

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 13: Turnabout

"Ahem... hint hint?"

I think it would be fair to say that I've been in some hostile situations before. There have been places the Wasteland has shown me that simply said, "This place is going to kill you." The Boneyard, Pony Joe's, the Fluttershy Medical Center, Brimstone's Fall. Heck, I'm pretty sure Hoofington was built two parts menace to one part creepy. Granted, there had been a few times when I hadn't taken the Wasteland's warnings seriously enough and paid for it, but that was my fault; the dangers of the Wasteland were usually fairly obvious.

In the Miramare operations center, all the usual decorations that came with the Wasteland had been cleaned away. The lights had been replaced, the terminals had been repaired, and the debris of two centuries had been swept aside and removed. With only a dozen pegasi, the Enclave had restored a little bit of civility to the Wasteland. And since it was civil, I was expected to put all my ammunition and weapons into a secure locker in the base's security station. I appreciated the irony. I also appreciated the firearms they'd collected from around the base. They'd repaired the collection to pristine condition.

So why'd they issue beam weapons that were nigh nonfunctional to Glory's team?

"I really wish I could have contacted you before you came to the base, Blackjack. We could have avoided the mess above," Glory said with a warm smile as we trotted through the metal hallway. We had to be at least a hundred feet down, maybe more. The operations center at Miramare had been designed to withstand anything short of a direct hit from a balefire bomb. Too bad that that's exactly what had happened to the base. I figured only the shielding of a stable could have blocked the radiation. "I told them you'd probably come looking for me, but Operative Lighthooves was skeptical."

Operative: there was a title that just screamed 'gonna shoot you in the back'. That crimson buck just gave a genial chuckle, smiling casually as we walked through his base. The athletic pegasus had been quick to forgive me for killing two of his team, and had seemed more interested in laughing at me gluing the rumps of two of his ponies to the floor. I wasn't laughing; I was inclined to shoot everypony in the ops center--not kill, just shoot--till they started answering questions.

"Not that I'm not thrilled you're okay, Glory. But what are they doing here?" I asked as my mane itched all the way to my shoulders... which I worried was appropriate, since that's where Lancer had shot me. "And why did they take you away from P-21?"

"Why don't we hold off on questions for just a tick?" Lighthooves said as he trotted along ahead of us, "But for a start, our purpose here is simple: to bring peace and stability to the surface and in doing so protect the pegasus community of Thunderhead." It sounded like a well-rehearsed line. *I'll bet...*

They escorted us into a break room next to a pair of doors marked 'Command'. Inside sat a pegasus and... what was a unicorn doing wearing an Enclave uniform? Maybe...maybe the Enclave really weren't just out for themselves? But then what... this was confusing. The green unicorn buck

pushed his lips together in annoyance as he adjusted the round glasses on his muzzle. The pegasus, a deeper blue that bordered on purple, gave me a frown that was probably much more honest than Lighthooves's pleasant grin.

"Ah, good. Blackjack, may I introduce Special Adjutant Minty Fresh and Sergeant Wind Whisper?" The unicorn nodded at the former name and the pegasus nodded at the latter. Lighthooves walked to the vending machine, popped out three cold Sparkle-Colas, and, hugging them with his wings, returned and passed one to me and one to Glory.

"What is a unicorn doing with the Enclave?" I asked, pointing a hoof at Minty Fresh. Said unicorn twisted his lips in a smirk. A very kickable smirk. Everything about him screamed 'kick me'. I'd have liked to oblige.

Calm down, Blackjack; these are Glory's people, I had to remind myself, taking a deep breath and trying to dial back my aggression just a smidge.

"Interested in signing up?" Operative Lighthooves asked with a grin. I gave him a look and he coughed awkwardly before continuing, "When we were forced, regrettably, to seal away the skies for our own protection, there were a small number of unicorns still in the clouds. Some worked in the weather factories, others in the war effort. Thanks to spells and talismans, they were able to remain, and their assistance to the Enclave has been incalculable."

I nodded, remembering Vanity standing on the cloud with Jetstream. "Alright. Obvious question done. Important question now: what are you doing with Morning Glory?"

"Blackjack, they're bringing me back from the dead," Morning Glory said with a smile.

I blinked and looked up and down at the gray mare. "Come again?"

"I was reported missing a week and a half ago. Then I was assumed KiF, killed in the field, when they found the rest of my unit in Weather Monitoring Four," she said, almost looking embarrassed. "When Bonesaw had my samples and notes couriered to the Volunteer Corps at the Rainbow Dash Skyport, though, they immediately launched a search for me. Then they heard about our liberation of Brimstone's Fall and snatched us up. I had no idea they were so close."

"I'm sorry that we weren't able to extract your other friend, too. I imagine it would have made your life easier, but the sergeant only had orders to retrieve Morning Glory," he said with an apologetic look. I was getting sick of that look. It was wrong on his face.

"Yeah, well, better you than whoever took him," I replied. "So what are you all doing here?"

"Observing, for the most part. For years the de facto policy of the Enclave was isolationism. Due to the efforts of vocal and influential members of the community, like Morning Glory's father, we're experimenting with engagement. If we can help stabilize the surface, then that increases security at Thunderhead." A perfectly reasonable explanation, so why did I want to grab Glory and run? "Understandably, there are power blocs in the Wasteland that resist our efforts."

"Yeah, I can only imagine how the Society and Collegiate feel," I muttered, though I didn't actually

have a clue.

"We try to operate with a low profile; some ponies take offense to some of the Enclave's policies," Lighthooves said, all apologetic smiles. Yeah, policies like blocking out the sun; who would have a problem with that? "Ms. Morning's ordeal was actually quite useful to us in terms of the information she's gathered; now that we have her back and safe, we need to do some debriefing about all that she's learned while out and about with you. And her discovery of the disease associated with raider behavior, a stroke of brilliance! I'm fairly sure that all of Thunderhead's medical research division is going to want a piece of this young lady. Figuratively speaking, of course."

Something in my heart sank as I listened to all this. The idea that Glory would be leaving with me was growing more and more remote; she was getting her life back and then some. It was like me returning safe and sound to the stable, only better because her home didn't suck.

"Actually, I was hoping I could stay down here with Blackjack," she said brightly. Habazawa? I gawked at her in astonishment.

"You what?" I asked, wondering if it'd been my imagination.

"Well the surface is extremely hostile, but it's not so bad. I can better serve the Enclave out in the field than doing work in some laboratory. After all, if I hadn't been with you, the disease never would have been discovered. I'm sure Thunderhead will start working on a cure at once." Glory seemed quite thrilled by the prospect, but what struck me was who else seemed happy about it. Lighthooves and Minty Fresh both looked quite pleased by this turn of events.

"I'm sure something may be arranged. There's just the paperwork to fill out. Reports to ready. Interviews. It'll just take a little more time." The operative looked at me, his hooves folding on the table in front of him. "I know you want to rescue your other friend too, but that job will be far easier with a half-dozen Enclave soldiers backing you up. If you don't mind helping us out with some local trouble, you can put down some raiders and help Morning Glory gather more samples while we work." He smiled at me. They were all smiling. Perfectly reasonable.

