to comment before both screamed. There was a bright green flash, and then nothing.

"What'd I do?" I asked as I lifted the tub to see the smoldering room. Suddenly the entire floor began to groan and tilt. As stout as its construction had been, clearly it had drawn the line. With a groan and pop the side of the floor facing the door gave way. As it collapsed, the tub tilted upright again, thanks to having lost its legs, and started to slide along its curved bottom as it picked up speed. We went speeding down the slope as the large green buck standing near the door just watched, the missile launcher in his jaw. The tub rocketed through the door of the room a floor below, sliding along the hallway and then down a flight of stairs as we held on for dear life!

The cast iron squealed across the cracked foyer tile as scrambling security ponies froze in their tracks, watching as we slid past and out the front door of Rooms. We juddered down the front steps and into the rainy street before the tub came to a rest.

I panted in time with my blue friend, our eyes staring into each other's, before he swallowed and demanded, "How did you just do that?"

"I'm pretty sure if I knew how I did it, it couldn't be done," I said with a chuckle. As he tried to stand, the cast iron tub tipped over, spilling us on to the cracked asphalt. I couldn't help myself; I knew I had three Zodiac killers after me, but for a moment I just lay there and laughed.

Then somepony started shooting at us. Make that someponies. A *lot* of someponies! The rounds pinged off the bottom of the tub, dimpling it as we ducked down behind the cover. I felt a sinking in my gut as I looked towards the north gate through the rain. At least three dozen bandits were filing through, shouting and hollering as they overran the few guards watching that end. Most important to me, however, was the one in the rear. No pony else in Hoofington had guns quite like that!

Either seeing me or sensing me, Deus shouted out across Flank, his voice seeming to echo off the rain, "CUNNNT!" Yup. No other psychopath could holler vulgar terms for mare genitalia with that kind of eloquence!

"Running now!" I shouted, keeping my head low as we wove around the various rusting wagons and crates left in the middle of the four lane street towards the exit to the south.

We ran into the barpony from 69 crouching behind some wagons with two more security mares. I had to admit, I never thought body armor could be both stylish and effective. She holstered a delicate

looking needle pistol as she looked at me. "What the heck is going on?!"

"Deus the Reaper is after me," I said, looking over my shoulder. "He's pushing through the north gate and as soon as I'm out the south gate..."

Wait, why were the security mares pointing their guns south?

"Find her! Find that varmint now!" hollered Sidewinder as an even larger horde of Pecos ponies pushed through the southern gate, shooting wildly and randomly. I saw a flood of local ponies rushing for Stable 69.

"We need to get to the stable, right now!" the barpony said as she looked to the north. Fortunately, it looked like Deus was more interested in checking the hotel than the occupants of projectile bathtubs, but that wouldn't last. He'd tear Flank apart looking for me.

Glory ran from the Exchange, ducking and yipping as bullets pinged around her. "Blackjack, I..." She stared at P-21. "You! You're..." Then she looked at the collar around my neck. "Blackjack... what..." She sat down hard, looking on the verge of tears. "What's going on here?"

"We'll get to that in a second, Glory." Like when I didn't have two small armies and three Zodiacs after me! "I want you and P-21 to get in the stable," I said briskly.

"No," P-21 said firmly.

"I'm not leaving, either," Glory replied, equally adamant. I gritted my teeth and smacked my head against the side of the rusted wagon frame. Of course. I didn't listen to sense or sanity. Why should they? "Not unless you come too," Glory added quickly.

For a moment the thought of being in a stable, especially one that wasn't a formalized rape factory, was immediately appealing. There was just one problem: I'd be trapped there. And given that the Zodiacs had unicorns who could walk through walls, I wondered just how long Stable 69 would stay sealed. "I can't. Deus managed to get into one stable. I doubt he'd sit out here and wait. If we're lucky, Deus and the Pecos will just kill each other. I need to keep moving till we can get out and run."

"Always with the running," P-21 muttered softly.

"Or hide," I amended quickly. "Either way, not trapped where Deus knows where I am."

"Right," the barpony said with a nod as she chewed her lip. "If you can get to the top floor of the Exchange, there's a group of pipes that lead over the wall. You might get out that way. I'm sorry I can't be of more help."

"Thanks. And tell Caprice I'm sorry for bringing her this trouble," I said as I peeked out at all the Pecos and the broken rooftops of the Exchange. The doors had been sealed up tight and, it being a former bank, I doubted I could just knock on them to get them to open.

The barpony just blinked at me, then smiled. "Sure. No problem." And with that the three of them ran quickly towards the parking garage.

"So, where to now?" Glory asked as she suddenly scowled, "And where is that psychopath when we need her?"

I wondered that myself, but it wasn't as if I could do anything about it. I could only really see one direction to take, and nodded to Mixers. "In there!" We raced into the building adjacent to the Exchange.



I could only hope there'd be a way upstairs. We just had to get clear of this mob!

Mixers had evidently been a club even before the war. Despite the cracks in the walls and floor and an occasional busted light, the place was in somewhat decent repair. A long bar ran along one wall, a hovering spiderbot patrolling back and forth overhead. It turned and focused its camera on me. "Good evening, madam. What is your chem of choice? We have the house special, Rainboom, for a mere 100 caps."

I glanced at Glory, but she just pressed her lips together, pretending not to be paying attention. I could really use the edge at this point, but the thought of the drugs reacting with the taint in my body and the memory of crashing on the Quik-Kare floor won out in the end. For now, at least.

"P-21, find us a way upstairs." He frowned, but nodded once as I turned to the light gray pegasus. "Glory, get your beam guns ready." She nodded as well. I noticed P-21 hadn't moved yet, his eyes lingering on Glory's brands; I gave him a nudge. Looking a little abashed, he trotted off to check the rest of the club. I scanned for something else that might help, then noted two yellow bars on the display.

There was a strange glass booth near the ceiling, and I was stunned to see two earth ponies sitting behind a counter of controls and looking down at us through their thick shades and strange metallic helmets studded with rainbow LEDs. I heard the shouts approaching the club doors and looked up at the pair. "Can you help us get to the roof?" I yelled up at them. They looked at each other. "Hello? Can you help?"

