

## Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

### Chapter 21: Waterfall

*"I shall save you! Show yourselves, you dogs! You curs! Ha! There you are, you mangy mutts."*

It actually seemed like the Wasteland, for once, was throwing me a carrot. Sure, we'd lost the whole morning going to Miramare only to have to teleport back to evade another monsterpony, but then we'd discovered an alternate route. One that might get us past without having to worry about flying death... or at least not worry so much. And I'd have somepony to get drunk with!

Of course, we'd need spark... magic-y... stuff... to make the boat run.

"Charity!" I cried as I stormed into the post office. The yellow filly didn't bother looking up from the stack of boxes next to her.

"No time to deal with you now, Blackjack. I've got to double-check this stuff and make sure Tarboots didn't swap me those mines for a few boxes of gravel," she said sourly around a pen as she scribbled on a notepad.

I leapt over the counter in a clear violation of every rule of the Crusaders and seized Charity's shoulders with my forehooves. "Charity, I need spark batteries and magic cartridges! Now! Or gemstones! I need them right now. Please!"

Her eyes lit up and rolled thoughtfully, and with a flip of her head she spat out her pen and sent it spinning through the air to land neatly behind her ear. "Well, adding in processing costs and the Getting On My Nerves Tax... I figger I could sell 'em for..."

"And we're broke," I added. Paying Ditzzy and trading for what we'd needed had sapped most of our caps. I grinned as widely as I could and tried to ignore the feeling of sweat running down the back of my barding.

Her smile disappeared. "Get out," she declared imperiously. She flicked the pen from behind her ear, caught it in her mouth, and resumed checking her list.

I fell to my knees. "Please, Charity! Please! Without the boat, we'll have to walk, if we walk the monsterpony will find us, if she finds us then I'll feel sorry for her before I kill her, and if I do that then I'll feel guilty, and if I feel guilty then I'll whine! Please don't make me *whine*!" I begged as several Crusaders peeked over the counter to watch in amazement.

"I... you... what are ya..." she sputtered as I fell on my face and hugged her hoof.

"Please Charity! Please please pretty please pleasepleaseplease PLU... LEEEEZZZEEEE!!!!" I wailed as I kicked my back hooves.

"All right!" she yelled down at me, yanking her hoof free of my embrace as she blushed. "I can spare one!" My eyes grew large. "Erm... two?" Tears ran down my cheeks as my lip trembled. She let out a grunt of disgust. "Oh, just take the whole box, Blackjack!" She walked over to a shelf, pulled out a wooden crate, and tossed it to me, six glowing spark batteries rattling within. I just gave a whimper, the whine growing higher and higher.

A bottle of Wild Pegasus plopped on top of them.

Humming in glee and floating the box in front of me, I made my way back towards the bridge, the humming faltering not a bit when, a few seconds after I got out of the shop, Charity screamed after me, "It's going on yer tab, Blackjack! You hear me? With interest!"

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"*Seahorse* used to be an Equestrian Navy patrol boat," Oilcan, the rust-coated engineer mare, explained as she trotted to a hatch in the stern deck, her horn glowing as she undid the dogs and secured a rag in her curly red mane. "Doubt there's anything original on it besides the engine, though. I figger the last twenty years or so we've had to replace everything at least once." She hopped nimbly up into the air and disappeared down through the hatch.

The rest of the crew was finishing up business with two caravaners from Flank who'd come to trade chems and boxed food for bullets and music recordings brought from Tenpony in Manehattan. Sore as I was at Caprice, I'd gotten some Sugar Apple Bombs and some more Buck (just in case I had to wrestle Rampage again) from them in exchange for a few rounds of hunting ammo. A dirty look from me proved quite effective at getting them to shave a bit off the bill.

"Come on in," Oilcan said cheerfully. "Plenty o' room for all."

Glory stared into the hole with an audible gulp. I just gave her a friendly nudge on her hip and a smile that would hopefully convince her not to worry about it. P-21 jumped down happily; stable ponies had no problem with nice, tight, cramped spaces.

The engine itself was a block of polished brass inset with rubies and emeralds. It was connected by wires to a sapphire water talisman, twice the size of what we saw in 99's utility room, that was hooked up to several large pipes. "This here's the engine. It converts the raw magical spark energy into power for the water talisman. That makes the water that jets out the back to move the boat."

"Is there supposed to be this much water in here?" P-21 asked, looking down at the inch or so of scummy water that was sloshing about our hooves. My PipBuck clicked slowly; there wasn't nearly enough radiation to worry me unless I had an engine bilge water slurpee.

The motherly mare grinned at him. "Well if you'd like ta grab a bucket and do something about it, I know we'd be much obliged." She reached into my box and pulled out a spark battery, flipping the heavy square container in her hooves. Inside the crystal hovered a red ball of magical energy that shed little waving lines of light. She opened a panel with her mouth and pulled out an empty container, then slid the fresh one into the receptacle. There was a sudden hum as the gems lit up. "Of course, for when we don't got spark batteries, we've got a flux converter." She gestured at a circle strung with a spider web of glistening crystal strands. "Ain't nearly as efficient."

"And if that doesn't work?" I asked.

"Well, then ya can get out and push. We've had to do that a few times."

P-21 looked at the grease-slathered boards of the exposed inner surface of the hull. "I'm just curious why it's made of wood."

"You know what happens when you take a nice metal boat out on the ocean? Pretty soon it's a rusty boat at the bottom of the ocean. Sure, lumber might be a bitch to find, but it's a damned sight easier to get and work than steel plate. We seal her up with tar and pitch as well as we can, paint her if we can get it, plate the hull if we can manage it, and she's the best damn boat in Equestria."

"With an interesting captain," P-21 observed dryly.

Oilcan chuckled. "Yeah, Thrush ain't what most folks expect, but her daddy was two buckets shy of a dry hold. Once, we were stuck on a beach off Manezibar with this tainted sea serpent watching us past the reef. So the captain, he somehow gets a whole flock of rock crabs to carry the boat on their backs to the far side of the island!" The rusty mare slapped P-21's back as she laughed. "Thrush ain't quite the measure of her daddy, but she's the best girl for the job," Oilcan said firmly as she smiled at P-21. "I had my reservations, but she's the mare who loves *Seahorse* the most. She was willing to let her daddy go to keep it."

The rest of the spark batteries went in a locker above the engine. "Seems to me going downstream wouldn't require much power," P-21 said.

"Shows you don't know boats, boyo," Oilcan replied. "Going downstream, you've got the water pushing you into rocks, beams, snags, and worse. Half our power is spent maneuvering around obstacles and the other half fighting current. Just wait till you see the Towers. Any boat that tries to just go with the flow is in for a nasty surprise. The Hoofington River eats ponies. With all the rain about, there's a lot of energy in all that water."

Just another thing about this place I hated. I found myself scowling in the direction of the city. It seemed so wrong, like it was a trap trying to draw everypony in with lures of riches and food. I wondered how many ponies had come to Hoofington and ended up killed by raiders, poisoned by taint or radiation, or sucked dry by Enervation fields. The more I thought about it, the more disturbing it became. Even Lacunae's Goddess seemed distressed by this place.

Hoofington: the city that kills. It'd killed ponies when the zebras burned it. Killed zebras as it made itself the target of the war. And now it killed everypony it lured in. I could almost hear the cards shuffling in my head.

"Hey, you okay, Blackjack? You've got a shooty look on your face," P-21 asked, giving me a nudge. I had a 'shooty' look? I needed a mirror.

"Just... not a fan of Hoofington," I replied sullenly.

Oilcan chuckled as she rubbed her nose with a dirty hoof. "Heh. Join the club. I used to live in Friendship City. Nice town. Maybe a touch crowded, but a good place to live," she said as she checked some power cables. "One day, her daddy's in port and so damn drunk that the town assigned him a guard so he wouldn't blow something up on accident. He mentions that he needs an engineer. I've got a comfy life ahead of me, but he goes on about the riches, the adventure, the sights, the adventure, the rum, the adventure, the sex... oh yeah, did he mention adventure? Boyo talked me into bed and then onto his boat. Been a lot of places. But Hoofington's always been the worst. Always has enough treasure to bring you here. Always has enough grief to make you wonder why you came in the first place. Bilgewater got eaten by a river serpent this trip. I doubt he'll be the last... but the *Seahorse* will be back. I'm sure of that."

