

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 20: Mercy

"Tough love, baby!"

It'd been raining for a while now. A cold rain. A hard rain. The kind of rain that makes you feel like somepony up there doesn't like you. My throat burned, my legs ached, and every breath I took sounded like rasping metal. I looked up into the rain, too tired to even cry. But not too tired for this; for what I had to do.

I started to dig.

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"It doesn't hurt... It doesn't hurt anymore... It doesn't," Rampage whispered to the crushed Thorn over and over again.

She was right. It didn't hurt. The shock rolling through me had mutated into something completely new: a fury so absolute and complete that I launched myself at the striped pony, not caring about my injuries or even that I'd no way to kill her. It'd taken a combat drug cocktail last time. This time, it was something even more potent: my absolute and complete failure to protect a filly I'd sworn to. Rampage had told me she was a monster. If it took a monster to kill her, then that is what I'd become.

"Murderer!" I screamed as I struck her, knocking the poor foal's body from that ghastly embrace. I screamed again, seizing her head in my hooves and slamming it against the metal railing again and again. I heard bones break and felt the spongy material within. Then I felt the head resolidify. No problem. I'd just do it harder and faster, again and again and again, till it *worked*!

Every bit of frustration, all my failures, built into a horrible frenzy within me. I was supposed to keep ponies safe! I was Security, damn it! Of course the first pony she'd go to was Rampage! And I'd been warned; I'd told her I'd stop her if she was alone around a filly. But nopony had thought to tell the Crusaders to keep Thorn away. How could we have explained it to her, anyway; she'd just lost her mother! She'd just watched her get put in the ground! How could I have been so stupid?

Just one! Just save one, Blackjack. Couldn't I even manage that?

Crack! Crack! Crack! Finally, Rampage heaved me away, her inequine strength sending me rolling across the cracked asphalt. The look in her eyes, the tone of her voice, the way she stood... it was all... different. "Murderer? You monster... don't you get it? This is the merciful thing to do," she said calmly as she charged at me, her lips curled in a snide grin. Her cutie mark churned over and around the pony skull.

I wrapped my forelegs around the railing behind me, twisted, and planted a double rear kick to her face just like a certain little orange pony would. The kick would have knocked out most mares, the crunch of a broken snout ending the fight. Rampage was not most mares. "She was suffering. I gave her mercy," she said quite matter-of-factly. Like I was an ignorant foal.

"You didn't have to kill her to end that, Rampage!" I yelled as she came at me again, throwing her forelegs around my neck and starting to squeeze. Only the rain allowed me to slip my head free before she popped it off entirely. I ended up beneath her and bucked to toss her up. As she dropped back down on me, I slammed my spine into her ribcage. Her breath whooshed out in a satisfying gust. I tossed her

off my back; she landed, choking and gagging, on the cracked concrete. Adrenaline was carrying me only so far. I really needed some Buck and Stamped!

"It was the kind thing to do!" Rampage gasped, choking as her eyes stared out into the rain over the bridge. "So much pain... so much suffering... I had to do it. Fluttershy couldn't end it! Celestia couldn't. But I could take their pain away." She glared at me in contempt, those glyphs twisting around the skull. "Can't you understand? They were in pain. Even when we took the nightmares away, they still suffered. So I gave them mercy! Wouldn't you do the same?"

Terminate Power: Y/N? A cold hand gripped my rotten heart. "No..." I said, but my denial skills had gotten rusty the last few days. "It's not the same! They were crazy and trapped. I would have had to leave them there!" I tried to slam her to the ground again, shut her up for good! I didn't want to think about it. Don't think about it!

But when she hit the roadway with the sound of another bone breaking, she arched a brow and grinned in that haughty, condescending manner. "Oh? Oh ho ho ho ho... so... you have given out mercy as well. Killed a helpless foal to spare them the pain? Pulled the plug?" I felt numb and stumbled, and she shoved me away from her. "Oh, so that was it? I've done that too."

"I had no choice!" I yelled, trying to convince through volume.

"I had no choice!" she mocked in return. "Isn't that how it *a/ways* goes?"

"No, you didn't have to kill her!" I said desperately as we circled each other, my body suddenly feeling very tired and weak. "There was nothing I could have done!"

"Nothing? Really?" Her voice lowered even more. "Didn't stay with them? Didn't help them? Didn't find somepony who could? Didn't devote yourself to doing everything possible to save them?" Her questions slammed into me harder than her hooves as I backed away, towards the flaking word 'Mercy' on the asphalt.

I'd thought my choice was lose/lose. I knew some of the children were crazy, but had I gone from pod to pod to find out for sure? Could some of them have been saved? I'd thought the Collegiate and Society wouldn't have helped, but had I asked them? Had I dragged Archibald and Splendid up there to find out for sure that there were no medics in the Wasteland? Had I devoted my life to finding some way of saving those terrible innocents?

No. I'd pulled the plug, sung a little song, and then gone back to Megamart to collect some bottlecaps.

Rampage pounced, knocking me onto my back on the warning sign and lying atop me. "You're no different from me. Not at all. Sanctimonious, cruel, and vile. This world is too painful, too corrupted, too hateful! Mercy is the only decent thing we can give them!" she said to me softly, contemptuously, as her hooves crushed down with terrible power. "But don't worry, Blackjack. I know you're in pain. I know you're sick. I'll give you mercy, too."

"Rampage..." I gasped, my legs kicking and struggling against her, but I wasn't even sure I was really fighting her anymore. Whoever this mare atop me was, she wasn't the Reaper I'd known.

"You keep calling me Rampage..." she said softly as I gasped and choked. "That's not my name."

"Get off her, you cunt!" Glory screamed. The gray pegasus dove from above, and a stream of red beams burned smoking holes in the striped pony's body. The holes closed before my eyes, but Glory had

the bit of her battle saddle clenched and poured on the fire. Finally, one red beam from her boxy pistols hit in just the right way, and the immolation reaction flashed along the striped pony. Her hooves burned my throat as she collapsed into a pile of ash atop me.

Something hard and heavy landed on my chest. I coughed and hacked as I looked at an egg of pink quartz wrapped in golden wire and glowing with an eerie pink-tinged light. A strange glyph in the egg's center, a twisting whirlpool that throbbed like a heart, glowed more brightly than the rest, and there were more lights within. I shoved it off and rolled onto my side as Glory landed next to me. "Easy, Blackjack. Easy. She's dead now. Breathe. She almost crushed your windpipe." From the worry on her face, I suspected that she wasn't sure about the 'almost' part.

"What the heck is this?" I asked softly as I held the egg aloft.

"I... I think it's some kind of rejuvenation talisman... It looks like..." Glory trailed off, rubbing her chin thoughtfully.

Suddenly, a pink cloud began to collect around the egg, forming worms of crimson that spread and curled into fresh veins and arteries. Tissue crawled over the surface and formed into a pinkish-red mass that began to beat. I watched as bones grew like weeds and muscle stretched to cover them. Finally, young pale skin covered in brilliant red stripes spread like moss over her frame.

The Rampage foal jerked, took a shallow breath, then another, then another. Her pink eyes opened and looked at me in utter misery. "I did it again, didn't I?" As I looked down at her, I wasn't sure I could answer. Slowly, the tiny foal curled up and wept. "I'm sorry," she whispered over and over again, but to whom I couldn't be sure. Her flank bore a dark mark, like a bruise.

"Sweet Celestia," Glory breathed in amazement.

"Rampage?" I asked softly as the two striped sticks wrapped in barbed wire appeared on her flank.

"I did it again, didn't I?" she said again as she sniffed. Then she looked at Thorn. A look of such pain crossed her young face that I couldn't help myself. I hugged the striped foal as she sobbed into my shoulder. "Not again... why did it have to happen again?" I'd been repulsed by what she'd done, and hurt by what she'd said, but at this second, all I knew was that she needed my help. And maybe a hug would calm everypony down enough for somepony to explain what was going on...

Glory watched her closely. "What happened, Rampage?"

"I... went away. I was bummed... I like being by water, so I thought I'd come out here till the funeral was done. And then Thorn was running... and she... she was crying... and... I wanted to give her a hug but... but I was afraid... and... I went away. Till just now..." Glory listened closely with a little frown. "I guess I got disintegrated... that's usually the only time I come out of it little like this."

"So... you're crazy," I said with a little half smile. "That should have been obvious."

"I guess."

Glory rubbed her chin in thought. "How long do these blackouts last?"

"It's not..." She sighed and smacked the sides of her head. "It's like I'm there and then I'm somewhere else. And it's... it's a bad place," she whispered as she trembled in my limbs.

"Then it's not crazy," Glory said with a small frown. Our eyes met and she gave a small

apologetic smile. "Please remember, I'm drawing on one class of psychology and something I once read in a Canterlot Journal of Medicine, but in real psychological disorders, another personality doesn't just completely take over. That's not how it works." Rampage looked shocked.

"Huh... I always figured... I mean... are you sure I'm not cracked?" she asked with a confused, worried little look.

"You just regenerated from some talisman in your chest," Glory replied with a shake of her head. "I'm not sure of anything with you. But if it was something as simple as being crazy, then it would be consistent. Or you're one hell of an actress... but if you wanted to kill us... heck... kill all of Chapel... you could have. So I don't think that a part of your brain twigged." She sighed and frowned. "This is something else."

I saw others running up and took the opportunity to engage in another bout of rasping and coughing. I rubbed my bruised windpipe, hoping that maybe sometime soon the Wasteland would give at least my respiratory system a break.

"Blackjack!" P-21 shouted as he limped towards us. Sekashi, carrying a burlap sack, was hurrying up behind him. The zebra took one look at the three of us, sighed, and came straight to me. She dug into her bag and pulled out a Sparkle-Cola bottle filled with something that had the consistency of paint. I took a drink and felt the familiar sensation of a healing potion, though it tasted somewhat odd. Good, though! P-21 stopped so short at the sight of Thorn's crumpled body that he tripped and fell on his face. "Wha... Thorn..." He looked at the tiny Rampage. "What the fuck is going on?"

I slowly rose, spitting and hacking phlegm as the zebra brew did its work. I was glad I could still swallow, even if it hurt. Finally, I rasped, "Somepony killed Thorn. Not Rampage." My voice sounded worse than a ghouls!

"What?" he said flatly and pointed at her broken body with a hoof. "Rampage... what?" He looked at the shaking foal with a look he'd reserved for me and the mine boss and thoughts of returning to 99. "What!" he shouted, his eyes glaring from one to the next in outrage.

"Something took control of her," I said firmly, the tiny Rampage looking at me as if she couldn't believe it any more than P-21 did. "She killed Thorn. Said she was giving her a mercy. She did it. Not Rampage." I looked at the slain foal, feeling empty and brittle again. "She tried to kill me next. Glory vaporized her. And then she regenerated into this."

P-21 clenched his head between his hooves. "Are you telling me we're travelling with a psychopath?" I gave a stiff nod, and his eyelid twitched as he threw his hooves in the air. "Oh, so her being crazy makes it all okay? That's so much better!"

"I don't think she's crazy," Glory replied. "Something else is behind this."

He glared at her, narrowing his eyes. "You're as bad as Blackjack."

Glory didn't back down. "I'm telling you that Rampage needs our help."

"Thorn needed our help!" he yelled at her.

"You're right!" I yelled at them both, feeling something tear in my throat and set off a coughing fit that silenced the argument. I gritted my teeth, trying to get the words out. "Thorn needed us, and I failed to protect her! Me! But we can't help Thorn now," I said as I staggered to my feet, coughing and hacking up snot. I nearly fell flat on my face, and was saved only by Glory propping me up. "It's my fault Thorn is dead. Mine." Be mad at me, P-21. Not Glory, not Rampage.

"No, it's not," P-21 said darkly, looking at the striped foal. "If she can't be killed, let's dump her back in Blueblood's well and blast it shut."

"That'd be fair," Rampage said softly. But the thought of burying anypony alive... even after what Rampage did... The cards shuffled again in my mind. I knew that at any second I was going to start having death ponies in my head and looking crazy.

"No. We're not going to do that." It would be like the clinic all over again. "Whatever killed Thorn was not Rampage. Understand, P-21?"

"I don't care who did it; the blood is on her hooves! What do you think the Crusaders will do when they find out? She was one of them, Blackjack!"

"I don't know, okay?" I rasped. "But you bury her alive, then bury me too! I'm just as guilty as she is! Or did you forget what I did at the clinic?"

He stared at me, his eyes widening. "It's not the same..."

"I know it's not, P-21! I know it's not. But..." I stared at the shaking Rampage... Arloste... I wanted to scream. I felt like I was the one going crazy now. "Just... trust me. Please," I begged him as I slumped against Glory.

He just looked at me. "You can't save everypony..." he said softly as I slid back to the ground.

"I know. But if I give up, then how can I save myself?" I asked as I hid my face in shame. He gave one last sigh.

"What do you need me to do, Blackjack?" I looked at him and gave him a grateful smile... at least, I hoped I was smiling.