They looked back down at me and then nodded in unison as Pecos started to flood into Mixers. Suddenly, the speakers began to blast a blaring beat that stunned both the Pecos and me. The bizarre, rapid-fire music pumped into the club like some sort of sonic weapon; it sure wasn't Sweetie Belle! Neon bars of light rose and fell in rainbow cascades behind their plastic casings, and beam talismans began to fill the space with flickering bars of dancing color. I looked up at the box, giving it a withering glare. This was help? The pair just grinned from ear to ear.

Then it was fighting time. Out came my favorite weapon as I charged the milling Pecos balking at the sudden display. The twelve gauge shot fanned into the crowd in a deadly spray as the music beat in tune with my heart. I had no idea which beams were Glory's and which were decoration, but neither did the Pecos. And I had to admit, despite myself, that Mixers was starting to grow on me. Then my gun clicked on an empty shell just as a bloody Pecos charged me with a rusty axe clenched in his jaws.

I blocked the swing with my PipBuck, looking him in the eyes as my horn flashed and sent two glowing magical bullets into his face. As he went down, I took his fire axe in my magic's grip and swung it at the next closest Pecos just as he brought a sawed-off shotgun to bear. My barding took the slugs with a crackling that probably heralded another trip to Scalpel's, but I didn't lose my focus on the axe. One low swing and the blade of the axe knocked his legs completely out from under him, then the axe whirled, reversed, and drove the spiked end through his cowboy hat and into his skull.

A mare screamed around the automatic pistol in her mouth as she charged, firing. I pulled the axe free as her rounds started to chew through my barding, then jumped into S.A.T.S. and queued up my attack. Time resumed, and the head of my fire axe flashed out to ram into the weapon jammed between her teeth and shove the gun's handle all the way into the back of her throat. She gagged, struggling to pull it out. The fire axe came around and its spike punched a hole through her temple.

There were more Pecos coming in, but now they were hanging back near the door, keeping their distance from me as they brought automatic rifles in battle saddles to bear. I started to switch to my automatic carbine, but I still had ponies pressing in on all sides. From the look of it, the ponies at the door were just waiting for their fellows to fall before opening up on me.

From the balcony overhead fell glittering death. Plunging twenty feet, Rampage landed on two of the Pecos standing by the doorway. Her heavy armor crushed both bucks beneath her hoofclaws as she drove them into the dance floor. A mare stepping in had one moment to regret her mistake before Rampage's tail lashed around her throat, the razor wire digging in as the Reaper charged two ponies pressing Glory, who had taken cover behind an overturned table and had been darting out with shots of her disintegration and beam pistols. The mare was dragged along behind the Reaper till the razor wire tore through her neck and sent her head bouncing across the floor.

The first buck she ducked right beneath, letting the serrated blades along her back saw him almost in half. The other buck shot her in the head at point blank range with a shotgun. I stared as I watched her eyes liquefy at the impact. Still, blind or not, she reared up and slammed her hooves down so hard that he didn't just crumple from the impact; he bounced. She reared again, dropping her hooves to slam him for a second and final time. Still, with a head wound like that...

I used S.A.T.S. to help guide my last axe swing into the head of the pony I was fighting and was rewarded with a lucky hit that took his head almost completely off. Unfortunately, the luck ended when the edge of the fire axe caught in his spine and I couldn't pull it free. No time for that now. I didn't even wait for his body to drop as I rushed to where Rampage stood, head bowed as she breathed deeply. Her face looked as if it'd been covered with synthetic strawberry jam, only red. "Rampage?"

Then I saw one ruined eye pop free of its socket, and then the other. Two pale pink eyes focused on me, blinking before she wiped the bloody gore away with her hoof. "Ugh, I hate regrowing eyes," she muttered and blinked, looking around. "Aw, none left?"

The pumping music had covered the noise of our fight, and for the moment we were clear. The ponies in the booth bobbed their heads to the music, but also thankfully turned it down a bit. "There's lots more. How did you... ugh... no time right now," I groaned as I looked at her. "Are you going to be okay?"

For whatever reason my question made her look sad. "Trust me. I'm *really* hard to kill," she said in a slurred voice before spitting out a mouthful of buckshot. "How are you?"

"Battered, but intact," I said as I looked at Glory. The small pegasus didn't look too much the worse for wear, simply drinking a healing potion and then passing me one. Figures that she would think to buy fresh potions from Scalpel while I just took a nap! She was starting to get good in a fight, too... and why did that make me feel bad? "P-21?" I asked, looking around and spotting him looting the dead, picking out bullets and shells and the occasional chem potion. Or weak healing potion. Better yet, most of the Pecos had a few sticks of dynamite! "Did you find a way out of here?"

"Stairs behind the robot. They only go to the third floor, though," he replied coolly.

"Good. Now can you take that collar off and--" Glory began.

"No," he said just as calmly as before, his blue eyes hard as glass as he looked at me.

"You can't..." Glory started to say in disappointment.

"I won't."

The gray pegasus just stared at him, her lavender eyes wide. "You... won't? What... P-21! What are you talking about? Stop messing around."

"I'm not messing around," he replied without the slightest raise of his voice.

Glory's jaw dropped. "You bastard! How could you do this? How? Do you know what she's

gone through for you? To help you! You... I'll blow your head off right now if you don't take it off!" she shouted as she started to cry.

"Glory!" I said as I stepped between them. She started to shake as I put my hoof on her shoulder. "You heard the recording. You know what I did to him."

She gave a tiny hiccup as her mouth worked. "But... Blackjack..." she whimpered.

"I wronged him, Glory. You know that." She shook even more as she clenched her eyes shut and I gave her a hug. "I'm sorry, Glory."

Rampage let out a long sigh. "Oh, what kind of party is this when you're being all dramatic? I mean, duh, bo-ring!" she said as she flicked a hoofful of blood at Glory, making her jump aside and scowl at the striped mare. "You three get out of here and take the angst with you, and I'll hang around and slaughter anypony that comes in!"