So why was my mane going nuts?

* * *

I really hated flying. It didn't matter that I couldn't actually see how high up we were; the fact we were in the air at all screamed to me that I was seconds from plunging down through the clouds and transforming into a tiny smear on the Wasteland. The armored skywagon we were in was an ominous monster in and of itself, armored front to back. It was called a Vertibuck, I was told, after its ability to climb extremely quickly; I hoped that I wouldn't get a demonstration of that particular ability. It was pulled by two pegasi in bulbous compartments mounted above and to either side of the rounded front, with baffle-shielded holes in the back for them to thrust through and armored windows. A magical thingy mounted between them apparently gave them the ability to steer and lift the huge mass of armor. It boasted more firepower than I'd ever seen, with two racks of missiles and two enormous energy cannon turrets at the front.

The Enclave ignored me, with the exception of the occasional laugh and the constant

disapproving attention of Sergeant Wind Whisper. They wore reinforced black armor and either pistols or top-notch battle saddles with quality gear. I heard one complaining about lacking power armor support; I could only imagine flying Steel Rangers, and it was not a reassuring mental image. Sergeant Wind Whisper then told the speaker to close his trap, and that was it for conversation for the remainder of the flight.

The target was a farmhouse turned raider nest. Aside from some meager crops in muddy fields, I didn't see much in the way of a farm. Just a single two-story structure and a barn. It seemed pretty isolated. "You're sure there are raiders here?" I asked the sergeant once I'd gotten used to having dead grass underhoof again.

"Yes," she replied tersely.

I looked around. Field. Dead forest. "It's just, every raider nest I've come across had some victims nearby. A road or something they could prey on." I wasn't seeing anything like that here.

"They're here," she insisted. "Maybe you'd like to lead the way?" The Enclave soldiers chuckled, quite keen on that plan.

I unslung my shotgun, loaded it with buckshot, and ratcheted a round into the chamber. "Why not?" That got some looks of surprise, and I marched up towards the farmhouse. If they were raiders, they would attack. If not, hopefully they'd come out and explain the situation to the death squad commandos behind me. Everything about this felt nine shades of wrong. I could hear the bony fucker shuffling the cards. What was my ante this time?

When I reached the door, I could smell it: that sweet rotten odor of putrefying flesh mixed with the stench of sewage. It was like a mouthful of rotten meat. I started approaching the door when the first raider appeared around the corner of the farmhouse. He had a pitchfork clenched in his mouth, and his work clothes were soaked in old blood. The tiny pupils, yellowed eyes, and rictus grin took care of any other doubts I had about his sanity. Even then, though, something was wrong: raiders didn't wear farm clothes, no matter how bloodsoaked. I'd seen them in some ridiculous outfits, but they were never remotely normal. They seemed to have a psychological need for spikes and black clothes.

Of course, none of his apparel prevented me from taking off his head with two sprays of hot lead buckshot.

The E.F.S. gave me a few more exterior hostiles, but I had no idea if they were raiders or radroaches. "If you keep shooting them in the head, it's going to be impossible to get decent samples," Wind Whisper said softly and smugly behind me. I just looked at her and with a snick drew the dragon claw. Her smirk faded as I kicked the door open.

"Security!" I yelled as I charged inside. I'd hoped for some yellow bars; all I saw were red. A pair of bucks and a young mare were gathered around a grisly feast: their mother. They screamed, whooped, and giggled that insane little chuckle as they charged right in, heedless that both of us were armed.

It felt like an execution.

My claw cleanly decapitated the front running filly with a lucky hit. I caught the head in my magic

and tossed it over my shoulder at the sergeant backing me up. The second one had the thought to grab a cleaver and charge with it, swinging wildly. I blocked it with my PipBuck's reinforced casing, then drove the dragon claw into his throat with my magic. His giggles became choked whines as I cut him from ear to ear. Let Wind Whisper take off his head.

The third lifted the rustiest revolver I'd ever seen. He cackled and drooled around the weapon, tongue trying to pull the trigger. Too rusty, it seemed. Shaking with maddened rage, he threw the revolver at me.

Wind Whisper's shots passed by my head so close that they made my ears ring. The young buck jerked and then went still. Wind Whisper, her nice black combat armor mussed with blood, gave me a look. "Any more?" Apparently she knew about E.F.S.

"One," I said, glancing up the balcony overlooking the living/dining room. I paused to examine the mother: partly cannibalized, but what shocked me was the amount of food I could see on shelves next to the dining room. Far more than their scraggly crop suggested possible. And there were apples! Where had an isolated farming family gotten their hooves on fresh produce like this? For that matter, Glory had suggested the disease spread through cannibalism or fluid transfer. No pony would turn to cannibalism with a stuffed larder like this!

Sergeant Wind Whisper just narrowed her eyes as she walked over to the shelf and deftly flicked up a fresh red apple. "Want one?"

I did, but there was a raider to deal with. "Afterwards," I said as I tossed it aside. I'd hoped our banter would have drawn him down to us, but he was still up there. I trotted up, humming the pony pokey loudly. Two doors. I went to the first. Pushing open the door, I saw the four bunk beds, the scattered blood, the toys and meager belongings. These were not rich ponies. These were fucking poor as you got ponies. I turned to ask Wind Whisper how the fuck they could have afforded all that food when I saw that she wasn't behind me.

She'd gone to the other door. I reached the doorway just as she kicked it open. I saw the red bar race across my E.F.S. and Daddy came flying out the door and wrapped his hooves around her neck; the two went through the railing and crashed down into the middle of the gory meal with such force that the table collapsed beneath them. Her wings were useless on her back, her rifles extending beyond his shoulders as he lowered his mouth to her throat and started to chew.

I didn't have any time for stairs. I ran at the balcony rail and leaped out over the two of them. My stomach and the back of my brain screamed like yearling foals as gravity took me right down atop both of them. The impact of my hooves snapped his back, but it didn't stop him from trying to eat! I put every bit of magic I could into lifting his jaw. When it pulled away enough, I wrapped my hooves around his head and pulled his head further and further back. *Be strong.* Suddenly there was a snap, and the forward half of his body went limp as well. Damn me, though: he was still attempting to chew!

I shoved his corpse aside and saw the blood gushing from the injury in Wind Whisper's neck. I might know next to nothing about medicine, but I knew that wasn't good! I pressed my hoof to the wound as hard as I could and floated out a healing potion. It was translucent and milky... better than bleeding out. I forced it down her throat. Please work. Please work. Please work...

She suddenly jerked and took a shaky breath. I pushed her back down, warning, "Don't move so much. He almost tore out your throat."

Wind Whisper stared up at me, going red as I climbed off her. "Well... yeah..." she muttered as she rose. *I believe the word you're looking for is 'thanks', Sergeant?* Weak on her hooves, I helped her out of the farmhouse. The rest of her squad seemed to be amusing themselves by looting the barn and setting it on fire. I knew from the smoldering that it was futile; nothing burned well around Hoofington. I escorted her to the sky carriage, where she got another healing potion that smoothed the raw circle next to her windpipe.