"Tell Priest." I couldn't. I'd rather die than see his face when I confirmed that Arloste had been a murderer. He gave a stiff little nod, then limped away towards Chapel.

"You should have let him bury me," Rampage muttered.

"Stop!" I croaked at her, then took a slow breath. "Just stop. I don't know who or what you are, Rampage. I know what I saw and what you said. I don't know if you're crazy or not, but stop saying that we need to kill you. That won't bring Thorn back." I sighed as I looked the clouds, my gut clenching before I doubled up and hacked and coughed through my bruised throat. I spat out another wad, hoping that that stuff wasn't blood.

Then I looked at her curiously. "So... why are you little?" The look she gave me could have curdled Sparkle-Cola. I swallowed and chuckled, "Okay... you don't know. How long are you going to be like this?"

She gave a little shrug. "Days? Honestly, it's been almost five years since I was disintegrated."

Right. "Glory... can you take her back to the Star House, please?"

"Blackjack, you should come too." But I just gave her the easiest smile I could, and she sighed. Of course Glory was more worried about me. After a look, though, she finally turned to Rampage. "Come on, kid."

Rampage blinked and frowned at her. "I'm at *least* fifty years older than you."

Glory smiled. "I can't help it. You're just... so cute!"

"I am not cute! I'm one of the top Reapers in all of Hoofington, and I'm a crazy, immortal death machine!" Rampage said with a little stomp of her hooves. "That is not cute..." She glanced back at Thorn with one last mournful look. "Not cute at all."

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I scooped at the mud, but it slid back into the hole. It was more bailing than digging now. My breath burned in my throat as I coughed and hacked and scrabbled. Working hard and accomplishing nothing... I had to do better. I had to be strong, and kind, and aware... but I wasn't. I was just a filly scraping at the mud.

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"I need your bag..." I rasped softly.

"Come. Let us get you out of the rain," Sekashi said as she started to help me up.

"Didn't you hear me—" I started, and then sighed. Of course she hadn't. Because she hadn't lived a life of relative ease in a stable; she'd been trapped in a mine, going deaf while the rest of her people were worked almost to death and then gunned down around her. I took a deep breath and looked into her eyes. "I need your bag. And I need you to tell me a story."

Sekashi's eyes widened. I looked over at Thorn. Without hesitation, she bit the end of her burlap sack and dumped her belongings onto the bridge. She pawed through the strange herbs, stones, and bottles she carried. "What kind of story does a guardian need?" She deftly bit a bottle and tossed it up onto to her snout, extending it to me. I coughed as I took it, hoping it was some kind of medicine.

"A funny one," I said with a little smile. "But what I really need is a story about a pony who cannot die."

Sekashi blinked, then tried for a smile. "Ah... well, it just so happens that I do know such a story. Quite humorous, too. Orion's story. Once, he was a zebra, the same as you or I." She paused and chuckled. "Well, I suppose that he wasn't the same as you. He wandered the plains with his tribe. He was not the strongest hunter, nor the bravest, nor the most capable. He was, in fact, the weakest, the most cowardly, and the most inept. Truly, poor Orion would not last long. But still, he wanted mares, and respect, and to stand proud and tall amongst his people."

As Sekashi talked, I limped to the still form of Thorn and, as gently as I could, tried to slip her into the bag. Her dull eyes looked at nothing at all, not understanding what had happened to her. I prayed, as I brushed her eyes closed, that her last thought hadn't been of Rampage's betrayal. "I'm so sorry," I whispered to her ear. Sekashi's story halted, and she coughed in the rain before continuing.

"And so, as young bucks are wont to do, zebra or no, he made a foolish choice. One night, he called out to the stars, asking them to make him strong and brave and terrible. And the stars heard and granted his wish, and gave him forbidden knowledge no zebra should know. He put his spirit within a rock and the rock within his chest."

I sat up, looking at her as I pulled the drawstring tight with my magic. "His spirit?" There couldn't be a coincidence between the story and what I'd just seen, could there?

She nodded. "Yes. All things have spirits. What you call a soul. It is the truest reflection of one's self."

Funny... I recalled a particularly boring lecture about cutie marks. "Why would that make him... well... invincible?"

"There is a power to spirits. Our spirit is the truest reflection of self, the thing that makes us exist at all. And when we die, it is the piece of us that persists to eternity. But if we damage that spirit willfully and place it within another vessel, that vessel gains the resilience of the spirit."

"And what happens to the pony that loses it?"

She gave a shrug. "Who can speak of such things? It is a dark subject, and I speak only happy, funny tales. When they die, their spirit may linger in its vessel, trapped for all time. But perhaps, some day, the spirit may be free and reunited with the rest. That is what I can hope."

"So what happened to Orion?"

"Ah, poor silly Orion with the heart of stone found himself stronger than the most terrible monster of the savanna. With his spirit within the unbreakable heart, he knew no fear, and so nothing could stand before his spears and hooves. But his tribe questioned how Orion could have gone from so little to so much. They questioned if he had used the forbidden magic of the stars, and Orion grew angry. He was strong and terrible, how dare they question how! In a rage, Orion slew his tribe from the elders to the youngest foal. And so he was left alone.

"For years he wandered. All zebras fled from Orion the traitor, for the blood of the slain had marked him in stripes of crimson. No monster could slay him, even as he wished it, for they could not devour the stone heart. No spear could fell him. And so he cried out to the stars to take their gift back. But the stars do not undo what they have done. So finally, he jumped so high that he reached the stars and joined them, hunting for the most terrible monsters of the skies in the hopes that one may slay him."

She finished her story as I rested my hoof on the bag. "How could somepony put their... their soul into a rock? Why? It's like... like... defacing your own cutie mark!"

"Or erasing one's glyph," Sekashi agreed, looking on as a spasm of coughing rolled through me. "There are many stories of doing such things, though. Of silly zebras wishing for power, or knowledge, or long life. Pursuing their desire, they sever their spirit and burn it in fires of magic, or barter with beings too terrible to name, or simply secure it within a new shell. The powers gained, and the knowledge, and the life... however, are rarely worth the price one has paid. But there are always fools who do not heed the warnings of the stars."

"Warnings from the stars? Or warnings about the stars?" I asked as I gently lifted the burlap sack and placed it across my shoulders. Too light and yet so very heavy... too young... she should have been given a chance at more life. A chance at happiness. Like those foals in the clinic.

"Yes," Sekashi said as she used a bit of string to tie together her bottles and belongings as well as she could. "I know that for ponies they are pretty lights in the sky, but just because something is pretty does not make it harmless. The stars are powerful, otherworldly, and fickle. A foolish zebra or pony who calls upon them dooms not only themselves but others as well."

"So zebras believe the stars are evil?" I asked, remembering those pictures and Maripony's memory.

"Some may, but did I say evil? No. Dangerous. Perilous. Fickle. But they do not wish our

destruction, for otherwise we would surely be destroyed.” She gave a sad little smile. “It is far too easy to simply say that something is evil. To invite their attentions and to plead for their aid is folly, but they are not cruel and wicked,” she said, her eyes lingering on Rampage before she looked up at the clouds. “There are stories of the stars giving guidance to those who need it. Stories of the stars granting succor and inspiration. It is when we demand of the stars that they grant our desires. Much to our pain, as your Nightmare Moon discovered.”

“Nightmare Moon?” I asked as we talked, glad for the excuse to take my thoughts off what had happened minutes ago. “What does she have to do with stars?”

“Who do you think it was that gave her such power?” she asked as she kept her eyes on me. “The lesson of the stars is not that they are wicked things. How simple that would be! So many make that mistake. It is that they allow us to bring our true horrors to the forefront, and the pain may be left for generation upon generation. The stars did not make your Princess into that monster. The monster was there to begin with.”

“But... Nightmare Moon and Princess Luna were two different ponies!” I protested. There was no way that the cute, intelligent Princess I’d seen could be a monster.

“Can you tell me the tale of how she became Nightmare Moon? The change from one to the other?” Sekashi asked. I opened and closed my mouth like an idiot. I knew the story of her banishment, but...

“I don’t know...”

“Nor do we, but many believe that she made a plea to the stars and that they answered her call. And though her sister and people forgave her easily, that which the stars touch, they change forevermore.”

“That seems pretty severe,” I said softly. “What if I were touched by the stars?”

Sekashi laughed. “Oh, my dear Guardian, it would explain a great deal to me.” But despite her laugh, there was uneasiness in her eyes.

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I’d only excavated a hoof deep. My throat throbbed with every swallow. My eyes burned as I tried to scoop out a little more muck. “I’m wondering...” the Dealer whispered as the rain hissed off the yellowed grass around me, “if there isn’t some symbolism to this?”

“Fuck you and your symbolism,” I muttered as I scooped out a double hoofful of sludge from the hole, the mud slathering my legs. “I have to do this.” I’d failed... it was my responsibility.

The Dealer just leaned against the wooden headstone, cards passing back and forth between his hooves as he looked at me with a rheumy old eye. “You’re only a pony, Blackjack. No shame in that.”

“I have to be better...” I gasped.

“Well, then, maybe you should see if you can get Sanguine to fuse some sand dog into you, or get some mechanical limbs. Maybe put a talisman where your heart should be so you can kick yourself in the ass for all of eternity?” With each question, he showed me a card. Gorgon, Deus, and the snide and cruel Rampage. “Would that be better?”

"Fuck you," I muttered as my legs gave out on the cold, wet ground.

"You're going to need more than harsh language to be better, Blackjack. And since you won't use what you've got... best get something that's better than nothing."

"And what have I got?" I rasped softly, looking at the burlap sack as blood slowly stained through the cloth. My voice cracked, then failed entirely.

"Blackjack, you idiot..."

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Side by side, we entered Chapel, and Sekashi looked at me with her easy smile and worried eyes. "Let me check on Majina. I fear... I just wish to check on her." She tried to keep her eyes on mine, but they could not help but glance at my passenger.

"Stay with her. At least one of us should have the sense to get out of the rain," I crackled, feeling cold and tired. It was how I imagined Scalpel and Bonesaw must feel. I wondered what it was like to be a mother; the thought was simply terrifying. I could barely take care of myself with my friends' help. What would it be like to worry about a foal? To lose one?

I was walking slowly past the post office when Priest stepped quietly out into the rain. The water spraying off his shoulders seemed to glint around him like an aura. Our eyes met, and there were no words. I looked with eyes of guilt, he with silent recrimination. He'd warned; I'd failed. What needed to be said past that? He stepped past me, giving the sack a small nuzzle of farewell, and walked off towards his church.

The door to the post office opened, and three young ponies tumbled out. Medley, Adagio, and Allegro rolled into the rainy street. Little Sonata followed the four; she'd have been the perfect age to be a friend for Thorn. Allegro struggled to get free with his treasure: a bottle of Sparkle-Cola RAD. Adagio hugged his rear legs while Medley clambered up his back, her horn glowing as she struggled to pull the bottle from his lips before he could drink it all. "Give it back! It's mine..." she shrieked as she pummeled his head with her hooves.

"You said I'd get a drink, Alleg!" Adagio protested laconically, the blue colt tugging at his limbs.

"Geff off!" the rose-colored colt growled, and the chartreuse unicorn yanked the bottle of soda from his mouth and held it above them. "Hey!" he protested, stretching up to reach the glowing bottle.

"It's mine now!" Medley declared, only to have Allegro grab her in a bear hug around her chest. Unbalanced, the pile of foals tumbled over with a loud thump. The glow around the bottle faded, and it fell into Sonata's hooves. Three pairs of eyes met hers. The little purple earth pony smiled and then promptly spat into the bottle. A chorus of "Ew..." filled the air as the filly enjoyed her radish favored soda with a small smile of triumph.

"Hey, it's Security Pony!" Medley said, pointing a hoof at me as she lay upside down upon the blue Adagio. They rolled to their feet, and suddenly I felt a pit opening inside me. "Did you find Thorn? Been looking everywhere for her."

"What's in the bag?" Allegro said with a grin of acquisitiveness, but he must have read something on my face. "Hey? What's wrong? You don't look so good." What could I say? How could I explain that one of my friends had killed their newest member?

"Hey, Sonata! Did you win?" Charity said from the doorway. Then youngest of the four took a

drink with a wide smile.

"She spit in the bottle," Adagio whined.

"Just like I told her. Good girl," Charity said before she yelled into the post office, "Sonata won! Pay up!" Then she glanced at me and her smile faded. She looked at me and the sack on my back. "What are you doing?"

"She's acting funny," Medley said suspiciously.

But Charity's eyes met mine. They flashed a moment like beam weapons before she said softly, "Thorn's dead, ain't she?" The four looked at her, then looked at me in worry. I couldn't speak, I could only nod. "She took the walk, huh?" Her gold eyes looked at the bag on my back and I knew that she was lying through her horn, but once again all I could do was nod.

The four didn't look shocked. They looked sad. Resigned. As if this wasn't the first time.

"I thought she was going to stay," Sonata said softly as she hugged the almost empty bottle. Medley put a hoof around her. "I really thought she wouldn't walk."

"It happens, Sonata. It happens," Medley said as she nuzzled her ear. This was how the Crusaders survived.