"But what about Deus?"

"Pffft. Who's afraid of that doofus?" she said with a snort, looking over her shoulder as she walked to the spider robot. "Now you crazy kids get going. I'm pretty sure there's more on the way and I'm in a mood to do something... Reaperish."

"Hello, madam. What is your chem potion of choice?" the spider robot asked as Rampage put both hooves on the bar top. Her grin definitely made my mane crawl.

"Everything," she said with chilling eagerness.

Okay. This little revelation into the nature of one of my... companions... certainly upped the creepiness factor, but I had to admit that she'd cut off Glory and P-21's argument. Even if they were pissed with each other, nopony wanted to hang around Rampage as the robot pushed its needles into her limbs and she started giggling wildly. P-21 led the way up the stairs as her giggles became hysterical laughter.

The stairs led up to the third floor, which was apparently a flophouse for ponies looking to sleep off the aftereffects of their benders. A few of the rooms were still occupied by ponies too unconscious or uncomprehending to be aware of the danger; I couldn't see them as being a risk to anything but themselves as we moved along the hall. Unfortunately, rubble blocked any further progress up.

"How are we supposed to get to the fourth floor?" I asked, more to stave off the fight brewing between the two over my bomb collar.

"Hey," a blue mare asked in a long, strung out voice as she stepped into the hall. Her pupils were huge, and she blinked in the meager light of the hall like it startled her. "Hey... are you moon ponies?"

"Excuse me?" Glory asked nervously as the mare reached out a hoof to touch something that wasn't there. "Are you all right?"

"Ponies from the moon are coming to take me away. I'll be with Luuuuunaaaa," she crooned as she swayed. "Are you moon ponies?"

"Er... yes. Yes I am," I said quickly with a smile. "But I need to get to the roof so I can use my... um... moon communicator!" I raised my PipBuck and grinned as sincerely as I could. "Do you know the way up?"

"Oh sure. Princess Celestia will send you. Straight to the moon. And we'll all be with Luna." She had, I noted with a pang, a crescent moon cutie mark. No wonder she was strung out on drugs.

I wanted to shake her, but doubted it would do much good. "Ah, no. The roof. We need to get up."

"Up to Luuuuunaaaaaa..." she crooned as she walked back into the room where another mare waved a hoof at the air above her. Then the blue mare looked at us with her dreamy smile. "Are you coming?"

Hesitantly, we walked in and saw a portion of the ceiling had caved in. A treacherous ramp of debris led up to the hole. "... thanks..." I said as I smiled with a little guilt for misleading the high mare.

"Give my love to Luna and come and get me soon. I really don't like being here," she said as she fell back on a mattress, waving her hooves in the air above her. "Luuuunaaa... I'm gonna go see Luuuunaaa... and live on the moon with the moon poooo-nieeeeees."

"Yeah. We'd all love to go live on the moon," I muttered as we carefully pulled ourselves up the slope, leaving the mare to her visions.

"What was that all about?" P-21 asked softly once we were all up on the fourth floor.

"Moon Dust," Glory replied in a far more snippy tone. "Scalpel was telling me about it. It's a hallucinogen. It's also very addictive," she added, giving me a sharp look as well. She glanced back down at the mares lying on their backs, waving their hooves aimlessly in the air. "Who doesn't want to escape the Wasteland whenever they can?"

I couldn't blame the mares at all. Still... "I hope Rampage didn't include that when she asked the robot to give her 'everything'." Glory couldn't hide her smile at that one as she started to crawl up through the hole.

The fourth floor had been neglected for some time. The rooms were filled with heaps of junk, rusting boxes, barrels, littered Dash inhalers and empty bottles of booze. The shag carpet under our hooves squished with every step, and a tangy, coppery smell clung to everything. So much debris filled the hall that I could barely navigate through the narrow space. In many places, the plaster had all but liquefied from the moisture, showing the rusting steel and crumbling cinder block underneath.

The hallway came to an abrupt end at two heavy cabinets and desks jammed between the walls. I frowned as I pushed and shoved, but, aside from squealing with a terrible racket, they weren't budging. "Maybe we can get through one of these doors?" Glory suggested as she looked behind us. Unfortunately, the first door was locked. Fortunately, P-21 was back. In, twist, and click. I could have screamed at how effortlessly he did it!

The room inside hadn't been filled with unwanted junk and was still relatively intact, if you could ignore a section of collapsed wall that *had* been half covered with junk. A terminal on the table cast a sickly green glow over the interior of the room. A few decayed posters still covered the surviving wall, their surfaces warped and faded by the constant exposure to moisture and spotty, hardy mold. They showed four ponies standing before a large audience on a magnificent stage.

P-21 had gravitated to the terminal while I tried to shift the steel crates choking the hole in the wall. Water splashed and dripped through the hole, so I hoped we'd be able to get up another floor. Glory searched the rest of the room. She pointedly avoided disturbing a pile of bones piled before a large, rust-pitted cabinet.

From the terminal came a buzz and crackle, followed by a mare's voice. *"...made it to Flankfurt. It's a big step down from Canterlot... and Manehattan... and Hoofington."* The speaker gave a frustrated sigh I knew only too well. *"No pony seems willing to promote us after that charity concert last year. You were right; I should have just played nice with the Ministry of Morale, but I can't shake that what they're doing is wrong. The proceeds of that concert were supposed to go to victims of the war, both pony families and zebra refugees. It wasn't as if we were trying to help the enemy!"*

*"I've found a place over a club. You should come see it; I'd really like it if you could see it. I'd like it if any pony would see it. I know I've never been... sociable... but I would dearly like it if some pony would visit me. Even write to me. It feels like I've been exiled from Equestria without a formal decree. All four of us have been blacklisted. They don't even need me at the M.o.I. anymore."*

*"I can only hope that I can land a job with one of the aristoponies out here. They've got estates all over and are fans of our music. It's like they're either running for the hills or circling the wagons in Canterlot. I don't know which is a safer bet. I can't see the zebras wasting a balefire bomb on Flankfurt. There've got to be better things to bomb."* Through the cracked window I could make out the glowing red crater to the north. Apparently not.