"So why do you stay?" P-21 asked.

Oilcan sighed and smiled, reaching out to touch the engine. There was a lover's look in her eyes. "Back home, I had a pretty comfy life; wasn't no Tenpony, but comfy. Out here... well... we ain't found riches, the sights are all pretty damned ugly, the rum's watered down, and the sex gets a little awkward on a little boat like this... but the adventure? He sure wasn't lying about that. Long as the captain can steer her straight, I'll keep her running. To Hoofington or Hell itself."

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*Seahorse* wasn't exactly made for a luxury cruise. The five of us had one room to ourselves, and that had only four hammocks. We had to shift the footlockers into the middle of the space and throw some blankets atop them for Lacunae. We were allowed to be there or sitting on the narrow walk that ran along the sides of the boat between the rails and the superstructure. P-21 pointed out that, since I couldn't fly, all my fancy new barding wouldn't be much better than an anchor. Damn it, what was the point of having cool looking armor if I never got to wear it?

There was a hum in the back of the ship that grew louder and louder, then two streams of choppy water blasted out the rear of the boat just below water level. Tarboots and Oilcan untied the lines and jumped nimbly into the rear of the boat, and the swoosh of the water plumes increased. At the stern, on top of the superstructure at the highest point of the boat, was the wheelhouse; for windows, it had rusty slats of metal that Thrush peered through as she moved the *Seahorse* upstream of the bridge before slowly turning the boat around. Immediately, the whoosh died to a gurgle as the powerful current carried us downstream.

I admit that I am a complete and utter pansy when it comes to flight, but, if the whole 'height' thing was taken away, I liked the sensation of being carried along without having to walk around. "Keep your eyes open," Captain Thrush called down to us as we sat on the walk, leaning on the metal rail.

I kept Taurus's rifle handy as my eyes scanned the scummy brown water. "What am I looking for?"

"Till we get to the Fork, anything poking out of the river bottom or anypony with a missile. We might come across some hoppers after the Fallen Towers, but till then our biggest risk is running into something sharp and pointy," she said calmly, making only the slightest adjustments to the boat's heading and letting the current do the rest.

"Are ponies with missiles a common problem?" I called back, looking at the increasingly thick ruins lining the river and deliberately not looking at the enigmatic towers on the other side of the boat. This close to the Core, I felt... odd. Lightheaded. I could only assume it was the Enervation fields of the city nipping at my cells. Thrush was keeping the *Seahorse* in the middle of the river, but I felt the urge to ask her to move closer to the rubble-strewn western bank.

She grunted. "Reaper wannabes and raiders, mostly. They gather in small groups to prey on Riverside or Flotsam. Unless they've got something big, we generally don't worry too much about it." She gunned the engine and threaded the *Seahorse* around a spur of concrete just barely below the surface; I spotted it only as we slid past it close enough to spit.

Glory proved the most valuable pair of purple eyes. Standing in the bow just in front of the turret, she and the crew's lookout, a young green earth pony mare named Seabiscuit, spotted hazards lying just under the surface that I couldn't see even as we passed them, Glory pointing them out with her wingtips so that Thrush could steer around them. As the river carried us along, the ruins became even larger and more elaborate and damaged. Blocks of apartment buildings had slid right into the water and filled it with deadly debris. Pipes blasted jets of yellowish-brown foamy, filmy water every few hundred feet as the land drained into the river.

A small camp of four ponies. Raiders, from the bloody bites on their limbs. I sighted them carefully, didn't see anything resembling a missile, and was about to fire when the Captain said, "Don't. Gunshots carry on the water." Reluctantly, I lowered the rifle.

"I thought you weren't an executioner," the dusty voice said softly.

"I'm not an executioner. They were raiders," I muttered to myself, glancing at the Dealer, who

was looking at the raiders with pity. "They're dying from a disease already. It's going to kill them one way or another." I remembered the mare in Miramare who had gorged till her stomach burst. "It's not an execution if they're already going to die." I flushed in anger as I saw Glory look back at me. Great. Now everypony was going to know I was losing it.

"Oh... well, that's convenient," he said with an understanding little nod. "So long as you're granting mercy, it's okay. Funny... wasn't there another pony using the exact same logic just yesterday?"

"Shut up," I hissed softly.

"Of course, it wouldn't be the first time you've done it," he continued.

"Shut up!" I yelled at the pale bastard, levitating Cupcake's revolver and pressing it to his forehead. "Why the fuck do you do this? I was feeling halfway good and then you... why are you trying to make me remember killing them all? Why can't you let me be happy?" My magic tightened on the trigger; sure, it wouldn't kill him, but I'd feel *better*.

"Blackjack?" Glory said in a fearful voice as the Dealer melted away.

The gun was pointed right between her shocked eyes.

My magic released the gun at once, and it bounced off the deck and landed in the river with a little splash. I stared into Glory's fearful and hurt eyes and felt myself start to shake. I hadn't had the shakes like this in a while. I thought that I was over it. I'd put it behind me. Matured. Moved on.

I am a fucking idiot.

I hadn't put anything behind me. I'd thrown it in the closet and forgotten about it. I'd murdered forty foals. Executed them. I'd rationalized. I'd justified. But my mind wasn't letting me let it go. "I'm sorry, Glory. I wasn't talking to you. I was... I'm just... sorry."

I saw the conflict in her eyes as I looked down into the water. Then she jumped over me and disappeared below decks.

"Well, that was interesting," Thrush said from behind the wheel.

"I don't want to talk about it."

She smiled and shook her head. "Didn't ask if you did. You don't have to explain to me. I talk to ghosts too, sometimes."

Not quite what I was dealing with... at least I hoped not! "You do?"

"Sure. Dad asking me to shoot him," she replied in a soft, casual voice that made me shiver. "Looking back, I probably should have, so it's only fair he gets to haunt me from time to time, right?"

Sometimes all it takes is one second, one wrong action, one little mistake, and something precious is gone for good.

All except for the regrets.

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P-21 had as much affinity for sea travel as I did for the air. He lay with his face in a bucket on the

stern deck behind the wheelhouse. Really, I didn't mind the rocking at all. It gave me something to think about besides that my brain was playing nasty tricks on my mind and I'd almost shot Glory in the face. True, she'd shot me first, but we were way past that.

My ears flicked as I heard a distant sound, like a deep breath being drawn continuously. It made my mane begin to itch in apprehension as I looked first at the fire-gutted ruins across the river and then at the grim walls of the Core. "What is that?" I asked Thrush as I rose to my hooves.

"Fallen Towers," she replied in a soft, grim tone. "You ponies better get down inside and tie yourselves in. This is going to be a little rough!" Her horn glowed as she lifted a length of rope and started tying herself to the boat.

Somehow, I sensed a whole riverful of understatement in that as I rose as high as I could, looking for the source of that terrible sound. I heard the others getting below, but I couldn't go hide. I had to see just what we were facing. The captain yelled something at me about breaking the first rule as I staggered forward. Passing the gun turret, I saw Oilcan pulling out the guns. Our eyes met, and I saw the fear in them. This was something bad.

I rushed to the front of the boat and ran into Seabiscuit trying to go the opposite direction. The sea green mare balked and backed to the bow as the deck heaved. We were moving fast... really really fast. The wide river now seemed ominously narrow, as if all the rubble and junk had constricted it into a foamy flume. The boat gave one more lurch, and the mare gave up trying to move back and instead began to frantically tie herself to rusty metal rings set in the deck. "Tie yourself down!" she yelled, but I wasn't really listening at that point.

My eyes stared out in front of me as I felt a sensation like taking a cold bath wash over me. Like everything else in Hoofington, I suspected that the massive Core towers rising to the rolling clouds were ridiculously overengineered. However, despite that, during the war's fiery end, one of the towers had broken off ten stories or so up and had fallen across the river. The heavy, armored face of the fallen tower acted as a dam of sorts, and the tower's fall had shattered and knocked down a half dozen more buildings that were now also lying in the swirling fury of frothing water. The water poured over the jagged stumps of the fallen foundations like saliva over teeth. The river was hungry.