Adagio looked at his brother, wilting in the rain. "Wonder who told her about the bridge. Probably Pander or Crisp... I'll thump 'em if they did," the blue colt muttered dully, and that was how colts survived.

"Head inside. No point in being stuck in the rain," Charity said, stepping aside. When they'd gone back indoors she looked at the bag again. "You going to take care of her?" All I could do was nod and her gaze dropped. "Good." The yellow filly turned back to the post office.

"Don't you want to know how?" I croaked, and then coughed. I was soaked through, exhausted, and just wanted to dry out.

She looked back at me with her sad gold eyes. "No," she said simply as she stepped back inside. She didn't need to know. Thorn had died, and I was taking care of her. That seemed to be enough. I'm sure a pony like her would eventually find out the details from Priest.

Alone, I walked to the grave where the trampled grass and muddy earth were the only indication of the ceremony that had taken place barely an hour ago. I looked at the wooden post. "Roses..." Gently, I laid Thorn on the grass. "I'm... I'm sorry. I didn't mean for any of this to happen," I said as I closed my eyes, hanging my head. "I bet you've heard that a lot, huh, you bony bastard?"

"You're talking to me?" he said from my left, where he was sitting and looking at the grave solemnly. I glared at him hatefully. He returned my gaze and had the audacity to look upset. "Yeah, it's an old theme. The road to hell and all that."

"Why can't I make it any better? Why can't I save even one foal who just lost her mother? Why do you take everything away?"

"I didn't kill her," the white horse said softly as he tugged the ragged cowpony hat further over his face.

"You know what I mean..." I said quietly as I looked at the brown muck before me. "Why do you have to make it so hard?"

"I don't, Blackjack. You do... because you care so damn much," he said softly, looking at me with a sad, avuncular smile. "And you know what caring means."

"Caring fucking hurts, no matter how you slice it," I whispered, and then I began to dig.

* * *

I don't know how long I worked on digging that hole. It could have been minutes; it felt like days. I rasped, coughed, and had conversations with my own fractured psyche. I just couldn't stop. I'd failed in all other regards; I would at least see her laid to rest or drop in the attempt.

And, sure enough, my aching legs finally gave out and sent me sprawling next to the sack, coughing and struggling just to breathe.

"Blackjack, you idiot," P-21 said softly beside me. "Don't you have the sense to get out of the rain?" he asked as he walked to the shallow hole and moved in to my left. The rain matting his navy mane, he started to dig alongside me.

Glory slipped in on my other side. Her lavender eyes met mine, and her wing gently wiped the rain from my eyes. She set down her packs and pulled out a blanket to drape over me before she moved to the hole as well.

Across from us stepped Rampage. She looked too small to help, but all the same she lay on her stomach to dig out the mess. Black hooves stepped in beside her, and she stared up at Priest in shock as he floated a shovel before him. Giving one long look at the tiny Rampage, he proceeded to dig as well. Then, to my amazement, the rain stopped... No. It hadn't stopped raining. It had simply stopped falling on us. Standing a little ways apart, Lacunae watched us toil, her horn glowing. Sekashi walked up with more of her potions and medicine. And then, most miraculous of all, Charity arrived with a shovel and bucket.

Beside me, the old pale buck watched with a wistful look of longing. "See that? That's how it should be." Lacunae glanced in my direction as I muttered to myself.

"I should be doing it..."

He gave me a look I was all too familiar with. "You are, Blackjack. You can't do it all yourself, Blackjack. You don't need to be better... smarter, maybe, but not better," he said as he looked at me. "You just need your friends to carry some of your load."

The six of us together made quick work of the hole, despite the mud and wet. Priest levitated Thorn down beside her mother as I watched. "Rest easy, Thorn. Roses. Be united forever in the hereafter."

"I... I never meant... I didn't want this to happen again. Not again... not ever again," Rampage blubbered as she looked down into the grave like she wanted to crawl into it as well.

Filling the grave was far easier than emptying it. Priest just closed his eyes as Charity collected her shovels. "I know, Arlose. But it did," he replied evenly.

"Yeah..." she muttered softly, and gave him a wan half smile. "Blackjack's going to help me figure out how to die. Pretty cool, huh?" He glanced at me and then at her. "Then... then I'll get what I deserve... and I won't ever do it again."

"Nopony deserves what you're going through, Arloste," Priest replied softly. "I wish there was something I could do to help, but you're still a threat to the Crusaders. You'll still have to stay away."

Rampage just nodded. "Can I see her before I go?"

His lips curled in a sad smile. "Of course."

She gave a nod, and the foal-sized red-zebra-striped pony walked quietly out into the rain beyond Lacunae's spell. Not towards the houses, but further into the graveyard.

"Where's she going?" Glory asked as she watched.

"She's visiting our daughter," he replied quietly.

Their *what*? Glory covered her mouth in horror, and even P-21 looked shocked. "I was barely a buck, but..." He gave a little shrug. "Old enough for it to happen once, after a lot of scotch and persuasion. I'd never seen her so happy. Then... out of nowhere... she killed her. It drove her crazy, I think. She tried so many ways to kill herself, it scared the Crusaders. Finally, she went into the city. I lost count of the number of times she was vaporized by the defenses. I thought that would be that. Only she appeared two years later as the Reaper, Rampage."

"Why doesn't she just... bury herself or something?" P-21 muttered, now with a touch of shame and pity.

"Because it wouldn't kill her. Someday... maybe in days, or years, or centuries, she'd escape. And when she did, who knows what kind of monster she'd be? The only punishment she feels is acceptable is to die," Priest said firmly. "She has to ensure that she'll never hurt another--"

"So she gets off easily..." P-21 muttered.

"--and be tormented eternally in Hell," Priest finished. P-21 blinked, then glanced at me. I think he finally realized just how deeply what she'd done had hurt.

There was just one last thing to do. I dug in my bags and pulled out my dragon claw. My horn was so dead that I had to grip it in my teeth and scrape it against the wood. When I finished, I looked at the post. 'Roses', and beneath it, my additions. 'Mother... Thorn... Daughter'.

"I'm done," I whispered through my ragged throat, slumping against Glory. "Time to get out of the rain."

* * *

Unfortunately, my departure for Stable 99 was going to have to wait a little while. I was sick... sick sick sick sick. I'd almost prefer dying of radiation sickness to coughing, hacking, and generally feeling miserable. I know, Rampage was in an infinitely worse place than me, but she was simply dealing with a second childhood... or third... fourth... and at the moment there was nothing I could do as they put me upstairs in Marigold's old bed.

Sekashi stopped by to administer her healing draughts and brews. Apparently, a zebra who didn't know how to mix simple concoctions was merely a striped pony. I know they may have smelled foul, but they were far better than the boiled leaves Glory brewed up. I was also admittedly curious about zebra culture. Pretty much all I'd learned about them was that they were the enemy during the war.

To hear her speak of it, the zebras had once lived in tribes across a vast grassland. Most were

nomadic (though legends and archaeological evidence indicated that this might not have always been the case), and, rather than set up large towns and cities, they simply established a few buildings for healing and protecting their wells. Unlike Equestria, which had tamed most of its wilderness, the zebra lands had been rife with monsters and threats. These were respected by the zebras, and zebra bucks and mares would test themselves against these threats. What they lacked in unicorn magic they made up for with rare and potent magical talismans.

Apparently, a long drought changed much of this way of life. With the savanna dying, zebras were forced to gather in villages and cities built around water sources, and, with the zebras no longer able to just move away from them, competition with the natural predators became acute. A decade or so later, the land's gem deposits were exhausted, and the dearth of the gems that were the foundations of the zebras' magical talismans threatened their survival. They found a twofold solution in Equestria. Equestria was industrializing, and many of the technologies it was beginning to develop held promise of replacing the need for talismans altogether. At the same time, though, Equestria had large supplies of gems, and, fortunately for the zebras, its burgeoning industry also meant burgeoning demands for energy, demands that the quickly-dwindling Equestrian coal supplies were unable to meet. Agreements were made: Equestria would supply the zebras with gems and give zebra industrialization a boost with the knowledge and technology for coal mining, and in return the zebras would send coal to Equestria.

The demand for mining and the desire for technology completely changed their nomadic way of life. The zebra lands were tamed and exploited for their resources, and the zebras began to develop their own technologies, both earth-pony-like and alchemically based, to supplement and enhance their traditional tools and talismans. The Caesar, the latest to occupy a position that was formerly just a sort of highly experienced diplomat in charge of settling the largest inter-tribal disputes, took up the increased power the sedentary lifestyle had given him and declared a bold new future, but it was not easy. The zebras, experiencing the same sort of technological growth as Equestria, also began to experience the same sorts of unsteady social changes. City dwelling was no longer just something in legends, done by only a few small tribes, or done to weather a drought; now it was the norm. Railroads snaked across the land, turning journeys that might once have been weeks of hard travel into a few days in a well-appointed coach. The increasingly unified zebra military, armed with new weapons and new magic, stopped simply keeping the beasts away and began to hunt them down. New thoughts shot through zebra culture like lightning, and among them was one that began to climb to a dangerous boil.

Most zebras had never been able to spare much thought for how things were elsewhere. They'd been too busy surviving, and it wasn't as if things in faraway lands would matter much to them. Those who did think about it, though, tended to be quietly resentful of Equestria. Equestria, chosen land of the living goddesses, where the monsters were tame and even the seasons were ordered for the ponies' comfort. Still, that resentment hadn't mattered much; Equestria didn't care much about the zebras, and the zebras couldn't do anything about the ponies.

The first wake-up call came when Nightmare Moon returned and delayed the dawn. That was when the resentment started to rise, but there was still nothing those bearing it could do. Then, years later, the trade agreements were signed, and, though they were very good for the zebras, they were even better for Equestria; the zebras were paying in coal ten times what the ponies were paying in gems. And those gems were even more valuable to the zebras now than before; the new industries might have reducing the relative utility of the old talismans, but at an even higher rate they were creating new uses for enchanted gems.

With all of this and more beneath the surface, it only took a small nick to start the process that would end with the world exploding. The hostage crisis was that nick, and the disaster proceeded from there.

The Caesar withheld the coal until fairer trade terms could be negotiated. In response, Equestria withheld its gem shipments. Pony power, transportation, and manufacturing were cut back, then cut back

again. Zebra industry faltered as the gem supply dried up, and the campaign against the monsters of the land found itself expanding beyond the capabilities of its suddenly-reduced supplies; this only further increased zebra reliance on coal-fueled technology, increasing the domestic demand for coal and decreasing the demand for foreign gems.

Peaceful diplomacy failed and Equestria, desperate as its ponies lost the infrastructure they'd come to rely on, began seizing coal shipments by force.

It was curious... almost cute... to hear about the first battles. Great care was taken to minimize casualties. Prisoners were exchanged immediately. Medical care offered. Meanwhile, Celestia constantly strove for some sort of armistice. But as the war progressed, the fighting grew worse. Weapons development, new combat spells, and dangerous new spell talismans pushed the destruction onward. Every pony and zebra involved seemed to agree that the fighting should stop, but none were able to let the other side fire the last shot. Zebra refugees and displaced ponies became increasingly common, and violence and resentment against them grew.

Then came the Littlehorn massacre.

I only knew it as a footnote in my history books: the attack on a school prompted Celestia's abdication and elevated Princess Luna to the throne. I hadn't known that it had been Luna's school. I didn't realize that the attack had employed a terrible new poison talisman. The Caesar denied that the school had ever been a target and said that the weapon had been lost and would never have been authorized. But the slaughter changed everything. No pony was interested in peace anymore. The only drive was to win at any cost.

Of course, the burning of Hoofington came soon after, and the reconstruction soon after that. It was as if, once unified in a common direction, ponies raced to discover how much they could do. No pony had seen that the new horizon they were racing towards was a cliff—wait.

"Somepony did," I muttered. "Somepony knew." I remembered the museum and the Cakes. Somepony had known the day and the hour and had taken steps... but for what, I couldn't imagine.

* * *

"You gave me your damn cold," P-21 muttered as he visited me with his own runny nose.

"Bah. I gave you nothing. You stole it," I retorted as I lay in bed.

"Well, take it back, then!" he muttered, sneezing hard. "Ew..." He stuck his tongue out at the snot on his hoof. "Ugh... I hate being sick."

"Apparently, stable ponies catch it more easily. We're lucky we're in Chapel where there's not a lot of Enervation. If we were in Flank, it could take days to get over." I sipped from one of Sekashi's bottles. "You should drink this. I think I've coughed up every color of the rainbow, but I feel better."

"Pass. Those zebra drinks taste like mare ass," he said as he stuck out his tongue.

I rolled my eyes. "Please. Do you even know what mare butt tastes like?"

He looked at me. "Well it depends on how clean she keeps herself back there." I winced and he reached over and pretended to read the label on the back, "Oh look. Side effects may include nausea, loss of appetite, rainbow snot, and putting all four hooves in your mouth." He took a drink and his eyes widened, his navy mane frizzing as he jerked. "Okay... tastes worse than—"

"I defer to your experience," I said quickly.