Now that the sergeant was in sight, the others busted their butts to clear out the farmhouse. I thought about how wrong everything here was. One gun. One. How the hay had these isolated farmers turned into raiders? If they ran into raiders, period, they'd have been lunch! Had they come across a raider and gotten bitten? Boy, that sure didn't sit well with me. Secret cannibal ponies? I couldn't see it. Damn it, why couldn't I be as smart as Glory, or, Celestia forbid, P-21? The Enclave brought the contents of the pantry out in two metal crates. I smiled and levitated out an apple as Wind Whisper watched with round eyes. "Now I can enjoy some lunch," I said with a grin.

To my amazement she scowled and smacked it right out of the air with her wing. Her hoof mashed it to applesauce in the dirt. "That's Enclave property now. Keep your mouth off it or I'll shoot you." She turned to the soldiers and snarled, "Get that shit locked up and let's get going," and trotted off to the pantry goods.

'Cuuuuunnnntttt!' roared the back of my mind, sounding eerily like Deus. Oh well, I didn't need her stupid apple. I had Sugar Apple Bombs, and I munched them sullenly as they finished loading the 'samples'. As we lifted into the air, I suddenly regretted my timing for lunch as the carriage swung around. A pop and sharp hissing noise sounded off from either side of the armored vehicle.

Things might not usually burn well in Hoofington's rainy wasteland, but the two missiles transformed the farm house into a pyre that burned quite readily before the skywagon turned back towards Miramare.

* * *

Helping out Sergeant Wind Whisper helped in one regard: the remaining Enclave soldiers seemed to back off a touch. They didn't let me wander just anywhere, but I no longer had one or two of the black-armored ponies following me around. My zone of permitted access expanded from the interrogation cell in security to the beds upstairs, the cafeteria, and the break room where Operative Lighthooves had sold me his plan: cooperate now and get help tomorrow.

"I don't like it, Glory," I muttered, stomping my hooves as we filed out of the break room. "Everything about this feels wrong."

Minty Fresh looked back at me, smirking as his horn glowed. "I like this, Glory. Everything wrong about this I like," my voice said back to me. I was hoping to give him a 'die in a fire' glare, but I was too shocked by the spell.

"Relax, Security Mare. Everything is under our control," he said to me with a dismissive sniff

before he looked at Glory. "I've got some notes to go over, then we can finish your debriefing. Best to get it all done here, right?" He was already striding away.

"Ugh, there! See? They're up to something!"

Glory sighed, looking up at me. "I know their methods are occasionally... unconventional..."

"Creepy is the word you're looking for."

"But they're Enclave. I'm Enclave. We're both working towards the same end: protecting pegasi and helping the surface." She pressed a hoof to my chest. "I know you don't trust them, but can you trust me?"

Not fair, Glory. Not fair at all. I sighed and bowed my head. "Fine."

"Thank you, Blackjack. Please behave yourself," she said as she walked off after Minty Fresh. I mentally went through my entire list of insults for stubborn mares twice. It was a short list. I wasn't that inventive.

Of course, that didn't stop me from poking around. Something was off... I caught the smell of a backed up toilet mixed with the smell of blood, but I couldn't tell if the source was down here, or if my barding just needed a wash. I poked around, only to get stopped. This was then repeated. The third time, Sergeant Wind Whisper personally escorted me up to the first floor. She walked me all the way to the gift shop by the front doors. Her dark purple eyes sized me up, frowning at something she saw.

The dark navy mare looked me levelly in the eyes, then said softly, "You should leave."

I blinked, surprised. After Lighthooves's schmoozefest, the blunt suggestion was almost refreshing. "Come again?"

She stepped closer, her voice low. "You should leave here right now. Go after your friend."

"I was under the impression that the Enclave was going to help me get him back," I said calmly, arching a brow as I smiled. She didn't look happy, not one bit. "Guess not, huh?"

"The Enclave has only one priority: protecting ourselves and pegasi. Period. Like our methods or not, that's our job. It's why we're here. You aren't Enclave and you're not a pegasus, so you should go. Let us deal with Morning Glory," she said as she scowled at me.

I looked at her, frowning. I couldn't imagine Operative Lighthooves approving of her candor. "Shouldn't that be 'escort her back to the safety of Thunderhead?'" No response, only a smoldering glare. "Ah, I see. So there *is* something going on. Mind cluing me in?"

"I don't know. It's above my pay grade or interest to know. I don't like the operative's methods or mission, but he is in charge. You should not be here. You reek of fuckup. You're either going to compromise us or betray us."

I sighed, shaking my head. "Wow, and I thought Glory was bad in the literal department. What

exactly are you afraid of?"

"Everything!" she hissed, sweeping her hoof across the decayed walls of the first floor. "Look at this place. Mutants and psychopaths, radiation, taint, Enervation, ghouls and killer robots, hostile parties everywhere we turn, and we're supposed to help these freaks? Fuck them and fuck you," she said with a snarl, then gestured to her chest. "We have safety. We have security. The pegasi earned our prosperity and I will not see it compromised because some of us want to play Nurse Nightingale to the Wasteland! You want prosperity? Earn it!"

I looked at her levelly for a few moments. "Easy words from somepony that already has a good life. You want to tell me how those farmers were supposed to prosper? You saw those fields. I imagine they worked every day trying to get something to grow. Kinda hard when it rains constantly and we never see the sun."

"We have to do that!" she protested.

"Horseshit!" I snapped back at her. "Every second of every minute of every day? You couldn't even give folks some sun one day a week? If I didn't know better, I'd think you were trying to starve us to death." And I still wasn't sure they weren't. Worse, Wind Whisper didn't look sure either.

"I'm telling you that you should leave. I don't know what the operative is planning. I just know that he's been talking with her all day since she's gotten here. I don't think he's after answers anymore. But it's not my job." She turned and started back towards the stairs leading down. "I didn't think I'd ever owe my life to a dirt pony, but I do. So I'm telling you now: get out. Go save your friend. Leave Morning to us." And without another word she walked back down the stairs.

Did I mention how much I hated this place?

* * *

There were too many things being watched down below, so I decided to sneak upstairs to peek at those safes in the larger offices. I tried to imagine what went on here. Generals looking at maps with grim expressions? Meetings with notes and minutes being taken? I saw a few posters of Princess Luna around and a few others with a creepy stare from the grinning mare of the Ministry of Morale. I leaned to the left, leaned to the right. Yes, it definitely felt like her eyes were following me.

How the hay could anypony work with that looking at them?

I tried messing with a few of the terminals, almost pressing keys at random. The safes were lost causes as well, and from the broken bobby pins around them, somepony else had already failed at picking them. Most of them I couldn't even imagine how to access. Then, though, I happened across one terminal that was still logged in after 200 years. I looked over at the unimpressive oil painting hanging askew on the wall: a fat brown buck straining his uniform. Colonel Cupcake. Most of the data was corrupted, but there were a few files that stuck out.