"How in Hell are we supposed to get through that?" I shouted. Then I stared as the boat flew between a pair of street lights. We weren't going down a river any more... this was a street! The impromptu dam had driven the river out of its banks, and now we were navigating racing currents running through the ruins of the shattered office buildings. Broken foundations and rusted streetlights flew past us as the water flew forwards faster and faster towards the source of that perpetual inhalation.

"Tie yourself down!" Seabiscuit screamed again as she grabbed a second length of rope, knotted it around my chest, and tied it to another ring. "Captain will get us through!" she yelled, the green mare staring back at Thrush with a look of frantic faith.

The captain just stared grimly ahead.

Then I saw exactly where she was taking us. The tower had not fallen completely intact. A split had opened up inside it where the top third had snapped back like a peppermint stick and created a yawning chasm that the river was forced into. However, I didn't see a way through, only endless black. The *Seahorse* seemed to hang, suspended on that eerily smooth rolling tongue of water that poured down endlessly into the gullet of the fallen skyscraper.

And then, with a blast of cold wet mist, we plunged into the darkness. I gripped the rail with my hooves as we plummeted into the hollow interior of the skyscraper. Then, just as we'd fallen down, the water rose into a vertical wall again, and this time we were going *up*. The *Seahorse* rode the arching wall

of water as it poured along the interior of the building like an enormous pipe. In my mutated sight, I could see the rusted steel beams stabbing at the *Seahorse* like spears. Something banged against the underside of the ship, and I felt the entire vessel jump as we raced wildly down the interior of the building. Cracks in the wall sprayed cold, foul water in my face. I had no idea how Thrush, how *anypony*, could navigate this passage.

Then I spotted light ahead, and with it the sight of another wall of water churning sideways. How could a vertical wall of water move *sideways*? “Hang on,” Seabiscuit screamed in my ear. I wrapped my front hooves around the railing as we approached that surging sweep of fluid.

For a terrifying moment, I swore we flew. My stomach rose in my throat as we were ejected from a second split in the side of the tower and right at the face of a fallen apartment building. The water rose up and up, and we rose with it. Higher and higher the boat rose, and I stared *down* towards the stern. I wasn't sure if I was simply soaked through or if I wet myself at the sight.

Then our rise stopped, but Seabiscuit's did not. She continued going up and out, connected only by the rope tied to the ring. The rope went taut. Then, with a metallic ‘ping’, the metal snapped. Her teal eyes widened in horrified resignation as she started to plunge back down towards the churning water as the boat hung in the air.

I screamed as I set my hooves and launched myself into the air, my legs flailing.

Save one. Just save one...

Her trailing rope smacked me in the face, and I gripped it with hooves, teeth, magic, whatever. My rope went taut as well, and the ring held as we swung back and crashed into the deck of the *Seahorse*. My teeth rattled as I hit the rail and hooked a rear leg around it; she tangled with the turret.

I wondered if we would hang like that forever. A small tilt in the wrong direction... backwards towards the surging torrent spraying from the tower... Then the boat fell. With horrifying, ponderous slowness, it tilted away from the crumbling apartment face as I was looking down at a swirling froth of brown water. There was nothing I could do but clutch that rail with every bit of strength I could muster.

Every inch of me was slammed with more force than I'd ever thought possible as the boat fell upside down. My breath blasted from my body in a bubbly scream as I felt like the rope was about to cut me in two! Then I was lifted from the water as the *Seahorse* reverse-capsized, coming to the surface dripping wet and pointing her nose downstream. I opened my eyes, looking for the sea green pony and staring at the rope trailing in the water. The rope burn had torn two raw strips of flesh from around my forehooves.

Just one... please, let me save just one...

I floated a Buck to my mouth and chewed down as the *Seahorse* raced towards a jagged strand of crushed buildings and debris. My heart thundered as I heaved with all my strength. I could barely breathe as I looped the rope around my forelegs, pulled, and looped again. I clenched my eyes shut, imagining the beams and concrete ripping her apart. It felt as if one of those jagged spurs had lodged straight through my chest as I pulled again and again.

And then a limp green form came over the rail and fell atop me. Water dribbled from her mouth as she lay there.

“One... just... one...” I whispered softly as I rolled upright and pressed down on her sides, trying to force the water out. Thorn. Roses. Tumbleweed. Scoodle. Eleven zebras. Forty foals. Let me save just one!

She lay there, another corpse, my heart racing so fast that I collapsed beside her.

Thorn. Roses. Tumbleweed. Scoodle. Zebras. Foals. Seabiscuit.

Then she coughed, gasped, retched, and vomited water. I shook as I fought to sit up, trying to do something helpful and managing just to blubber and hold her shoulders as Tarboots walked carefully along the heaving deck, rushing to help. She drew one shaking breath after another as I fell on my back, gasping for breath with the blood-soaked rope tight around my hooves.

Everything fell away as I smiled.

I saved one, you bony son of a bitch...

I saved one.

\* \* \*

"Wake up, Fishy. Fishy?" my mom called over to my bed. "I know you're awake, Go Fish. You're smiling."

"Am not! Sleepin'." And I snored loudly to prove it.

She bumped me with her nose. "Security mares have to wake up and do our jobs, Fishy."

"I dun wanna be Security, Momma. It's no fun," I muttered, looking up at my lavender momma with her smart, indulgent smile and striped purple and red mane.

"Security's the best job in the stable," she said softly.

"Everypony says that 'bout their job," I said as I rubbed my eyes and yawned.

She just chuckled. "But ours really is. We get to save ponies."

~ ~ ~

"Why do we gotta be so mean to the boys, Momma?" I asked as my eyes looked over at two bucks walking with their heads hanging, following two mares. They looked hurt and... something else. I didn't know what shame was back then.

She smiled sadly as I got a green alfalfa smoothie from the cafeteria, munching on the sweet grassy sludge. "We don't. But a lot of mares can be mean, so a lot of mares are mean to ponies they think it's okay to hurt."

"But why? They're not in my classes or nothing. What do the colts do?" I asked as I ignored the spoon and straw and chowed down.

"They do something very important for the stable. They make babies."

I imagined something like a factory where little fillies were assembled like dolls. "They do?"

"Mhmm. One of them made you," she said with a smile. "Not sure which one, but..." She flushed slightly as she said that to herself more than me.

"But what did they do?" I asked with a little frown.

"Well in your grandma's time, colts and fillies shared all kinds of jobs. All except for one: the Overmare. Everypony got one baby to take over their jobs when they died, whether they were bucks or mares. Then, one day the Overmare had a baby colt. The males were happy because there were a lot more mares than bucks, anyway, and they thought the rules weren't fair."

I grumbled, "I don't think the rules are fair either. It's stupid I gotta go to bed when I'm not even tired."

"If you did, maybe you wouldn't have problems waking up," she said as she levitated a napkin to wipe my face clean. "Anyway, the Overmare said that the colt couldn't be an overmare because he wasn't a mare. The bucks said the Overmare was breaking the rules because she couldn't have another baby. Then her foal died in medical. The bucks said the Overmare had killed him to have another baby and demanded she be replaced, but there's nothing in the rules for taking away an overmare's job."

I gasped as I squirmed, trying to get away from her floating napkin. "And did she, Momma?"

She just smiled sadly and shrugged. "The bucks thought she did and they were angry. They took over the maintenance level and threatened to do something very bad if the Overmare didn't step down. The bucks had a lot of mares wanting to help them before, but breaking the air purification talismans would have killed everypony. There was a nasty fight, and several important parts of the stable were damaged. Finally, most of the bucks were captured, and the Overmare said that from then on mares would run the stable and bucks would make babies."

I munched my green smoothie, making a mess of my face again. "Huh. I wondered why I never see any colts in school. Well, except for this one. He's always hiding near the door. Or he was," I said as I tapped my hooves against the table. "I haven't seen him since I took him back to medical."

She gave me such a sad smile. "Try not to think about it, Fishy."

Because once you started, you wouldn't stop. Not till it drove you mad.