He took another drink and then sighed, setting the bottle back on the nightstand. "I also want to apologize. I know you're trying hard... harder than any of us. I just didn't handle it well."

"I'd be scared if any of us did," I said as I leaned back in the bed, looking at the moon painted on the ceiling. "I'm sorry too... I want to save her. I do. And Thorn. And Roses. And Flank. Why is that so hard?"

"Because it's better. It would have been easier to leave Roses and Thorn in that ruin or write off Flank. It's what I would have done." He sighed and shook his head. "You want to know what bothers me the most, though?" I cringed inwardly but nodded. "I really didn't care that she was dead. It was wrong and all... completely messed up... but I was more angry that Rampage didn't get punished for it."

"She is," I pointed out.

"Maybe. I'm not quite sold on the 'not crazy mare still innocent of killing a foal somehow 'cause she feels really bad about it' theory," he said with a wave of his hoof. "And I still want to know what Lacunae's angle is."

"Maybe she just wants to help make the Wasteland better?"

"I don't think she has a clue what she really wants... or this Goddess. I talked with Priest about it. Apparently there are acolytes all over the Wasteland selling this whole 'Unity' religion. An alicorn takes you away to become one with the Goddess. Catch is, nopony ever comes back," he said as he rubbed his nose.

"Apparently I'm too damaged for Unity," I said with a rueful smile. "And too whiny."

He wasn't smiling. "Blackjack, nopony is too damaged for Unity. They'll take anypony. Murderers. Rapists. Raiders. Slaves. It doesn't matter. I can't really believe that they'd turn anypony away for being 'too whiny'."

I frowned at that. "Maybe. I just don't understand where the Goddess ends and Lacunae begins. She sounds like she's a part of it, but... not. She said something about Hoofington being full of nightmares." I caught his look and chuckled... then coughed, hacked, brought up something a decidedly 'bugh' color, and spat it into a rag before shaking my head. "Ew... anyway... not normal nightmares, scary dreams. It's definitely an alicorny thing."

"Well," he said as he wiped his nose on his leg. "Just... don't let this bite us in the tail. I mean... I know you want to help her, but she and her Goddess are one great big unknown. Okay?" I sighed and nodded, taking another sip of the tasty medicine. It was kinda like licorice... salty licorice? P-21 relaxed a bit. "So... last question. What are we going to do at Stable 99?"

"Take it over," I replied calmly as I rubbed my bruised throat. "I mean it. If Mom won't listen, I will shoot her till she does. I will feel very guilty about it afterwards, but I'm not going to let that place continue." Then I took a deep breath. "After that, anyone who doesn't like the new rules can have fun in the Wasteland."

He looked at me with a sigh. "I notice that plan doesn't have anything about punishing them for what they did."

I closed my eyes. "Sorry. I'm not an executioner. I'd give you the Overmare if I could, but Deus took care of that."

"Well, get back to Stable 99 and take over. I assume profit follows on step three." He crossed his forelegs on the edge of my bed as he cocked his head. "And if it doesn't go to plan?"

"Drink some Wild Pegasus, sing some dirty limericks, shoot a lot, and try not to die," I said as I looked him in the eye. "But I'm not leaving there till it's taken care of, P-21."

"Good. That I can live with," he said softly.

"I know you don't believe it," I said with a smile, "but most of Stable 99 are good ponies. We won't have to kill them all." Because if we did, then I was going to follow them. But I couldn't believe Mom and the others would hold on to rules that weren't even a part of the stable to begin with!

"You're an optimist, Blackjack. Still, while I'm not sure about their goodness, I'm pretty sure they aren't going out of their way to screw us. If they have a choice, then they'll do what's easier." He gave my hip a nudge. "I'll be honest. Fighting you... is hard." I smiled at that. I needed to make cards. 'Security: Don't fight me, it's hard.' "And afterwards?"

"Put Mom in charge as the new Overmare and put them in contact with Bottlecap. There's got to be valuable things to trade. Trade will save the Wasteland," I said with a smile. "Then we get the routing to the next destination for EC-1101, and maybe make a little stop at Hippocratic Research and see if I can't talk Sanguine into giving up on it."

"Sounds... good," he said, actually sounding impressed. Then he chuckled. "You know that something's going to go wrong."

"Yeah. Probably Sanguine," I said, rolling my eyes. "The Zodiacs knew I was at Stable-Tec R&D. He'll probably guess that I'll head to Stable 99 to find the routing. He's probably going to throw every raider, bandit, and slaver against me. Probably why DJ Pon3 said the area was so much more hostile now." I brought up my PipBuck and tapped the screen. The sleek black display showed the navigation tool in soft, cool blue. I was amazed at how many places I'd reached in the last few weeks. "Ditzy is flying back to New Appleloosa tomorrow. She can drop us off at Miramare. From there, it's two days to Megamart and two more to Stable 99."

"That's a lot of ground to cover. Any chance Ditzy could fly us straight to Stable 99?"

"She's not a taxi. 99 is way out of her way, and we used up most of our caps paying for EC-1101." Most of that money went to Ditzy for flying all the way out to Hoofington and back, a trip she usually risked only every other year or so. "We can't keep her from her business just to save us some walking."

He made a face. "All very well for you," he said with a grimace. "All your legs work."

"My knees are half shot too, after jumping off that catwalk," I reminded him; I could have taken a Hydra, but after all the damage done to me by the drug, not to mention seeing the manufacturing process, I'd rather wait a bit instead. He looked a little unconvinced. "It'll work out. And just think, in a few days, we'll be able to set Stable 99 right once and for all!"

He rubbed his chin. "Well, that's a point. Maybe, though, we could find one of those magic flying wagons of our own? That would make travel much easier."

"I doubt that Glory would be up to flying us all around the Hoof," I said, not sure if a pegasus's lift was related to their size. Then again, Ditzy wasn't the largest pony in Equestria, and her wings didn't even have feathers, so... so I didn't know how it worked. Well, nothing new there.

"Glory would fly through fire if you asked her to," P-21 pointed out.

I flushed a little. "It's not like that. She's... it just feels weird to lust after her. And I'm not going to exploit her crush on me. So we'll stick with the plan."

"Mmmm... maybe. I don't know, it just seems that, every time you have a plan, it ends in disaster and heartbreak," he said as he rose. "I should go make sure we have everything we need."

Leaving me in bed presented an interesting problem. On one hoof, I was tired, on the second, I felt too rotten to sleep, on the third, I wouldn't feel anything if I was asleep, but on the fourth, my dreams were full of the sound of crunching foals and Thorn singing 'hush now'. However, being stuck in bed felt suspiciously like waiting, and I'd finished my gun magazines and the hoof-to-hoof training manual. Then, in desperation, I'd even tried reading one of P-21's arcane science books. There simply wasn't any way to make arcane radiation gem reactors and spark generation as thrilling as reading about Fallen Caesar fighting techniques. And don't get me started on his books on locks!

I still had two more memory orbs that I hadn't viewed yet. Theoretically, I was safe as houses, provided no stealthed zebras or ghost unicorns attacked. I levitated the two from my bag. I still didn't want to view the bloodstained orb, so I lifted the third... then frowned and floated Cupcake's revolver into my bed. Slipping it under my pillow, I breathed out and touched the orb with my magic.

Nothing. Not that it was locked, or anything. It was just that I could feel Stonewing being merged with the cockatrice, sense the creature squirming inside me as I shifted and distorted. It made my hide crawl! I took several deep breaths, closed my eyes, and tried again to coax myself to make the connection.

Nothing...

I was sick. I was tired. My horn sucked. Always decent explanations, but somehow they didn't comfort me. How would I learn about the projects and see the Marauders if I couldn't even get my horn to make the connection?

I lay back in the bed, staring up at the moon. Had Marigold felt this way when she was being slandered and torn down by the system that had happily put her in harm's way? Exhausted, disconnected, and alone? I tried to make the connection again and again before finally dropping the orbs back into my bag and turning over in bed. Just one more thing I couldn't do.

* * *

I sat alone on a mountain. It shifted and rumbled beneath me, but I could almost reach the clouds. If I could reach them, I could tear them aside and see the stars again!

"Don't look down," rasped the old voice with a chuckle. "Care for a game? Draw Poker? Hearts? Go Fish?"

"Very funny," I muttered.

"I try. We've got that in common."

I stretched and strained to reach the clouds. "Go away." Just a little bit farther...

"Hey. You're the one dreaming me. You wake up," he said with that purring of his cards. "So, what are you trying to do?"

"Get to the stars," I replied. "If I can reach them... maybe they can help me."

"Sekashi told you they were dangerous."

"Only to selfish ponies who try to use them to become super powerful and stuff," I said as I started to push the clouds aside. "I'm going to use them to help." I wobbled as the rocks beneath me shifted a little, but I kept my eyes turned upward. "Nothing bad's going to come of that."

"So thought Fluttershy," he rasped. "But you saw what came of trying to force a better pony."

"Well, making the Wasteland happy, then."

"And that's Pinkie Pie's thinking. You're just going from bad to worse now," he said as he shuffled the cards beneath me. "Come on down from there, Blackjack, before you hurt somepony."

"I can't! I've got to help," I said as I finally pushed the clouds aside. I could see the twinkling lights.

"Help who?" the Dealer asked from below me. "Why?"

"Because I'm going to turn into a monster if I don't," I said as I reached up and pinched a star between my hooves. It glowed like a memory orb, but hot and terrible.

"Oh? Then what are you now?" the Dealer asked. I looked down to tell him to shut the fuck up and—

I stood on P-21's corpse. And Glory. Rampage. Lacunae. Bottlecap and Caprice lay further down the slope of corpses. Roses embraced the crushed body of her foal. Dozens of Crusaders lay still in their tattered cloaks, the filly patches fluttering softly in the breeze. Hundreds of ponies in Stable 99 barding. Thousands of ponies dressed as raiders. Enclave pegasi littered the slope like broken birds. At the edge of my sight loomed the blasted corpse of Deus, the pulped remains of Gorgon, and the smoldering body of Blueblood. And past them, the bodies continued farther and farther till they blended with the horizon.

"Told you not to look down," the Dealer said, sitting on Rampage's face.

The mass then shifted and the slope collapsed beneath me. I fell through the darkness, my friends' bodies burying me in a crush of limbs, the star coolly looking on between my hooves.

* * *

I jerked awake, knocking the box of Vanity's memory orbs across the sheets and sending them rolling across the wooden floor. I looked around, the images of the stars no longer quite so comforting. I sat up in bed, curling and pressing my head between my rear knees as my forelimbs hugged my head tight. "Please... don't take that from me. Don't take the stars," I whispered to my poor crazy brain.

I finally calmed down enough to climb down off the bed and gather up the fallen memory orbs. One must have rolled under the bed, and I huffed softly as I lay down on my stomach and peeked under for the orb... wait? Orbs? Two memory orbs glimmered at me from under the bed. What, were they breeding now? Very carefully, I pulled the pair out. One was quite dusty. I put Vanity's orb back in the case, looking at the newcomer; Marigold's. I touched it to my horn. "Please... please please please..." I begged, trying to make my horn work.

A flicker, and world faded away.

oooOOOooo

This unicorn mare fit me like a sock. Even her glasses felt like my glasses. Her headache matched my own. All she needed was a runny nose and a scratchy throat and we'd be interchangeable.

I also knew this building. This was the Fluttershy Medical Center, and I even knew this hallway. Even though it wasn't half-lit and painted with a blood-lettered 'PLAY'.

She stepped into Redheart's office; I at once noticed that the stacked up papers and files seemed even higher than when I'd visited. The tired mare behind the desk pushed her glasses back and gave a frayed smile at my host. "Thank you for coming, Marigold. I know this is terribly short notice."

"Well, you made it sound like it was life or death," Marigold said in a soft and thoughtful voice edged with some tension. "Why else ask me to come out here in the middle of the night?"

Redheart trotted around from behind the desk to put a hoof on Marigold's shoulder. "I know this has been... a difficult time for you."

"Difficult?" Marigold said in a soft, taut voice. "Spending three years of my life on a dream I've had for as long as I can remember, only to get pulled for a medical review two weeks before the launch? Yeah. I suppose that counts as difficult."

"It's been challenging for all of us, with the assassination attempt. Big Macintosh's funeral last week and all... well... yes. Difficult." Redheart then pushed a file towards Marigold and she glanced down. 'Marigold: P:H medical authorization: denied.' And then atop it, 'Medical Waiver: Approved.' Her eyes went over those stamps once, and then twice. "So I'm glad to make things a little less difficult for you."

"Why...?" Marigold asked in shock.

"Because we've reviewed the test results for your heart and found them... less severe than we anticipated. And because Fluttershy knows what it's like to have a dream. And because... we need your help." Marigold frowned as she walked to a cushion and took a seat across from the elderly mare. Redheart gave a small smile. "Fluttershy has a dire medical emergency involving a pregnant mare. Without your help, she may lose the foal."

"My help? But how can I help? I'm an astropony and an astronomer. I don't know anything about medicine."