10-11-XXXX: I don't care how good they are, the Marauders need to be brought to heel. They've lost three lieutenants in as many months. Send that big red bastard to the academy for a week and throw a bar on his helmet. Better yet, just throw a battlefield commission on him and make him a lieutenant.

And if he protests, have him shot for insubordination! We can't have some of the most effective fighters on base tangentially controlled. At least make him a sergeant or something!

I recalled the devotion the other Marauders held for Macintosh. Somehow, I had a hard time imagining him as an officer giving orders. He led by being there and doing what he did best: being steadfast and courageous. I moved down to the next interesting-looking file.

11-4-XXXX: Thank you for your condolences, Your Majesty. The loss of Big Macintosh has been a blow to Miramare and the ponies he served with. There have been some severe depression issues among the members of the Marauders; I believe that it may be best to rotate them off the lines and separate them. I know a security officer is needed in Zebratown, and I think Twist might be useful as an instructor at the Camp Ponyton training center. I believe that if the unit is to remain cohesive to drum up enlistment, as the Mol suggests, we need to get them past this hump.

I winced as I leaned back, blinking at the amber letters. If the Marauders were shaken by Stonewing's death, then the loss of Big Macintosh must have destroyed them. The more I thought about it, the more it felt like his death, his sacrifice, had sent ripples through Equestria. My thoughts drifted back to that mare in the memory by the lake, left all alone and pregnant with his child. The Marauders hadn't just lost their core, but each other as well.

12-13-XXXX: When the ministry sends us something to 'look at' you might want to remind them not to send the thing in a sealed container! We've been trying for weeks to get this damned thing open. I'm tempted to use it as a paperweight, but the MWT wants to know what Ironshod is up to. I'm pretty sure the OIA wants to take it too, and you know how grabby those bastards can get. I've already got a fine crop of hemorrhoids just dealing with the zebra, so see if you can magic it open or something! If I'm called to Canterlot, just use the key taped under my desk.

I reached under the desk, scraping with my hoof. There! The end of my hoof brushed against the duct tape underneath it. I peeled it away and the key softly thumped to the moldy carpeting. Carefully, I lifted it, slipped it into the lock, and twisted, anticipating treasures! Instead, I received some two-century-old paperwork. I looked at the moldy papers and swept them aside with a sigh. Clearly ponies before the bomb had a weird paper fetish. That was the only explanation. Then I frowned as I saw something on a little shelf in the back: a black box as long as my foreleg. I cautiously levitated it out.

It was exactly like the box I'd seen in Ironshod R&D, except this one was much heavier. I reached out and touched it with my hooves. There was a click and the case opened. The bullet within was nearly a hoof long, the tip seemingly coated in gleaming silver. Something was inscribed on the base of the casing: 'BBP-001 #5'. A sudden sustained burst of clicking from my foreleg informed me that it was also radioactive! I snapped the box closed and tossed it into my bag. 'Silver Bullet' appeared on my inventory screen.

"Silver bullet? That's it?" I shook the PipBuck and thumped it with my hoof. "You can magically tell me the value of radigator meat without ever coming across a radigator, but you can't do better than 'silver bullet'? You are so fired, PipBuck." A bullet this big could only fit in a gun like Deus's massive cannons.

I blinked as my ear twitched. I heard Glory talking from somewhere nearby. Finally! A chance to speak with her without our escorts. I trotted towards a far office, but then paused outside the door as I

frowned softly at what I heard. "I can better serve Rainbow Dash out in the field than work in some extremely hostile laboratory. Thunderhead is like a disease; the surface is a cure."

"Glory?" I called as I pushed the door open. The room was empty. My mane felt like it had the mange as I tugged the glasses down a little and stared at the empty office. I had that same feeling as back in the classroom. Somepony was in here, whether I could see them or not.

And Glory couldn't turn invisible.

I looked over at the bookcase and ripped the pages from a ruined pre-war tome. "You want to play hide and seek? Fine." Manipulating a cloud of particles wasn't much different from digging in the dirt, as long as I wasn't trying to do something fancy with them. I guided a flurry of flakes of paper in around the office, sweeping it back and forth. Then the whirling flurry outlined an equine shape.

Right next to me.

There was a soft 'pfft pfft' and a numbness spread down my neck. I touched the side of my head as the world fell out beneath my hooves. I saw blood on my hoof. *'Sweet Celestia, did I just get shot again?'* I thought, as everything faded to black.

* * *

"This is an absolute outrage, Operative Lighthooves. Completely unacceptable. You told me that we were past this. I vouched for Blackjack and she willingly worked to help Sergeant Wind Whisper. Now somepony shoots her twice within a facility under your control? What is going on here?" I'd never seen Glory so livid before. She practically quivered with rage as she bared her teeth. "Is this the best the security apparatus can do?"

I had to admit, lying on the operating table with some fine, fresh, potent healing juice flowing into me, that I was really glad that rage wasn't directed at me. Operative Lighthooves was trying the nice routine and it wasn't working. "She killed two of my team entering this facility. Somepony must be bearing a grudge to shoot her from behind like that."

"Do I have to contact the Enclave operations director about this? Or my father? Find whoever did this to my friend," she demanded in a low, dangerous voice I'd never heard before. "Now get out of here at once. I need to talk to my patient."

No more nice buck routine. I could see Glory had crossed a line; his eyes no longer twinkled merrily as he smiled at both of us. Instead they looked at her like she was a problem to be removed. Worst of all, though, he hadn't stopped smiling. "Of course, Morning Glory," he said politely with a nod of his head before he stepped out.

I slowly rose to my hooves, groaning. Wind Whisper had found me and gotten me downstairs. Fortunately, whatever the weapon had been, it packed far less punch than Lancer's sniper rifle had. The Enclave had top notch medical supplies, that was for sure. "I can't believe somepony shot you."

"Everypony shoots me. It's like it's an achievement: 'I shot Security'." I took a deep breath. "Glory. There's something very wrong here," I said as I rubbed my throbbing head. She looked

sympathetic, floating over a bottle of water. "I heard your voice up there. It was you talking about how the Enclave was bad."

"What?" She looked scandalized. "Blackjack, I would never say that. I'm a part of the Enclave. I have been my whole life. Just like my father and..." She trailed off as guarded Glory returned and looked at me in worry. "Are you sure that's what you heard?"

"I..." I rubbed my head. Had I been sure? I'd thought so, but getting shot twice in the head did little to help a pony's memory. "I think that's what I heard. And that's not the only thing. That 'raider' nest was just wrong. Isolated raiders away from victims? Tons of food available, but no clue how they got it?"

"Maybe they scavenged it? Maybe they traded some infected meat; you've seen ponies eating it. They could have been exposed in any number of ways." Glory gave me a sympathetic smile. "I know you don't want to be here. A few more hours and we'll take the Vertibuck to Flank and save P-21, and then we can continue together. I meant it when I said I wanted to stay with you. You've done more good on your own than the VC has since we got here a few weeks ago."

Okay, now she was making me blush. Still, there was something else I wanted to ask. "Glory. Who's your father? 'Cause what I just saw a second ago was not the mousy, blush-at-everything Glory I've known." The Glory I'd seen a second ago had been downright bitchy.