~ ~ ~

Security were friends with security. Thus, my friends were, by default, the children of security mares. Daisy limped to the corner of the schoolroom where we were being taught our core lessons and security training by the bored, burned-out banality of Miss Textbook. Marmalade looked at the crème-colored filly in concern, at the darkened red bruises on her face and the twitchy look in her eyes. There were bandages on her legs, side, and flank.

"Are you okay, Daisy?" I asked, looking at the bruises on her cheek and muzzle.

"Yeah. I got in a fight," she said, sniffing as if it were no big deal. Daisy always got in fights. As security, she was supposed to fight; we all were. But I always wondered just who she was picking them with. "So, what's teach going on about?" she asked, and the honey-colored Marmalade and I looked at each other in concern. Daisy never cared about what the teacher taught.

"The Ministry of Awesome and how it was just a bone thrown to Rainbow Dash, since she never actually did anything," I said softly.

"Sorry I asked," she yawned, and we relaxed.

Then Duct Tape walked by and the homely gray filly looked at the three of us... no, looked at

Daisy. Daisy looked at her. "What are you looking at?" Duct Tape shook her head as she backed away. "I said, what the fuck are you looking at!" And as Duct Tape turned to run, Daisy charged her.

"No! Please! I'm sorry!" Duct Tape begged as Daisy ploughed into the smaller gray filly and proceeded to pummel her.

"You didn't see anything! You understand?! Nothing, you gray pussy!" Daisy shrieked as she kicked the other filly over and over again while Textbook just looked on with a mild expression of annoyance that her lecture had been interrupted.

"Daisy!" I shouted in alarm, and the cream earth pony jumped as I raced to shove myself between her and the fetal Duct Tape. Marmalade just followed, because that was what she did. She didn't have the sense Celestia had given a roach. Still, I shoved my way between them and kicked Daisy's face firmly with my forehooves. That seemed to snap her out of it enough to make her fall back. "Get Tape to medical, Marm!"

The yellow unicorn looked at me, then Daisy, then Duct Tape, and finally realized I was asking her to do something. She bit Duct Tape by her mane and dragged her out the door. "What is wrong with you, Daisy?" I yelled as the rest of the class pretended to listen to the teacher. Because that was safer than listening and thinking.

The bandages had fallen away, and I stared at the cuts in Daisy's sides and flank. They'd only been barely healed by the magical bandages. And unless she'd been hiding a horn her entire life, there was no way Daisy could have made such regular cuts. "Who... how?!"

Now I was the one slammed to the ground. "No pony. It was an accident. I mean... a fight! That's ALL it was!" she said as she shouted down at me.

Don't think about it. Don't ask. Don't wonder. Crawl back into my desk and pretend like it never happened. Agree it was a fight, and don't ask who. Agree it was an accident, and don't imagine how. Do that and she might forget as well. And you'd be friends... friendish...

"Did your--" was all I said. All I got out. She knew the question. I knew the answer as she tried to shove every ounce of her pain into me, and she had a whole lot of it to shove.

\* \* \*

I opened my eyes, feeling the bobbing of the boat and hearing the sounds of ponies walking above deck. "You okay?" Glory asked as I stirred.

"I feel like I got hit by a boat," I muttered, lying there and feeling my heart thunder. I felt bruised from horn to hoof.

"You did get hit by a boat," the captain replied as she leaned on the rear hatch. "Didn't I tell you to get below and strap in? The rest of your friends did. You? You ran right out to the worst place you could." The captain did not look happy about me breaking the first rule.

"Seabiscuit? Is she okay?" I asked as I looked at the torn skin on my front legs. At least my PipBuck had saved me from some of the burns... but from the pain on my sides, I suspected I was missing hide there, too.

The captain's look softened. "Yeah. So I won't shoot you for breaking the first rule. Besides," she added with a grin, "I have to admit, there's no sight like going through Fallen Towers." I had to agree; I'd be having nightmares about it for a while. I noticed that the captain was also showing raw rope burns

and bruises. “Normally, I would have waited a few days for the water to subside. The water level was half again as high as it should have been for safe passage, but you folks are in a hurry.”

“Not in that much of a hurry,” I groaned, momentarily sitting up and regretting it. I fell back into Glory’s hooves with a groan. “Where are we? How long have I been out?”

“We’re in Riverside, just below the falls. That crash did more than just crush both of you; it also busted a seal on the bottom. We can patch it, but it’ll just take a while,” the captain said. “There’s not a lot to see here, but you can take a peek around town. It’s a Finders village, so it should be safe... ish.”

“Safeish. I like that word. Not quite safe, but in the neighborhood,” I muttered sarcastically. I slowly dragged myself to my hooves. “Well, get me my barding.”

“Blackjack!” Glory said. “You just woke up from passing out after having a ship fall on you, and from your pulse you’ve taken at least another Buck! Why don’t you just stay here and do something radical, like rest?”

I took a deep breath as I steadied myself, fighting to keep from hyperventilating. Nice and slow. Calm. “Well, Glory, there’s three reasons why I have to go. First, I need to get out there so that whatever eyes and ears Sanguine and DJ Pon3 have can see me so he doesn’t send that monsterpony to Chapel. Second, I want to see if there’s anypony I can help. Third, and most important of all...” I took a moment, looking at her gravely. “I really... really... need to go to the bathroom and I’d rather not hang my fanny off the side of the boat.”

Glory took one look at me in shock as the captain collapsed with laughter, then seized a pillow and beat me with it till I grabbed my bag and fled outside.

\* \* \*

After a visit to the town latrine (a ditch that reeked so badly it almost had me reconsidering the boat), I found myself in Riverside. The town of two dozen inhabitants was built in a horseshoe-shaped strip of shops adjacent to the river. One floating dock made of old empty barrels stretched out to a post and the *Seahorse*. The roads north and south were barricaded, and the park in the middle of the village held planter boxes filled with vegetables and waxy green grass. Shops were selling pale sides of smoked fish and slabs of radigator meat, and at one outdoor butcher shop I saw two ponies cutting and chopping up an enormous frog.

Despite the town’s size, I got the impression that it’d once seen better days. There were apartments above the repurposed stores that now had busted windows and were boarded shut. One shop had only some scrap metal, electronics, and nine millimeter ammo. I couldn’t see any signs of families; there was a terrible sense that, at any moment, the last occupants would just fade away, leaving Riverside just another ruin.

“What happened here?” I muttered as I looked at the ponies moving like ghosts around the almost empty shops.

“Same thing that’s happening everywhere, Miss...” an old unicorn mare said as she mended a fishing net. I had to question the sense of anypony who ate anything out of that river. Slowly, I walked to her, and started as I realized that she was blind. Her milky eyes stared out at me as her hooves skillfully felt out the tears and her horn mended them.

“Blackjack.”

“Fishy,” she replied.

Now that made me feel all kinds of strange and alarmed. "What? How did you know--"

"My name. It's Fishy. Granny Fishy. Nice to meet you," she said with a soft chuckle.

"Oh." I sat down across from her. "What do you mean, the same thing happening everywhere?"

"Riverside used to be a nice village. We were smack in the middle of the west side ruins. There was plenty to pick out of the countryside. Food. Safety. But the ruins've been picked clean, mostly. There's more and more raiders, bandits, and Reapers. Less folks bring in less food. So villages just dwindle away. Death picks off the ones who stay, and there's fewer and fewer boats."

"This lady bothering you, Mum?" a pink mare with a pair of fish on her flank asked as she trotted up.

"No, thank you, Perch," Granny said as she waved a hoof at the mare, who took it between her own and guided it to her head so Granny could pat her. "She was polite enough to ask about the town."

"It's those damned dogs that are to blame," Perch said with a stomp.

"Dogs?" I blinked.

"The sand dogs," the elder unicorn answered. "They live underneath the western ruins."

Perch, clearly having a lot more to say, stomped her hooves again. "And they're a menace. They scavenge the ruins, but they don't trade, and I know they've got some decent salvage in their holes. They've got some weird cybernetics that make them too tough for most raiders and bandits, so we have to deal with them instead."

"Now, that's enough, Perch. Times are tough enough without making things harder for some folks who don't deserve it," Granny said firmly to the younger mare.

