

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By: Sombre

Chapter 36: Victims

"Cross my heart and hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my--ARRRGH!"

"Okay, when I said 'home', I was really thinking of something along the lines of Chapel, or the Star House specifically," I muttered as we trudged along the railroad towards Hoofington; from here, even the dark, roiling clouds over the city somehow looked darker and more... roiling-y... than the clouds everywhere else in the Wasteland. "Heck, even being teleported inside a chlorine-choked stable seemed more likely to me." The eight metal rails stretched as far ahead and behind us as we could see. Clearly, somepony had gone to great lengths to clear these tracks. The least pitted and rusted lengths from all over the Wasteland, it looked like, had been selected to repair a single line, and the ties that were too badly rotted had been replaced.

"The Goddess will not risk any more of her children in that place. Not until the Enervation dilemma is solved," Lacunae said softly. "You know how multiple alicorns cause the resonation effect. And technically, we are within the old Equestrian territorial province of Hoofington."

"Technically, the Goddess can kiss my dock," Rampage muttered as we passed a rusted switching station with a sign that read 'Hoofington, twenty-two miles.'

"Whine whine whine," I said with a roll of my eyes. "A few days in Tenpony and you all go soft." I didn't feel tired at all! ...Though, of course, I was kinda cheating.

"Ponies is always whining," Rover agreed with a snort.

"What we really need is a form of transportation like LittlePip's," P-21 said. Glory lowered her ears, and he glanced over. "Not necessarily a skywagon. But some way to get around that doesn't involve all of us being worn out by walking." He stopped and looked speculatively at a simple little hoofcar sitting on a covered spur behind the switching station. He rubbed his chin. "Hey, Scotch. Are you pondering what I'm pondering?"

Scotch blinked at the hoofcar and then at the scrubland around us. "I think so, P-21, but where are we going to find a dozen rockets out here?" P-21 looked back at her flatly. "What?" the filly said defensively.

A little bit later, Scotch had checked over the car and found it good to go. I smiled as they pushed it out and onto the repaired track. "Well, I suppose it's an improvement, but now you're going to get all worn out working those levers." P-21 turned to look at me, and then a small smile grew on his face. "What?" Glory glanced at me apologetically. Rampage grinned, and even Scotch was smirking. "Why are you looking at me like that?" I asked as I took a step back. "What?!"

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"You know, I'm supposed to be the hero... leader... thingy!" I said as I trotted along. "LittlePip's friends wouldn't make her do this!"

"P-21! It's making that whining noise again," Scotch Tape said as I hauled the hoofcar along the

tracks, the wheels squealing softly despite the grease the filly had pumped into the bearings. In addition to the grease gun, P-21 had found a dozen or so caps, some bits, and some scrap metal while searching the switch house and maintenance shed.

"Because it is pony engine," Rover said with a snort.

"Well, work the reins a bit till it stops," the buck said as he lay back with his saddlebags pillowing his head. The filly snapped the ropes against my non-metallic ass, making me jump, blush, and glare back at my friends. "See? Pretty responsive, actually."

"You all suck..." I muttered darkly.

"It's just till we get to Hoofington," Glory assured me as we rolled along. Then she rubbed her chin. "Though... really, we might be able to find a wagon with intact wheels and tires. It'd certainly save us a whole lot of walking."

"I thought you said you weren't going to turn this into a regular thing!" I protested as I tugged against the harness and received another smack from the reins.

"Yeah, but that was before we found out how sweet it is not to walk our hooves to the nub," Rampage said with a laugh as she deftly sharpened her horn blade on the spinning rear wheel.

I looked at Lacunae gliding effortlessly beside me with a small smile on her lips. "What?"

"Oh... nothing." The alicorn's amusement was nearly palpable. "I just thought I'd mention that there's a train coming this way."

I looked ahead and spotted the dark shape on the tracks ahead of me. Lacunae lifted the hoofcar onto some neighboring spurs as it grew closer and closer and...

"What the hell is that?" I gasped. Clearly, the idea of having a pony pulling a cart wasn't new, but I'd never imagined a pony like this before. He was colossal. Twice as big -- no, ten times as big! -- as Big Macintosh! His bright blue hide dripped with sweat as he walked along on hooves almost as big as my entire body! Bright yellow eyes looked down at us, and he gave a great snort at the sight of me hooked to the cart.

"Wuss..." the giant pony muttered as they rolled past.

"Goliath! Don't you be talkin' to no riff raff!" shrieked a bony yellow unicorn mare from a little platform atop his back. "You let me handle this, ya'hear? You just keep on walkin' till ya hit the Everfree Spur!"

"Yes, Momma," he sighed. He pulled three enormous rusty tankers and two flatbeds loaded with hundreds of stacked barrels. Scraggly ponies with hunting rifles watched us sullenly as they rolled by.

There was a bright flash, and the bony unicorn mare appeared before me. "Whatcherbusiness on my here railway?" she asked as she glared at... well... everypony. She twitched in aggravation. "And land sakes, which of yer is the pony in charge?"

"That would be me," I said. She took one look at me in the harness and summed up my failed

management skills in one look.

"Right... really, which o' yer's in charge?" she said, then looked up at Lacunae. "Yer with Red Eye?"

"What if we are?" P-21 said coolly.

"Well, then I'd say ya better have my pay ready! Express don't work for no fancy talk of glorious futures. We work on pay per load, ya hear?" she snapped. I noticed she had a huge scar across her belly. Landmine? My own stomach muscles twitched in sympathy. I wasn't exactly sure I had guts anymore...

Glory looked back at the immense pony. "What... happened?!"

She scowled at Glory. "T'aint none o' yer beeswax, that's what happened!"

"But... he's huge!" Glory stammered, her jaw hanging open.

"He's blue too," Scotch said dryly. "Just in case you missed that, Glory."

The yellow unicorn snorted but gave a little smirk at the olive filly. "My boy is the damndest biggest, strongest, dumbest, hungriest heap o' pony to ever tangle with the blue weed. Eats a whole damn tree every time we get back around the Everfree!"

"Ah... Killing Joke," Lacunae said calmly. The yellow mare glared at the alicorn but didn't deny it. "You're the Goliath Express then?"

"Haulin' anything from FillyDee to Trots to the Hoof to any damn place in between if the pay is right!" the crotchety old unicorn said proudly. Then she looked at Glory and pointed behind us at her son. "He's Goliath, case ya missed that."

"But what is that stuff?" P-21 asked as he looked at the receding train cars. She glared at him sourly and suspiciously.

"Wern't paid ta chat," she snapped. "Got better things ta do than flap my lips at six idjits and a half-metal dog."

I frowned, wondering if I'd have to thump her to get my answers, then reconsidered. Really, she was just trying to make a living. *Be kind...* "Scotch?" I said as I looked at the filly. "Can you get me... say... a hundred caps?" The filly dug through my bag, found the painted bits of metal, and held them out to the sour mare. "Now you are." She took the caps in her magic, separated one to look at it sharply, bit it, then shrugged and slipped them into her saddlebags.

"You fail bribery one oh one?" she snorted, "Kinda blatant, don'tcha think?"

"You want caps and I want answers. You'd prefer alternative methods?" I asked, getting a few looks from my friends. Was I really threatening this scrawny yellow mare? Even I wasn't sure. For some reason, I felt my annoyance growing faster than usual.

She seemed to pick up my mood and relented, nodding toward the train. "Barrels are full of some flamer fuel Red Eye wants. Burner Boys been mixin' it up special in the refinery fer weeks now.

The tankers? Dunno and don't wanna know. Got a whole nother load waitin' fer us after this one," she said with a shrug.

"And have you been doing this long?" Rampage asked. "Working for Red Eye, I mean?"

She twisted her mouth in a scowl before shrugging. "Naw. Red Eye was using Usury to provide the materials. When she couldn't, Red Eye sent in his boys. Then, rather than do a couple dozen loads, he paid us to move it all fer him in five." She looked me in the eyes with a frown, but then shrugged. "Anywho... you tell that glowy-eyed son of a bitch I want my caps and no funny bizz'ness when this is over, ya hear? Or else my boy'll turn that there fancy buildin' into his next outhouse!"

"Momma!" bawled the immense blue pony, his voice echoing across the scubland.

"Your train is leaving without you," Glory said. The bony mare rolled her eyes in scorn.

"Goddesses' sake, anythin' else profound ya wanna say? Point out it's a cloudy day? Tell me water's wet? One winged idjit." The bony yellow unicorn snorted and with a bright yellow flash disappeared. I could barely make the corresponding flash on the back of the enormous pony.

I closed my mouth, open to ask her about what had been happening in the Hoof, and then huffed softly. I guess I'd have to find out what was happening in the Hoof the hard way.

"You want to stop them? A few good blasts into those barrels should make a pretty impressive show," Rampage said as Lacunae lifted the hoofcar back onto the tracks.

I sighed. "I'm probably going to regret this, but no. They didn't attack us, and I really don't want to know what Goliath can do in a fight. Let's get home. I want to find out just what's going on there." I lowered my head. "Let's see if I can't get a little more speed out of these things!" I yelled as I started to run instead of walk. The sooner I got back, the better.

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It was weird. My back ached, my sides hurt, my ass throbbed, and my neck felt stiff as a board, but my legs were fine and dandy! I'd need to chow down on some gems soon, though; there was a little blinking message in the corner of my eye telling me that my main energy storage was getting low. The cart was squealing, too; something was burning up inside it. Scotch had used up all her grease already, and it smelled like any second the cart was either going to lock up or catch fire, maybe both. We were drawing close to Brimstone's Fall, though; I could see the outbuildings and the perimeter fence. It looked fine and dandy. Quiet...

Shit...

"Unhook me. Something's wrong," I muttered. Where was the cloud of rock dust? Where were the sentries? I shifted impatiently in the harness, my teeth working the battle saddle bit. Looking up to the north, I could see the Roosehoof Academy; it was smoldering, and the reinforced buildings were now streaked and blackened with soot. Once I was loose, I ran around through the railway gate and into the yard. The doors to the admin office and barracks were open and there were sounds of banging, whooping, and hollering. A small mob of scavengers was picking the buildings clean, tossing anything not easily edible or easily converted into caps aside.

Then one, a rancid-looking ghoul if ever I saw one, noticed me. His eyes popped wide and he croaked, "Reapers!" You know... right now, I felt like that term was pretty applicable. As the scavengers grabbed what they could and scampered, I chased him down in three leaps and pinned him outside the barracks as the rest ran with whatever knickknacks they could carry.

"What happened here? Where is everypony? Where's Dusty Trails?" I yelled into his face, beating him with my hooves. All my friends ran up to support me save Lacunae, who hung back.

"I don't know! I don't know anything!" the boiled-looking pony pled as he curled up defensively.

"Blackjack," Glory said sharply, snapping me out of the momentary rage. I looked down at his bent forelegs; I'd snapped both in my tackle and hadn't even realized it. Hadn't heard or felt a thing. I backed off, and she fished out one of our Tenpony healing potions. I noticed it was already losing some of its vibrant color. It was potent enough to heal the ghoul enough to hobble, though; some radiation and he'd be right as rain, right?

"Came here this morning, what with all the attacks. Heard there'd be top-notch salvage," he croaked. "Please don't kill me."

"Then tell me about the attacks," I said evenly as I backed off enough for him to sit up.

"They started a few days back. Right after that whole *Celestia* explosion that killed Security and half the Rangers. Expert merc band hit Megamart hard. I mean *hard*. Then they scragged the group at the Fluttershy clinic. Then Stockyard, marched the whole village into a radioactive hole and just waited for 'em to die. Cold... man... cold. Still, might mean for a few new ghoulies," he chuckled with a wan smile. "Hope some of 'em are cute."

That got some hard looks from me, and his grin sickened as his milky eyes darted away. "Anyway, that place was picked clean, and there was already a crew up at the school thing, so we came here. Just been an hour or so."

"Then the academy. Then here," I murmured. I scowled at him. "But where is everypony?" I demanded.

"I dunno! There was like nopony here! Honest! You think I can take a whole town of ponies with my bare hooves and swinging cock?" he retorted.

"What cock?" Scotch murmured scornfully.

"Oh shit! Did that fall off again?" he said as he looked around under him.

I closed my eyes and shuddered with the effort to not buck him into pieces then and there. "Get lost," P-21 said flatly. The ghoul nodded so fast it looked like his head would come off, little flakes of hide sloughing off in a cloud.