Now she looked incredibly nervous. "I... an... well. This is awkward." She swallowed. "Well. My father is Councilor Sky Striker. He's one of the... ah... elected leaders of Thunderhead." Oh Celestia, could you lube up before fucking me with these little revelations?

"Your father is a politician?"

She nodded. "Yes. A prominent one. He was the one who helped form the Volunteer Corps. He's worked closely with the Enclave for years, trying to make it a reality." She paused for a moment with an expression of discomfort. "I told you I entered medical school because I was seen as a prodigy, but... really, that's only half true. My father's name carries a lot of weight in Thunderhead. He used to be Enclave security and he was instrumental in dealing with a dragon attacking the city ten years ago. He's something of a local hero to a lot of ponies."

But not, I wagered, to Operative Lighthooves. "And he doesn't have enemies? How do you know Lighthooves isn't going to kill you just to get back at him?"

She sighed and frowned. "Because I was already killed, remember? My father gave a heartbroken speech about the sacrifice he'd paid, but how he still believed in the goals of the Volunteer Corps. He even demanded the Enclave offer better protection to the VC." Glory put her hoof on my shoulder as she continued. "I know you're suspicious of some of the things the Enclave does, but they're good ponies trying to protect ponies. Their methods might be sneaky sometimes, but I swear that in the end they're trying to do what's right. Like us."

I sighed, knowing I wasn't going to break through to her on this. Not yet. I had to find some evidence, some something to convince her to get the hell out of here. Once we rescued P-21, I'd walk her right to the Skyport if she wanted, but I had to get her away from Operative Lighthooves. "Yeah, I guess," I muttered, looking away.

"You rest. Lighthooves said we'd go get P-21 in a few hours. I need to finish recording a message to Father about everything that's happened here." She gave me one final pat and then slipped from the medical room. I watched the door close, then sighed.

How were you supposed to deal with somepony this deep in denial? There had to be something here that I could use to convince her to leave with me. Unfortunately--barring Glory being right and me just being paranoid... but, hello! Wasteland!--I couldn't see how I was supposed to do that from this one little room. I didn't even have my bags, let alone my guns! Plucking the healing potion feed from my PipBuck, I slipped to the door and peeked out. Yup. There was a guard. Of course there was a guard. Sweet Celestia, why couldn't I get an apple thrown to me every now and then?

I really didn't want to kill more pegasi if I could help it, at least not until I had Glory firmly on my side. I looked at the drugs on the shelves. Buck and Med-X, I knew. Mint-als? Dash? I would have loved it if my PipBuck could be bothered to explain what these chems were for! Rebound... alcohol! Yeeech... that was no Wild Pegasus! Tasted horrible. Aspirin. Chloroform. Acetaminophen? Words were hard enough on their own; now doctors were making new ones up?

Then I spotted it and thought, in my expert medical opinion, that this should work just fine. I popped open the door, and as the guard turned to look I smashed an empty oxygen tank upside his head. His helmet saved him from losing his brains, for which I was grateful. He staggered and swayed as I grabbed him with my hooves and magic and hauled him into the medical room. A second smack upside the head reduced him to a twitching heap. I stripped his black, reinforced armor and sidearm before heaving him onto the table and strapping him down. I put the healing potion supply tube in his mouth and started the drip. Well, at least he was still breathing.

I wiggled into his uniform, tucking as much mane out of sight as I could. I was able to hide my compact horn, and hopefully nopony would realize that my 'wings' were just flaps of linen. It didn't have to be a good disguise, so long as it worked. With a sidearm in my hoof holster and a baton in my belt, I almost felt good.

Unfortunately, my freedom didn't seem to be doing me much good as I trotted through the underground tunnels of the Miramare base. I kept reaching sections that were clearly damaged by the balefire blast. One maintenance room had its floor collapsed into some concrete pipes. From the radiation clicks, I wondered what the odds were that they connected to the outside? I smiled, wondering if the Enclave were crazy enough to poke through a radioactive crater to check for entrances to their secret base.

Aha. A door with a guard. That meant something useful, or at least important enough for a guard. He stared ahead with a bored, patient expression as I trotted over and adopted the same position on the far side of the door from him. "Boring, huh?"

"Yeah," he sighed softly.

"Can't believe they're making us guard this," I muttered.

"I know. They should just put the damned things on and be done with it. It's not like that Security mare will be able to do anything to them," he said with a bored sigh. Then he blinked as he looked at me,

my 'wings'... my PipBuck... my grin. The automatic pistol pressed into his ear canal. He swallowed and muttered, "Aw... shit."

I had him open the door and we went inside some sort of high-tech maintenance bay. Some electrical cord and duct tape later, I had him tied up and was carrying two automatic pistols. Then I got a good look at what he'd been guarding.

I admit that I can be somewhat irrational when it comes to weaponry. I still had warm and tingly feelings in my crotch about the IF-88 Ironpony. What sat in this bay were two pieces of machinery so over-the-top lethal that I nearly climaxed at first sight. From the four sleek rifles to the glossy armored plates to the wicked scorpion tail at the rear, there was nothing about this armor that I didn't love. Had I the slightest clue how to use it, I'd have been happy for the rest of my life. But this armor looked like it was made to fly.

'Operative Lighthooves' was written on one, 'Sergeant Wind Whisper' on the other. If I couldn't use them, then I sure-as-Celestia didn't want either of those two using them against me. I looked at the shelves of Wonderglue, duct tape, scrap metal, and turpentine. I looked at the taped-up pegasus and smiled. "I wonder just how much damage I can do in five minutes..."

Four and a half minutes later I left, confident that those suits of power armor wouldn't be used anytime soon and that I owed the Enclave a doozy of a repair bill. I could only imagine how hard it would be to get a suit of that armor on with all the seams filled with glue, or fly in armor soaked in turpentine. I continued my way around the loop, and that was when I noticed it. If the Enclave had left everything a mess I probably wouldn't have noticed the scent of fecal matter.

I peeked around the corner at another guard and slowly approached. The mare looked over and immediately her eyes widened. I knew her; she had sat her butt in a pool of Wonderglue for me. Her tail had been shaved to a stub in the process of freeing her. I raised the pistol faster than she could draw her own. "Hi. Now, I said it last time and I'll say it again. I don't want to kill you. I just want some answers." I knew that stench creeping out around the hatch. I'd smelled it hours before. "Open the door."

She swallowed hard. "I can't. It's locked, and I don't have the key." I carefully took her gun from her holster and added it to my growing collection of sidearms. Then I looked at the lock. I doubted I could pick it *and* watch her. I glanced at the puce pegasus, my lips pressed together, and transferred the gun to my mouth. Then I put as much of my telekinesis into the lock as I could, focused, and twisted. The resistance made my eyes water, then there was a metallic crack and the door swung open. "There. Inside," I said after transferring the Enclave pistol back into my magical grip.