*"Anyway. I know it's not your kind of music, but I've got some recordings of our last concert together. I hope you'll accept them with my apologies. Your once, and hopefully future..."* But the recording fuzzed out at the end.

We shared a glance, and I looked at the cabinet. Carefully shifting the bones to lie on the bed, I opened the doors of the cabinet. The passage of the years had not marred the finish of the burnished brown wood nor rusted the strings of the beautiful instrument. The cello -- or maybe it was a double bass, I couldn't tell -- rested comfortably in its frame while the interior of the doors were covered with pictures of a somber gray mare performing before a crowd of thousands. Pictures showed her cool and aloof, a bit like P-21, I had to admit. But there was one large photograph that stood out from the rest.

The charcoal-maned pony sat beside a white unicorn mare with electric blue hair and opaque glasses. She was licking the gray pony's cheek, and, from the shocked and blushing expression on the gray mare's face, it was a gesture that hadn't been anticipated. A note was written at the bottom: *'Hey Octavia. Lighten up, chill out, and have some fun, girl! Take care of yourself. Pon3.'*

"Were there music files still on the terminal?" I asked P-21 quietly. He nodded, and I trotted over to the device. There wasn't a way to take the instrument with us, but I could at least take the music. He transferred the files to my PipBuck. I looked at the cabinet and bones, hoping that I would remember to return and move the instrument someplace safe rather than leaving it to eventually rot. There were a few books of sheet music as well, but I couldn't see much reason for bringing them. Tragically, my PipBuck couldn't even assign a value beyond one cap for a 'pre-war book'.

It didn't take long for me to clear out the rest of the hole. Water sloshed across the rusty, debris-littered floor as rain poured through a large hole overhead. We were barely able to scramble up the slippery slope to reach the fifth floor, and then only with me shoving P-21's rump up towards the top. We emerged into a twisted tangle of broken concrete, rebar, and shattered glass. Whatever floors had once stood above the fifth were long gone now. And worse, from the shouts coming from the wagon parking garage next door, we hadn't found the only way up here.

Lightning flashed overhead. Okay, now it was officially worse. Thank you, Luna, but this is as exciting as I need it to get right now. Thank you. A white bolt snapped across the sky.

"We need to move. Now!" I urged as we picked our way through the tangle towards the Exchange. Bullets began to zing and whiz through the pouring rain to plink off concrete. I couldn't tell if the shooters were Pecos or Deus's ponies; I supposed it didn't matter. Fortunately, their night vision was

as crap as ours in this rain, but they were making up for lack in accuracy with quantity of bullets. When possible, we crawled behind cover as they fought to catch up to us.

The Exchange rose six stories, and the gap between the two buildings was bridged by a narrow slab of concrete. Worse, it had no cover. Even *worse* (again), the slippery uphill climb would be dangerous all on its own. "Get up there, Glory," I shouted as I swapped out for the carbine. There weren't many bullets left for it, so I switched to antipersonnel flechettes and picked my shots carefully. The miniature darts punched right through the flesh of our pursuers and fragmented into dozens of razor-sharp lengths inside the body. I could only assume that, aside from being highly injurious, it was painful as hell too. Right now, I'd take all I could get.

Once Glory was up, P-21 was next. After he'd ascended the slippery slab, I turned and ran as quickly as I could, hooves slipping and scraping as I kicked my way up to the top of the Exchange building. A missile hissed past my head, blowing a chunk out of the concrete wall past me. I stared across the street at the large green pony standing atop the Trough and calmly lining up another shot with his missile launcher. Worse (I was really starting to hate that word), he'd gotten to the highest corner piece of the crumbling building and could fire down at us with ease.

I froze on the slope, wincing at the rounds that bit into my flank as I swapped magazines and aimed my carbine as carefully as possible. We fired almost as one, but the missile detonated only twenty feet away, knocking him from his perch and sending the launcher flying down into the street. I could only hope it was a really long fall inside the building... now all I needed was...

Sweet Celestia, why is it never easy? The top of the Exchange was a hollowed-out disaster. A drop of two to three stories plunged down beneath us into a jagged mess filling the shell of the building. While floors were missing, parts of the walls were still intact and created fragile and thin bridges like a jigsaw puzzle. Debris and beams also bridged the voids. Looking down, though... oh fuck, why did I look down? I quickly closed my eyes and focused on the horizontal plane. I didn't see how anypony could survive that fall. Bullets pinged off some rusty barrels stacked near the ramp; from the sound of it, trying to roll the barrels down the ramp would at best be only a temporary distraction, and it would probably just let somepony shoot us while we were trying to shift them.

Fortunately, I could see the pipe bridge coming in the side of the building... three stories down. A nearby concrete stairwell looked almost intact enough for us to get down, though, and, better yet, it'd protect us from Taurus's... damn, why had he stopped shooting? My eyes scanned the blown-out windows of the Trough, but I could see neither hide nor hoof of him. Or the two ghosts. My mane felt like it was trying to crawl clear off my neck!

Though Glory might not have been able to fly, she was still by far the most agile of us. She hopped nimbly from beam to beam and reached the stairs before us. "Come on. It's clear all the way--"

Two bolts of energy lanced out from the underside of a beam below me. One struck her in the chest, a shocked expression crossing her face as she tumbled slowly down the stair, landing limply at the first landing. I looked straight down at the black armored carapace of Enclave power armor sitting on the underside of the beam. It looked back up at me.

And that's about the point I lost it. With a scream, I launched myself over the edge, grabbing the armor mid plummet and wrapping my hooves around its neck. Whatever spells allowed it to fly and stick to things weren't strong enough for two ponies. Gray armored wings tried to fly as we tumbled end over end down towards the debris below. I jumped into S.A.T.S. in mid fall and sent two telekinetic bullets into the pegasus's head, but the magic was ineffective against its helmet.