"Right. Yeah. Getting lost! Sooo lost! Where am I now? Heh..." he said as he staggered away from us. "Um... Hoofington Rises and shit..."

I turned and glared right at him. "What did you just say?"

He froze, clearly torn between running for his life and cowering for mercy. Slowly, I rose to my

hooves, my tightening jaw making Taurus's rifle cock. "Me, say? Fuck! I didn't say anything... nothing at all..."

"What you just said: Hoofington Rises. Why did you say that?" Glory asked as she stepped into my line of fire.

The ghoul blinked in confusion. "Well... I don't fucking know. It's just shit folks say now days. Like 'Sweet Celestia' or 'Luna fuck my ass with a frosty strapon.' You know?" He looked at each of us desperately. "It's just what people fuckin' say!" I chewed the saddle bit. One jerk of my head and I could try out firing it.

Be kind, a little yellow pegasus reminded me. *Do better...* Glory looked back at me, spooked at my anger. She seemed to be asking how I could pardon those four but be so ready to smash some ghoul into paint. I had to admit, it bothered me too. Why was I so angry at him?

"Go," P-21 said darkly.

"Can I..." He pointed at his looted goods.

"Take them and go!" I snapped. That was as kind as I was going to get right now. I knew that, for a scavenger like him, it'd mean the difference between life and death... but that didn't mean I had to be happy about it. When he was gone I stomped my hooves. "Any evidence probably got taken with the scavengers. Who--"

"Blackjack," Rampage said in a dark and even tone. I looked at her, then saw her pointing towards the metal doors with her armored hoof. I looked and froze. I'd been so occupied with the scavengers and the ghoul that I'd missed the letters painted six feet tall in a maroon paint that wasn't paint.

'SECURITY'.

Slowly, I trotted forward, looking at the bloody slop drying in a rusty bucket beside the door and the paintbrush shoved within. I pushed the door open, and a *stench* rolled over my nose and skin. I didn't know words to describe that metallic reek. All I knew was that it was bad. I didn't have a real stomach anymore, but if I did I'd be puking like the rest of my friends.

Lacunae groaned as she slumped. I looked at her sharply. "Enervation?" She nodded. Suddenly, my friends were looking at each other. They all seemed tired and drawn all of a sudden. "It wasn't like this before," I said softly, looking at P-21 and Glory for confirmation.

"But... aren't you feeling it?" P-21 asked me in concern.

That surprised me. No, actually. I didn't feel the lethargy or pain or anything. I felt just... me. "No. I guess the cybernetics are resistant or something." I frowned; that didn't seem right... "I'll... check inside. You folks see if you can find anything not picked over yet."

"She throttles a scavenger and then tells us to scavenge. Inconsistent much?" Rampage muttered, but our eyes met. I was pissed, and she knew this wasn't the time.

I took two steps in and nearly walked right into the recorder hanging from a rope in front of me. I looked at it for the longest moment before remembering that my horn didn't work... damn it! Slowly, I

reached out with my hooves and tried to tug it free. Finally, I just downloaded the contents from the device and gave it a shove, sending it swinging in the darkness. The air was thick and heavy and silent as I selected the audio file.

I looked around. One blue bar on my E.F.S. If this was a trap, and it probably was, then they were probably using StealthBucks or zebra stealth cloaks.

For several seconds there was nothing but the sound of machinery and the movement of ponies. Then a male rasped in a familiar boiled voice, "They say the third time's the charm."

Sanguine's words filled the dank tunnel as if he stood beside me. "I always wondered where that came from? What, is twice 'not trying hard enough' and four times 'give up 'cause you're fucked'? Always wondered that."

I found myself trotting faster, my augmented eyes picking out the gray rails of the tunnels and avoiding pitfalls as I looked for mines, tripwires, or other traps. The air felt wrong. It felt wet.

There was another long pause. "I guess it's not true, though. We've been waiting for hours, Security... and you still haven't shown up. No words from that DJ fuck either. But I know you, Security. I know that you didn't die with that ship. I don't care what they fucking say. You're alive, because if you're dead then I'm fucked anyway. And if you're alive, then you're following me. You're just taking your fucking time."

I sped up, trotting past the little security station halfway in. Now I was tripping every now and then as I raced forward.

"Well... let me give you some more incentive to hurry your ass along. I want that program. My time is fucking *up*. I can't stay here anymore. That thing in the Core is awake thanks to *you*. The shit is going to happen, all because of *you*. Red Eye might... MIGHT... be able to stop it. Who the fuck knows? But I need a bargaining chip if he's going to keep me safe and sound. I need Chimera. For that, I need EC-1101."

There was a horrible moment of silence, then the grinding of machinery and the terrified sniffing and sobbing of ponies. "Do it."

Psychoshy's voice broke in. "Sanguine... You can't be serious. Stockyard was fucked up enough!"

"Throw 'em in! Now!" he snarled. "All of them. Save her for last!"

"Whatever," muttered an unfamiliar voice. "Toss 'em."

And then the screams began... just like Gorgon had screamed. The gnashing metal noise became muted. Pulpy. I didn't think, I simply ran. I ran as if I could somehow magically sprint back in time. I raced faster and faster, propelled by the screams of those ponies that I was already too late to save.

And then, suddenly, I was in the round cavern, the ledge ending abruptly behind me as I tried to stop. Momentum carried me onwards. It flipped me forward into that dark and still void. My hooves flailed at the air as I twisted, hoping there was some magical telescopic leg thing that would let me grab

the edge. But there wasn't. And I fell as horrified screams played out of my leg.

The pool below broke my fall. It wasn't very big... wasn't very deep... but it was deep enough. My metal legs sent me straight to the bottom as I struggled and flailed. I opened my mouth, and then I tasted it. I screamed into the thick soup and tasted blood.

He'd put them all through the crusher.

I flailed and struggled, trying to find footing beneath me. A little O2 gauge began to drop. I might have been cybernetic, but I still needed to breathe. I could see nothing. Hear nothing. I felt bits bobbing and brushing against me as my hooves flailed and kicked out under me. I was going to drown in the crushed-up remains of dozens of pony workers.

Then I felt hooves grab my neck and pull. My head broke the surface, then my mouth. I automatically took a breath; a reeking, coppery, iron breath. I wanted to be sick at this. I wanted to wake up. "Stop it, Blackjack! Stand up!" P-21 shouted in my ear.

The interruption took only a moment or two, but it was just enough for me to calm down. I got my hooves under me and stood. My muscles shook; my legs remained steady. The foul mixture of pony and rainwater was little more than chest high at the base of the crusher. The small blue buck carefully helped me along to where the ramp led up to the ledge, my superior weight threatening to drag me down and make me slip. I'd been lucky to fall where I had and not get speared by the many spires of rock and broken bone.

Right. I was lucky. Brimstone's Fall... wasn't.

"You came in after me?" I asked, feeling the fetid mixture coating me slowly dripping off. I was so glad my low light vision was in black and white. I could imagine the gray tones as just mud.

"Nothing good ever comes from you going alone, Blackjack," P-21 said with a small smile. Then he looked over at the... remains. I guessed there was enough light coming in from above for him to get a good enough look. "How could anypony do this?"

I stared at the gory pool; there was no way to tell how many ponies had been put through the machine. Dozens? A hundred? How many ponies had been working here? One thing was clear, though: Sanguine knew exactly how to get my attention. He'd known there was one sure-fire way to bring me to him. This was it. Then my ears twitched just a little bit.

"Blackjack."

I stared at P-21, and the mare's voice croaked out again. "Blackjack."

I turned and saw the blue bar on my E.F.S. align with the hopper bin of the rock crusher. A chill ran through me a moment, and then I was scrambling up to the lip of the bin. Thickened blood smeared the side; a small heap of limbs and burst flesh lay in the bottom. And then part of the heap moved. Eyes opened in the gloom. "Hey, Blackjack," croaked Dusty Trails.

I didn't hesitate. I jumped into the gruesome hopper and slid down beside the sand-colored earth pony. "Dusty! You're alive...?" I couldn't believe it.

"Take more than a rock crusher ta kill me." She looked at my legs and smiled a little more. "See

you got yerself some fancy new legs.”

I swallowed hard, forcing myself to smile. “Yeah. They’ve even got a radio built in.” I looked at P-21 as he pulled the torn gobbets of flesh away with his hooves so we could see how she was trapped. He looked even more ill as he examined the area.

She gave a weak little smile. “He stopped the feeder when I was halfway through the jaws.” I looked down at her hips. “Cast... cast some healing magic on me. Made sure I survived,” she said, and I reached out and held her. She was burning up with fever. “Told me... give you a message. Told me yesterday... if I hung on... you might kill him. Fucking... bastard...” She coughed. “He was right... I hung on... knew you’d come. Knew... Glory would... save you...”

“Right. Now you hang on, and we’ll find a way for Glory to save *you*. Just... hang on,” I said with a sniff... but I couldn’t see how. Her waist was trapped in a jagged three-inch-wide hole. Celestia only knew what condition her legs were in. I didn’t have a second life support jar for her head.

“Don’t be an idjit...” she murmured with a frown. “You ain’t got time ta waste on me. He’s going ta Flank next.”

“How’d he take you out?” P-21 asked.

“Snipers. Armed with beam rifles. Took a few hours, but two of ‘em picked off everypony with a gun. Then griffins dropped stun grenades. Rounded us up with a bunch o’ freaks. After that, they marched us down here. Said they were waiting for you. Ghoul was half out of his mind. Kept waitin’ for you to show. Talkin’ to himself. Jumpin’ at his own shadow. Finally he got sick o’ waitin’ and... started tossin’ folk in. Saved me for last.”

“Griffins. Red Eye,” I muttered.

“Mebbe... if so, the way they were looking at him... if you don’t kill him, they will. They’re powerful ticked off at the moment.” She coughed again.

“Funny. I’m powerfully ticked off at him too,” I said with a sniff.

She rubbed her face with a gory hoof and looked at me. “Think you can get something for me? Doubt they found it. Weren’t much interested in lootin’.” She pointed towards the exit tunnel. “It’s that way.”

I jumped and clambered out of the hopper, spotting the wooden crate in the direction she’d pointed. Inside was a large clay jug. I recognized it from the Arena and carefully cradled it as I walked back to the hopper. She looked up at me with a lazy smile. “That sure is some funny zebra trottin’ yer doin’ on them fancy legs of yours.”

“The original owner was half zebra,” I replied as I pulled out the stopper and was assaulted by the potent alcohol fumes. It actually cut through the stench of the room. I brought the opening to her lips, and she steadied it with her forehooves and took a long drink.

Finally, she sighed. “Muther’s milk...” She sniffed and looked up at P-21 and me. “Promise me you’ll drink the rest over his damn corpse.” I couldn’t trust myself to speak; I jerked my head in some spastic imitation of a nod. “Can you send me on muh way?”

It was Flank and Mini all over again. She was dead; we all knew it. It was just a question of how long it would take her to die. Do it, Blackjack. Do it! Draw that fucking gun and give her peace! Yet I just sat there like an idiot. I couldn't move, couldn't draw Vigilance and give her the peace she deserved so much. "I'm sorry..." I murmured as I hung my head. "... I wish I could. After everything... everything I've been through... I still can't grant you that..."

"T'aint yer fault yer a decent mare," she replied. Then she looked at P-21 calmly, and he didn't hesitate.

"Med-X?" P-21 asked softly as he opened his saddlebag. "Five doses?"

"Five doses? Mare can really end her pain with that much," she said softly as he took out the syringes. As if it were no matter at all, she began to inject herself with the chems. "Oh... Blackjack. Can you do me one last thing?"

I slipped the moonshine into my saddlebag as I looked at her. "Name it."

"On yer way out, there's this button..." she said, her voice growing softer as more of the potent painkiller entered her system. "Red... key is in my hat..." She sighed. "Was gonna use it... but... got stunned before I could."

"I'll take care of it," I promised. I could do that at least.

"Take care of things... better than I did." She sniffed as tears started to run down her cheeks. "It... it was a good mine... Blackjack. I did right... didn't I?" she begged as foam gathered at the corner of her lip. "Celestia'll... be proud... won't she...?"

"She will. I know she will," I said as I held her, listening to her raspy breathing becoming more and more broken. "Thank you... thank you for your help."

"T'wernt nothing..." She smiled slackly, pulled her battered hat off, and set it atop P-21's head. "Fer tha... chems... best ta... settle... debts..."

He nodded, and then said softly, "Ayep."