But the pink pony wasn't listening. "You want to help?" she said to me. "Go down to the Riverside station of the Sunset Line, shoot every one of them, and open up the tunnels for scavenging. That'll turn this place around, no sweat," she said as she lifted up one of Granny's nets and sulked towards the river.

The blind elder mare just sighed as she ran her hooves over the netting. "Please, do not mind her. She is just desperate to save the home she knows," Granny Fishy said as she tugged the nets with her horn and hooves. "I suspect you feel the same way."

"You do?" I gave a nervous little smile. "No offense, but you don't know where I'm from. Trust me, nopony would want to save that place."

"Oh? But isn't that where you're going? Or maybe it's where you've been. Who can say?" she said as she carefully tied a hole. "I suspect you have a long trail before you to reach your home."

My mane started to tingle as I regarded her. "What do you know?"

She chuckled at that wary question. "Know? My dear, I simply mend holes in nets," she replied with a toothless smile. "But I have a sense about you. The past and future reach through you. Messenger, harbinger, and judge. Life in one hoof. Death in the other. Which will you decide? Not even the stars can tell..." Okay, that just jumped the creepiness factor up by fifty at least!

P-21 and Glory trotted up, the two probably noticing my slightly uneasy look. "Blackjack? Who's this?" Glory asked politely.

"Granny Fishy," she said with a broad smile as she thrust her hoof out in the general direction of Glory. Glory took it in her own and gave it a shake. "Ahh... a pegasus. How interesting." How'd she get that from a hoofshake?

"Fallen Glory," Glory said softly as she glanced at me, then frowned at the old mare. "Did Blackjack... tell you?"

"No. I just get a sense of things," she said as she released Glory's hoof and returned to the net. "Like your name... Fallen. How far have you fallen, I wonder. Have you learned to hate? Have you learned to spite? Have you learned to crave vengeance? If not, how can you know how to forgive, Fallen Glory?"

"How... what did you tell her, Blackjack?" she asked, clearly startled.

"Nothing. I just met her," I said defensively.

P-21 looked at Granny mending the net, then looked at me. I cocked a brow. "What?" he said. "I don't want creepy mystical mutterings about my fate or destiny, thank you very much." He backed a few steps away from Granny. "Leave me out of it!"

"Oh, don't worry young buck. Your fate has come and gone. It only begs the question of what happens in the epilogue," the old mare said with a lazy wave of her hoof. For some reason, that seemed to bother him more than some cryptic remark.

Then Perch yelled across the square. "Granny! Stop with the fortune teller routine and get that last net patched up!" The blind mare chuckled, and I gave her a skeptical glance. Had all this just been a local messing with rubes?

"Ah well, fun is fun, but I'd best get back to work," she said. "Don't give an old blind mare's words too much thought." As we walked away, I looked back and saw her still wearing that lingering old smile.

\* \* \*

"Blackjack, are you sure about this?" P-21 asked as we moved through the ruins.

"It's one of my plans. Of course I'm not sure about it. But Perch said that if we could deal with the sand dogs, it'd open up the underground tunnels for salvaging again. And you know that there's always time for dealing with raiders and bandits. We've got at least three hours till Thrush patches up the boat, so why not do some good while we're here?"

"I have to wonder how your foes will view your good," Lacunae said from the rear. She'd shed the heavy black lace dress and veil once we were out of sight of town.

"Oh, don't get her started with moral relativism," P-21 groaned. "She'll be stuck all day!"

Moral whatism? "Look. It's simple. We're good. They're bad. That's all I need to know."

"Right. Till one of them starts crying," the blue buck muttered. "Why are four smart ponies being led around by an idiot?"

"Can't be that smart, then." I stuck my tongue out at him and looked at Rampage. She still wasn't much bigger than a filly, but I wasn't going to pick a fight with her with that chainsaw knife in her jaws. "Hey, Rampage. Are you smarter than me?"

She spat out the blade and balanced it atop her head as she said something in zebra to me. A toss of her red curls and she caught the blade again in her jaws with a grin. "I'll take that as a yes," I said with a roll of my eyes.

The plan was simple. I'd keep an eye open on my E.F.S. for red bars. Glory would scout them out. We'd annihilate them and save the day. My PipBuck navigation already had a toggle set on Riverside; how it knew, I'd never know. Once the dogs were out of the tunnels, the *Seahorse* would hopefully be ready to continue downstream.

I just hoped we didn't get lost amid these ruins. They were unlike anything I'd ever seen; the swampy remains of Flankfurt were nothing compared to the cracked and broken ten and twenty story buildings that loomed over us. Most bore the telltale black charring of firestorms, and the streets were littered with rubble, smashed and twisted wagons, and, of course, bones. Still, a century of scavenging had turned the ruins into rain-drenched shells. Perfect little lairs for predatory ponies.

And speaking of which, there were some red bars straight ahead...

I gestured to Glory, and she flitted from blasted-out window to blasted-out window, her gray hide and pale blue barding blending in with both sky and rocks. I had to keep track of her blue bar at times. She scouted the hostiles and returned. "About nine or ten, some in an old store right around the corner and the others in a coffee shop across the street. They've got a sniper on the third floor. I couldn't tell if they're raiders or bandits, but they're all armed."

"Red, it's dead," I muttered, glancing at my PipBuck. I imagined the cards shuffling in my mind, but I wasn't even going to acknowledge the pale bastard. If they were armed and hostile, this wasn't an execution. This was trouble and we were taking care of it.

"Okay, so I'm in front. Glory from above and tagging that sniper. Rampage mixing it up. P-21, keep your eyes open and use Persuasion if there's a knot of them. And you..." I looked at Lacunae and suddenly felt at a bit of loss. "What are you going to do?"

"I'll back you up," she said with a faint smile. Right, that was less than specific or comforting.

"Okay. Don't shoot me, please," I asked with a half joking smile. I started towards the hostiles when P-21 cleared his throat. "What?" I asked, looking at him and his sardonic little smile. He stretched out a hoof and tapped the helmet sitting atop my saddlebags. "Oh! Right. Headshot... good thinking." I levitated and strapped the helmet in place, flushing slightly. Okay! Now, were we ready?

We were.

I strolled down the street as clear as day with Taurus's rifle floating ahead of me. Rampage moved like a ponified cat, unnervingly quiet without her clanging metal armor. Glory moved overhead like a silent guardian angel while Lacunae walked behind me. Where P-21 was, I had no idea. Laying mines? Readyng grenades? I just knew he'd be there.

Through the scope, I saw a mare walking from the coffee shop towards the corner grocery store. I saw the spiked armor, the sawed off shotgun, and, more importantly, the half dozen hooves dangling off the sides of her barding. Most of all, I saw the eager grin that split her scarred face, yellowed eyes widening in glee at the sight of me.

Then I sent her brains out the back of her head with a clean shot through her left eye.

All hell broke loose. At once, three more ponies rushed out, but they had the sense to go for cover behind the piles of rubble. One opened up with an SMG, a 10mm zebra model if I knew my guns, and sprayed bullets down the street at me. Where the heck had raiders gotten enough bullets to waste them with an SMG? The pistols were a little more accurate, but my barding took the rounds with equanimity as I took aim with the rifle and blew the noggin off the mare with the SMG.

From overhead came the boom of a rifle round, and a resounding 'PING' glanced off the side of my helmet. Somewhere, I was sure, P-21 was thinking smug thoughts. Okay, enough badass stupidity. I had their attention now, so I made for my own cover behind a fallen wagon as my head throbbed. As nice as the rifle was, it just didn't have the time or rate of fire for messy work. Good thing I had a shotgun!

Glory swept sideways, raking the sniper's nest with her beam pistols. There was another loud boom from the sniper, but she deftly twisted clear of the shot, pirouetted, and resumed cooking the sniper with little beams of death.

I just waited as Rampage raced in towards the two raiders with the ten millimeter automatics. The sight of a charging little zebra-striped pony seemed to make them hesitate in amusement. They realized their mistake too late as Rampage leapt over the rubble and wrapped her hooves around the mare's neck. Then the ripper roared as she sawed her head clean off in a fountain of blood that seemed to make the remaining raider stare in awe. No wonder Deus had been able to command these psychopaths.

Unfortunately, her awe made her a sitting duck for a round of buckshot to the head. Now, where were the rest...