Apparently some goddess was looking out for me still, because when we hit the ground, I was on top. Even shaken to my hooves, I didn't waste any time. I felt like I'd just injected a dose of Stampede.

"Me!" I screamed as my magic pulled over a chunk of rebar-studded concrete and, with my forehooves helping, brought it smashing down on the power armor's helmet. "Me! You kill me first! You got it? Not Glory. Not P-21. Not anypony till you kill me!" I screamed as I brought it down again and again on her... yeah, I was pretty sure it was a her... head. I paid little heed to the pain in my back and haunches as I smashed in her visor.

"Blackjack! Stop!" Glory begged from the stairs.

I wanted to ignore her. The stupid tail kept beating at me, so I pinned it beneath some rubble. Here was one of the Enclave that had taken her cutie mark and disgraced her. I wanted to send my magic bullet right down the pony's throat! One thing alone stopped me: Glory's plea. She was wrong. I should kill this soldier. It was like in Miramare. I was right. I knew better.

"Blackjack, stop," P-21 said calmly beside me. "Trust me. Please."

I stopped my attack and looked down at... Glory? Yes, the gray coat was a little darker, the lavender eyes a more purplish shade, and the face a touch more mature, but it was the spitting image of Glory staring up at me. Glory limped down, drinking a fresh healing potion to close some of the burns on her chest. It was then that I realized my barding was soaked in blood. The bladed stinger had been ripping into me and I hadn't even noticed.

Glory passed me a restoration potion, and I noted with distaste that it was already turning a paler shade of purple. Still, it closed most of my injuries well enough. Glory was looking down at the Enclave soldier with an expression of sadness. "Hello, Dusk. How are you, Sister?"

*Oh shit. Why, Celestia? Just... why? Deus, Pecos, Zodiac, rain and lightning, and NOW you're throwing a family reunion at me?*

"You don't have any sisters, Morning. You left your family, just like her. You've destroyed Father. My career! Everything!" Dusk hissed up at her. "We'll be lucky if we're not exiled from Thunderhead for this, you dodo!" She glared at me.

"I didn't fall, Sister. I'm not a Dashite. I'm still Enclave. There are things going on..." Glory began in a brittle, heartbroken voice.

"I know all about it, Morning. You've taken up with this surfacer terrorist." With a great mechanical heave she threw me off and rolled to her hooves. That impact had really done a number on her shiny black armor. I really hoped I'd taken those lethal energy guns out of commission. "Off on your own selfish crusade to save the surface. Just like her!"

"No!" Glory shouted back. "Operative Lighthooves! He's making a disease! A bioweapon."

"Lighthooves was studying the surfacer plague, you featherbrain!" Dusk roared. "He was sent to determine if it was a threat! And you two killed nine Enclave soldiers for that!"

"What?" Glory sat hard, her eyes wide.

"You two destroyed an operations base. Why? Because we weren't clearing away the clouds fast enough? Because we weren't showering the surfacers with enough food? They don't deserve the sun!" Dusk shouted, pointing a hoof at P-21 and me. "And neither do you." Those energy rifles pointed right at both of us.

"I met a pony, vegetarian, who contracted the raider disease," I said sharply as I stepped between her and Glory. "And I'm pretty sure she got it after eating your food. And I was sent with Enclave soldiers

to an isolated farm that had turned raider. Again, your food was given to them. So unless the Enclave is fine with using innocent ponies to test a plague, there's more going on here." While fury still burned in her eyes, there was a moment of hesitation. "They manipulated her speech magically and branded her. Don't believe me if you want, but that's what happened." Still, I doubted that my word would sway her.

Her dark purple eyes glared at me. "The Enclave doesn't turn against its own. Ever."

I chuckled. "Yeah. You are definitely her sister." Now she was about to shoot me. Good. Bad as it might be for Glory, I could live with defending myself to her death. "I'm also going to say... you try and shoot me or my friends again and I'm going to make it ten Enclave soldiers dead." Red eyes stared into purple, neither of us blinking as we waited for the other to twitch.

"Mare pissing matches aside," P-21 said dryly as he stepped between us, looking at the older pegasus, "You've got something to say?" I fought the urge to snort; only P-21 could come up with that.

"What... do you want... Sister?" Glory begged the question between her tears.

Dusk's eyes now showed some doubt, but that doubt didn't stop what came next. "You're dead now, Morning Glory. That's the only way any of our family will survive. Father's ruined, but he's not totally shamed. I am going to report you as dead. Maybe they won't believe it, but that's what I'll report. Lose your name and the uniform and stop pretending to be one of us. Because if so much as a rumor gets out that you're still alive, I will bring my entire wing down on you." Her eyes swapped to me and she added in a hiss, "And I'll be sure to kill you first."

Only the fact that it would devastate Glory if I killed her sister stopped me from putting a magic bullet through her eye.

With that she leaped into the air, past the broken crossbeams, and hesitated only long enough to blow the ponies who had made it up the ramp into ash. She scooped some into a pocket on her armor and then without a second look back flew up into the stormy sky. Glory slowly curled up and collapsed into a sobbing heap.

"We'll have to carry her. We can't stay here," I muttered as I knelt down to scoop her over my back.

A chunk of concrete whirled around and smacked me upside the head, sending me staggering to the side. A length of rusty rebar followed it and was barely deflected by my PipBuck. Both levitating up anything heavy or jagged, the two ghostly unicorns had the audacity to look sad. "Sorry about this," the first said softly with an apologetic smile as she stabbed at me with another piece of rebar.

"But Deus is already up here and on his way, and we really need to finish you off quickly," the second said as she floated towards me. I pulled out my shotgun, but the shot was just as ineffective now as it had been earlier.

"If it's any consolation, we're sorry about your friend," the first said as she moved around to the side. "I can't imagine how bad it'd hurt to lose family."

"Wait! Didn't Rampage kill Leo?" I asked as I watched one float above me with her rebar weapon.