She slowly curled forward, pressing her face into my metallic limbs. Then she let out her breath in one slow rasp. Her blue bar disappeared from my E.F.S.

And that was that.

It took me a few minutes to pull myself away and crawl out of the hopper again. I reached down, hooked my hoof to P-21's, and pulled him up after me. I sat there, hanging my head. "This was--"

He kicked me so hard that I was knocked on my side. I blinked up at him in astonishment as he glared down at me, his breathing taut and hot. My head spun from the impact, and all I could do was gawk up at him as he sat on my chest.

"If you say the words 'my fault', I will hit you again," he said sharply, then gritted his teeth and spoke slowly, his voice tense. "This wasn't your fault. None of this. You didn't know this was going to happen." He stared down at me. "And if you start with that 'I'm scum' or 'I fucked up' or anything, I will

beat it out of you!"

"I should've dealt with Sanguine sooner," I said. "If I'd--" Again his hooves thumped down against my face. Hard. "I didn't--" Another thump. "I coulda--" Thump. Finally we just lay there, him panting and me feeling blood trickle from my swelling lip and nostril.

We just stared into each other's eyes, angry tears dancing in his. "I won't let you hate yourself for this." Damn it...

He was right. As much as my instinct wanted to pin this all on myself, I couldn't. This was one burden that wasn't mine to bear. I smiled. "Then let's get the sonovabitch that did this." He helped me to my hooves and then tugged Dusty's wide brimmed hat more square atop his brushy mane.

We headed out, and he murmured, "I'm going to tell Scotch. About me. Her mom. Everything." He sighed softly, rolling his eyes a little. "I guess we messed with her memories for nothing then, huh?"

"We wanted to protect her and keep her happy," I replied as we made our way up. I kept a careful eye on him. He looked horrid and exhausted from the Enervation, but I didn't think he was in flesh melting territory yet. The field wasn't quite that strong. Still, it'd make the mine a deathtrap for anyone working here. One nick that wouldn't heal and a pony would be finished. And there were still a lot of gems in these rocks and tunnels...

I spotted the red button she'd mentioned and grinned, rubbing my metal hooves together. Then I reached for the shiny, candy-like button -- and P-21 bumped my hoof aside. "You ever think you should find out what a button does before you push it?" he asked as he lay on his back and looked at the gap between the button and the wall. "Case in point... dynamite."

I blinked and grunted. "Why would Dusty want to blow us up...?"

"She didn't. She wanted to blow up anypony stupid enough to push a button," he said as he cradled the hat in his hooves and pulled a metal key out of the brim. He slipped it into something on the backside of the button and turned it.

I reached for it once more... and once more he smacked my hooves away. "But... key!"

"I promise you can press the button..." He looked a little more and then nodded. "Looks like the key activates a delay and a fuse." He whistled softly. "She rigged the mine to blow. Guess the idea would be get down here, get folks out through a tunnel or something, and blow the mine behind them. Smart." He sighed as he looked back the way we'd come. "Too bad the stun grenades ruined the getaway plan."

"Sooo... button?" I asked with a grin.

He sighed and closed his eyes. "Wait fifteen minutes for us to finish searching up top and get cleared out. Push it, then run for your life. Outside." Then he trotted out, mumbling to himself about babysitting. I sighed as I waited, tapping my hoof against the wall beside the shiny button and sucking on chips and chunks of tasty gems. Each one gave me an invigorating rush, which in turn gave me inspiration for new and interesting ways to handle the job before me. Should I push it slowly and deliberately? Mash it with enthusiasm? A rear hoof jump push? It wasn't every day a girl got to push a

button rigged to a bunch of explosives.

"You sure are one twiggid mare," the Dealer murmured. I glanced over my shoulder at him. "You have a friend die in your hooves, and now you're giddy with glee at pushing a button while soaked in the blood of murdered ponies."

"And talking to you," I added, refusing to let him interrupt my contemplation of buttons and the pushing of them. "P-21 already convinced me not to kick myself for not being able to stop this. Soon as I push this, we'll head to Flank and I'll try to think up exciting and creative ways to kill Sanguine."

"Why do you think Sanguine hit Stockyard?" Dealer asked softly.

"Huh?" I blinked as I looked back at him. "Because he's a murderous asshole?"

"Think about it for a second. He attacks Megamart. Why?"

I frowned. "To draw me out."

"But why Megamart? Why not... say... Toll? Or Flotsam?" he asked calmly. "They're closer to him. Instead he went all the way over to Megamart. Why?"

I sighed and set aside my contemplation of button-ness. "Probably because they helped me?"

"But how would he know that?" he asked softly. "And after that he hit the clinic. And then Stockyard. Why Stockyard? They never helped you. Then they burned the academy. There's not even anypony there, but he burned it. Why?"

I frowned as I rubbed my nose. "Because... because that was the next place I visited. And then here!" The blood drained from my face. "But how would he know where I've been? I mean he..." Then I blinked as my eyes locked with his. "He'd need my PipBuck navigation information..."

"Which was copied onto Marmalade's PipBuck," he murmured softly.

"Which I gave to him..." I looked back towards the chamber. "He told Dusty he was going to Flank!"

"Then count yourself lucky. He's following the road rather than going strictly in order." Dealer didn't take his eyes off mine as he asked, "But where is he going when he's done in Flank?"

I smashed the button and heard an electric fizzle, then immediately turned and raced for the exit. I hit the door out with all four hooves and rolled out as it flew open, screaming to my friends to run.

"Fifteen minutes, Blackjack! I said fifteen minutes!" P-21 yelled crossly as he came out of the bunkhouse.

"He's going to Chapel, P-21! After Flank, he's going to Chapel!" The blue buck shut up immediately, and all six of us ran off through the rain away from the mine.

Moments later, the muddy ground thudded under our hooves as the charges below went off. We were outside the fence when the administration building blew apart in a cloud of wood and reinforcing sheets. The flipping ends didn't even reach the ground before the bunk house blew as well. There was a

rumble beneath our hooves and a massive gust of wind as the chamber below collapsed. I watched as pits opened in the earth where we'd been standing. I hadn't appreciated just how big that chamber had been until I saw the wide depression before me.

"What is pony thinking? Pony runs out and blowing everything up!" Rover snorted. "Why does everything explode around pony?"

"Listen Rover, you need to get to Riverside and your people. Sanguine's hitting every place I stopped since leaving Stable 99. We might have caught a break with Chapel, but if we didn't..." I didn't want to think that far ahead. Instead, I pulled the harness on. "Come on!" I grunted as I pulled, but the wheels of the hoofcar squealed as they locked up entirely.

"The bearings are burned out!" Scotch said. "We'll have to repack 'em and I don't even think we got parts and I know we're out of grease. Even if we had all the stuff, it'd take hours." I gave the car a kick. Of all the times to break down!

"Dog will return to den and send warning to the river ponies. River ponies whine, but have good fish," Rover said as he scratched behind his ear.

"Will you be able to make it safely?" Glory asked in concern.

Rover snorted and lifted his robotic hand, showing the razor claws. "Is good for more than digging through rock, pony. Old dog know many tricks. Dog be fine. Ponies take care of ponies. Is what pony is good at," he said, but for the first time there wasn't the usual bitterness in his voice. "Pony stay safe."

"We can just hoof it straight to Chapel," Scotch Tape piped up.

"It'd take all day, and we'd be crossing unexplored territory," P-21 countered.

Rampage nodded. "There's the Halfhearts headquarters in this area and a crashed skywagon that's a feral ghouel nest. We can follow the rail and cut over to Chapel, but that's even farther. Same problem if we hoof it to Flank."

"Maybe Lacunae can go to Miramare, soak up some radiation, and teleport us all there?" Glory asked.

"It would take many hours," Lacunae replied, the frustration clear in her thoughts.

"What if Blackjack went alone? She can move faster now and she doesn't get tired with these legs of hers," Scotch offered as she rapped her hoof on my enameled foreleg.

"That'd leave her outnumbered by a lot," Rampage said with a frown. "Personally, that's fine for me, but I can't die. Blackjack doesn't have that advantage."

Glory was looking in the direction of the strip mall. "Blackjack... when we came by here the first time, we set a bunch of supplies and stuff on fire. Remember?"

"Yeah," I replied. It was a little bit fuzzy. I was pretty sure there'd been some buck lobbing dynamite at me or something.

"Well, that was a lot of supplies. I doubt they carried it all on their backs from Flank," the gray pegasus pointed out.

"You think they might have had a working wagon?" I asked. She flushed and nodded. I seized her in my hooves and kissed her hard enough to curl her hooves. "I love smart ponies! Let's go." We started towards the nearby strip mall, and I blinked back at Glory still sitting there in a daze. "Hey, Glory!" She shook her head hard, losing her befuddled smile and running to catch up.

* * *

For once, I was glad for the Hoofington rain. It was pouring down in full force by the time we reached the strip mall, and the bloody gore coating me was more or less washed off. For a minute, I was afraid we'd struck out and would be left trying to run all the way to Chapel. Then Rampage checked behind the strip mall and found a wagon that was only marginally rusty. One tire was flat and one axle squealed when Rampage pulled it out, but Scotch just rubbed her hooves together.

"I'm gonna need Lacunae to levitate it up. Gonna need some Wonderglue, some turpentine, a hunk of inner tube, and some grease... any grease or oil you can get your hooves on!" With that, she got out her wrench, and we were scrambling. Fortunately, P-21 found an oil can in the back of the bar, and Glory found the inner tube and helped Scotch work.

And me? I put four bits into the jukebox, selected a song, and kicked the side of the machine with my hoof. The lights flickered, and then the machine gave a dry hum. I dug behind the bar, and hidden by dozens of empty glass bottles I found a flask of Wild Pegasus. I trotted to the table Dusty and I'd sat at so long ago and practiced with my fingers, setting up the two least-grimy shotglasses I could find. The machine clicked, and the music began to play. Out of habit, I started to record as I sat back and looked at all the cards scattered around the table.

I chewed through another mouthful of gems, then looked at one of the face-down cards on the table in front of me and stared. I tried to imagine the magic reaching out. *Try to imagine it like a wind brushing against it*, the book had said, *like blowing on it without using your lungs*. I closed my eyes, trying to focus even though my temples throbbed and my useless stub of a horn ached. I tried imagining blowing the card over. I felt the faintest magic buzz and tingle in my horn. Then I chanced a look down.

Queen of spades; Princess Luna, smiling up at me. It wasn't much at all... but it was a start.

I leaned back, extended my fingers, and picked up the shot glass as the song came to an end. I lifted my glass to the empty chair across from me. Who was I lifting it to? Dusty Trails? Sure. But I was also raising it to Rivets and Midnight. To those ponies in Stockyard killed simply because of a blip on my PipBuck. In a perverse way, I was lifting it to Deus as well, one monster to another in a silent pledge. Sanguine had been around for way too long. It was time to finish the bastard.

The jukebox crackled and finally died. I rose to my hooves and trotted out the door. My friends looked at me, and I must have been wearing the most damned shootiest look that had ever been worn by a mare because they didn't say a word. Scotch and Lacunae hitched me up to the wagon. I took the bit in my mouth and glanced back to make sure everypony was aboard. Glory climbed up onto the seat at the front of the wagon and took my reins. I looked back at her and grinned.

"Um... giddy-up?" she asked, giving them a little shake. No no, Glory. Not giddy-up. Ante up.

I wasn't the strongest pony in the Wasteland, but as I leaned into the harness between the covered wagon's shafts I felt an unfamiliar but welcome orange pony pulling right along with me. *Be strong*, she told me. And right beside her was a blue pegasus telling me that I was going to pull it off and that it was going to be so awesome! With those two pulling alongside me, I couldn't just run. I could practically fly!

With an eep from my pilot, my four mechanical legs lunged forward and we raced down towards the east. Sanguine wanted to find me. He'd found a perfect way. *I'm coming, Sanguine, and I'm bringing a whole lot of hurt along with me.*

* * *

Pulling a wagon had the most startling effect of focusing my world; every bit of my energy was put into moving forward. While my legs weren't all that bothered, I had plenty of flesh and blood bits that were stressed and sweaty. I pushed through the pain. Atrocity takes time. The bastard wanted me to catch up to him. I just had to do it before anypony else died.

Glory and Scotch guided me. With all my attention on running, I had no time to look for washed-out sections of road, abandoned wagons left as barricades, or bars on the E.F.S. I was too busy running! Since DJ Pon3 was off the air temporarily, my PipBuck played some of Mixers's finest and time slowed down to just the present. I didn't have time to think about the future. I didn't have the energy to think about the past. I just had the pull of the reins and the thudding of my hooves and the rattle of the cart to tell me what to do next.