From the inside of the store spilled the remainder of the raiders; they'd been taking their time getting their barding on and guns ready. Another unicorn came out, spraying Rampage and me wildly, and this close in the shots were much more effective. I slipped into S.A.T.S. to plant two neat blasts in her head, then fired two more into the milling raiders behind her.

Rampage jumped right over the fallen unicorn and slid on a sheet of blood to saw and kick wildly at the limbs of the raiders as I fired off two more shots and then reloaded as fast as my horn could manage. Then, from the coffee shop behind me came the purr of a minigun motor. Instantly, my ass began to vibrate as the stream of shots started to chew through my barding. The five millimeter rounds lacked individual punch, but I knew that in seconds those individual rounds would add up to a very holey Blackjack! Raiders behind me. Raiders in front of me. Not good.

There was a soft thump, and a moment later the raider with the minigun was enveloped in a blast that tore off their head and all four limbs; what was left collapsed in a bloody heap that writhed for a few seconds. As two more came rushing to the door, P-21 emerged like a blue ghost, bit the stem off of a frag grenade, and tossed it through. A second explosion, and two more red bars vanished.

With Rampage already raising havoc inside, I charged in through the door and proceeded to paint the raiders with lead. One had heavy metal armor, but no helmet. S.A.T.S. allowed the buckshot to render his head into paste. When the gun was empty, I tossed it into my sling rather than waste time reloading, then grabbed the fallen unicorn's 10mm SMG. One raider was taking aim with a hunting rifle. In a second, I unloaded the twenty-five bullets left in the clip into him. His rifle shot still hurt like hell.

And then, like that, it was over. There was one red bar in the back of the grocery store, but I didn't see a target. Back room? Unconscious? I'd find out, I supposed. Lacunae walked calmly behind me, her hooves avoiding stepping in the blood. "Watch out. There's one more in the back." I looked at the carcasses put on display. Odd that so many of them were striped; they must have ambushed a zebra

tribe nearby. It explained all the 10mm ammo. The guts dangled like garlands over the shelves. I moved towards the rear door that I guessed led into the stockroom.

I paused and noticed a forlorn bottle of Sparkle-Cola sitting in the dead refrigerator. I floated it out, popped the top, pocketed the cap, and took a drink, then continued to the door with the bottle floating on one side and the gun on the other. Carefully, I swung the door open, ready to pop S.A.T.S. and end the hostile.

This was a nursery. I saw the foals lying together inside some kind of pen next to a roll-up metal door. My mutant eyes picked out the shapes... one of them shaking and sobbing and rocking amid all the rest. "Hey... it's okay..." I said softly as I put the gun away. She was clutching a little ball to her chest as she sniffled and hiccuped. "You're safe now..."

Then she looked at me. She giggled, her scarred lips slashed all the way to her ears as she raised her 'ball' and bit off the stem. I just stood there as she threw it at me from the heap of dead fillies and colts. I couldn't move. I could only think 'PLAY' as I watched the grenade arc towards me.

A shimmering whiteish-purple field appeared around the filly and the grenade. The explosive hit it and bounced back just before the fuse ran out. The room shook, part of the roll-up door blew out, and I just stood there, looking in a daze at the pulped pile of ponies. A voice whispered in my head. "I told you I'd have your back."

\* \* \*

The raiders had a surprising collection of firearms and explosives, something we helped ourselves to. Despite myself, I kept a pair of the ten millimeter SMGs and collected as many thirty-round clips as I could. Glory looted the sniper's nest on the third floor and brought locked ammo containers down for P-21 and me to open. Rampage was munching down in the raiders' stores; I really hoped she was keeping it to identifiable food and skirting cannibalism, but she was a growing girl. Literally; I thought she looked as if she'd added half an inch since we left Riverside. I made sure to grab some extra cans for later.

We heaped up the raiders in the middle of the street, and P-21 tossed in two incendiary grenades. With two soft 'whomp's, the raiders began to cook in the magical magenta flame.

The real surprise was Lacunae picking up the minigun with her magic and turning it over curiously. I was struck with how she handled it, ejecting the belt before detaching it from the slain raider's battle saddle. She tested the motor, rotating the barrels slowly as she maneuvered the massive weapon with shocking grace. She kept the weapon pointed towards the ground as she examined it closely; she knew guns. "Is there something you need?" she asked quietly as she noticed me watching her.

"I just didn't expect the Goddess to be into guns."

"More than a few who have joined the Goddess know about guns," she said patiently, but there was a strange scornful undertone in the telepathic voice. "The Goddess, of course, knows that guns are weak and worthless compared to raw magic. What are bombs and missiles to the energy of the cosmos itself?" she asked as she turned the weapon over again, pointing it down the street. I had no idea how you aimed a minigun.

"You disagree?"

"One of the few who can. The Goddess is quite disgusted with me for even handling such a weapon," she said calmly as her magic lifted the heavy ammo drum from the battle saddle and slid it underneath the weapon, connecting the belt once more. "There is a certain destructive elegance in it,

however. They are tools of war crafted with care and skill.” I noticed her magic had no difficulty at all handing the weapon and ammo. I doubted I’d even be able to carry it.

“So now you have a bigger horn *and* a bigger gun,” I grunted softly.

A long regretful sigh drifted through my mind. “Perhaps, but you have friends, Blackjack.”

“Are you saying that the Goddess doesn’t have friends?” I asked, scratching my head. She slowly shook her head in a negative. I gave a confused smile. “Wait, I thought all you alicorns were connected, right?” She gave a single nod. “Why would the Goddess want friends if you’re... well... all together?”

“Just because we’re bonded doesn’t mean we like each other,” she said as she pointed the minigun down the street and narrowed her eyes. The motor whirred and a spear of fire and lead lanced out to chew through the rusted side of a wagon. Her eyes relaxed as the gun whirred down. “Sometimes, I think the Goddess desires friends more than anything else in the Wasteland. She simply can’t admit it.”

\* \* \*

There’s nothing that says ‘Welcome, we have milk and cookies!’ quite like a welcome mat that really did bear the words ‘Welcome, we have milk and cookies!’ So it was somewhat understandable that, standing in front of the Riverside subway station, I felt a distinct sense of unease nibbling at my mane. I looked at the welcome mat sitting in front of the only unbarricaded door to the subway. “Well... should we knock?” I muttered as I stepped closer to the door.

BEEP! BEEP! BE--

I jumped back just as a cone of shrapnel blasted up from the covered landmine. “Right. No knocking. That might count as a doorbell, though.” Carefully, I gripped the door with my magic, imagining a canine Deus rushing out at me screaming ‘cunt’. Nothing came out, however.

“Maybe I should go first,” P-21 said as he looked at the black doorway. Emergency lighting flickered in the depths. “And try not to touch anything,” he said as he dug through his saddlebags and took out a pair of wire cutters. He knelt in the doorway, and there was a metallic snip as he cut a tripwire strung across it. He stepped cautiously through and past two rigged single shot shotguns. I snagged the box of twelve gauge shells as I followed close behind him.

The subway was a nightmare of tangled junk and debris with one path snaking back and forth through it. There were two mines half hidden on the edges of the trail, but P-21 walked with extraordinary cautiousness. I almost made him put on my barding; I might survive one mine, but he certainly wouldn’t.

He froze at a dingy bucket. “Blackjack, could you please turn that to face me?” he said softly. I slowly rotated the mouth of the bucket to face us, swallowing at the mine within. Calmly, he stretched forward and tagged the disarm tab with his hoof. “Thank you.” My respect for him rose even more.

“How did you know?” I asked.

He gave me a sardonic look. “I thought ‘if I wanted to kill a mare stomping at the front of a row of ponies, what would I hide a mine inside so she’d kick the bucket?’”

Glory gave a nervous little laugh. The pair of us looked back at her and she blinked. “Oh, that wasn’t a joke?” Yes Glory, it was a joke. It just wasn’t very funny.

“Why don’t I just trot ahead and set ‘em all off? It’s not like they can kill me,” Rampage suggested

with a cocky little cant of her head.