The door opened and a physical wave of stench rolled out. I saw her visibly recoil, tremble, and then puke at the reek. Clearly she'd never been to a Pony Joe's. I poked her in the rump with the sidearm as she moved into a storeroom that had been converted into a prison. A half-dozen cells each held a foaming raider who jerked against their bonds and snapped at us in desperation as their haunting giggles filled the room. Some had chewed off their lips and tongues, greeting us with bloody grins and pinprick yellow eyes. This was the end result of raider evolution. If they couldn't eat somepony else, they'd eat themselves.

I was more interested in the tan pegasus strapped to a frame. She was missing her wings; they'd been amputated, and her cutie mark was just a round scar over an outline of a cloud and lightning bolt.

The brand looked old. The amputation looked recent. Her eyes spotted me and started to shake as my prisoner started to vomit again. "Please... please... no more needles," she begged brokenly. I looked over at a tray holding several large sample syringes. Many of them held blood.

"Unlock her. Now," I ordered my prisoner, who was just holding herself together enough to realize that I was in the perfect mood to toss her into the nearest cell. The puce pegasus hurried to unlock the tan prisoner. "What happened to your wings and your cutie mark?" I asked her softly.

I could see the look of pain on her face at the question. She wasn't going to answer, and what would I have done if she had? Torn off the wings of my prisoner? After a moment, she sobbed, "It's my mark... the mark of all who leave the Enclave. I'm a Dashite." Once she was freed of the frame she took a few weak steps.

"What were they doing?" I asked her gently, grinding the gun against the back of my prisoner's head.

"I don't know. They kept giving me shots and injections. They were trying to get something to work..." She was visibly falling apart before my eyes as she tried to flutter her missing wings and sobbed. It'd be like if they'd cut off my horn.

"Get on the frame," I ordered my prisoner, and she reluctantly moved into position while I buckled her into place. Then I turned to the mare. "You can get out if you go..."

She lay in a heap, the top of her head missing. I didn't think, I simply grabbed everything in range of my magic and threw it around the room. In one spot, the debris bounced right off an invisible barrier. I'd never lifted two pistols before. Theoretically, it should be possible. Two pistols came up, aimed right at the void, and I unloaded a spray of fire that would have done a small machinegun proud. There was a shimmer and Adjutant Minty Fresh appeared, bleeding from numerous holes in his armor as he staggered back.

He tried to bring the silenced pistol around, but I dropped both my weapons and seized it in my own telekinetic grip. As we struggled, I ducked down, spun around, and slammed both rear hooves into his face. That took care of what remained of his concentration. I quickly picked up all the guns; a dropped firearm was a useful firearm for a unicorn. Then I picked him up with my magic and hooves and slammed him upright against the bars. "Why?" I said as I glared into his eyes.

He spat in my face, smirked... and then I received help from an unexpected source. The raider within hadn't been as tightly secured as the others; she still had the use of her limbs. And now she lunged at the bars and bit down hard into the side of his neck. He screamed as she started to chew.

"Why? What are you doing here?" I demanded as I slammed against him, pushing his exposed limbs through the bars. The raider giggled in delight at the banquet I provided.

"Fuck! I don't know... I don't..." he screamed as he tried to fight his way free.

I forced more of his nearest limb between the bars. "The fuck you don't! You're one of the Enclave's special unicorns. You fucking know!" I roared into his face.

"I don't! I don't! Sweet Luna save me I don't!" he yelled as tears poured down his face. There was a wet ripping sound followed by frantic swallowing. He started to pass out, and I levitated out one of the healing potions from the medical room and shoved the contents down his throat. He choked as he swallowed, then screamed again. "The disease! We need... It doesn't..." He struggled to speak as the raider chewed frantically.

"Tell me!" I roared, giving him another healing potion.

"It doesn't affect pegasi!" he screamed as the raider gave a twist and pulled his forelimb off. I administered another healing potion. "We don't know why! They're immune! Sweet Goddesses, stop!"

He'd shot me twice in the head. He'd killed this unarmed and mutilated pegasus prisoner from invisibility like a coward. I could easily see the blood on his hooves; the fuck I was going to stop! "Then why do this?" I demanded and shoved his rear leg through the bars. The raider inside squealed in delight.

"Because--" he started to say when his head exploded in front of me in a flash of crimson light.

Operative Lighthooves stood in the doorway, his battle saddle on and twin beam rifles pointed at me. He looked... impressed. Perhaps a little bit nauseous. "I'd have sworn that Minty Fresh would have died rather than talked. Clearly I didn't anticipate interrogation by raider. I'll have to remember that one."

If I could have drawn and fired I would have, but he was on a hair trigger. He continued, his voice low and controlled. "If you'd just waited a day... just a day... all this would have been nice, clean, and wrapped up. But no. You come in here, complicate everything, disrupt my operation, and then feed my trusted lieutenant to a raider to make him talk..." He blinked and then smiled. "I don't suppose I could interest you in a job, could I? The Enclave security forces could really use you."

"Fuck you," I replied. Not eloquent or catchy, but I was in a really bad mood at that moment. "So you vaporize me now?" He was clearly thinking about it. I saw him glance down at the ravenous raider pulling more of Minty Fresh through the bars before glancing back at me. Yeah, he was definitely thinking about it.

"I really should. You are not a pony for me to underestimate again. It would be wise to kill you." He took a deep breath. "But you have great value to my operations. Handing you over to Deus and Usury will calm a lot of air for me," he replied matter-of-factly. It was refreshing to hear someone wanted to turn me over for something other than a ridiculous amount of caps. "So you are going to strip and you are going to walk very politely to security's jail. Then I can finish up here and things can get back to normal."

Carefully, I shucked the disguise I'd adopted. Two more pegasi entered; one freed the pegasus I'd strapped up and the other gathered my gear. "Clean that up," Lighthooves said to the released pegasus, gesturing to the raider and her green unicorn snack. "Fortunately, he completed his work before going looking for you."

"Why?"

"That's a question that is going to drive you crazy if you keep asking it," he replied casually, but I

could feel his beam weapons aimed for my head. "Suffice it to say that Councilor Sky Striker has forgotten that the role of the Enclave is to protect the pegasus people from any and all threats. Even from our own good intentions. I really have nothing against you or Miss Glory. I'd be content to let you both go if you weren't so terrifyingly effective at times, Blackjack. But Glory's 'death' didn't make her father see the folly of his ways."

"So what will?" I asked as we reached the jail and he marched me inside, shutting the door behind me.

I could tell part of him wanted to make me squirm; not because I'd killed his men, but simply because he was a bastard. Then he replied simply, "Her defection." He looked at the guards. "No guns. No batons. Take a Buck, a Hydra, and a shot of Stampede if you need to and beat her into paste with your bare hooves. There's two of you against a girl. If she tries something, yell for help and then kill her." He paused, looking at me with that sick smile. "She *will* try something."

With that he turned and left the room with my unarmed and very apprehensive guards. I paced back and forth, my amber gaze moving from one to the other. "So. He's a shining example of all the Enclave stands for. What all of you stand for," I said as I stared them in the eye.

"The moron knew she was getting in trouble by coming down here. It's her own damn fault," the first muttered with a sneer.

"Shut up. Don't talk to the prisoner," said the second. He also had a tail that was shorn short.