"Fluttershy wishes to perform a procedure that will transfer the foal from the patient to you, making you a surrogate mother." Marigold's ears stood almost upright at this.

"You want me to do *what?* To... to have a baby?!"

"Yes," Redheart replied calmly. "Afterwards she'd be transferred to an M.o.P. foal services caregiver. You wouldn't be expected to raise her." As Marigold balked, Redheart continued, "I know this is hard. Normally we wouldn't even attempt a surrogacy spell like this without far more preparation and counseling, but when we reviewed your files, we found you to be an ideal candidate. And time is critical."

Marigold looked at the file and then at Redheart. "And does this waiver disappear if I say no?" And from her tone, I knew that she'd walk if it did, even if it cost her her dream.

"No, Marigold. That was Fluttershy's and my final decision. You don't *have* to do this." But from the look in the pale pony's eyes, it was clear that she was desperate for Marigold to agree. "But we hope you will."

Marigold reached up, rubbing her temples with her hooves. "You just... it's going... ugh, don't you realize it's going to be pretty funny if all of a sudden I look pregnant?"

"The foal is currently the size of a chicken egg. It'll be months before you start to show."

"Not to mention suspicious that I was turned down and then got a waiver. Somepony's going to raise a red flag," she said as she chewed on a hoof nervously. "It might... maybe... foul up the mission..."

"Well then, you should say no," Redheart replied in a no-nonsense tone. "I know you're willing to face terrible risks. This is no less a risk; perhaps even more dangerous than going to the moon. But I can tell you that the mother needs this. Fluttershy needs it. And I think a great many ponies will need it too, even if they never realize it. This is your chance to save one pony."

I'd do it, but then, I'm an idiot. Marigold sighed as she looked at Redheart. "I almost wish you'd blackmailed me. It'd be easier," she said as she closed her eyes. "All right," she finally agreed.

What came next were a number of papers signed in a flurry. Clearly, she wasn't reading them all, just signing on the X's. Then two unicorns gave her a number of injections, but I was relieved that none of them seemed to involve the horrible rainbow-colored sludge I'd seen with Gorgon's memory. Now definitely woozy, she was led into a room decorated like a forest. There were actually living tree branches coming out of the walls! I wondered what kind of spell did that. A veil of leaves separated one half of the room from the other.

On the far side of that thin barrier, a mare sobbed inconsolably. "Shhhh... shhh... it'll be all right..." Fluttershy said calmly over and over again.

The mare spoke in a voice thick with grief. "Y...y...you must t...think I'm t...terrible... I am terrible, Fluttershy..." she stammered around the tears.

"No. No, I don't think that anymore. I think you're sad, and hurting... and if I can help I will..." A blue eye peeked through the fall of leaves. "Oh. The doctor's here. Are you absolutely sure?" Fluttershy said, and there was another sob. "Okay then. Just a little shot and we'll get started."

The mare's thick voice said softly, "Fluttershy, can you take it all away? Please? I don't... I can't... there's so much..."

A soft sigh. "Of course. You kept my secret. I'll keep yours." *Be kind.*

Then, a few minutes later, Fluttershy stepped through, gave Marigold one teary look, threw her forelegs around her, and hugged her with a teary sniff. "Thank you. Thank you so much." Marigold relaxed and put her forelegs around Fluttershy, returning the gesture.

"She doesn't know, does she?" Marigold said softly.

Fluttershy shook her head. "She couldn't bear it if she did. And she has so much to do. So very much to do that she was willing to give up her baby." She looked back at the leaves. "If the public found out, she'd be finished." And if they found out about *this*, she'd be equally finished.

"But who..." Marigold started to say before she shook her head. "I guess it's better if I don't know." Fluttershy gave a sad smile and nodded.

"Hopefully, when the war is over, she'll be strong enough to remember and meet her again. And she'll have the opportunity, thanks to you." Fluttershy took her hooves. "I know a lot of ponies look up to you for going into space and all, but this makes you my hero."

I don't know about Marigold, but I felt damn good about that.

oooOOOooo

When I opened my eyes I stared up at the ceiling, feeling conflicted. That was nothing new. Every single time I went into an orb, it felt like 'Blackjack' was getting a little more scrambled up with other ponies. Was I learning? Maturing? Or was I actually doing some kind of inherent harm to myself with these memories? Had Marigold selflessly become a surrogate, or had she feared that Fluttershy and Redheart would rescind her waiver? And what of the mare that was behind the veil? Was she wrong to have wanted to end her pregnancy, not knowing that Fluttershy had an alternative? Who had she been? Important, obviously. A Ministry Mare? *There* was a scandalous thought. Or even one of the Princesses?! Or maybe I was thinking too grandiose, and she'd just been a mare that Fluttershy wanted to help.

I pulled my pillow over my face. "Ugh... why can't anything be black and white!" I shouted into it. Everything had to be so... tangled. I sighed, then pulled the pillow away, looking at the moon overhead. Marigold had gotten her dream, but the scandal had destroyed her. The nameless mare had suffered terribly, but did that make it right? "Why am I the pony that gets stuck thinking about this?"

"Because you care," Lacunae said softly beside me. I jumped so hard that I fell out of bed in a tangle of sheets. The alicorn cocked her head as she looked at me lying on the floor. "Are you alright?"

"I... wa... don't do that!" I panted, feeling my heart thud. "I've had bad experiences coming out of memory orbs." Which was probably why I had so much trouble getting into them.

"Forgive me," she said politely. "I hope it was a pleasant memory."

"It was... complicated." Slowly I rose to my hooves. "What are you doing?"

"Waiting. Glory is attempting to cook. Her cooking is not going well, so I thought it best to check on you and get away from the smell," she said as she looked at the memory orb. "So... is it worthwhile?"

"More questions," I whined, but looked at the orb. "What do you mean?"

"I... we... we live within our memories, and the memories of each other. The Goddess directs and we act, but within her we flow from dream to dream and thought to thought. I can no longer remember which are my own and which are the dreams of the Goddess."

I wondered if that was why I was having so much trouble entering the memory orbs. Was I becoming afraid of changing?

"Do you... or the Goddess... know anything about magic?" Lacunae actually smiled broadly, and my answer was in her smile. "Okay. Dumb question, I guess. But I'm wondering about something Sekashi told me about a zebra who put his soul in a rock. Is that possible? I always thought that a soul was... well... you."

"It is, but there is dark and cold magic that can do such things. What you describe is a soul jar,"

Lacunae said in her distant voice.

“But... I don’t understand... how does something like that work?” I walked to the door, opened it, and was greeted by the reek of burnt apples smothered in melted rubber. Gagging, I closed the door and rested my back against it. Okay... there was gross, and then there was that.

Lacunae seemed to be listening to something; her Goddess, I assumed. “Imagine if you were to take a gun... something special and inherent to you... and then you placed within it a piece of your soul. That gun would retain the resilience of your soul. Perhaps it would never jam or rust. It might always be oiled. Perhaps even more accurate than identical firearms. In extraordinary circumstances, perhaps it might fire an extra bullet or two before needing reloading. To you, it would simply be a weapon, but to anyone else it would be a weapon beyond any of its kind.”

“So what’s the catch? Because that sounds way too good to be true,” I said as I looked up at her, rubbing my runny nose with a hoof.

Lacunae smiled sadly. “The catch is that, so long as your soul is here, you can never pass into the everafter. And there is a price paid for rending something eternal. Souls do not heal, and it would take an exceptional pony to rend their soul thus and not suffer horrifically for it.”

I closed my eyes, trying to get my brain to work right. What had Priest said earlier... about her healing like... “What if you had... I don’t know... like a healing talisman. A really powerful healing talisman...” Like the kind that had stuffed my guts back into me in the clinic... “And you made it a soul jar? Could it keep you alive forever? Even if you were vaporized?”

Lacunae looked intrigued. “Perhaps...”

I imagined the pink egg I’d seen earlier. Just like the one I’d seen back in Fluttershy’s clinic, but with a tiny, ghostly Rampage stuffed inside. Indestructible, powered by the soul trapped within, remaking Rampage again and again. It didn’t explain what she’d done, any of her other abilities, or Glory’s theory that it wasn’t simple madness, but it did explain how she could get turned to ash and still reform.

“Is there any way to free a soul from a soul jar?”

“Ah...” Her lips curled in a slight smile. “For that, you’d need a... very special book.”

“Don’t suppose you’d know where?”

“Canterlot, perhaps? In the Ministry of Image.” Something was off. Years of poker had taught me the little tells that something was awry. The hint of a smile. The tone. Everything. “We’ve been searching for one for a very long time.”

“Canterlot?” I huffed. “May as well be in the Core.”

“It may,” she replied softly. “We know of one book for certain, but there may be others. A copy was seized by the O.I.A., but whether it was turned over to the Ministry of Image or not is unknown.” Then her eyes looked at my PipBuck, her smile widening. “But perhaps you possess a means to obtain it from the O.I.A. hub, yes?”

I gave a snotty sniff, narrowing my eyes slightly. Maybe it was due to Caprice’s games, but I just wanted to know for sure who was pushing my buttons. “Funny. What kind of Goddess wouldn’t know?”

“WE DO NOT NEED TO DIVULGE EVERY—” I smiled.

"Gotcha," I said with a little smirk. "Goddess. Right? Mind letting Lacunae back?"

"WE ARE THE INFINITE AND ALL-KNOWING GODDESS! WE DO NOT..." But the Goddess was now hissing her words in pain. "NOTHING CAN... WE... ARRRRGH!" She clenched her head as she trembled. "THIS... IS... UNBEARABLE! HOW DOES SHE TOLERATE IT!?"

Right. Lacunae, okay. Goddess, not okay. "You okay?"

I'm sure that somewhere, P-21 was grinding his teeth. Suddenly, she swayed and collapsed onto the bed. "That is... most disagreeable," Lacunae said softly.

"So. I guess that the Goddess doesn't like Hoofington."

"Hoofington screams in my dreams. I have become used to it. I fear the Goddess had not," suddenly her eyes widened. "And I fear she is very put out by your irreverence."

"Yeah? Insecure goddesses don't impress me," I said as I pulled out Cupcake's memory orb. "I've seen Luna and Celestia. They didn't act all-knowing. There was a hell of a lot they didn't know. I don't have time to waste on a Goddess that pretends to."

Lacunae closed her eyes for a long moment. "Oh yes, very put out."

"Are all alicorns like that? Like you?" I asked as I put the orb away.

"No. Most are... extensions. We exist within her, and within her we act to carry out her will. But we remain ourselves. She can dictate our actions as she wishes. I am an aberration."

"So you're a mutant alicorn?" I asked with a little grin, but she smiled and nodded politely.

"I have been in Hoofington for many years. I am... resistant to the screams of the city. Few alicorns can survive in it for long. In some places, it is physically damaging," she said with a little shudder. I wondered if she was referring to Enervation, or if this was yet another horror of the Wasteland that I just hadn't encountered yet.

"I'm pretty sure she wants me to find a book for her."

"It is magic she lacks," Lacunae agreed.

I paused, frowning in thought. "Can it help Rampage?"

"I do not know," Lacunae replied softly. "We have only hints at its power."

"Right," I sighed, rubbing my muzzle. "Well. Good to know." Then I sniffed as the rubbery smell increased. There was a soft knock from the hall. I glanced at Lacunae, then opened the door.

"I made breakfast... er... lunch? Brunch," Glory said, trotting in with a tray balanced between her wings. She turned and presented something that looked like mashed Sugar Apple Bombs soaked in milk and wrapped in a fried egg...then burned to crunchy sticks of carbon. I lifted one, wrinkled my nose, and took a bite. Somehow, she'd managed to make it charred on the outside and gooey within. "I had to improvise on a lot of the ingredients."

I chewed thoughtfully for a few moments. "Not bad. Is that vinegar?" She smiled and nodded. "Huh, pretty good actually." Glory beamed; I'd probably just made her day as I slurped down the rest of the interior and then munched the crunchy shell. I levitated another at Lacunae. "Want one?"

The alicorn shied away as she asked politely, "Blackjack, by any chance are you part dragon?"

* * *

By morning I felt, if not better, at least decent. Between Priest's healing and Sekashi's tonics, I'd coughed up most of the sludge in my lungs, and my throat no longer sounded like a rusty tin can full of nails. While I had to admit that the smell was off, Glory's cooking really wasn't that bad. I thought that what she could do with the few ingredients rattling around in our packs was pretty creative; Rampage promptly told me that, if I suggested she try one, she would be aiming for me with her vomit this time.

I took stock of my armaments, laying each weapon on the bed before me. The dragon claw for close in work, then Cupcake's .44 magnum revolver, after that the twelve gauge pump-action shotgun, and finally Taurus's rifle. The rest I'd traded, along with surplus ammo, for ammo for these. I'd kept Folly, of course. To be honest, I didn't know who'd buy a gun with impossibly rare ammo. While the IF-33 would be tempting, I barely had enough ammo for a clip, and the 12 mm gun had been trashed. With the exception of the incendiary bullets, I'd blown through most of the specialty ammo we'd picked up at Ironshod Firearms R&D. I hoped we'd come across some more, especially the explosive rounds.