"Because if you miss one, then we get blown up anyway," P-21 replied as he continued his crawl. We reached the turnstile, and P-21 started to push through when he froze. "Glory. Can you fly over this and check the far side?" The little gray pegasus nimbly flew over the top and landed behind the gate.

"Don't... push through that. There's a gas tank and a grenade." P-21 had me float his clippers to her, and she snipped the wire to the grenade. Only then did we move past. Thankfully, the space beyond the turnstile was clear of the heaps of debris, and we were able to spread out a little. There were bathrooms to the side with red hostiles.

I pushed through down to the round lounge and relaxed at the sound of skittering radroaches. I stomped them with my hooves, then blinked as I saw a Sparkle-Cola machine. Smiling, I trotted over and started to push the button to see if I could get out a few more sodas. "Blackjack!" P-21 warned, and I froze. I looked back at him, then at the machine. Slowly, I stepped back. It was finally starting to click that I shouldn't touch anything in here.

Then I heard the metallic click of a first aid kit being unlatched near the door to the bathroom. I turned. As it creaked open, a round tin fell into Glory's hooves.

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

She stared at it in horror, frozen.

It exploded in her face.

Glory fell back, screaming as she writhed, her hooves shredded up to her elbows as she thrashed wildly in agony. I leapt atop her, pinning her, holding her tight as I levitated out a Med-X and jammed it into her leg. She stilled enough to go from screaming to sobbing. "I can't see," she said around bloody and torn lips. "Goddesses... I am sorry... I am so sorry..."

I stared down at her as I tried to tear my eyes away from her bloody sockets. Save this one, Blackjack. No matter what, save *this* one. I fought to shake off the urge to fall apart. I looked at the metal embedded in her face. Oh this was going to suck...

"Shut up," I said as my magic proceeded to pick the bits of shrapnel out like tweezers. She gritted her teeth, trying to strangle her screams as piece after bloody piece was removed. Then I poured Sekashi's healing potions down her throat. And there was nothing for it... I took out a Hydra and injected the gray sludge into her as well. She immediately started gasping and squirming as her face began to knit back together thanks to the influence of both potions. Then she opened her bloody eyes and stared at me in shock. Sobbing, she curled up tight against me as she shook. Her face still looked red and raw, but not blind or dead.

"Shhh... it's okay. You're okay..." But she nearly hadn't been. "Okay... so the rule is... don't touch *anything*."

"It might be too late," P-21 muttered as he looked behind us. "They must have heard that."

"Yeah, well they almost killed my friend. They're about to hear a lot worse," I muttered darkly.

We picked our way down. P-21 found a grenade box with a live grenade inside, a bottle of Sparkle-Cola tied to a bomb inside a steel crate, and three grenades rigged to a tripwire. All that was before we even reached the stairs going down to the actual subway platform itself! Three more mines were on the steps, and he slowly crawled down to them. Then I glanced up and grabbed his rump hard

with hooves and magic, pulling him back.

"Stop," I said sharply as I looked directly above him. Three little amber lights were shining on the roof just above his head. If there'd been a beeping, who would have looked up?

And then I felt him shaking in my hooves. "G...g...get off..." he stammered. I looked exactly at what I'd grabbed and suddenly felt the noxious mix of shame, embarrassment, and general horror at what exactly I'd pulled in getting him back. It was as if he couldn't move even once I'd moved away. I wanted to give him a hug as he trembled and gasped for air; I knew that was the one thing I couldn't give him.

"I'm sorry, P-21... it was an accident..." I muttered.

"I know... just... I know," he said before pressing his trembling lips together as he walked away from us. "Just, give me a second," he said as he walked back towards the bathrooms.

"Blackjack," Rampage said in a tone mixing impressed with scandal.

"It was an accident!" I sputtered as I blushed furiously. "I hadn't meant to grab... that... with my magic. He was about to get blown up!" I stood and started towards the bathroom. "I got to go apologize..."

"You..." Rampage said firmly as she stepped into my path, "need to disarm those mines while somepony with a lot less history, a lot more annoyance, and a lot more regeneration talks to him. Okay?" I stared at her in shock as she turned away, looking at the teddy bear on her flank as she disappeared down towards the bathroom. I frowned and snuck to the door as well. I wasn't going to allow a repeat of Thorn. I'd bury her alive if I had to.

"Go away, Rampage," he said in that short-breathed voice. "I'm not in the mood to talk about it, especially with you."

"No surprise," she replied.

"So then why are you staying?" he demanded crossly. "Why is it every mare around me thinks she can tell me what to do now! This isn't 99!"

"No, it isn't. And I'm not making you talk. I'm not your friend. You can keep silent and not feel guilty. Lie to my face. Beat the snot out of me, if it'll make you feel better. All I'm going to do is sit here." There was a soft thump. "And listen in case you do or until you're ready to go... or Blackjack blows us all up with a well-timed sneeze."

"I'm not going to talk about it."

No response from Rampage.

"Go away, damn it. There's nothing to talk about," he said in an trembling voice. I pressed my back against the wall, my ears twitching as I dreaded what he might say. Then his breathing caught and he said, "I can't believe she grabbed me like that..."

"Well, Blackjack doesn't do anything if it's not spectacularly. Even groping the last buck in the Wasteland who'd want it," Rampage said dryly, and despite myself I felt my cheeks burn.

"It's stupid. It was an accident. I know that!" His thin voice cracked again. "I thought I was over this..."

"Yeah. Funny how it's never over till it's over," she said. "So, is it because she *grabbed* you or because *she* grabbed you?"

"I don't want to talk about it," he said in a brittle voice I'd never heard before. I was so used to him being calm and stoic. And then there was a horrible hitch in his throat, and then a sob reached my ear.

"Took you back, didn't it?" Rampage said in a calm, mature voice so terribly different from her normal impudence or the snide tone after killing Thorn. "It was an accident, P-21. She saw the mines overhead and just acted. It's what she does. And I know she feels horrible for it."

"I know... I just... she killed him... and she used me... and... I know she's a good pony and didn't mean it but..." He broke off in a shaking sob.

"So. It's because *she* grabbed you," she murmured softly.

"I know it was an accident... I just... I sometimes wish she'd left me outside 99. That she hadn't tried to find me in Flank. I feel so glad to be alive till... something... anything... reminds of me that place and it feels like I'm back there!" He sniffed terribly as I clenched my eyes shut. "And worse of all... the second she did, I was ready to... to..." He choked like he was being strangled.

"Perform?" Rampage softly offered and he sobbed again like a colt. I sat there helplessly, crying too as I listened to him right around the corner. A good pony... that's what he'd called me. He was the good one. Even Rampage, barring the murderer within her. They were all good ponies.

I was the one so cowardly I had to eavesdrop.

"I couldn't help it. She touched me like that, and it was like she was next on my breeding queue. Everything I've felt and thought and... wanted... was just gone. She touched me like that, and I was back there again." He gave a hysterical half cry, half laugh. "You want to know what I thought? What I really thought? *I hope she likes it.* That's what I thought! Not '*get your horn off me,*' not '*how dare you,*' not '*why did you do that,*' not even '*pretend like it's not a big deal...*'"

"You've been conditioned to think that way. It's not your fault. Blackjack is heading back there now to deal with the ponies responsible, right? You need to not blame yourself. This was a stupid accident. She didn't mean to do it. You didn't mean to react as you did. Neither of you is to blame." She took a deep breath. "I'm going to contact Dr. Helpinghoof in Manehattan. He's a lot more reliable than those Ministry of Peace hacks. I probably wouldn't have been able to stay in the Guard if he hadn't--"

"Rampage. What are you talking about?" P-21 asked softly.

There was only silence, then she stammered, "I... I don't know. I don't know what I'm talking about! I don't know... any of that. But I can tell you Helpinghoof's clinic's terminal number. His receptionist is Carrot Cake. He tries to sing Sweetie Belle. I... I don't know why I can or how I can... So why the hell did I just say it?" Now it sounded like Rampage was the pony falling apart, but it also seemed to be pulling him back together as well. She let out a shaky little sniff. "Do you think maybe Blackjack's assembling the deadliest therapy group in the Wasteland?"

"Goddesses, I hope not. Blackjack the therapist... we're really doomed." Then he paused. "You know, I haven't heard anything explode in a while. You don't suppose she's listening to us right now, do you?"