"Oh, relax. She's got nothing. She's in here and she's going to sit there," he said with a dull chuckle.

There was a crackle over the speakers. "My name is Morning Glory. I'm making this statement to notify the ponies of Thunderhead that I can no longer tolerate your callous and cruel abandonment of the surface. We live in our clean and safe world while below us is suffering and death."

I stared at the speaker in the wall. It was her voice but... off. "How?" But then I knew.

"Minty Fresh. I'll give it to that horned goat; he could magic around words like nopony's business. Make anypony say whatever he wanted," the first guard chuckled. "Pop that into a holotape recording and voila. Instant confession."

Glory's voice continued, slightly dull and monotone, as if her normal inflections were blurred together. "Years ago my mother left the Enclave because she realized she could no longer stand by while ponies suffered. She believed in Rainbow Dash. I believe in Rainbow Dash. The cowardice I see in your faces sickens and appalls me. At least some of you joined the Volunteer Corps, but it's not enough. I won't suffer foolishness any longer. I can better serve Rainbow Dash out in the field than work in some extremely hostile laboratory. Thunderhead is like a disease; the surface is a cure."

"Minty's been listening to her talk for hours. He could probably make her sound like she was turning tricks on Red Rainbow Street," the first soldier chuckled.

"Shut the fuck up man. Stop pissing her off," the other said as he looked at me in fear. "You

didn't see what she fucking did to him."

I closed my eyes, trying to ignore the tirade against Thunderhead. They were things she might normally have said, but stripped of her Enclave loyalty and pride in Thunderhead. I could imagine Rainbow Dash telling off her own kind for being too scared to fly down and help.

"Just what is she gonna do? What?" he taunted.

I looked from one to the other. "Quick question: which one of you has the keys?"

The second guard looked at the first while the first's eyes went wide. I stared right into his eyes and toggled S.A.T.S. Three telekinetic bullets straight to his face. Luna must have been listening in; his head exploded before me. Coming out of it, I looked over and my glare drilled into the second guard's eyes. I didn't talk, threaten, or even blink as he started to shake. "Get the keys and open the door," I said slowly. "I don't want to kill you," I added. But I would if he did anything besides what I told him to do right now.

He shook as he dug out the keys from his friend's pocket and fought to control his shaking enough to unlock my cell. I could smell he'd wet himself; good. I stepped out, still staring at him before I nodded to the cell behind me. He stepped in and I closed the door. "Don't come out," was all I told him as I searched his ally and found the Buck, a large syringe marked with a four headed dragon critter, probably Hydra, and an injection kit I figured was the Stampede.

Then I heard Glory screaming. Not even the thick metal door marked 'Interrogation' could cut out her wails. I beat on it with my hooves, scrabbled at the lock with my magic. Nothing. I looked at the door past it, 'Observation', and kicked it open. It was empty save for a metal table. Then all my world turned red with rage.

Through the window I could see Glory bent over the table inside, one buck pinning her torso and the other fighting to keep her rump in place. It could have been textbook rape if the skin of her flank wasn't darkening, reddening, and smoking as some chemical burned away her cutie mark. The sunrise on her flank set forever, darkened to a dull hemisphere.

I slammed my hooves against the mirrored window. The glass rattled, but aside from sparing a glance they continued their work. One pulled out a brand; I'd seen the mark less than an hour ago, burned into the flank of the Dashite prisoner. He stretched it into the flame of a blow torch and I watched as it slowly turned red, then yellow. I rammed my hooves as hard as I could into the glass, but it didn't break. Operative Lighthooves gave a long-suffering sigh as he looked at me from the far side of the interrogation room window.

The brand touched her blackened cutie mark, and it disappeared entirely behind a veil of smoke and a hiss and a scream that punched straight to my core. *Do better.* I chowed down on the Buck, shot myself full of Hydra, and then without the slightest hesitation injected myself with the Stampede. All the world went red in a scream that went on and on and on.

* * *

I knew it had been minutes because everything still felt warm, but cooling, when my brain

restarted. I sat painted head to hoof in blood. Copper fluid filled my mouth, as well as strings of meat. One metal table jutted through the gaping hole in the window; the other had been twisted out of shape. I could only count the dead by their torsos. Little else remained. The door hung open, and I had the furious certainty that none of these bodies belonged to Lighthooves. But all that didn't matter. Glory was crying.

I'd failed her. Failed to convince her of the risk. Failed to find the evidence in time. Failed to put together Lighthooves's plot in time. Failed to reach her. Her cutie mark was gone, taken by the ponies she'd trusted completely. And it was my fault. The raw brands were dark and oozing, a ring of black filled in with glistening angry red showing a circle with a cloud and lightning bolt within. A Dashite symbol.

"Come on," I rasped, my heart beating furiously in my chest and pounding in my skull. Gently I nudged her with my nose. "Come on," I groaned, then coughed as I hung my head and fought for breath. "We need to get out of here."

"Leave me," she whispered, almost too soft for me to hear.

I collapsed next to her. "Nope," I replied, glad to be off my hooves. Lighthooves had said 'beat her into paste'. Now I had a literal example all over me. "Not gonna do it."

"I've ruined everything," she said as she sobbed into her hooves.

Oh yeah. Been here before. And even though I thought I might pass out and was covered in pony goo I reached out and pulled her into a hug. "You haven't ruined everything, alright? He played you. It's his fault."

"I can't ever go home. I've ruined my father's work. The Volunteer Corps. Everything," she said as she wept with tiny little gasping sobs.

I patted her back gently. "Only if you give up," I said quietly. "If you give up, you're dead. One way or another."

She sniffed but finally opened her lavender eyes to stare up at me. "Thanks, Blackjack," she whispered softly, "But I still feel like I messed up."

I just smiled. "Well, at least your fuck up didn't kill anypony. I've heard there have been ponies whose fuck ups killed millions." I nudged her to her hooves; it was like trying to help a foal walk again, despite the look of pain on her face. "Now let's get the fuck out of here."

"And wash," she said in a shaky little voice. "I really need to wash. I need to get this place off me. And..." She swallowed hard, fighting to smile. "You really need one too. You're gross right now."

"Oh? The raider look doesn't suit me?" Okay, that was a stupid thing to ask. Now I looked at the eviscerated torsos that I'd ripped apart with my hooves and teeth and prayed it was just the drugs at work. I rose to my hooves and step by step we struggled out the door. Thank goodness all my stuff was in security; I ignored the squishy sensation as I pulled it on. I could only see three bars on my E.F.S. down here, and they were yellow. I would come back and loot the place properly once Glory was safe.

We made our way outside. I figured we could get to the camp trailers and then...

Everything exploded.

Sweet fucking Celestia, why the fuck does everything explode?! Why!

I pulled myself to my hooves, the face of the building collapsing behind us to bury the front doors. The Vertibuck swung around before us, its near-silent motion eerie for something so large, its turrets lining up to take a shot. "Glory, fly!" I shouted, but she was too hurt or too overcome to do more than curl up like a foal. I staggered as fast as my hooves would carry me. I had to lead it away from her before it could take us both out; with luck, they'd go for the running target and assume that they could take care of her later. My heart was still thudding in my chest as I weaved back and forth erratically, taking out the assault carbine and loading armor piercing rounds.