Then I felt the reins pull back and the squeal of the wagon's brakes. Obstinate, I wanted to keep running! But then sense settled in; there was a good reason to stop. We were here. Glory hopped down beside me as I looked at the wall of rubble that had been erected around the town. There was smoke and fire, but not a whole lot of shooting. I still couldn't feel myself breathing, but my vision was flashing warnings about dehydration, caloric intake, and power reserves again. Why'd my insides have to be written in egghead?

Glory hopped out and immediately cracked open a bottle of filtered water with her teeth and hooves and held it to my mouth. I slugged it down as Scotch released me from the harness. My body... hurt wasn't the accurate term. I wasn't in pain so much as a full-body ache spread through my organic parts. Was that because I'd just never really put myself to moving like this before, or something else?

Once I'd finished the bottle of water and was unhooked, I trotted my way clear a bit and looked around. Flank had seen better times, but it looked, surprisingly, that Caprice had followed through on my suggestions. Two of the turrets Glory had made were still functional atop their buildings. The single gate had been blown open, but, judging by the dead ponies scattered around it, the assault had cost the attackers dearly.

"Is it just me, or does the Enervation feel... worse?" Glory asked, looking at the pained expression on Lacunae's face.

"I don't know. I can't feel it just yet," I said as I trotted towards the main gate, alert for red bars. Maybe something was turning up the Enervation across the whole valley? Wasn't that a pleasant thought! I still couldn't feel the tearing sensation or the fatigue, though. Was I just not being affected by the draining energies, or were my synthetic parts resistant to the field's power?

Trotting towards the settlement, I looked around. I remembered the addicts and half-starved ponies lingering outside in the marshy ruins of the town, but they were nowhere to be seen now. Instead, there were a cluster of tents and banners (three black vertical bars on a green field) and a couple dozen ponies standing around watching us head into Flank. They weren't shooting at us, and I didn't see any monsterponies, so for the moment my curiosity was sated. Still... I'd have to check them out... soon.

I made my way inside, looking at the metal wagons turned on their sides and braced together to form a secondary security wall. From the scorching on the inside, they'd been attacked by some sort of flamer so intense it'd slagged the metal. Rooms was on fire still, and from the four dead manticores it was clear that at least one monsterpony had been here as well. Still, Flank had clearly put up a tougher fight than Brimstone's Fall. I could imagine the beam rifle snipers picking ponies off through the chain link that had protected the settlement before, the defenders split in two guarding both entrances.

Then, from out of nowhere, a red bar appeared, a mare in pink barding racing at me faster than I'd ever imagined a pony could move. In a flash she was in my face, and so was the revolver in her jaws. I rolled away just in time to avoid a bullet to the forehead. Still, her next three shots bit through my barding, barely slowing. Her pupils were tiny points in her pink eyes, and she was on top of me before I could recover. The mare was smaller than me, but her hooves slammed into me with more force than I'd thought possible.

Rampage tackled her off me, the pair rolling across the rain-slick street. Another frenzied mare charged Glory, a pair of metal batons glowing as the pegasus turned and hosed her attacker with green beams of magic. Astonishingly, the mare didn't seem fazed at all as the bolts burned at her flesh. Glory raised her hooves as the batons smashed into her face and legs.

Lacunae's magic glow wrapped the frenzied mare and threw her back. She rolled, tried to rise, and failed, but two more ponies raced to their fallen ally and jabbed her with hypodermics. In an instant, she was back on her hooves again. I aimed some suppressive fire at the three and they took cover... at least for the moment.

"Stay down!" Rampage roared as she raised her hooves and smashed them down on the thrashing mare. The earth pony kicked out furiously, denting her armor. "Stay down!" she repeated with another stomp of her forelegs, the kick making the mare bounce. Still she kept trying to get back up. "Stay *down*!" Rampage yelled. The mare rose to her hooves, bleeding and broken and still on the attack. One more stomp and the mare's head crunched like a nut. She trembled and went still. Rampage's pink eyes met my own, and she gave a shrug. "Told her to stay down."

There were a lot more red bars on my E.F.S. now, the ponies matching them fighting with incredible ferocity and resilience. They were all coming out of Mixers. I had no idea where P-21 was in all this, but I hoped he could hear me. "P-21! Kill the robot in the club!" I had a distinct worry that this was what 'everything' did to a mare.

I moved around as quick as I could. One downside of the battle saddle was that it made me less effective in melee combat. Pumped up with Stampede and Buck, these mares' kicks and blows hurt! I almost preferred getting shot to some of the applebuck kicks that connected. I moved away, clenching my jaw on the left trigger and blasting buckshot. The lead was more little more than irritating to the mare it hit, but I didn't know how to swap out ammo without my horn and I lacked earth pony tenacity and resilience. Scotch tried to keep behind me as the two circled.

"Scotch! I need green shells!" I said, tossing her on my back.

"Got it! Use the rifle," she yelled, and I twisted the right side of my jaw. I didn't have a chance to hit; the mares were so jazzed up on Dash that I didn't think they could physically stop moving at that point. I heard the sounds of the olive filly attaching a belt of green shells to the shotgun; not a real Ironpony, but a semi-automatic IF-84. "You're loaded!"

The green toxic rounds weren't much more fatal than the lead, but the chemicals slowed the ponies' movements enough that I was able to plant a few solid shots in their torsos. Still, under the effects of Stampede and Med-X, and probably Hydra too, they just weren't dropping! Worse, they had plenty of fresh healing potions on hand and weren't shy about using them.

Suddenly, there was a loud whistle, and P-21 emerged from Mixers with a familiar pinched-looking medical pony in tow. One of the frenzied mares moved back, shaking with the effort not to attack. The unicorn lifted a strange tube with her magic, loaded some sort of dart, put the end of the tube to her mouth, and shot the dart out of the other end at one of the mares harrying me. She took three steps, staggered to the side, and fell on her face. Another dart, and the next one went down. The mares were frothing at the mouth as I moved back, letting the Flank security mares see to... their dosed comrades? They were all wearing the same uniform!

Scalpel looked at us and said sourly, "Sorry. Didn't recognize you. Thought you might have been those mercs come back for another round or those nutjobs across the way." She looked at the lucid mares in their pink security barding. "Come on! Get them back in my office before their hearts stop!"

"What did you shoot them with?" I asked.

"Fixer and a Moon Dust solution," the doctor replied smoothly.

Now that the fight was over, ponies were coming back onto the street. Lacunae was seeing to Glory, her horn glowing as she healed the pegasus's injuries. I, if I was right about what the glowing messages in my vision correctly, needed something entirely different to fix my damage. I looked around, gave the melted barricade a second look, and then eyed a spur of metal. I bit down, trying to close my mouth enough to activate the softening spell. Finally, the rusty metal peeled off, and I chewed it with a disapproving face. Needed salt.

"I suppose that after three Prices, I shouldn't be surprised by what you can eat," said a familiar voice. Caprice didn't look well. Some of her softness had worn thin, and her quiet humor was now silent worry. The peach mare looked at me in concern with a shaky smile. "I'm glad Glory was able to fix you up. She said... she said you were pretty bad."

"I was," I said as I looked around at Flank while the rain fell upon us. Thick black smoke billowed from the first and second floors of Rooms. "You got hit pretty hard too."

"Thanks to you," snapped an orange unicorn mare as four of her fellows glared at me.

"Citrine..." Caprice said in a tired tone. "If Blackjack hadn't made us step up our defenses, none of us would have made it into 69 or gotten into Mixers. We would have been completely at their mercy."

"And considering the people who hit you put everypony in Brimstone's Fall through their own rock

crusher, I doubt that would have been very pretty," P-21 added as he stepped up beside me.

"And if you'd just given Sanguine what he wanted weeks ago, then hundreds of ponies would still be alive," Citrine retorted with a sweep of her hoof. "I heard the DJ talking about you. Your noble sacrifices for other ponies. Well, how many ponies have died because you've hung on to whatever he wants? Hundreds? Or are you up to thousands now?"

"He's a monster," Glory objected.

"And what is she?" Citrine demanded as she pointed a hoof at me. "Since she showed up around the Hoof, everything's gone from bad to worse! We didn't have griffin mercs, monsterponies, and bounty hunters attacking us every other week till she turned up. If she hasn't killed folks on her own, then she's gotten everything stirred up!"

"Citrine, that's enough," Caprice said, now with an edge in her voice. "Blackjack didn't ask for any of this to happen!"

"No, but she's sure willing to shed rivers of blood to keep it going!" the orange mare said. And worse, more of the ponies listening in looked angry. "What is so damned special that he wants that you can't give it up?" I hung my head, her words echoing in my ears. Was all of this really my fault? If I'd just handed it over at the beginning, could I have prevented all this? "Why don't you just give it up?"

"Do you know what she's been through trying to help everypony in the Hoof?" Glory demanded. "Can you even imagine?"

"Oh, shut up, Turkey. Go back to your clouds. You can't imagine what she's done to life here in the Hoof!" Citrine countered. "Dozens of Halfhearts dead in a war she started. The Fillies are gone! Because of her. The Rangers blown to pieces! So I want to know what the hell she has that's worth more than all those lives!"

"It's the key to Equestria!" I shouted over the din, and even Citrine went silent. "It's the key to firing every megaspell still charged. It unlocks every dirty secret weapon from two centuries ago. It'd let Sanguine make an army of monsterponies... and that's *just* Sanguine." My voice fell as I sat down hard. "For all I know, it's the key to getting into the Core. Or something even worse," I said as I closed my eyes.

"Blackjack," P-21 said as he put a hoof on my shoulder.

"No, P-21. She's got a point," I said, and I looked at Citrine out of the corner of my eye. "Holding onto this has cost me every pony in my stable, save two. It's forced me to kill dozens due to a stupid bounty. It's thrown one of the deadliest ponies I've ever known against me." Then I looked at her and snapped, "You think I haven't thought of just giving it up? Handing it over? Maybe I would have, if you'd told me a month ago I'd lose both eyes and all four legs over it! Or lose almost everypony I knew! But I didn't. And once I found out what it could do..." I shook my head and rose to my hooves, stepping towards the orange mare and staring into her yellow eyes. "Do you want Sanguine to have that kind of power? Or Red Eye? Or somepony even worse than both of them? Because that's what's at stake."

I had to give Citrine credit, she kept her eyes locked to mine for half a minute before she said slowly, "That might be true. All I know is that I lost a mother when Deus came for you, a brother when the Halfhearts fought the Rangers, and a little sister when..." She stopped and looked at the burning Rooms building before sniffing. "And, sorry... any one of them was worth a thousand keys to Equestria." With

that, she turned and walked to join the mares watching Rooms burn.

Caprice trotted up beside me. "You should probably go." I looked at her and saw the apology in her eyes.

"Yeah. Did they go north?" I asked as all of us trotted out the melted gate. I knew the answer, and I pretended I could feel my heart rise in my chest. I found a tin can in the gutter and bit down, trying to get my teeth to soften it so I could chew. Caprice made a face. Clearly, the sight of the fingers on the end of my limb and me eating tin were turning my visit a little surreal.

"Three or four hours ago," Caprice said. "We'd killed off about twenty or thirty of their foot soldiers before the monsters got into the fray. They had a pony who breathed fire and another who exploded! After that, we were falling back. But by then the griffins in power armor were getting pretty impatient. They looked ready to waste Sanguine themselves. Nasty bastards."

"Red Eye's got a couple in his employ," I said as we trotted back outside. I felt Citrine's eyes on my back, but when I glanced back the last I saw was her yellow eyes turned towards the burning building. "Psychoshy said Sanguine was in deep shit..."

Caprice nodded. "He is. If you do nothing, I think they'll waste him."

"I can't wait. They're going to Chapel," I said softly. Fighting griffins and monsterponies? I needed... something. A plan... some sort... Then I looked at her a long moment. "Will you help me?"

Caprice returned my gaze. "If you promise me you'll kill the son of a mule..."

"I do. You're not the first I've made that promise to," I answered. I told her what I'd need, and she nodded. It was going to cost us a serious chunk of caps, and that was with our discount. When she finished taking down my order, I nodded my head towards the small encampment. "What's their story? Is that where Sanguine's guys made camp?"

"No. They're followers of the Prophet," Caprice replied with clear distaste. "Bunch of wackos thinking they're going to find some sort of paradise in the Core."