They glanced at each other and giggled. "Oh, she did worse than kill him," said one as she flew at me and solidified just fast enough to kick me upside my head with her full weight. I tried to blast her, but she went ghost too fast. Then the rusted steel hit the side of my head. She wasn't very strong, but grabbing the weapon with my magic just made her pick out something new to hit me with.



The second came flying out of the floor, solidified, and gave my chin a rear leg buck that knocked me to the ground. "She broke his gun!"

"And his legs, Mini," Gem giggled as she resumed beating on me with her rebar while her sister kept flanking me. "And his face."

"His poor, poor face," Mini said as she kicked out at my rear legs; it didn't knock me down, but every hit was wearing at me. I kept trying to shoot them, but they kept using that damned intangibility spell! The cheaters!

Then I looked over at P-21 next to Glory. They'd screamed at the grenade he'd thrown. Why? "P-21! What was that grenade you used?"

He looked at me, his eyes widening in comprehension. "Magic!"

I dropped the shotgun and raced towards Glory. "No!" shouted the one with the rebar as she speared it into Glory's beam pistol. The casing cracked open with a sparkle of rainbow light. I rolled her over, yanking the disintegration pistol from her battle saddle with my teeth. I had no clue how to use it. I just had to get them. If I couldn't, then they'd bludgeon me to death.

I wasn't exactly a good shot with the disintegration pistol, but I could at least point it in the right general direction and fire. The deadly pink bolts raced through the air, forcing the translucent mares to keep dodging. A bolt struck finally struck one of them and she screamed, solidifying in midair and dropping toward the jagged debris. At the last second, she ghosted again and disappeared through the floor.

So, a hit from the disintegration pistol would disrupt whatever it was that let them fly and pass through things. If I could disrupt them with one shot, I could take them out with a second. Of course, that would mean I'd have to hit them *twice*... but it was the only thing I could do. I kept my focus as I fired pink bolt after pink bolt.

Then the gun died. I stared at the cartridge and tried to figure out how to eject it. For that matter, what was I going to reload it with? And at that moment, one of the mares launched herself at me through a collapsed wall. "Now, Gem! Finish--"

My telekinetic, *magical* bullet fired, striking Mini in the torso. And just like that she stopped, staring at me with a horrified look on her face. Her very solid face. She hung there like a decoration, half her body on one side of the wall. Half her body on the other side. "Oh," she whispered softly. "That's... not good."

"Mini!" screamed Gem, hovering in front of her sister. "Go ghosty! Do it!"

"I... can't. I don't think the spell works inside something," she said softly. "I can't feel my legs."

Gem solidified before my eyes, the three of us forgotten as she held her sister. "No, do it. Do it!" she begged as she changed ghostly and passed her hooves through her sister. "Mini! Go ghosty. Please!" Again and again she solidified and desolidified, trying to get her sister to do the same. I looked on, wishing that Mini could somehow free herself.

Gem finally threw her forelegs around her twin sister, sobbing brokenly.

"I'm sorry... I mean..." I said lamely. I'd meant to kill her, but I hadn't meant for... *this*.

Mini looked at me with a small smile. "It's okay. We were trying to kill you. I mean, it's only fair." Somehow that made me feel even worse as the trapped mare gently stroked her sibling's mane. "It's okay, Gem. It doesn't hurt at all."

"Gem? Mini?" a male said from behind us. Standing on the pipes leading to safety was the green buck. He must have started moving the second we were out of sight. If Gemini hadn't slowed us down he wouldn't have had the time to head us off. I whirled, looking at the stallion as he panted for breath, his sides gleaming with sweat. His gun was slung across his neck, though. Something about him reminded me of Big Macintosh. His dying sister seemed worth infinitely more to him than caps. "Ah no... Mini..." he whispered as he walked past us without a second glance.

"We should go. Now," P-21 said softly as he gestured to the now-vacant pipe bridge that passed over the fence and into another ruin just outside the south gate. Looking around and venturing a cautious check of the street, I couldn't see a lot of Pecos. In fact, I couldn't see much of anything moving except us, the three Zodiacs, and the rain. Then I heard a soft mechanical click overhead.

The pipe bridge exploded. Of course it exploded... not from a bomb, of course, but from the two massive cannons that sent a heavy boom thumping through the building. With a rusty squeal and a spray of fetid, stinking water, the remains of the old pipes tore free of the building and tumbled down into the gap below. Standing at the top of the ramp, the rain sheeting off him as his cannons smoked, loomed Deus. The pony who had made my life a living hell for the last two weeks or so. "Done. This running is finished," he growled as he looked down at the three of us, then over at the three Zodiacs. His red eyes widened and he chuckled, "Is that little cunt stuck in the wall?"

I started to move, but P-21 got in my way. "Hold the fuck still, I need this," he growled as he reached up with his hooves and did something to the front of my collar. To my amazement, it fell right off. I blinked at him, feeling overwhelmed. Too much shit was happening right now, and it felt like my brain had gotten whiplash trying to determine what to feel. He looked right into my eyes, though, and said softly, "We still need a talk. So live long enough for that." Then he smiled at me. "Plan Boom."

So, there was a plan? "Um, yeah," I muttered, looking up at Deus, wondering how the hell I was going to beat him.

"Well this is just too pathetic for words, so..." He swung the barrels down towards the two pale unicorns. "First, the distractions!"

"Stay away from my sisters, you metal son of a bitch!" Taurus shouted as he backed away, then gritted his teeth around his rifle's handle and, kicking through the rubble, expertly fired shot after shot at the massive Reaper above us. Our eyes met, both of us mirroring the other's apology. This was his way to make it up to me. This was my chance to make it up to him; I'd killed his sister, the least I could do was see to it that she wasn't blasted for the sadist's amusement. The rifle was loaded with some kind of armor piercing rounds, and, as I scrambled up the concrete steps, I was glad to see them punching holes in the cyberpony's side.