My 'armor piercing' rounds turned out to be pretty overrated; the bullets couldn't even damage the machine's windows, much less its armor. Its guns, on the other hand, spewed rapid fire bursts of glowing death that blew small craters in the tarmac around me. I leaped and rolled for my life, chips of flying concrete stinging my hide. The high-speed clatter-squeak of the guns kept me moving and scrabbling for cover as I thought desperately of anything I had that could put a dent in it! "Okay. This is getting ridiculous!" I shouted as I staggered and tried a clip of explosive rounds. They just made pretty flashes across the reinforced glass protecting the two pegasi keeping it aloft. I could just about make out the pilots in their armored pods grinning at me! They were fucking playing with me!

I needed more gun.

I needed a bigger bullet.

And, with a mental click, I realized I had both.

I swallowed as I dropped the carbine and pulled out Trottenheimer's Folly. The pistol's breech swung open with a heavy thump. I took out the black case with my mouth, the magical lock clicking open as the silver bullet fell free. I slipped the shell in as another burst of light hit the tarmac next to me, blowing me off my hooves and peppering me with more debris. I really was tired of getting shot at today. Actually, make that in general! I saw the heavy pistol nearby and pulled it over with my magic. I snapped it closed as the Vertibuck came by for another pass.

My turn. I levitated the pistol and activated S.A.T.S. Strange arcane marks appeared on my E.F.S. as the weapon did... something... with my PipBuck. I could only target one shot, which was good, given I only had one. Then I started--mentally, of course--as words appeared in my vision like on a terminal.

>PipBuck synchronization: complete.

>Blood pattern analysis: confirmed.

>Magical field analysis: confirmed.

> Authorization confirmed.

>Warning! BBP loaded. BGP armed.

>Do you wish to fire? Y/N?

If I hadn't been frozen in magical stillness I would have screamed. What kind of gun asks if you want to fire? I toggled yes over and over again.

>Firing.

A white field of energy wrapped itself around me, locking me in place. A second field formed a cone projecting forward towards the Vertibuck. I couldn't move! I couldn't breathe! The armored skywagon lined up its shot perfectly. Then I felt the trigger pull.

The recoil made a twenty-foot chunk of ground jerk around me as the world went red. The magical fields held me and the weapon steady, and the only thing that remained in my ears was the roaring noise. I needed to run. I'd stayed put for too long! I could imagine another pair of missiles heading in to blow me into...

The Vertibuck was gone.

As was the air traffic control tower.

As was a circle of clouds.

Distant stars twinkled at me as if waving before I slumped over on my side. As it happened, this gave me a perfect view of a hovering form that could only be Operative Lighthooves. Of course the fucker would escape on his own while the Vertibuck took me out. Somehow he'd managed to get into his power armor, too; I hoped he had scrap metal scratching at a tender place.

Lying like this, I was an easy target; all he had to do was take the shot. He hovered in place, and I could almost feel him looking down at me. I narrowed my amber eyes and lifted Folly up, my weak focus making the huge armored pistol shake. I took a deep breath and steadied myself, pointing it at him. Like a flare, he flew straight up towards the cloud layer.

"Bang," I rasped before falling on my face with a groan.

* * *

I'd lost. It was like walking out of the hospital; sure, I was alive and breathing, but that bastard had hurt Glory and gotten away with his doctored confession. I had no clue how much damage it would do to her father. I honestly didn't care. I just knew that the thought of what he'd done to her cause had carved out that shining light of optimistic hope inside her.

'Not fair, you bony fuck. Not fair. Play your games with me,' I thought as the rain began to drizzle once more. *'Fuck with me all you want. Not her. Not P-21.'*

'Oh, can't I fuck with everypony?' I could almost hear that card-dealing bastard reply as I looked

at the truncated air control tower. The hole in the clouds had closed up, but I could still remember those beautiful jewels in that terrible black. *'I used him to fuck with her. Used her to mess with you. Used you to screw with him. You're a piece in the game, just like everypony is.'*

'I'm not. I'm not your tool. My friends aren't,' I thought as I tried to pull Glory together. I wished I had a regeneration talisman on me; I wished my horn wasn't so incompetent that I couldn't even manage a healing spell for her.

'Oh. You're not? You don't want to be a player, that makes you a card.' That bony cheating bastard shuffled the deck in the back of my mind. *'And what, I have to wonder, makes you different from everypony else? You think you've got virtue? Friends? You're broken goods travelling with damaged wares, Blackjack. But don't worry, I don't mind busted things.'* I could hear the cards being dealt as he chuckled, like bones in a steel drum. *'Ante up.'*

The clack of power armor announced the arrival of Sergeant Wind Whisper. Reeking of turpentine fumes, she could evidently fly without her helmet. I looked up at her from where I sat beside Glory. I could kill her: three telekinetic bullets right to her head. But I didn't want to. I was burned out, beaten, and my heart still hadn't stopped thundering in my chest. But I could kill her.

"We're withdrawing from here," she said formally, not taking her eyes off me. The two pegasi following her had shorn-short tails: the pair I'd spared earlier. They looked at me now like I was a mutant dragon. Maybe I half looked the part. "The operative took our flight pass, so we'll have to head to the Skyport."

"What will you report to your superiors?"

"The truth. You attacked and destroyed an Enclave security operations base in the Miramare Air Station. That I heard the confession of Morning Glory broadcast over the speakers. That Operative Lighthooves was involved in some sort of project regarding the raiders," she said very matter-of-factly before she looked up at the remains of the air traffic control tower. "I will also recommend... strenuously... that we not attempt any retaliatory strikes against you."

"It didn't happen like that. That's not what happened," Morning Glory whimpered as she hung her head. "I'm not a Dashite. I'm not like her."

"That's what I know and what I heard. You find something else, have it couriered to me... specifically to me. Otherwise my wings are clipped." She looked back at the base. "We took care of the raiders for you. Anything that remains is yours."

Thanks for small favors. "Right," I muttered softly. The three started to fly away. "Wind Whisper," I called after her. She stopped and turned, hovering. My eyes narrowed. "Why'd you stop me from eating that apple?"

The pegasus looked down at me coolly a moment. "We gave those farmer ponies that food three weeks ago when we got here. A show of good faith, he said."

"You knew it was contaminated."

“No, and I still don’t. I’m in security, not medical or research. But I suspected,” she said calmly as she met my amber gaze. “But I didn’t anticipate a dirtsideer would save my life. The least I could do was return the favor. Be careful, Security.” And with that the trio flew away. I could appreciate the irony.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk added: Sniper - Your chance to hit an opponent’s head in S.A.T.S. is greatly increased.

Quest Perk added: Telekinetic bullet (rank two): Your telekinetic bullet now does damage equivalent to a shotgun slug. You are limited to a number of bullets per day equal to your endurance.

(Huge thanks to Kkat for making FoE, Hinds for helping me brush this to perfection, and readers who keep this thing going with your comments.)