"Do they? I think I'll go have a chat with them," I said, then looked at the peach pony as she turned away. "Caprice?" She looked back in concern. "I'm sorry." I only hoped I imagined P-21 grinding his teeth like that. "I'm sorry I didn't talk to you back when we were trying to make Flank more secure."

"I really thought you were just pretending not to know who I was," she said with a little half smile.

"Yeah, well... this whole 'thinking' thing is really challenging for me," I said with a rueful smile. She looked sad and regretful as she smiled back.

"I'll talk to Scalpel and get what you need. Shouldn't even be half an hour," Caprice said in a polite tone of deference, then stopped. "Blackjack..." She looked evasive for a moment. "About Deus..."

"It's old news, Caprice. He's dead. Usury is scraping up brahmin turds. There's nothing else to say," I said with a smile.

She opened her mouth, then closed it again. Her eyes slid away. "Yeah... sure... sorry..." She

gave a little smile. "I'll get your stuff."

"Oh! And if you've got any grease lying around, we could use it!" Scotch piped up, pointing at the wagon. "Damn thing wobbles and whines worse than Blackjack after a crate of Wild Pegasus."

"I do not wobble and whine when drunk. I have it on good authority that I am undefeatable while drunk out of my gourd," I said with a prim nod. Of course, once it all metabolized...

"Don't ask about the bathtub," P-21 said with a shudder.

"And I'll be saying hi to your new neighbors," I said with a glance over at the collection of tents.

"Please don't tell me you're going to make enemies with a new bunch of ponies," Glory said with a sigh.

"I'm just going to talk!" I snorted. "I don't make enemies with every group of ponies I cross in the Hoof."

"Fallen Arch?" Rampage said with a small roll of her eyes, "The Flashers. Burners. Technically the Reapers, too, though that's our typical audition."

"You certainly didn't make a good impression with Enclave Intelligence when you ran across them," Glory pointed out.

"And you nearly speared Triage through the throat after she saved you at the Collegiate," P-21 added.

"I think it would be better if I did not add how the Goddess feels about you," Lacunae murmured.

I felt something winding up in my brain, like a wire drawn too taut that was about to snap. I was trying to do better! Really! It wasn't my fault I made enemies as easily as sneezing. "Okay! Fine! I am going to walk over there, say hi, and probably meet another group of ponies wanting to kill me!" I said with an indignant snort, lowering my head as I grumbled to myself. "Okay?"

"Good enough for me," Rampage said as she trotted up next to me and grinned back at my friends look. "What? I don't mind ponies shooting at her. Lot less boring than all that negotiating stuff."

The two of us trotted towards the tents, and Rampage asked quietly, "How's Scotch holding up?"

"I... don't know?" I asked as I looked over at her. "She seemed fine in Tenpony."

"She was a mess in Tenpony. When you died... I had to go out and pick a fight with some alicorns and what they call raiders there just to get away from her," Rampage said with a worried look. "She's trying to put on a brave face now that you're back, but I think she still blames herself. She's also scared to death of male ponies now."

"Huh?" I frowned. "They didn't touch her..." The thought froze me down to my hooves. "Did they?" Had I missed one and didn't hear it?

Rampage snorted. "Blackjack, she didn't have to be raped. They worked you over for an hour, and she heard it all. I think the only buck she can be around at the moment is P-21." Rampage looked

back at where Scotch, Glory, and Lacunae were fixing the wagon. "Pretty sure she wets the bed."

I sighed, ears drooping. "Great. Another thing I need to address."

"Or you could have P-21 talk to her about it. I would talk to her myself. I've gone through a ploughing more than a few times. But if she starts bawling..." The striped pony gave a sickly smile before shrugging.

"You've been raped?" I blinked and received another '*you're being stupid again, Blackjack*' look. Was this something from Twist or... something else? I couldn't imagine anypony raping Rampage.

"I told you I had," she said, and I wanted to kick myself for forgetting. How do you forget *that*? She snorted and shook her head at my lapse. "Lots of ponies in the Wasteland have been raped. Mostly mares, but bucks too. Flashers were notorious for it." She sighed and looked in the direction of the air station. "When I was pried out of the wreckage at Miramare, I was a blank slate. I was also a hole. The ghouls who kept me pimped my ass out to every buck with a twitchy ball sack. Celestia only knows how I didn't get knocked up. Maybe I did and I just killed the foal... like Hope," she said in that horrible, fragile voice.

"One day, those two ghouls got bored and sold me to the folks that got Paradise started. After a while, though, I figured out that explosive collars aren't much of a deterrent when you can regrow your head. I busted out, and I was on my own again. Bonesaw and Scalpel were kind enough to win me over, the first two who didn't try to inseminate me for caps."

"Then how are you so normal? I mean..." I stammered as she looked at me like I was a idiot again... which, to be fair...

"Normal? What makes you think I'm normal, Blackjack? I have nightmares. The old flashbacks. Every time I came to 69, I paid a mare to let me sob into her chest for an hour or two and call her Mommy. Then I'd pay twice as much just to keep her quiet. Crybaby Reapers are a liability," she said with a grin, but I saw past it into her eyes. "Sometimes, I'll go into a place and I can just see the looks. The 'I can fuck you if I want' look. I wear jagged steel armor and am as strong as three ponies, and I still get that look. So what I really want to know is, how are *you* so normal?"

"Huh?"

"I heard from P-21 and Glory. You were a glazed donut by her account. I smelled the blood and spunk. Probably still can on the *Seahorse*. So why aren't you a cringing ball of terror around males?"

I looked at her flatly. "I think we should hurry up and get going."

But she jumped in front of me. "No, really. What's your secret? I mean, you probably had four different cocks in your ass and your mouth..."

"Look, we don't have time..." I muttered, going red.

"I mean, did you choke or swallow fast enough--"

"Rampage. I don't want to fucking talk about it. It happened. It's over. Fucking drop it."

"I mean, to get that ploughed and be perfectly fine..."

"Shut the fuck up, Rampage!"

"Or did you like it a litt--"

I smashed my hooves into her face. "Shut up!" And suddenly, I couldn't stop. I had to kick and kick and kick again. Her blood splashed over me as a dark rage suddenly flowed out of my brain like boiling acidic blood. I hated her. I hated her for picking open the wound. I hated her for being wounded in the first place. I thought that I could just ignore it. That I'd gotten lucky and it hadn't affected me. That somehow I'd owned that dreadful hour back on the *Seahorse*. I wanted to smash her to pieces. I wanted to hurt as badly as I'd been hurt.

My fingers found a brand new function as they locked on her throat and squeezed with every bit of force I could muster. She'd never ever hurt me again. Never. I'd tear her head off before I let her! I squeezed harder, feeling the cartilage give and listening to it crackle...

And then I looked down at her battered face and crushed neck and jerked my hooves back. Pink light flashed as her injuries healed before me. Any other pony... I imagined Glory or P-21... Scotch... I sat down, glad for the rain. So glad for it. She looked up at me with a sure smile as she healed. "Sure... you're just fine... aren't you?" she rasped with soft sarcasm.

I'd been raped. I wasn't okay with it. I was so damned angry I wanted to kill somepony. I was scared that it'd happen again. And I was ashamed. No matter how I tried to rationalize it... no matter how I tried to make it sound like it'd been preferable... the fact was that I'd been hurt. Hurt bad... maybe forever. I wanted to shake, but everything was a damn calm inside me, aching.

Rampage groaned and rolled onto her belly. "Ow... Therapy isn't supposed to hurt this much."

"Rampage... I..." I stammered in horror.

She sighed as she looked at me. "You didn't do anything that any mare or buck who's been put through what we have wouldn't do." Slowly, she rose to her hooves and shook herself. "You have a nasty tendency to repress stuff. So do I. So does P-21. But you need to know those landmines are there now, because otherwise somepony is going to come along and step on them, and it's going to be ugly."

"Right..." I murmured softly. Victim... I was used to thinking of other ponies as the victims; they were the ones hurt, and I was the one dealing with addressing it. Victims were weak and helpless, like Dusty Trails caught in the crusher. Ponies to be saved by ponies bigger and stronger and nicer, like me. Was all my supposed heroism just an excuse to feel superior?

I couldn't say for certain... but the thought had me shivering in my synthetic legs.

I looked at the blood speckling my hooves and imagined it coming from one certain pegasus. That night in Tenpony had been wonderful... no question... but sitting here now in the rain, I thought back. One wrong touch... one reckless moment... and I could have hurt Glory just as badly as I had Rampage. The thought nearly floored me, and I looked back at Glory way over by the wagon, barely visible through the rain at this distance. Thank Celestia none of them seemed to realize what I'd done. "That's why you were able to talk to P-21..."

"And you couldn't. And it's why I can talk to you like this and about this, and Glory can't," she said quietly as we continued towards the tents.

"No offense... but couldn't you have waited till after we pulped Sanguine? I've got to say your timing stinks."

"Why'd you let Citrine spout off at you like that?" she asked with a nod over her shoulder back at Flank.

"She was right," I muttered.

"She was hurt, and you knew it. And you know hurt, Blackjack. But there's a difference between hurt and right. Her pain didn't make her right. If pain were all it took to be right, then every half-baked raider in the Wasteland would be right in doing whatever they wanted. We're all victims, Blackjack. The only difference is what we do with our hurt." She nudged my rump with her own. "That'll be fifty caps for one three minute Wasteland therapy session."

I couldn't help myself, laughing softly. "So there is a therapist in the Wasteland."

"You bet. Helping you makes it easier for me to repress and ignore all my own fucked-up issues," she laughed.

I shook my head as we reached the little encampment and several things struck me at once. There were only about twenty or so ponies sitting around the fires. At once, I took in their grubby and gaunt appearances; it didn't match their clothes. Those looked practically new! And their weapons still had the sheen of manufacturer's oil. Boxes of pre-war food were stacked in heaps. But for the overabundance, the ponies just sat in circles around their fires, humming one... continuous... tone...

A tone I'd heard before...

I sat down with a sensation of horror creeping over me. I glanced beside me at Rampage and imagined her covered in foal cadavers. P-21 as a bloody tyrant, his own daughter a 'breeder'. And Glory... Glory made a *thing*. I wanted my heart to pound. I wanted to gasp for air. I wanted to scream! Rampage was saying something as I fell on my face, hugging it, trying to black the thoughts out. Trying to stop that noise! I'd seen exactly this. Heard exactly that. It had been a dream, hadn't it? Or had it been some kind of vision? Had it even been my dream, given how mutated my body was by that time?

Then I heard the faintest voice. A tiny chime, quiet and pure, filling my ears. Slowly, I lifted my face and looked around for the source, but I could see none. Rampage knelt next to me, shaking me. "Hey! Hey, are you okay? Should I get Glory? Should I start with the mayhem?" I struggled to clear my mind and think as those two tones fought inside it. Gradually, thankfully, both faded and I pulled my wits together. I looked at Rampage and slowly shook my head. A part of me really wanted to open fire; there was something fundamentally wrong in that note. But I couldn't kill ponies just sitting there...

"No... no..." I said. "I'm...fine. It's all... just a little creepy."

From the look on Rampage's face, she didn't believe for a moment that I was telling even half the story; this was maybe the most worried I'd ever seen her.

"You're sure?"

"Yeah. Let's just... go talk to them. I need answers."

"Well, okay. Just let me know when to start the rampaging!" she said with a familiar wide grin and only a fading hint that her worry had far from gone away. I steeled myself, faced the encampment again, and stepped forward.

A brown earth pony approached, all welcoming smiles and apparently paying no attention to my episode. Something ugly growled in the back of my mind. He was too clean. Too well fed. "Welcome. I am Auger. Have you come to join the faithful?" I looked at the corkscrew cutie mark drilling through a heart; I supposed that this was a step up from his old life.

"Faithful?" I asked, looking at the humming ponies. "What, them?"

His smile faded a touch. "The faithful have come to this city of wonders to be saved from the horrors of the Wasteland. Soon, the doors shall open, and we will return to a world of plenty and paradise." He immediately reached over and scooped up a box of Sugar Apple Bombs. "Please accept this blessing of plenty from the Hoof."

I took the box in a hand and looked at it skeptically. On the one hoof, I was really leery of accepting anything from these ponies. On the other, the box looked unopened, I could eat rocks and rusty old cans... and I was hungry and they were Sugar Apple Bombs. Well...the hum probably wasn't contagious through food. I shook the cereal into my mouth and chewed. My eyes popped wide; even for Sugar Apple Bombs, these were good! "Where did you find this?"