The Aegis Security combat armor had pockets and holsters for most of these weapons. I had to admit, I felt better wiggling into my armor than I had in a while. While I missed my old security barding, the polymer and ceramic combat armor more than made up for it. Some spray-paint and I was just Security again. Best of all, Charity had used a stencil and some white paint to mark the rearing filly on my rump. I secured the weapons, clips, and the handful of healing potions I'd acquired and made my way downstairs.

"Wow," Glory muttered, her eyes lighting up at the sight of me.

"No helmet?" P-21 asked with a little frown.

"It cuts off my vision and hearing too much, and it's uncomfortable as hell," I said as I saw that Rampage was now Charity-aged. Apparently, while Glory's own cuisine was too much for my friends, Rampage had gone out of her way to get every remotely edible bit of meat in our packs cooked up. Growing up, even with the assistance of a healing talisman, clearly used up the calories. I really preferred my Sugar Apple Bombs. Glory had 'assisted' her with some mixture of nausea, fascination, and disappointment that she wasn't allowed to indulge in any culinary experimentation.

He just looked at me like I was doing something stupid again. "What?" I asked levelly.

"Nothing. It's great armor," he said before going back to his Carrot Crisps, adding, in a mutter just loud enough for everypony to hear, "Boom. Headshot."

Yeah, like he had room to talk! He still wasn't using any barding, period! Still... maybe I should reconsider the headgear.

I looked at Lacunae. "What about you? Do you need armor?" Black mourner's lace hardly seemed like adequate protection to me.

She looked at me, or, rather, at my horn. "I will be fine."

"Are you sure? I mean, P-21 likes to be all sneaky, but you're a little too... big... for sneaking."

"I'm good, thank you," she answered.

“Okay. Just saying... I’m pretty sure Celestia and Luna weren’t bulletproof, so no harm in wearing some.”

“Blackjack. I don’t need armor. I have magic,” she said with a small smile of irritation.

“Right. Of course you do. Because you’re part unicorn. You do magic. Excuse me...” I said as I stalked over to the kitchen, muttering sourly under my breath about big-horned alicorns and their magic. I could sing while blasting away ghouls. Could she do that?

Once everything was set, I gave the house a parting look and locked the front door, feeling slightly less secure in the knowledge that anypony with some skill and a bobby pin could open it. Oh well. Not much I could do about it now.

* * *

As a... pleasant surprise, Glory’s food didn’t taste much different on the trip back out and into a paper bag that Ditzzy kept in her wagon for just such occurrences. I found two boxes in the back, wedged myself between them, and did everything I could to avoid screaming, crying, wetting myself, or taking my mind off my striped friend. Filly Rampage looked oddly like Silver Bell’s striped sister as the two sat in the back. I kept my magic grip on the revolver. If I saw a skull appear on her butt, I was going straight into S.A.T.S.

Glory and Lacunae flew at our flanks; Ditzzy had stared at the alicorn with some nervousness, but of course she hadn’t said anything. I had to admit, the sight of the lace-draped alicorn was decidedly surreal. Then again, I was travelling with a pony with a soul thingy lodged within her and a hallucination that liked cards, on my way to... liberate... my stable. Reality was now a lot more subjective.

Then P-21 peeked out the back with a small frown. Why didn’t *he* freak out at the sky?
“Blackjack...”

“Urgh...” I grunted in reply.

“What is that?” he asked as he peered through his binoculars.

I carefully moved to the back, making sure to avoid looking at the clouds above and the ground way way below. “What is what?” I asked, and then frowned as I spotted a black speck behind us. “What is that?” I lifted Taurus’s rifle and sighted through the scope.

At first, I thought it was the Enclave. Maybe Dusk was coming to finish off Glory? But there was something off about how it moved, and I couldn’t see any mounted weapons. Its wings were as big as Lacunae’s, and it was gaining on us... fast. Really fast!

“Behind us!” I shouted as the creature rolled faster than I could follow with the scope. “Ditzzy! Get us on the ground,” I yelled as it swept over us. I heard the buzz of Glory’s beam weapons crackle as she shot at it.

My stomach rose in my throat as every terrifying nightmare I had about falling rose in my chest. Ditzzy was getting us on the ground by the fastest means possible: straight down! As she dove, I saw the flash of beam guns and flickers of lightning from our airborne friends. After that, I was just holding tight as half of Ditzzy’s wares battered P-21 and me. Rampage laughed in delight, and even Silver Bell appeared more thrilled and less scared by the drop.

Just before we hit, Ditzzy flattened out, flying over the rubble strewn fields of Miramare. The wagon suddenly lurched to the side and the wagon cover ripped, four sets of brown claws tearing open

the canopy. Something growled overhead, and I wasted no time thrusting Taurus's rifle upright and blasting away blindly. With a snarl, it released the wagon, and Ditzzy was able to pull up over the main building. "Get ready to jump out!" I yelled.

The wagon came to a stop and the three of us spilled out. I could have kissed the ground... if we weren't facing some kind of clawed, winged, flying thing trying to kill us. It wasn't in sight, but I doubted that would last.

"Get the door open, quickly!" I said as I nodded at the door to the locker room. "We gotta get out of sight!" I looked over at the ghoulish pegasus. "Best get out of here. It'll be after us." And oh, how I hoped that was true and that this wasn't some sort of ridiculously aggressive predator with a taste for ghoulish flesh. "Thanks, Ditzzy! I owe you a new canopy."

She grinned and shrugged, then winked a cloudy eye at me and took off. I made sure to fire a few rounds at anything that might be a bat-winged thing. To my relief, I didn't see anything go after the damaged wagon.

Rampage looked at the duffel bag between my shoulders that held her spiked armor. "I hate being little. How am I supposed to kick tail like this?" she said as she gestured at herself.

"You'll find a way. I have no doubt about that," I assured her. Behind us, the door clicked open. "Quick, inside!" If we were fighting something that flew, the lower the roof, the better. We disappeared inside just as the winged thing flashed over us. Whatever this thing was, it was fast. Really damn fast!

I'd just closed the door when an oozing brown stinger punched right through the heavy metal. "Ah!" I shouted as I reeled back, blasting at the appendage. It jerked free with a metallic squeal, leaving a hoof-sized hole.

A bright blue eye peeked through and then narrowed. "Peek a boo," a low feminine voice growled.

"Peek a this," I muttered as I fired the rifle, but the eye jerked away with a laugh. "Well, at least it's a happy monster."

"Great. So you won't be adopting it, then?" P-21 asked as he took a magic grenade and carefully positioned it at the base of the door so that anypony opening it would flick the stem off the weapon. We quickly moved further into the locker rooms. It wasn't trying to come in through the doors. Maybe it was going to enter through the second floor to flush us out?

"Well, you never know. It could have some horribly tragic sob story," I said as I rushed to the Marauders' lockers. Actually, given my track record with these kinds of things, it was probably likely. I selected Doof's locker and typed 'Mamma'.

There were a stack of papers, a memory orb... of course there was a memory orb... and some large boxes of ammo. In the back was a... gun? It was a short tube about two feet long, with a mouth grip stock. Really, it resembled the biggest single-shot gun I'd ever seen before. A heart was carved in the stock with the words 'Twist + Doof', and somepony had painted 'Persuasion' on the barrel.

No time for reading, and certainly no time for a memory orb. I dumped them into my bag and then turned the gun over. It sure wasn't something I'd seen in any Ironshod Firearms catalogue. "What the heck is this?" I asked with a frown. "It's sure no Ironpony."

"What's what?" P-21 asked, and I showed it to him. "Oh! It's a grenade rifle."

"Great. Enjoy," I said as I pushed the tube into his hooves.

His eyes went round. "Blackjack! It's a gun."

"It's a grenade gun!" I countered. "You do grenades. So logically you should be fine with it."

His eyes went even rounder. "There's nothing logical about that!"

I sighed and slid him the ammo. "Look. I trust you. Trust yourself and ante up. This isn't some gun you point and shoot, right?" He frowned in worry but nodded. "Gotta figure out angles and delays and stuff?" He nodded again and I tapped his forehead. "Then it is right up your alley, egghead." He sure didn't look happy about it, but he took the weapon and the grenades and slipped them into his saddlebags. And if I was wrong and he was feeling 'shoot Blackjack'-y, at least it'd be quick.

Now there was just the question of how we would connect with Glory and Lacunae. Unless miss big purple horn had a magical location spell, and I wouldn't put it past her, we'd have to go out or they'd have to come in. If I were the flier, I wouldn't want to be stuck inside, so I guessed she was somewhere on the roof waiting for us to come out the second story.

"We can get out through the crater," I muttered. "But we need to tell Glory so they don't come in and have us chasing each other in circles."

He frowned, then dug through his bag and scribbled a word on a piece of garbage. 'Rads'. "Hook it onto the hole on the door and let's go," he said as he carefully unhinged the gun and slid a grenade into it. I did as he asked. Unless the monster was standing right outside, the pair would see it when they checked the door.

"Why 'Rads'?" Rampage asked.

"It's the official term for measuring the intensity of magical spell radiation," he explained as he looked back at us. "So unless that monster has cracked open a copy of Scientific Equestria or a Big Book of Arcane Science— ACK!" I swept him up in my hooves and gave him a hug. "Leggo! I got a grenade! A whole lot of grenades! Blackjack!"

"I got a smart pony," I said to Rampage with a grin.

* * *

In the main hall, I kept my eyes up. Vermin had gotten in: huge bloated mice that weren't much more threatening than radroaches but still packed a wicked bite. I still wished the E.F.S. would give me a scale of bad guys-ness, but the bars were just red or blue. I had to watch for something a bit more substantial.

I hadn't realized that something substantial was watching for us.

As we made for the stairs down to operations, I heard the low growl rumble through the halls. My mane did the pony pokey as we looked at all the open doors. Was it that bar by the barracks? The gift shop? Maybe somewhere above? Of course not.

I'd just turned the corner to go down the stairs into operations when a great leonine shape pounced up at me. Its mangy hide was covered in bald patches and sores, but that did little to detract from its crushing weight or sharp fangs and claws... and wings... and stinger?! What the fuck, Wasteland? This had to be one of Chimera's critters, right? How else do you stick a lion, bat, and scorpion together?

Knocked on my back, I had no choice but to keep rolling. If it pinned me, I'd be dead. Fortunately, it had to hop to the top of the stairs first, and so I found my footing and levitated the shotgun in my white magical grip just as it started a second pounce. S.A.T.S. lined up three blasts to its head. Three blasts stripped great bloody swaths away from its face and shoulders.

Didn't kill it. I hopped away, avoiding a strike by its stinger tail as I fired and moved away. Its claws scraped horribly on my barding, and I was very glad all I'd face was a bruise... for the moment.

"Another one!" P-21 shouted around the mouth grip of Persuasion as he pointed it towards the second floor. The weapon made a curious 'Thump' noise and sent the grenade up to the second floor, where another of these monsters was starting down after us. The explosion took off the creature's legs. Unfortunately, there were more behind it, and they were far more wary.

Rampage tugged at the drawstrings of my duffel bag where it had fallen. "Blackjack! Why'd you use knots? I need my gear!"

"A little busy!" I yelled, jumping and moving as quickly as I could.

"Come on! I can't rampage like this! I need my ripper! Hoofclaws! Something!" I sent my dragon claw skittering across the floor towards her. "Thanks!" she said happily and started to saw through the knots.

"Rampage!" I yelled in exasperation. P-21 smirked – yes, he was actually smirking – as he fired another grenade to the top of the stairs.

She blinked, looked cross-eyed down at the weapon in her jaws, and then rolled her eyes. She let out a fillyish squeal as she raced to the monster and hugged its back leg with all her hooves. Her head jerked back and forth as she sliced into the thick tendons behind its knee. It let out a roar as it staggered, and I was able to move away from it and reload with slugs.

The monster then swung its tail and speared Rampage through the side. She twisted, grabbing the scorpion stinger in her hooves and started to slice through that instead as blood foamed out around the dragon claw. She simply continued to hold tight and slashed away at the stinger tail. The monster, seemingly confused by the squirming filly's refusal to die, cut to the chase and pulled her towards its maw.

Unfortunately for it, that meant taking its eyes off me. I pressed the barrel of the shotgun against its head and took off half its skull. As it spasmed and flopped, Rampage was thrown free. One last shot and it went still. "We're running some more."

"Always with the running," P-21 muttered as he limped down the stairs. Rampage wasn't walking much better as her mouth foamed, but the hole in her side was healing with pink light. Once we got downstairs, I slammed the door behind us.

I noticed Rampage was already intact, but still dripping white foam from her lips. "You okay?" Not the best question to ask her, but still.

"Poisoned," was all she rasped. I pulled out one of the antivenoms Glory had made for radscorpion stings and poured it down her throat. At once, she gagged and clutched her throat, falling over.

"Rampage?" I asked in alarm, dropping beside her. Had I somehow made it worse?

"That... tastes... disgusting..." she coughed.