What I hated was how those holes didn't seem like more than annoyances to him. He shifted his stance and swung the two cannons over to point down at the green pony. The shots echoed like thunder pouring into the remains of the building. The structure began to groan and sway as his cannons blasted Taurus with explosive shells. The large green pony couldn't run in the debris. He couldn't hide from the blasting explosions. So, he died.

"One done," Deus said as I reached the level he was on, my shotgun loaded with slugs. I had no clue how I was going to stop him. I just knew I'd either do it or die trying. His eyes narrowed as he smirked. "Are you finally done running, cunt?"

"Yeah," I muttered as I looked back at him across the beams and walls that crossed the void beneath us. "You're not afraid you're going to blow this up?" I asked, lifting my PipBuck as I glanced down at P-21 working on something. Glad one of us had a plan.

"Nah. See, when you have guns like these, I don't have to hit you. I just have to hit near you." And triggered by a thought, the firing mechanism gave a loud metal click before the guns roared, and I was running as the blast took off the top of the steps in a shower of rubble. I am not the nimblest of ponies, but right now I kept my focus on blasting him with slugs and moving ahead of the clockwork explosions ripping the ruin apart behind me. I could only hope that nopony below was buried in falling rubble.

I didn't aim, I simply fired as fast as my shotgun allowed. He didn't run or dodge. The lead pancaked and fractured off his armored hide and all I could do was keep moving and keep firing and keep praying that whatever P-21 was doing would work. When I tried to sprint to point blank range, he blew the beams out ahead of me, grinning and saying something that was lost in the ringing in my ears. Worse, my legs were starting to go numb from the constant battering concussion. One misstep and he wouldn't have to shoot me.

I wasn't fast enough. I wasn't strong enough. I had to be more. I slipped into S.A.T.S. and tried to think of something. Nothing around me would be very useful, so... my inventory. I lacked explosives (and knowledge of how to use them). My shotgun was my strongest weapon, and it wasn't doing anything to Deus except amusing him. I needed... what I shouldn't use. I had them; Glory hadn't taken them from me. I could use them. I knew it was wrong and stupid. It was going to get me killed... but then, so was Mr. Cyberpony's shooting spree. I had to do better. I had to talk to P-21. I had to make this better for Glory. I had to give Mini some peace before she died. I had to.

Buck. Rage. Med-X. Flash. I dropped S.A.T.S., then pulled open my pack as I kept dodging. I chewed and injected like a fiend, trying to close the distance at the same time. Damn me... it felt good. When the Flash hit my system, the world crawled to a halt. It was almost like I was back in S.A.T.S., but I could still move. When the drug wore off, Deus found me in his face. Or rather, my shotgun in his face. I fired four S.A.T.S.-guided rounds at point blank range... and a little shield popped up on my E.F.S. with each. Even now, he was too tough for my weapons to touch.

I didn't give a shit. For all his pistons and steel, he was still a pony and I forced my way underneath him. "Gonna give me a blow job?" he laughed as he smashed my shotgun with one hoof. It would be his last laugh.

Then he screamed. I had a feeling that he had never screamed like *that* before. I prayed to the Goddesses that this was one injury, no matter how superficial, that he couldn't regenerate or heal. With my final, extremely satisfying magic shot, I gelded God.

All sadistic banter went away as he stomped and kicked wildly. To stay underneath him was to be rendered into bloody paste. I hooked my hooves around the ammo feed to one of his guns and was jerked out from under him, flipping onto his back. All I could do was hang on for dear life, biting into his mane to keep from slipping off as he reared and kicked in a frenzy of his own. One swing would have tossed me out over the edge if not for my hoof being caught in his ammo feed. Finally, he managed to get his teeth on my mane and pull. I felt my flesh tear, but more terrifying was that I was yanked off his back and thrown into the interior of the groaning building.

By pure luck I slammed into a metal pipe and wrapped my hooves around it desperately, dangling over the jagged floor two stories down. I looked up at Deus, my neck throbbing despite the painkillers, as he stared at me with maddened eyes. He wasn't going to shoot near me. He was going to render me into bloody vapor and fuck EC-1101. Looking at the ruin between his hindquarters, I couldn't blame him.

Then a white unicorn ghost floated in front of him with a slave collar stuffed with dynamite on her left and a detonator on her right. "Gem! No!" I screamed as she went solid, bit the end of the duct tape, and pulled it off the glowing detonator as she began to fall.

The explosion blew me right off the pipe. I hit a landing on the concrete stairs, then flopped down the steps limply like a doll.

I had thought that I'd heard Deus scream before. I was wrong. Rearing up on his hind legs, the flayed Reaper's mechanical mouth gaped, forcing a shattered jaw to stretch impossibly wide. An articulated metal windpipe released that horrible noise as flaps of skin dangled from him. Broken pieces of skull clung to an armored sphere that was still horribly attached to his mechanical spine. The bilious fluids pouring from the tubes along his throat and chest oozed and steamed in the rain. And he still wasn't dead.

One red eye-camera focused right on me, and he pointed his cannons at my prostrate form. "Cunnnnntzzzzzz..." an electronic speaker crackled. The cannons' firing mechanism clicked... the cannons, the barrels of which were now fouled from the blast and his mad thrashing, backfired.

The explosion of the shells tore his cybernetic body in two. The magazines went off a second later, and with that the exterior corner of the wall gave way, tumbling outward as the ruined stone collapsed like a house of cards. Sections of the other walls followed it down, and it was only by luck that we weren't crushed.

Good and bad luck.

I looked to P-21 and the still trembling Glory. Both alright... No. Not alright. None of us were alright. But we were alive.

And so was Mini.

Slowly, I made my way towards where she was still breathing shallow little gulps. I floated out Cupcake's revolver. "Mini..." I said quietly, though with the ringing in my ears everything felt quiet. I was numb from horn to hoof.

"Hey." She gave a shaky smile. "It's the Security pony..." she said quietly as she hung there. "Where're Gem and Taurus? She had to go..."

I looked over at one of the rubble heaps and the motionless green head poking out of it. "They... they left. They got away." *Please, if there is any goddess in all of Equestria, let her believe me.* "They're both... just fine..."