"The city guided me to an old recharging station in which we found that treasure."

"Treasure? You have no idea," I said around a mouthful. This was the best of the best cereal ever, and it was hitting my snacky perfectly! I licked the powder off my lips and then frowned. I looked at the box. Something was off. "You said this was in a recharging station?"

"Indeed. The city will always provide for the faithful," Auger proclaimed. "Food for the hungry. Ammunition, weapons, and barding for our protection. Even potions unravaged by Enervation."

"This box is new," I said softly. Rampage frowned and leaned towards it. "No fading. No dust. No warping. And the cereal inside tastes new too."

"A miracle of the city, a bounty for the faithful."

"You know, in my old stable, we had machines that could make food like this. Oh, sure, not as good or as varied, but yeah. Food from machines." I shook the box between my hooves. "What I want to know is where the machines are."

Clearly not the way he wanted my line of questioning to go. "The glories of the Hoof are not for us to question or to ponder," he said in faintly hurt tones. "If you are not prepared to join us, then I suggest you take our gift and leave. But I would suggest you not begrudge those that have so very little and have suffered so much."

"I don't. But I do question where such plenty comes from and who is pulling the levers and why," I said as I stood. "Thanks for the cereal." I picked up the box in my mouth. He hadn't sounded like he'd been hiding something. A true believer, I guessed.

We started back, but then Auger trotted up after us. "One last moment. You two seem formidable. There is a mare that has something we desire greatly. She is the murderess called Security. She wears a black device on her left hoof. If you find this mare... if you bring us what she wears, we will provide you with riches beyond compare."

I stared at him for the longest time. I swore I heard my left foreleg rattle like a hundred thousand bottlecaps. "Good to know. What do you want it for?"

"It is the key to our entry to the Hoof," he said with a broad smile. "We have seen it in a dream." You're not the only one... "When we have it, the doors shall open wide, and we will be permitted to enter the Core." He bowed his head to us. "Hoofington Rises."

As he left, I gave one look at Rampage. All we needed was for this guy to talk to Citrine, and I was going to have a whole lot more trouble. But what could I do? It wasn't like I could just kill... him... actually, I could. In fact, I was with the one mare who'd probably be just fine with it. Just slip into S.A.T.S. and use my hooves and...

I shook my head hard. Killing a buck just to make my life easier? That wasn't me. Yet as I glanced back, that one ugly voice in my head told me I should do it anyway, just to be safe. Just in case. One less pony after my head, one step farther from that dream... I glanced at Rampage and saw the sympathy in her pink eyes, the acknowledgement of what was in my head. "Let's go," I said with a sigh, doubting I would ever get to be so open ever again.

Back at the wagon... we needed a name for it. Road Bandit? Huh... something. Anyway, once we were back, we saw that Caprice had brought my order. I shouldered into the harness once more, tore two holes in the cardboard box, and slipped my ears through, burying my muzzle in the sugary goodness. Well... at least I'd got a box of my favorite cereal out of it.

* * *

New bonus to having a piece of machinery for a stomach: no cramps after eating. Actually, I wasn't exactly sure what I was feeling, but I don't think that 'cramp' quite described it. It was more like a strange whirring sensation where my stomach used to be. Whatever it was, though, it didn't seem to be having any effect on my pace. I pulled us as fast and steady as I could, sucking down on a sapphire and some water every now and then to keep my energy supplies topped off.

Yeah. I had energy supplies now instead of rumbling stomach pains!

That was good, because, every minute that passed by, I was moving a little faster and a little faster. I thought of Chapel and the fillies being force marched across the bridge and the colts tossed into the churning river. The rain was getting heavier and thunder began to growl overhead. Little flickers of lightning danced between the dark clouds. I hoped Thunderhead was just feeling bored or something. I did not need to spend a few hours unconscious again!

We passed Blueblood Manor and finally spotted the village. No smoke. No fires. No bodies littering the street, and there were lights in the post office and little church. For the briefest of moments, I could have pretended that everything was okay. Sanguine was dead in a ditch somewhere. We could have dinner in Star House. Everything was going to be fine and peaceful.

That illusion was destroyed in a yellow flash that sent my head reeling and me crashing into the

asphalt. Glory jerked the brake, but I was still ground along the broken road and left a few square inches of my face on the tarmac.

Psychoshy twisted so hard I thought she'd snap in two and came at me once more, but Glory's stream of emerald beams made her veer off and instead fly by the wagon. There was a flash and a crack as her power hooves discharged and smashed Glory clear off the seat. I rose to my hooves and at once slipped into S.A.T.S., then gaped at the low hit probability. Was she really moving that damned fast? Three shotgun blasts fired in slow motion and not one hit her.

Then time sped back up, and she curled in and dove again. "Unhook me!" I shouted, firing wildly to force her off to the side. I felt Scotch scabble at the pins holding me to the cart. P-21 had Persuasion out, but he'd need her to land before he'd have a chance of blowing her wings off.

That left Lacunae. The purple alicorn was large, glorious, and magical. She was also, unfortunately, slow; her magic arrows streaked in a deadly barrage that Psychoshy left in the dust. Lacunae's shield flared with each connection of those power hooves, all four of them striking precisely to maximize force; without the cage to constrain her, Psychoshy could move ridiculously fast, and the alicorn was getting more than a little worn out by the powerful and precise flyby attacks.

Then I was free and stepped ahead. "Lacunae! Try and grab her!"

"We are trying, but she is... infuriatingly... swift!" the alicorn said into my mind.

"Not happening!" Psychoshy shouted as she reversed with a powerful snap of her wings and corkscrewed straight at Lacunae. With an explosive crack, the yellow pegasus blasted right through her shield and smashed both forehooves against her skull. Lacunae dropped from the sky into a heap on the dead, wet grass.

Hoping she'd take a second to brag, I tried for a S.A.T.S.-assisted rifle shot, but she didn't slow after knocking Lacunae out and instead dove for me once again. I saw her wide, murderous grin, her blue eyes wide in glee as her power hooves crackled. Worse, I realized why her strokes were striking with such precision: on her left foreleg was a PipBuck of her very own.

Then a red-striped wall of steel hopped in front of me, and Psychoshy slammed all four hooves into Rampage's side. I heard ribs snapping like dry branches, but while Rampage grunted and bent a little, she didn't go down. "My turn," she hissed through her pain, and then she reared up and slammed her hoofclaws into Psychoshy's face. Six bloody furrows opened in the pegasus's hide as she snapped her wings hard to get away.

Rampage wasn't going to give her the chance, though; she leapt and landed on top of Psychoshy like a falling house. The yellow pegasus screamed as those claws dug into her shoulders and haunches. "Well... too bad I don't have a wood chipper. But..." She grinned ear to ear. "Make a wish."

"Rampage!" I shouted, stopping her from tearing the yellow pony in two. Something was wrong with this. I slowly approached while Glory and Scotch worked to revive Lacunae. Psychoshy's eyes were wide... and terrified. Slowly, I walked in front of her and she gave a sniff. "Hey Psychoshy."

"Flutters--" she began, then flinched away when she saw my face. "You have to help him. You have... you have to give him the program. Please!"

"He's tried force, bribery, and coercion, and now he sends you to beg for him?" I asked as I took a seat.

"He didn't send me!" She tried to heave Rampage off her, but my friend wasn't budging. "They're going to kill him!"

"Funny. I'm going to kill him," I said, smiling slowly. "Sounds like he's fucked."

She sniffed as she looked up at me. "You have to save him. You have to! Somepony has to!" she said as she struggled again. "Give me the program!" she screamed in mad desperation, her hooves clawing at me.

"Girl, you have completely smashed your apple," I said with just a touch of amusement. "You really think... after everything he's done, not to mention you... I'm just going to save him?" She looked up at me and nodded. And then, like that, the amusement was torn away, and I shouted at her, "He threw a whole settlement of miners into a rock crusher and left the last one alive to tell me where he was going next! He marched a town into a radioactive crater and watched them die! He sent Deus into my stable! And I don't even want to *imagine* what he may have done that I haven't heard about yet!"

She finally went limp, sobbing as she hid her face in her hooves. "I know... but he's all I have. Nopony else is going to save him. So I have to," she sobbed brokenly as she lay there in the mud. I stared down, and P-21 emerged from the rain to sit beside me.

"You can't be seriously considering this, Blackjack," he said quietly. I couldn't answer him. It was insane, and we both knew it. "This is the pony responsible for making our lives a living hell. That fucker exposed 99 to that damned virus! You promised Dusty Trails!" he shouted.

"I know!" I shouted back, making him balk. I knew that Sanguine was a monster. A complete fiend who deserved to die. I knew it. But I never imagined having a pony beg for the life of such a creature. And that introduced the insidious thought into my head. Could forgiving Sanguine actually be... better? I had a very similar yellow pegasus in my mind begging me to do just that.

"Please. He's all I have," she whimpered. "If he doesn't get that program, he'll kill everypony in Chapel. And then Vermilion will kill him. Or something worse in the Core will. Or you will!"

I sighed and ignored P-21's glare. "Who is he, Psychoshy? Why should I forgive a monster like him? Who is he to you?"

She trembled as she closed her eyes. "My momma was killed by raiders while I was still in the womb. He cut me out... used his machines to keep me alive. He... he raised me. Named me. Taught me how to read. Made sure I was better and stronger than anypony," she said, giving a little heave against Rampage, without result.

"And you two are... ah... intimate?" Glory asked, tapping her hooves together awkwardly. All of us stared at her a moment, and she blurted, "That's what Mallet said!"

"What? No! That's disgusting!" Psychoshy said in disbelief.

Rampage blinked in surprise. "Seriously? You're not riding his jerky stick?" The yellow pegasus went bright red, looking away. "Oh... so you want to..."

"He's the only pony who's ever been nice to me..." she murmured as she closed her eyes.
"But... he calls me his little filly..."

I sighed as I looked at Rampage. Why wasn't anything ever easy? "Well, Doctor Rampage?"

"Well... she... I think... is batshit crazy," Rampage said softly. Then she looked right at me.
"You, however, have a nasty case of bleeding heart. Worst in the history of the Wasteland. You just can't kill a pony in cold blood, can you? You can kill just fine if somepony is shooting at you, but the moment... the *second*... you have to face the thought of deliberately killing somepony... then your guts get all squirmy."

"I'm not an executioner," I muttered. I thought of Brimstone's Fall. Of Flank. Of 99. So many ponies deserved revenge.

"If you can't do it, let us," P-21 said softly.

"Yeah! P-21 and I can make a game of it," Rampage said with a chuckle. Psychoshy sobbed foalishly beneath her.

I sighed. P-21 groaned and covered his face. "Not the frigging sigh. I know that sigh. That's the 'you don't want to kill somepony who deserves it' sigh."

I smiled a tiny bit, then looked down at Psychoshy. "I'm sorry Psychoshy. I can't make any promises to spare him. Not after what he's done. Especially after Brimstone's Fall and what he did to Dusty. I'm sorry."

Psychoshy sniffed and sobbed wretchedly, pressing her face into the mud. Rampage rolled her eyes. "I'm guessing you don't want me to accidentally sneeze and tear her in two?" I shook my head, and she groaned. "Softest damn heart in the Wasteland. You can push a button or pull a plug, but face to face, good and ugly..."

"I'm not an executioner," I repeated softly as I looked down at Psychoshy. "Wonderglue her wings to a tree. She'll work herself free eventually." She glared up at me with a teary sniff. "Then she'll come after me... and next time, Rampage will get her wish. But I am sorry. I can't promise you that."

Rampage got off her roughly, bit one of her wings, and dragged her off to the trees beside the manor while Lacunae took off her power hooves. She screamed over and over again how she was going to kill me before Lacunae silenced her with a mouthful of her own yellow feathers. P-21 just looked at me, and I looked out at Chapel. "Don't look at me like that. I know I'm an idiot for sparing her."

"I don't think you're an idiot," he lied, but then our eyes met and he sighed himself, rolled his eyes, and said with a half smile, "Okay, you're an idiot. But... you're an admirable idiot. I just hope that nopony dies because you keep giving ponies second chances."

I smiled too and looked at Chapel. Hours ago I'd been so sure. Now I was fighting myself. I closed my eyes, remembering the promise I'd made to Dusty and all the other ponies who were owed some revenge. Thinking of all the ponies who were in danger. For the longest time, I'd wanted somepony... the Dealer... the little mares in my imagination... the stars themselves... to give me a nudge one way or the other. Nothing. This was my call...