I rolled my eyes and licked the end of the bottle. Okay, so it was a *little* bitter. "Baby."

"I am *not* a baby. I'm older than both of you combined," she said as she pointed at me with a scowl. "You've just got a... a... a mutant tongue! That's what!"

"Hey, could we focus—" P-21 started to say as Rampage charged at me. I stuck out a hoof and pushed against her forehead; even small, she nearly shoved me off my feet.

"Oh yeah? Better check," I said, sticking my tongue out at her.

Rampage blinked, then tackled me with a roar. It wasn't nearly as effective as it would have been if she was her normal size. "Oh yeah! Really mutated! Just like those bruises!" she said as she swung her hooves at me.

"Awww, somepony needs her nap. She's all cranky!"

"Ladies!" P-21 shouted, making us both look at him. "Imminent mortal peril here! Chimera monsters hunting us down and you... you two are... uuugh!" He sat down, pulling his mane before he jabbed a hoof at both of us. "Do not make me put you in corners! Now, are we going, or do you two want to keep acting like two-year-old foals?"

We both stared at him a moment, then pointed at each other in unison and said in chorus, "*She* started it."

* * *

Travelling through the operations center gave me a sense of déjà vu. I'd fed Minty Fresh to a raider trying to get info out of him. Glory... I was really glad that Glory wasn't down here again.

P-21 had strung a wire across the bottom of the stairs and up overhead, then had me tie three frag grenade by their stems. Jerk the wire, grenades pop free... boy I was glad he was on our side.

"Hey," the Dealer whispered from a dark doorway. "Got a second?"

"Not right now," I muttered.

P-21 looked at me. "Blackjack?"

Great. Now I was starting to act crazy. Crazier anyway. "Just... go away. I'm not crazy anymore and I don't need you creeping me out. Okay? I've got monsters to deal with, and Rampage and Stable 99 and... you know what? This relationship just isn't working out. It's not you. It's me. Okay. So just go away and stop bugging me." I smiled to the old pale pony as pleasantly as I could, then saw the pair staring at me.

P-21 repeated himself in a far more unsettled tone, "Blackjack... who are you talking to?"

"Nopony! Okay. I'm just... ah..." I sat down hard and blurted, "Sometimes I see this pale horse who has a real fetish for cards and he likes being all cryptic and mysterious and I think he's some crazy part of my brain but I'm not crazy anymore so I don't need to talk to him so he just needs to go away..." I took a deep breath, glaring at the old buck. "Right now!"

The old buck just nudged his hat back, looking at me with an amused smile.

"Okay!" Rampage said brightly, grinning at P-21. "Suddenly my problems don't seem quite so bad!"

"You killed Thorn," he replied bluntly, taking away her grin as he sat next to me. "This been going on for a while?"

"Since Glory got branded," I admitted. "I mean... I kinda had hints before then, but it was after she got branded that he started showing up for chats."

"Why didn't you tell us?" he asked in a slightly hurt tone.

"Well. I mean... you were just getting over wanting to kill me... you are over that, right?" His eyebrows arched as he looked at me coolly. "Okay... mostly over that. Anyway, Glory was hurt, I felt completely useless... then we fought Deus and the Zodiacs and there were all the problems in Flank and... I just wanted to seem like I had it together. Okay? That I could tough it out."

He just shook his head. "Blackjack, you're an idiot. You sing while chopping up ghouls. You befriend any monster than seems the slightest bit depressed. You seem to make enemies with shocking regularity. And you think that seeing things that aren't there is too much? I figured you were crazy when you stopped Daisy from bashing my head in, and nothing I've seen has changed that much." He nudged my shoulder with his hoof. "You might be one twigged mare, but you're also a good pony and a good friend."

Rampage looked from me to P-21, and then asked, "Um... are you two gonna kiss or what?"

The Dealer just smiled and chuckled softly, shaking his head. Immediately, we both went bright red. P-21 stammered and pointed at me. "Kiss? Her? She's a mare!" Rampage broke into giggles as P-21 scowled. "I don't even like her like that... really! I have grenades, you know!"

I just smiled and shook my head, then stepped past the Dealer into the room. The office had once been somepony's living quarters, but clearly the Enclave had cleaned house before abandoning Miramare. There hadn't been much in here to begin with. Just a terminal I hadn't even bothered to try accessing. Locks were one thing, but I had no clue how to—

I might not, but... "P-21! I need you! Right now!" I shouted. Rampage's giggles exploded into peals of laughter.

He stepped in with a look promising to find some way to murder a certain striped pony. "It's not for sex or a joke," I added quickly. I stepped over to the terminal. "Can you access this?"

His scowl disappeared. "Maybe. Let me see." He hobbled in front of it. "Ugh... huge password. It better not be mares setting up more sex dates." Rampage walked in, rubbing tears of mirth from her cheeks. He started his magic as I tapped my left hoof on the top of the monitor. Then he hit a key and the terminal let out a beep. "Whoa... I'm in on the third try! That was lucky," he said, pleased at the turn of events.

Yeah... luck. I looked over his shoulder. "And... so much for luck. Most of the files were auto deleted. Looks like... just garbage here." Then he moved the cursor over one entry. "Wait, here's one."

To: Minty Fresh

From: Lighthooves

Nice job getting that confession. I knew that Dashite was just itching to tell us her true contempt for the Enclave. Morning Glory's whole family is no better, really. It's in their blood. Can you believe she'd accuse us of misconduct? Where is her loyalty? Her sense of duty? Her honor? Ah, well, as long as she has that surfacer terrorist assisting her, there's not much we can do. Since she's insisted we brand her, I suppose that's what we'll have to do. Such a pity. We were making some real progress investigating potential cures for the surface, but she's mucked up the whole operation. Now she's probably run off to Flank or Megamart. I suppose we'll have to hope Yellow River offers better fruit. Get ready to relocate.

I wanted to shoot somepony. Actually, I'd already wanted to shoot him, but this moved him back to the top of the list. But, oddly, despite my horn twitching with the need to put a hole in the screen, something held me back. "Something's wrong," I muttered. "Back out. All the way out." He frowned and did so. I looked at the screen and selected the first password option from the screen of gobbledygook. Then the second. Then the third.

'Exact match.' I repeated it two more times, and every time the third guess brought up the password, no matter how I put in the password. "That bastard," I muttered.

"I would like to buy a clue, please? Something in a size four," Rampage said as she peeked up from between my legs.

"This is why Dusk tried to kill Glory. This wasn't for me. This was to put Dusk on Glory's trail." And if she'd been a little more lucky with her Novasurge shots, she would have killed her right in front of us. I read the message again and tapped the screen. "Yellow River. That's for me."

"Yellow River? What's Yellow River?" P-21 asked in confusion.

"Well, if you've ever seen me drink a whole lot of Sparkle-Cola all at once--" Rampage began with a little smirk.

"I don't know, but he wants me to go there. A trap. A setup? Something." I gritted my teeth. I had to go. It was the only lead I had for helping Glory at the moment. "He's playing me." Like the Goddess.

"So what are you going to do?"

"Play along. Then I'll play rough and dirty when the time comes for it. Find something to hang him with. And if all that fails, feed him to a hungry raider. Alive," I muttered.

"Yeah, right. Like anypony would do that..." P-21 began, and then our eyes met. His grin slowly slid away as he muttered sheepishly, "Oh. Damn. Awkward." A loud explosion echoed through the operations hallway, followed immediately by a bestial roar of pain. "Saved by the monster," P-21 muttered. "Blackjack, if there's a way out, now's the time."

I agreed, giving the Dealer a cold glare... not that it mattered. He wasn't really there anyway; I just hated that disingenuous look of innocence he wore. We made our way to the storage utility that had been blown out. Both of us took a pill of Rad-X, and I held one out to Rampage. She just snorted and slid down into the hole in the concrete pipes in the floor. My PipBuck immediately began to spike, the readout showing a blue pony turning green and then yellow as the rads increased. I hoped this wasn't going to be a long tunnel, or the whole thing would be moot.

Thankfully, we were able to reach the open pipes at the base of the crater, and sure enough, there was Lacunae, waiting patiently. Was it just me, or did she look even... well... more alicorny? Her coat glistened and her horn seemed to shimmer with potency. Radiation did an alicorn good, apparently.

"Good. You made it. I was about to come in after you. We must be quiet. Glory is nearby."

I took a look around and my jaw dropped. That was a fuckton of red bars! I passed P-21 some RadAway, then gulped down some myself (not even getting to savor the sharp orangey flavor!) before the four of us crawled up out of the crater to where an armored vehicle lay on its side. Glory sipped on a packet as well, looking at me nervously. "Oh, good. You made it out," she said with clear relief. "We're surrounded by manticores."

"Mantawhats?" I muttered as we crouched in the hull. Everywhere I looked, there were more of the lion/bat/scorpion hybrids. "How do you know what they are?"

"Manticores are a constant threat in the Wasteland, though they're usually not so well organized." I'd thought for sure that they had to be something from Project Chimera, but apparently some abominations the Wasteland just whipped up on its own. "I think that she's controlling them somehow."

"She who?" I asked as I looked through P-21's binoculars.

Oh... she *her*. Now THIS had to be something from Chimera. The tawny pony prowled back and forth on the roof of the main building. Her legs ended in razor-sharp claws rather than hooves, and the wings on her back were leathery instead of feathery. The scorpion tail she possessed snapped and stabbed at the manticores that didn't shy out of her way quickly enough, and with her lips parted I could see a set of wicked fangs. As disturbing as she was, it wasn't as bad as the flock of manticores lounging around the airbase. I couldn't see how we were going to get a hundred feet without one of them spotting us.

And the radiation was still building up in us.

"Okay. We need to get the heck out of here," I said as I looked at the twisted wreckage concealing us. Rampage was examining a heap of bones in some frayed and charred uniforms, while P-21 seemed to be checking his grenades and Glory took another Rad-X.

"Would you like to return to Chapel?" Lacunae asked casually.

"Well... yeah. That'd be great, but I don't know how we're going to get there without all of them piling on us," I said and then frowned. "Are you telling me you can return all of us to Chapel? That's miles away!"

She took a long, slow, luxurious breath as she looked at the glowing crater. "Right now? *Most* certainly."

"Right." Ten or fifteen more minutes here and it'd be moot. I trotted over to Rampage, who seemed to be staring down at the bones with a wistful look. "Come on, Rampage. We're leaving."

"Huh? Oh, yeah," she said as she crawled through the gutted vehicle. For a moment, I almost joined her, but then I moved to look down at the same pile of bones. This far into the transport, the body was a little more intact. Nothing valuable, of course. Just a rotten, scorched uniform, two tin ID tags hanging around her neck, the junk of two centuries ago. Slowly, I took a closer look at the name stamped in the tin.

'Twist'.

I stared at another of Macintosh's Marauders. Slowly, I bent down and nudged the brittle bones. Her hooves had pinched something between them, bundling them in the rags of her uniform. With care, I liberated the objects from her rags.

The pictures were all partially burned, discolored, or waterstained. There were little mouthwritten notes on the bottoms, smeared but still barely legible. Twist on a playground next to a foal so alike that only Twist's glasses really set them apart. *Weren't we alike back then, Apple Bloom?*

Twist standing in a candy shop with a sign that read 'Peppermint' under two crossed candy canes. *Too bad about my candy shop, huh?*

Twist standing proudly amid a line of recruits with a buzzed mane, the youngest and smallest but looking eager to fight. Big Macintosh loomed beside her, giving her a brotherly glance. *Look at my mane! It's so short!*

An older and more mature Apple Bloom posing for a picture in front of a stable door marked with an immense number 2. *Looking good, Apple Bloom. Looking really good.*

Twist putting Big Macintosh in a hooflock as the rest of the Marauders cheer and laugh at the sight. Psalm smiling in reserved amusement, Stonewing grinning as Jetstream leans against him. Vanity shaking his head with a smile. Even Doof having a great time.

Then a picture of the Marauders all gathered together in Prance. Her grin around the peppermint stick goes from ear to ear. *My family.*

The next picture was of Twist and three red-marked zebras. As sad as she looked, they appeared... haggard, yet also proud. She's hoofbumping the leader. *Last of the Proditors.*

All but one of the Marauders standing in grim lines on one side of a casket, the Ministry Mares on the other. Applejack resting her head upon the corner of the coffin as Twilight Sparkle holds her shoulders. Applesnack's eyes looking at the orange mare past Celestia giving a eulogy. I had never seen such a look of repressed pain on a buck's face before. Twist just looks... lost.

One of her in the hospital, looking hurt, but Vanity, Echo, and Applesnack are with her. Three out of eight friends; her eyes show far more pain than joy.

She wasn't smiling in the last picture. Oh, her lips were curled at the edges, but there was no mirth in her eyes as she stood alone on a tank, sergeant stripes on her uniform. She had the eyes of a ghoul: flat and lifeless and eager to die.

And so she had.