"That's good. Gem does silly things without me," she said quietly as she looked at me, red eyes just like my own, crying just like my own, as her lips trembled. I wasn't that good a liar. Were it not for the mane, I might have been looking into a mirror as she asked, "Are... are you going to finish it?"

I couldn't say it. I could only nod as my eyes blurred with tears.

Her lips smiled as she whispered, "Thank you."

I wrapped my hooves around her, hugging her as I levitated the gun up under her chin.

*'Pull the trigger. Pull the trigger. Pull the Goddesses-damned trigger. Damn it, you bony son of a bitch, let me be able to do this!'* I sobbed as I held her, shaking as I poured everything I could into this. Five pounds of pressure was all I needed. *'Pull the motherfucking trigger, Blackjack. Do it! Do it!'*

*Please, for the love of Celestia, do it!* I begged myself.

"I'm sorry." I sobbed, gritting my teeth together. Clenching my eyes closed. Wishing it was my head that the gun was pressed against.

Mini just laughed softly. "You're a good pony, Miss Blackjack." I felt a second unicorn's magic on the gun.

One last gunshot sounded out across Flank.

\* \* \*

The mournful tones of a cello came from my PipBuck and filled the rainy night alongside the slow, heavy notes of a piano. The hushing sigh of rain pattering over the rubble around us complemented the sorrowful music. Looking at the clouds, I was too dead within to care about that sensation of being swallowed by the sky. I wanted it to swallow me. Send me to the stars.

It was over. If there was anypony still after me, they were dead or had fled. I couldn't care which. I felt hollow inside, and the only hint that I wasn't just another corpse littering the Wasteland was my Buck-withdrawn heart thudding in my chest. I sat under an overhang on the edge of the Exchange, looking out at the pouring rain. I was alive. Deus was dead. Another fucking win...

Yay.

Glory only pulled herself together enough to take off the black Enclave uniform and toss it over the edge. She looked like she wanted to follow it. Instead, she just curled up out of the rain beside me, staring into the gray downpour.

Rampage had jumped up to us. I was so numb, I didn't care how she did it. "Congratulations. You're a Reaper now. If you want it." Even with the rain, the striped pony looked like she'd been put through a meat grinder. I couldn't think of how many she'd killed below. I didn't want to care about ponies trying to kill me anymore. I just wanted to burn that part out of me.

It'd be easier to rip out my own heart. "Is it worth it?" I asked as the cold water dripped into my eyes.

She didn't answer right away. "Not really, but it's better than being alone," she said as she gazed out at the rain with a distant, sad expression. Finally she sighed and muttered, "Fuck, I hate this maudlin shit." She stood. "I'm going to go wait for 69 to open. I need... something... bad." She hopped down from three stories, then walked down a road strewn with dismembered corpses.

P-21 slowly trotted over and lay down beside me. I floated Cupcake's revolver to him and laid it at his hooves. "Here. You deserve this," I muttered quietly as the rain poured over me.

"What's this for?" he asked softly, nudging it with his hoof.

"Justice," was all I said. He looked at me and then nodded once. He reached down and took it into his mouth, teeth tightening on the handle. Slowly, he pointed it at me. Smears of Mini's blood still glistened on the end. I wondered if it would hurt. I hoped so. I deserved for it to hurt.

Then he tossed the gun out into the street below.

I looked down after it, seeing the dull metal flickering in the remaining neon lights. "Why?" was all I could ask. "After what I did to you..."

"I don't blame you for Stable 99," he said softly. "Not anymore. For a while I did... but... if we were there right now, would you put yourself on the breeding queue?" I shook my head dumbly. "Would you blow away the Overmare and anypony that tried to keep that sick place going?" I nodded and he let out a breath.

"Then for Stable 99, I can forgive you," he said simply.

I closed my eyes. "And for U-20?" I felt him stiffen beside me, sucking in a breath. "You loved him. You loved him and I beat him to death in front of you."

The longest silence yet was followed by a quiet, "No. Not for that." I closed my eyes, imagining that the dead weight in my chest was whatever was left of my heart.

"Then why not kill me? Why didn't you kill me when we first escaped? Or after I killed Scoodle? Or... or any of the other times?" I asked at I stared at him.

"I wanted to. I still want to... a little. And I don't think that will ever go away. I still see it. Still feel it. And no matter what, that murder and Stable 99 are part of me," he said as he bowed his head. Then he looked at me. "But for as long as I've known you, I've known you're something special. You could have killed both of us out of spite. Out of sadistic glee; I know Daisy would have. You could have let Daisy take me. You could have left me for Deus when we fled 99. You could have killed Scoodle and blamed *her* for her death. You could have left the killing of forty psychotic foals up to me or Glory. You just fought the scariest fucking monster in the Wasteland while trying to defend three ponies that were out to kill you, Blackjack!

"Time and time again the Wasteland gives you the easier path and you refuse to take it. You could have just given EC-1101 over. You could have not cared about 99. You could have just left me to die. Or the Crusaders. Or Glory. You take the hard road no matter how damn much it hurts you, and I can only watch in awe that you keep walking it. And every time I think you're going to do what's wrong and easy, you surprise me. I couldn't do it. I would have cut a deal the second I was alone outside 99. But you're sticking it out, trying to find out what makes the damned thing so important.

"You walk the hard road, Blackjack. And sorry, but you deserve this." I clenched my eyes shut.

He hugged me. He actually hugged me. At that point, everything fell apart in broken sobbing as the assorted fucked up emotions filled up that great big hollowness within me and poured forth. And I felt Glory silently lay down beside me as well, holding me in her hooves. I pressed my face into the wet concrete. I may not have been forgiven, but I was at least cared for.

I wasn't alone on this hard road...

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Footnote: Level Up.

New perk added: Action Mare (rank 1) - +15 Action Points

Skill Note: Melee (100)

(Thanks to Kkatman for creating Fo:E, thanks to Hinds and Bronode for making it worth reading, thank you to all my readers and commenters, and thanks to everypony who helped me through that tough patch earlier.)