I thought of the little figurine in my saddlebags, the mare smiling in the atrium of the Fluttershy clinic. The mare to be a mother so long ago. *Sorry...*

Sanguine would have to die.

* * *

We looked down at the town from the road. "So... let me guess. You just trot right down there, and then we make it up as we go?" Glory asked with a half smile.

"I love this plan," Rampage said, stomping her hooves in glee.

"No." I wasn't going to have another Fallen Arch. Not here. "First, P-21 and I are going to go down there and get a good look at the place. I do *not* want a bloodbath." I dug into my bags and took out the first of the tricks I'd purchased in Flank: a brand new StealthBuck. "Sit tight. We'll be back soon."

* * *

"Okay," I said as I extended a finger and started to draw in the dirt behind the wagon. The StealthBucks had lasted long enough to get me in and out. Since we'd gotten back, the blue buck had been wearing an undeniably smug look on his face. "Here is the situation. We've got an hour or so, tops, before things get ugly. They've noticed Sunshine here is missing and think we're coming soon."

I glanced over at Psychoshy. "Sanguine's trying to get Vermilion, the griffin in charge, to send the other fliers to check the road. Vermilion just wants to dust the whole town. I really want to hit them before they come for us."

"Do we have a plan?" Glory asked with a smile.

"We actually do."

I drew a snaking path in the dirt, then drew squares at the approximate locations of the buildings. "Two snipers are hidden in the chapel's bell tower," I said, putting down two bottle caps in the appropriate spot. Nopony could hide from E.F.S. after... well, okay, they could, but these two hadn't. "They're ponies, so they're yours, Lacunae. Zap them. Use mind control. Drop a boat on them. Whatever."

The purple alicorn nodded once. "I will endeavor to neutralize them appropriately."

I put down a bottle cap outside the chapel, in Sekashi's house, and in the post office. "Here are the positions for the three monster ponies. The dragonpony is here." I touched the first. "Then the exploding one." I touched the second. "And the manticore." I pointed at the third. "She's got three more of her pets in there."

I looked at Glory. "The manticores are all yours. Keep strafing them. If they hide or run, fine. If not... do what you have to do."

"Right," she said with a little nod. Scotch Tape had divested Psychoshy of Marmalade's PipBuck and placed it on Glory's hoof; she was still occasionally trying to reach out and touch the E.F.S. bars in her vision.

"P-21 is going to neutralize Fury and then join me at the chapel." He just nodded once, not

looking happy.

"And the dragon monsterpony is mine, right?" Rampage said in glee and started dancing. "I get to fight a dragon. I get to fight a dragon!"

"Her name is Precious," Scotch said firmly, and I smiled.

Time to burst Rampage's bubble. "Nope," I said, and immediately she sat down hard and glowered at me. I put four bottle caps down in one of the small residences. "There're two griffins and two ponies in here." I sighed and smiled. "Do what you do best."

Inside the chapel, I put down four bottle caps. "Two more ponies are in here, along with Vermilion and Sanguine. P-21 and I will handle that. When you've taken care of your targets, meet us there. They have most of the children in this corner." I put a Sparkle-Cola there and looked at Lacunae. "I would be really happy if you could get in there and keep a shield as long as you can."

Scotch frowned and then chewed her lip nervously. "You... you didn't say what I'm doing. Please, I really want to help! Don't leave me behind again!"

I smiled at her. "Don't worry Scotch. Not this time," I assured her, then took out a little tin of mints. "You get the most important job of all."

* * *

The streets of Chapel stood silent and empty, looking abandoned to anypony who didn't notice the occasional pairs of eyes peeking out into the street through boarded-up windows. A pair of beam rifles poked out at the drizzly night from the belltower, panning back and forth. Outside the large white building sat a very dejected-looking filly. At first glance, she was simply a purple unicorn filly with a slightly odd-looking green mane. Then you saw her spade-tipped reptilian tail, her clawed limbs, and that her 'mane' was in fact a row of green spines.

Then there was a shimmer, and an olive filly appeared at the corner of the building. She gave a perfect warm smile and gestured for the dragonpony to come closer. The suspicious filly stepped towards the corner, and my heart was in my chest as I watched. I had the bit in my teeth... but then the pair disappeared around the corner with no sign of violence. Slowly I let out my breath. One cap down...

I looked up at the rifles, then up further at Lacunae flying over the belltower as silently as a purple ghost. There was a bright purple flash with a twin above the river, and the three bars vanished from my E.F.S. Two more caps down, but that flash wasn't inconspicuous...

I moved over to the door to the building the griffin mercs were behind and set an empty Sparkle-Cola bottle upright beside it. From out in the rain came the clatter of hooves on asphalt. I looked at the door to the house, waiting... waiting... Then I knocked hard on it.

The door creaked open and a metal-covered head peaked out. "Huh?" He had just a second to do the right thing; instead, he stood there gaping at the glittering form charging him.

"Reapers!" she screamed as she slammed into him like an armored freight train. Me on Stampede had been ugly... Rampage on the stuff... well, at least she was happy.

At the racket, the manticore mare Brass stepped out of the post office just in time to receive a blinding burst of green gatling beam fire to her face as Glory stepped into view. The monsterpony ducked back, but the next manticore that tried to leave the post office exploded in crackling light and collapsed in a heap of emerald dust.

Fury raced out of her building and at once started to run towards Glory... but as she charged, there was a soft 'Pfft' from the gap between the houses. A metal dart appeared in her flank; she started to glow in shock, then dimmed, took a staggering step, and fell over on her side as the solution of Fixer and Moon Dust filled her veins. I turned back towards the door of the chapel. Two bucks in combat armor, one floating a sniper rifle and the other with two marksman carbines on his battle saddle, were stepping out and taking aim at Glory.

I supposed that a mare appearing right in front of you was more than a little bit cheating. Appearing and using S.A.T.S. to blast your face with explosive rounds was a lot cheating. To the unicorn stallion's credit, though, it still wasn't enough to take him down. He staggered to the side, injecting himself immediately with Stampede and a healing potion as he fired the rifle at me point blank. One downside of being able to feel my cyberpony parts was that it really hurt when that round punched clean through a forelimb.

The other merc mare raced to my side and strafed me; I drank a healing potion, but the process was horribly slow. I just had to grit my teeth as I turned and fired both rifle and shotgun blasts at the earth pony mare. She kept pouring on fire, definitely not going down easily.

Then a little apple with a green band arched out of the darkness behind her and landed at her hooves. She leapt aside at once and was midair when the magic grenade went off in a green sphere of energy. The magic transformed her into so much green sludge splashing across the cracked pavement.

Unfortunately, I'd taken my eyes off the sniper unicorn, and he reminded me of his presence by putting a round into my chest. My E.F.S. lit up with flashing warnings and diagrams telling me how badly I was injured, and the burning pain was another clue that even I couldn't miss! I looked at him, seeing right down the barrel of the gun and knowing he'd put the next round through my brain.

Then there was a resounding clang, and fragments of wet, rusty metal flew past me as a dark hulk landed atop the sniper. It rocked twice, and I gaped at the rusty keel. Lacunae landed neatly atop the hulk and thought simply, "I found a boat."

One of the griffins leapt out the window of the house of Rampage. He whirled, wildly firing a pair of multi-disintegration-bolt guns that rained destructive magic in a cone of annihilation sweeping towards P-21, Lacunae, and myself. Like a rain of destructive death, the bolts, any one of which could turn us into matching pink slime, began to strike us; Lacunae's shield spell was immediately rocked by the onslaught.

Then the griffin opened his eyes wide as green magic crept over his body. He glanced back, his face twisting in one brief moment of agony, and then collapsed into glowing dust.

Unfortunately, turning her gun on the griffin meant that Glory had given an opening to Brass. Like a thunderbolt, she launched herself out the double doors of the post office and into the sky. "Fuck this!" she screamed as she dove, scooped the unconscious Fury in her hooves... claws?... and started climbing, flying north as fast as her scorched wings could carry her.

"Hey, get back here!" Glory yelled after her.

"We'll turn you into a Reaper yet," Rampage muttered as she limped out. She had an entire foreleg missing. The pink light was creeping out her shoulder as the limb slowly regenerated before our eyes. Glory flushed, not entirely convinced that that was a good thing.

Then a voice croaked out from the chapel. "Well then... time to finish this little drama of ours."

I winced, watching the red damage bar slowly creeping upward towards stable conditions. And this was going to take a while... I looked around, spotted some tin cans, smashed them underhoof, and popped them into my mouth. The rusty metal had the consistency of paste and didn't taste much better. Three more cans and some scrap metal later, though, and I was getting in the yellow territory.

"Blackjack, are you going to be able to take care of him?" P-21 asked in concern.

I looked at him and smirked. "If he takes a hostage, he is one dead ghoul." There was just the issue of saving his hostage...

"Only Blackjack, please," called Sanguine.

"You're crazy if you think--" Rampage began. Then there was a gunshot, and the Crusaders inside began to yell and shout as a filly cried out in pain.

I looked at Lacunae. "Get Glory and P-21 in the bell tower and teleport in once I have them distracted. Rampage, he doesn't leave out this door. Got it?"

Everypony nodded. I took a deep breath; my injuries were mostly regenerated. Slowly, I walked into the chapel. The pews were all smashed and stacked in a pen or barricade that had most of the Crusaders inside. I was afraid they might have been moved or mixed up when the attack started, but they were mostly all together. Harpica, the ghoul pegasus, was softly humming to keep them all as calm as possible. Sekashi sat bleeding in the corner cradling Majina; somepony had worked her over good the last hour.

There were... however... three who were not penned up: Priest, Sonata, and a bleeding Charity. The yellow filly clutched her stomach as Sonata tried to staunch the bleeding with her hooves.

"So glad to see you again," Sanguine said from behind Priest. The boiled-looking ghoul watched me over Priest's black back with a half lidded gaze and a smile. A glowing revolver appeared, freshly reloaded, from his saddlebags, and then he nodded over to the pen where a glowing grenade hovered over the collected children. "I really do apologize for all this. I *really* would have rather settled this some other way." Then he paused. "Is Fluttershy still alive?"

"We didn't shoot her in the gut, if that's what you mean," I replied.

Sanguine had the audacity to look relieved at that! "Yes. Good. Well, lose the weapons, and I will heal her."

"This is taking too much time," growled a dark form lurking in corner opposite the pen. A *big*, dark something... Vermilion was one of the most impressive griffins I'd ever seen... and, on top of that, I wasn't entirely sure what was armor and what was augmentation. His black armor was edged in stylish red that matched his dark red wings. The glowing eyes in his helmet narrowed slightly. "Just kill her. I've wasted

enough time with this shit.”

“Shut up, Vermilion!” Sanguine snapped, pink vapor trickling out his nostrils. “Security has taken out Deus and the Steel Rangers’ battleship. She is ridiculously dangerous. But she also doesn’t want to risk her filly friend here bleeding out.”

“Don’t count on that, asshole,” Charity hissed despite her agony. “Blackjack owes me a ton of caps. She doesn’t have to pay if I’m dead.” Shut up, Charity. I’d much rather pay you back...

“Please. You don’t have to involve the children. I’m hostage enough for you,” Priest said calmly.

“Yeah. You’re a martyr waiting to happen,” Sanguine said, then looked at the little Sonata. “But there are advantages to having spares.” The glowing gun whirled and pressed itself to the side of the little filly’s head. There was a click as the hammer was drawn back.

“Okay!” I shouted. His eyes were narrow and desperate. Slowly, I began to remove the battle saddle.

“I didn’t want it to be this way. I wanted things simple. I wanted them simple!” he shouted as he stamped the gun on Sonata’s head. The weapon was shaking as his focus wavered, and I could imagine it going off by accident. “Red Eye needs male alicorns to keep the Goddess in line. I can make male alicorns... or fuse a unicorn and pegasus together and make one convincing enough for her. I can make myself useful to him, get him the materials he needs... but the one... single... thing I’m missing is the key to Chimera.”

“So you found out where EC-1101 got stuck and found a painkiller-addicted Deus to send after it,” I said as I carefully shed the weapons and tossed them back out behind me. “I lost the guns, now heal her.”

“In just a second,” he replied as he kept the gun pressed to Sonata’s head. “EC-1101 was all I needed. Simple, really. But then... then... you had to go and fire a megaspell at Miramare! Do you have any clue how many alarms and sensors you set off all across the Hoof when you fired that thing? And sure enough, you woke up that thing in the Core, and now it’s taking over one system after the next.”