There was one last picture that had fallen away, and I almost missed it. I recognized the young Apple Bloom as almost a spitting image of Applebot. I didn't know who the orange pegasus or the unicorn with the purple mane were. They seemed to be in the middle of a fight in a garden, surrounded by statues, as Twist looked on with a sad smile. *The worst day of my life was when I got my cutie mark, and you didn't.*

I pressed the pictures back between her hooves as I heard the others call out a warning and bent my nose to nuzzle her skull. I prayed that she'd finally found rest at last. With one regretful look back, I returned to the others. There was a brilliant flash of purple light, and the world disappeared.

* * *

Okay. I admit that I was a little frustrated. I had another monsterpony after me with a small army of flying monsters. I had no doubt, as lay there in the post office, sucking down my third RadAway, that she was probably already looking for us.

Worse... if she found out we were in Chapel...

"Why so gloomy?" Adagio asked lazily as the quartet collected around me. "If it's about Thorn, it happens. Sometimes a colt won't even stay an hour before they take the walk."

I gave a little smile to the blue colt. "Thanks, but it's not that. It's just that I need to travel way up north, but it's become a lot more complicated."

P-21 nodded. "Yeah," he said as he looked at a crude map Priest had drawn for us. "We'd have to travel all the way south to Flank, head into the hills to cross the river upstream of the dams, north through Society territory, past the Collegiate ponies in Hoofington U, past all the Enclave at the Skyport OR sneak past Paradise, get past the Steel Rangers, and cross the river again near the coast way up north." It was going to take weeks. Lacunae wasn't familiar enough with anywhere up north to teleport to it, even if it was inside her range.

"So why don't you just take the boat?" Medley asked, giving us a look that questioned our intelligence. P-21 and I stared at each other; in all our time in Chapel, nopony had ever uttered the syllable 'boat' in our hearing.

"There's a boat?" P-21 asked sharply.

She rolled her eyes. "Stable ponies don't know nothin'. 'Course there's a boat," the chartreuse unicorn filly said. "The *Seahorse* goes up and down the river all the time. Her captain's a bit off, you know, but she's the only one brave enough to risk it."

I looked at her skeptically, and then took out the Hoofington Edition of the Wasteland Survival Guide. After flipping through a bit, I found an entry on the Hoofington River.

No visit to the Hoofington area is complete without spotting the Hoofington River. The largest river in all of Equestria in our times, the Hoofington River runs north from Equestria's second-largest lake to the sea. Its progress is only interrupted by the dams, south of the city, that continue to provide power to the region to this day!

Now, you might be tempted to stop and take a swim, or, if it's a rare dry day, take a drink. Take my advice and don't. Upstream contamination has made all of the water mildly radioactive and tainted. That's led radigators and river serpents of prodigious size and appetite to spawn. Even if none of that gets you, the river is choked with debris and its current is powerful. All the rain goes somewhere, ponies.

For those folks desperate to travel along the river course, there are always a few brave souls willing to make the trip for caps. The most successful ferry is the Seahorse, which is still operating even after years on the water. The passenger is recommended to bring plenty of caps for the trip. However, the captain is quite... erratic in his pricing.

Allegro nodded. "Yeah, the captain is one rough, tough, twigged pony, but they're always good for getting us up and down the river. Doesn't deal in slaves, and so as long as your caps are good, the captain's usually fair. Crazy, but fair."

I looked at P-21, beginning to see a pattern. He grunted sourly, looking at me. "Another unstable pony. Wonder if he's as twigged as you are."

"What?" I said defensively to the snickers of the four. Giving P-21 a slightly incensed look, I asked Allegro, "So, when does the boat stop by Chapel?"

"She's here now," the red colt said with a grin.

"Now? As in, right *now* right now?" P-21 asked as he and I looked at each other.

"Yup! She's tied up under the bridge. Charity's doing her trading now." With one last look at each other, we turned and raced to the door.

* * *

I really didn't know what I expected when I thought of the word 'boat'. Could it carry five of us? Would it be safe? Fast? Would Sanguine anticipate us taking it? Would we have the caps the captain wanted?

P-21 found the concrete steps that led to a crumbling concrete slip underneath the bridge. Panting, we picked our way underneath and saw... the hunk of junk that looked as if it should be lying under the river instead of floating atop it. Okay, maybe that wasn't fair. What did I know about boats? I just didn't think that they should look so... rusty.

It was almost as long as the bridge overhead was wide; maybe seventy or eighty feet? The hull had been patched and painted so many times that it was hard for me to figure out what its original color was. It was made of wood with metal sheeting hammered over the top; I knew this because of all the places where the metal sheeting was no longer there. At the front of the boat was a small enclosed turret with two machine guns pointing out.

It looked as if there were seven or eight crewponies, and the biggest buck of all was sitting at a card table staring at Charity with his forehooves crossed. With his scruffy black beard, anchor cutie mark, and scarred hide, I guessed he was the captain. Charity stared back undaunted, as if trying to will him to part with his caps. "You'd better wait here," P-21 said. "I'll see if I can get us a ride."

"Great. Waiting," I muttered as I sat with a grumpy frown as he trotted down and started trying to break into the staring contest. He might as well have been talking to a wall for all the notice he got.

"Tell me about it," said a mare beside the river. "So boring just waiting for them. They've been at this for hours." The turquoise unicorn mare had a mane so filthy and chopped that I wasn't sure if it was blue, gray, or some mottled mix of the two. She wore a battered black cap complete with skull and crossbones, like from a story book. A leather eyepatch covered her left eye. She swirled an amber drink in a bottle. "Want some? It's rum... or grog... one of the two." She glared at the contents suspiciously. "Sneaky little drink..."

"Sure," I replied as I joined the inebriated mare, plopping down beside her and taking a swig. Rum (or grog, maybe), I discovered, was a bit sweeter than my preferred intoxicant. "That's not bad."

She offered her hoof. "Thrush."

"Blackjack." I bumped it with my own.

She eyed my security barding, leaning back and squinting as she fought to focus her gaze. "Security... Security... where have I heard that before?" She suddenly pointed the bottle at me with a gasp. "You're that... that... mare with the bounty, ain't 'cha?" I felt my mane start to prickle, but then she grinned. "Well, good for you. I always said that if you're doin' something good enough for somepony to pay to want you dead, then ya must be doing it well."

"So, you're not looking to collect?"

She took another pull off the bottle and then burped. "Who, me? Collect for Usury? HA! *Fuck Usury! Fuck her right up her ass with an anchor! Bitch wanted me to transport slaves for her.*" She scowled at me. "Do you know what kind of mess slaves make? I mean really? Smell lasts for... ev... er..." She made an annoyed face. "So I told her to go fuck herself, and everypony in Paradise, and I think Equestria too while I was at it." I just grinned as she frowned and rubbed her chin. "I think I might have shot her too. Shot at her... one of the two."

"Really?" I said with a chuckle.

"Well I was drunk at the time, and I don't quite think she understood all the implications therein. She took it all personal-like. Put a ten thousand cap bounty on my noggin. I don't think she realized most bounty hunters can't swim," the turquoise mare muttered as she upended the bottle into her wide open mouth. She swallowed, then blinked and stared into the bottle. "Gone... why is it always gone? A great tragedy strikes the Wasteland once again." She looked at me through the bottom. "Oooh, wavy."

I smirked. I had been waiting for a special occasion to enjoy it. This would do. I floated out a bottle of Wild Pegasus that Glory had bought. "Security to the rescue," I said with a little grin. I might not be able to save ponies who needed it, but I could at least get somepony drunk who'd appreciate it.

An hour later, I had a nice warm glow in my stomach that gave rise to a pleasant buzz spreading throughout my body. "So, what's your story, Thrush?"

"Who? Me? Pffft. Story? I'm lucky if I got a limerick." She cleared her throat. "There once was a pony named Thrush, her mane was like a dirty old brush. But her daddy was captain and when his luck was cashed in, on his boat she'd have a serious crush," she said as she balanced the bottle of Wild Pegasus on the end of her horn. Since she had her horn stuck in the bottle, it wasn't that impressive.

"No second verse?"

"Same as the first!" she said with gusto, and I laughed even though it made no sense to me at all. "I've been steering the *Seahorse* all around Equestria. My daddy showed me all the neat little hidey holes and hazards to avoid. Normally I ply from Ironmare to Friendship City, but I tuck up river to see what the Eggheads or Crusaders have scavenged up every now and then. Damn skilled fillies and colts." She sighed as she tilted her head left and right, making the bottle rock on her horn. "Most boats are lucky to last a year on the water. I've lasted three." She looked at the dinged-up rustbucket with a look of love. "Saved my life, being captain. Having some control..."

Somehow, I doubted that there was nothing more to her than just five lives of verse. "So... wait? You're the captain?" I asked in confusion, and then I gestured at the scruffy looking buck with the thick beard. "Then who's he?"

"Him? Tarboots? He's our quartermaster. He tells me where to go to make money and I go there. It's not like I understand any of this business stuff. I just turn the wheel that points the *Seahorse* in the right direction and try not to get sunk. Hasn't happened yet." She let out a long, low belch, then smirked at me. "What? I've got biggest hat. That makes me captain."

"I can't argue with logic like that," I said with a laugh.

"And you? How the heck does a mare go around with a big 'Security' on her barding, shooting up the countryside?"

I took a deep breath as I balanced the rum bottle on my horn... okay... stuck my horn in the rum bottle. Ta-daa! "Well damn, if you're a limerick..." I coughed and cleared my throat. "Blackjack steps outside. She tries to do good and help. Poor Equestria." Never underestimate the powers of inebriation

for inspiration! “Anyway, now I’m trying to get way north. Going home actually,” I said as I stretched over and showed her my PipBuck’s navigation map. “See? Stable 99. Way up top there.”

“Oh... up there huh? Raider territory these days. Didn’t know there was a stable up there,” she said as she rubbed her nose. “Well, I can drop you off here at Boardwalk. Just a quick stroll to your stable, then.” She then looked at me skeptically. “Question is... can you follow the rules?”

“Probably. Depends on the rules,” I said cautiously.

“One... and this is a big one... listen to the motherfucking captain.” She lifted her hooves in frustration. “I cannot tell you how vital rule number one is. I tell you to shoot, you shoot. I tell you to shut up, shut up. I tell you to hide, then you hide. I tell you to swim for your life, then you swim for your life. ‘Cause otherwise somepony is gonna shoot you. Probably me.”

“Sometimes it feels like the day’s not started without somepony shooting Security,” I said with a resigned sigh.

“Price of virtue,” she said with a grin before continuing. “Two. Stay on the boat. You hop off for any reason and we gotta burn power to pick you up. Lots of places there isn’t anywhere to pull in. You got fliers?” I nodded and she looked curious. “Then they really have to stay in. If they take off, they’ll get thirty or forty feet before the city picks them off.”

“The city doesn’t shoot things in the river?” I asked curiously.

“Doesn’t have to.” She pointed a hoof at where the city wall met the river. A curtain of white rolled along it. “See all that rough water? It’s all busted up concrete and steel scrap. Besides, that close you’ve got ten minutes before the Enervation sucks you dry.”

“So no flying. I’ll truss them up like a turkey myself if I have to,” I said with a nod, wondering just how one tied up an alicorn. Politely, I guessed. Tying up Glory... that led into some downright disturbing neighborhoods of thought.

“Third, you pay for your own gas. That means spark batteries, gem cartridges, even raw gemstones. If you can’t swing that, then you get to point your horn into a flux converter and channel till it falls off. And trust me, it’ll feel like it if you do.”

“Right,” I said with a nod, watching as P-21 and the large gray Tarboots strolled up. “Hey, P-21.”

“Hey, Blackjack. I got us a deal with Captain Tarboots here, and—” He stared at me. What? Did I have something on my face?

The gray pony interrupted him. “Captain Thrush? Got a request for five passengers...” He broke off with a sigh. “Captain?” The turquoise mare blinked at him, and he coughed. “Captain... you have a bottle stuck on your horn again.”

She looked at him coolly and said, with as much dignity as she could muster, “I knew that. I did. Ahem. One moment.” She rose to her hooves, her magic carefully unscrewing the bottle from her horn. “Excellent observation, Master Tarboots... BUT... I’m afraid you’ll have to tell this adorable little guy that I have already agreed to provide passage to this filly and her friends.” The scarred buck opened his mouth, and she raised a hoof. “No no, Master Tarboots! This is an adventure!”

I looked at her with a wide grin that was mirrored by the turquoise unicorn and bumped hooves against hers. “You bet. I’ll get every spark battery I can, even if I have to tie Charity up in a sack to do it.” Okay, maybe I wouldn’t go that far. Maybe I’d pay for them and THEN tie her up in the sack.

The bucks stared on in shock as they looked from one of us to the other. "Sweet Celestia," muttered the grizzled buck as P-21 set down on his rump with a groan.

"There's two of them. There's two..." the blue buck moaned in despair. "Celestia save us all..."

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk added: Ferocious Loyalty -- When you drop below 50% HP, companions gain DT.

(Huge thanks to Kkatman for creating FoE in the first place and for Hinds and Bronode spending 8 hours making it decent, and huge thanks for all three for putting up with my whining and bitching...)