“Sanguine. You’re rambling,” Vermilion said in contempt as he looked at the ghoul. I had a suspicion that Sanguine was dead either way.

“And now this murder spree... all to get my attention,” I scowled.

“You left me no other choice!” he snapped. “I tried force. I tried bribery. I tried letting Fluttershy fight you for it. I even offered to restore your body to normal. In the names of sweet Celestia and Luna, why the fuck didn’t you just give it up?” he yelled in complete exasperation. “I have been forced to cartoonish levels of monsterdom simply to get what I need!”

Priest carefully lowered his horn and started to heal the wound to Charity’s gut as Sanguine raved. The ghoul spotted the glow, however, and shoved his head back. “Next time you try that spell, you can see how well it works on a head wound.”

I wanted answers, and to splatter his head across the wall... but Charity didn’t have a lot of time left. I tossed my weapons all the way out the door, and then my saddlebags too. I hissed in frustration, “I

disarmed! Now heal her!”

“Give me the program!” he snapped.

“Heal her first, and I will,” I countered. The filly clenched both eyes and jaw in pain. Sanguine looked half mad as his eyes darted between Vermilion and myself.

“To hell with this,” Vermilion muttered. A missile launcher popped out of the back of his power armor and fired straight at the pen. Then Lacunae, with impeccable timing, appeared in a glorious flash of purple light and raised a shield. The missile exploded against it. She turned her head to the floating grenade, and her own glow subsumed the light surrounding it. There was a thump, and Persuasion’s projectile arched down from the narrow stairs to the belltower and exploded in Vermilion’s face. Green bolts raked the griffin as he dodged to the side and readied another missile.

At once, Priest’s white glow surrounded the revolver against Sonata’s head and sent the weapon flying as he turned and slammed Sanguine against the back wall. “You won’t lay a hoof on another--”

But Sanguine simply drew a deep breath and blew a bright and colorful plume of pink vapor over Priest’s face. On contact with the vapors, the black unicorn’s flesh seemed to turn runny. He didn’t cry out. He just jerked and spasmed and then collapsed. I stared in horror at Priest’s boiled, melted face...

A pair of Vermilion’s missiles blasted up, and only by jumping and falling to the floor were P-21 and Glory able to get clear as the explosions blew the upper corner of the building apart. The delicate stained glass windows shattered into clouds of shards, and the paintings of the Ministry Mares split apart as the entire front of the building peeled away into the street. Heavy timbers fell upon Glory, pinning her.

There was a flicker as Lacunae pushed the grenade through the shield, pulled the pin, and lobbed it at Vermilion. The armored griffin leapt out into the street. I charged at Sanguine as Priest fell to the side and the ghoul threw Sonata at me.

“Priest! Priest!” P-21 screamed as he scrambled across towards the fallen stallion. Glory was still trying to work her way free. Sanguine bit down on Charity’s mane and hauled the bleeding filly out through the hole. I set the sobbing Sonata aside to curl up beside Priest.

I looked back at Glory. “Go! Get her!” she cried as she struggled to free herself.

Outside, Rampage was tearing into the armored griffin, who was tearing back and trying to shake off the mare. I spotted Sanguine making for the bridge, slowed by the injured filly. I raced after them, closing the gap. Finally, he turned, clutching the bleeding and battered Charity. “Give me the fucking program!” he shouted as he backed towards the edge.

“Don’t give him shit,” Charity countered, struggling weakly. “He doesn’t deserve it.”

“Shut up, Charity,” I said, my eyes darting from him to her and back again. I stared at her and heard Citrine’s voice: *‘How many have died for this?’*

I jumped into S.A.T.S. to think. No weapon. No healing potion. She was bleeding out... but Sanguine was here! Right here in front of me! I knew his pink breath trick. I could beat and smash him back and let the city defenses turn him into ash. I’d promised Dusty and Caprice! I owed so many ponies his head!

All it would cost me was Charity's life. I stared at her, at the blood streaking her yellow stomach. I wanted to talk to somepony... anypony. Talk me into this. Convince me that I could kill him and get her to safety!

"Your life isn't that easy, Blackjack," the Dealer rasped softly as he trotted into that still scene. He looked at the filly and the ghoul with equal dispassion. "Looks like you have two choices. Kill him, let her die, keep the program. Give up the program, and she lives. Decisions, decisions..." I wanted to smack that smug smile he wore off his face. Don't mock me with the choice. Tell me the better thing to do.

He pushed his wide-brimmed hat back and smirked at me. "Well... look at it this way... you give up the program, you can always take it back. You know a way to bring her back if she dies?" he said with a smile. I mentally groaned, and he laughed at me. "Oh. And if you're trying to think of a third option, don't bother. You're not clever enough for that. So... is keeping EC-1101 worth the filly's life?"

I slipped out of S.A.T.S. as the Dealer vanished again. Shit...

Security saves ponies...

"Here!" I said as I lifted my leg and opened the panel hiding the PipBuck screen.

His eyes widened, and from his saddlebags emerged a ripper. The chain whirled, and I grit my teeth. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of hearing me scream. A few surprisingly careful passes of the weapon later, he tore out the Delta out, leaving me with an ugly new cavity in my leg and making my E.F.S. vanish, and stared at it. "Finally. I can finally save them... I can..."

"Heal! Her!" I yelled as I pointed at Charity, the lightning flashing overhead. His lips curled in amusement.

"Heal her? Why would I do that?" he said as he tucked the Delta into his bag. "Better get her to your alicorn friend quickly and not waste time with me."

"Fucker!" I shouted, ...but he was right about Charity; I grabbed her and put her across my shoulders, then turned and raced back through the rain towards Chapel. The hole in my left foreleg made some unpleasant noises and twinges of pain, but the limb held. As I ran into town, I saw a dark shape overhead; Vermilion was airborne, but he was winging his way away towards the southeast.

"You... you shouldn't... have given it up. Bad trade," Charity muttered weakly in my ear.

"Shut up and don't die. You hear me?" I shouted as I scrambled into the blasted church. Lacunae was seeing to the injured, but winged over and immediately pressed her horn to Charity's belly when she saw us, using her magic to heal the injury. Glory knelt beside Priest, who breathed slow laborious breaths though a tube inserted into his throat through his neck. His entire head was a smooth pink bullet. His eyes, nose, and mouth had melted closed from the pink vapor.

"Did you kill him?" P-21 said in a shaky voice.

"No. I had to bring Charity back... before she bled out," I muttered softly.

"Of course you did," P-21 said with a sniff. "That's what you do. You save ponies."

I looked at Priest and his side moving slowly. "Can we do... anything?" I asked Glory.

The gray pegasus looked at me and shook her head slowly. "We... we can't even move him," she whispered in horror. Then I looked at where she was pointing and gasped. The melted flesh had somehow fused to the floor beneath him.

P-21 made a choking sound. "Well, I'm glad you didn't kill him, Blackjack. I'm glad. Because when I find him... when I find him he's going to wish that it was you he was facing! I am going to get creative when I find him! You hear me... I'm gonna... gonna..."

I touched him, knowing what it was like to be ready to explode. To want to lash out at the world. Rampage had said it; we're all victims in the Wasteland. All of us. He tensed under my touch, so rigid I thought he'd shatter. "Shhh... I understand..." I said sincerely, remembering Mom's head on a stick.

He gave one broken sob... then another... then another. And like that all his hard anger softened to tears as he curled against me, and I held him in my embrace. "Not again... not again..." he whispered softly between sobs.

"No... not again. This time, you have friends with you," I said quietly.

He nodded and pulled away. Glory trotted closer to him and gave a tiny smile. She wanted to help; she knew what it was like, too. And she touched P-21's shoulder. For the longest time he sat there, and then he slowly turned into her embrace as well. Priest coughed; even with the tube, he couldn't last much longer.

Slowly, I knelt down and spoke softly into the hole beneath the melted nub of his ear. "You saved her, Priest. You saved Sonata. They're going to be okay." I brushed his white mane gently, closing my eyes. "I... They said I died. Maybe I did... I can't remember for sure. But I think that Celestia and Luna are waiting for you. Just... just follow the music."

I couldn't tell for sure, but I hoped his boiled lips curled a little. His chest rose... fell... rose... fell... rose... fell... and then that was it. Priest was off on his own final pilgrimage. I hoped he'd find his way.

* * *

It was getting late. We'd dug the grave next to Thorn and Roses. Rampage had watched from afar, still as a statue as Lacunae lowered him into the ground. I didn't want to imagine how Glory had freed him from the floor of the broken building. We'd found a sheet to wrap him. Scotch had rejoined us, the bemused-looking dragon filly sitting beside her. I tried to think of something to say, but no matter how hard I tried, it kept coming back to one fact:

Sanguine had won.

He'd gotten EC-1101 from me after so many had suffered and died. He had my PipBuck, and I now had an empty hoof. Every step was a little reminder it was gone. But right now, even with my fears, EC-1101 was nothing compared to the loss of Priest. It wasn't over, though; not at all. I'd almost taken off after him then and there, but the thought of coming across him with Brass and Fury and maybe Vermilion too didn't sit well with me; not even I was stupid enough to run into those odds unprepared. I'd

track him down, though; he couldn't escape us. Scotch Tape had my PipBuck tag.

"Blackjack?" Glory murmured, and I turned and looked at her. "I... I found some music back at the mine when I was searching Dusty's room... I was thinking... could I play it? He... he was a nice pony."

I swallowed, then nodded once. "Sure. Go ahead." She nodded and fiddled with her PipBuck, and a moment later a guitar began to play slow and simple notes. For once, it seemed, even the Hoof gave a little reprieve as the cold rain slackened off. Then a buck began to sing in a soft, rusty voice...

Some roads are straight and narrow, some paths are high and steep

*Some ways are slow and heavy, some tracks are dark and deep
But this trail is the one I follow, no matter where it leads
And I know I'll never wander as long as I heed*

*No matter where or how far it goes;
I'll walk it without fail
Because I know that no matter what
I will lay my burdens down at the end of the trail.*

*My load is mine to carry along, I packed it all myself
I chose what to leave behind on that old and dusty shelf
And though memories follow my tail, I'll pay them not a care
My troubles are all my own, my treasures I will share*

*No matter how sore my hooves, I know that I'll go on
So though I am weary I will continue along
Because no journey lasts forever, there's an end to this tale
And I will lay my sorrows down at the end of the trail.*

*Though rocks may trip and slow me
Though rain may lash my mane
Though love may call out to me
Though pain may cause me shame
Though mud may bog my passage
Though snow may chill me through
Though dust and wind may blind me
There's one thing I must do.*

*I look ahead and find myself at the journey's end
And finally I see again both family and friend
And to those that still walk along, please don't weep and wail
For I have laid my troubles down at the end of the trail.*

*Yes to those who still love me, please don't weep and wail
I'll be waiting for you when you're through at the end of the trail.*

There wasn't much else to say past that as the last of the music faded. Not much at all. And as we moved to fill the grave, Charity came up. The yellow pony kept her eyes down as she carried something on her back. "Um... Blackjack?"

"Hmmm?" I couldn't manage more than that right now. I looked at the green-outlined towers of

the Core. 'Welcome home, Blackjack' they seemed to say.

"I just... I... um... I know you didn't want to give that thing up. And... I know... I know if you'd let me die, you probably would have gotten revenge and stuff." Charity closed her eyes as she pulled off a bundle the size of a bottle of Sparkle-Cola. "I found it in the manor and... I just... here." And she shoved it into my hooves, then turned and trotted over to where Sonata was being comforted by Allegro, Adagio, and Medley.

I slowly unwrapped the dirty cloth with my hooves. It was the wrong shape for a bottle of soda... or Wild Pegasus. Then a flash of purple and white met my eyes. The cloth fell away, and I looked at the startling figurine: a white unicorn mare with a stunning purple mane and three gems for a cutie mark. I stared at her in shock and then looked down at the little plaque at the base.

Be Unwavering

I stared at it and sighed softly, closing my eyes and holding it to my chest so that I could feel it better. "I'm trying, Rarity... I'm trying..."

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Author note: Thanks to Kkat for creation of FoE, thanks to Hinds, Bronode, and Snipehamster for actually making this worth reading, thanks to all my readers for leading comments, and lastly thanks to people who leave bits in the tip jar through paypal to David13ushey @gmail. com. Thank you so much to so many wonderful ponies for being so supportive.)