"Come on. Even Blackjack wouldn't be that dumb." I grimaced, rose to my hooves, and tried to sneak away as I blushed shamefully. I needed to find a hole and bury myself till I sprouted some new

brains. They grew like mushrooms, right? Keep them in the dark and feed them shit? Maybe smarts grew the same way. Unfortunately, I was so occupied by thoughts of fungal brains that I kicked an empty Sparkle-Cola bottle.

“Blackjack!” the two shouted indignantly as I ran, but afterwards... there was laughter too.

Maybe there was also some hope.

\* \* \*

“Okay. What kind of sick creature traps a baby carriage?” Glory asked loudly, blatantly deflecting every trace of awkwardness off of my screw up on the stairs. The baby carriage trap had been extremely effective, using a baby’s cry. Only a reflexive telekinetic shove by me had pushed it down into the gap between the platforms before it exploded. A second later, and only Rampage would have been walking out of here.

“Smart ones. It almost got all of us,” P-21 muttered as we looked around the subway platform. “And we also know that Perch was right; these sand dogs are sitting right on top of a treasure trove of salvage to be able to set up traps like this.”

“So where are they? They have to know we’re here,” I muttered. This subway station was clearly a home... or den... of some sort. There were beds set up in the subway trains. A table with some recently opened cans of food on it. A radio playing DJ Pon3, of all things. Were they out scavenging? Raiding? Lying in wait? I walked over to a table and looked at some busted open energy cartridges. There was also a small smattering of ruby flakes.

My eyes scanned the room, but my E.F.S. came up blank. I trotted to a door marked ‘Maintenance Access’ on the far side of the room. There was a blue bar inside. “Hello? Is anypony there?” Then I remembered that we weren’t looking for ponies.

The maintenance space was filled with electronics and strange mechanical devices. The opening door brushed against strange metallic limbs hanging from racks over workbenches that rattled against one another. I looked at the tools set neatly in order. On one workbench sat empty Sparkle-Cola bottles that held a small stash of emeralds, rubies, and even some diamonds. One corner had a bed and filthy blanket covering it. I had to admit, I was tempted to take everything that wasn’t nailed down.

For some reason, somepony had taken a small plush Rarity unicorn toy and had turned it into a pincushion. It didn’t look like there was much of a need for needles in a workshop like this. There was a little sign above it: ‘No whining.’

The wall by the bed was covered by papers. A lot of them appeared to be old plans and designs. ‘The Victory Plaza Rail Station’. ‘Shadowbolt Tower’. ‘Tunnel 456’. ‘Luna Hydro Spark Generator System’. ‘Tokomare Reactor Facility’. All of them were stamped ‘Ministry of Wartime Technology: CLASSIFIED’, ‘Ministry of Arcane Sciences: TOP SECRET’, or ‘Ministry of Morale: FOREVER!’

Here and there were photographs of a trio of dogs. One showed them dressed in army fatigues similar to those of Macintosh’s Marauders and armed with energy weapons and a lot of explosives. They were grinning while behind them smoked numerous craters. Another one showed the three standing in the middle of a half-buried ruin, bizarre and disturbing spirals carved in the walls and doors. A third, this one grainy and black and white, showed a valley that possessed a stark kind of beauty to it. There were a few more here and there of individual dogs, and I was surprised by the sight of the dogs in some sort of eating contest with Twist while Vanity looked on in disgust. The picture next to it had Twist sprawled out in defeat.

The other interesting thing was the newspapers. 'Ministry of Arcane Sciences declares Pleasant Valley Relocation act. Diamond dogs to be moved to appointed land outside Appleloosa.'

*Ministry Mare Twilight Sparkle invoked eminent domain to appropriate the Pleasant Valley Mine Works and has started eviction processes for the current inhabitants, beings known collectively as 'diamond dogs'. Although the natives protested the relocation extensively, Princess Luna granted the royal decree and dispatched members of the newly reformed Equestrian Army to maintain peace in Pleasant Valley and surrounding communities like Olneigh.*

*Twilight Sparkle said that she sympathizes with the diamond dogs, but that the needs of Equestria must take priority. Pleasant Valley is being designated a critical M.A.S. research facility for the testing and implementation of radical and potentially hazardous spells as well as a high risk storage area for any potential by-products. She assures the diamond dogs that a new community for them will be founded elsewhere in Equestria.*

Another article caught my eye: 'Trail of Broken Diamonds'.

*Military units supervised the relocation of the diamond dogs from Pleasant Valley this week to a temporary holding camp near Appleloosa. Units from the 1<sup>st</sup> regiment were deployed from Hoofington and the 99<sup>th</sup> from Fillydelphia to ensure that the diamond dog removal went smoothly. Despite their apparent submission, several diamond dogs made a futile and savage attack on the ministry mare Twilight Sparkle. Their attack was foiled by a handful of troopers led by Big Macintosh of Ponyville, who quickly came to the rescue of Miss Sparkle and were able to subdue the attackers without casualties.*

*Some critics have dubbed the relocation the 'Trail of Broken Diamonds', citing the unprecedented move to force non-ponies from their homes. Legal experts have pointed out that diamond dogs, being non-citizens of Equestria, are not protected under law. Ministry Mare Rarity was quoted saying, "Oh don't worry about those things. They're not like ponies, or even zebras. As long as there are some gems for them to dig up, they'll be perfectly fine. Well, except for the breath, and the fleas, and their nails, oh and don't get me started on their manners!" Critics of the plan have pointed out the region set aside lacks sufficient clean food and water for the diamond dog population and speculate they will try to return to their homes in Pleasant Valley.*

I looked at the picture of a very relieved and slightly mussed Twilight Sparkle shaking the hoof of a slightly flustered Big Macintosh. Behind them were two rows of canine creatures walking away and carrying bags and sacks or pulling wagons. Pegasi flew overhead with their guns trained on the canine creatures. Off to the side, Applesnack, Doof, and Twist were pinning three canines while Vanity tied them up.

'Hoofington -- Goldenblood to welcome diamond dog workers for Reconstruction', and beneath it, 'Goldenblood unfit for position?' I saw one of the three from the second photograph shaking the hoof of a pale, sickly looking unicorn. The canine, his vest ripped and patched, hardly looked happy about the deal. To be honest, neither did the unicorn.

*Goldenblood, once famous for his stirring 'Hoofington Rises' speech prior to his collapse on the ruins of city hall, has arranged for several of the strange diamond dog beings to be permitted to aid in reconstruction efforts. 'The reconstruction effort has stalled due notably to the fact that ponies are absolutely lousy with digging. Diamond dogs possess a capability to dig that far exceed what we can accomplish with sweat and magic alone. Employing diamond dogs is the difference between having Hoofington completed in three years or thirty.'*

*A Hoofington native, Goldenblood has received increased criticism for diverting substantial resources to the reconstruction effort and has drawn the ire of aristocrats across Equestria for proposed taxes to pay for the war. His recent comments about ending the war at any cost have drawn many to question his commitment to serving Princess Luna and the kingdom. Others question his physical soundness after his injuries--*

I heard the faintest sniff from beneath the bed, breaking me away from the article. Who hides under a bed? I knew who. "Come on out," I said as softly as possible. "I won't hurt you."

It took about a minute before she emerged. I'd seen the sand dogs in Maripony's memory and in the pictures, but I had to admit that there was something distinctly creepy about the strange upright build of the being. Its arms hung down almost to its knees when fully upright, but nearly reached the ground as it slouched forward before me. A wet black nose sniffed constantly as she... unless diamond dog colts were in the habit of wearing dirty dresses... kept her eyes low. I was shaken by how thin she looked; but then, she hadn't had a stable feeding her three recycled square meals a day.

"Hungry?" That got her looking at me, at least for three seconds. I fished around in my bag and came up with some cans of Cram. Personally, I wasn't convinced it was meat, but I wasn't going to eat radmeat to find out. However she recognized the can at once. I tried pulling on the tab, but it snapped off and I was left staring at it stupidly. "Damn..."

"I can open it, pony," she said, holding out her hand; her other forelimb ended in a stub just below the wrist. I looked at her sheared-off stump, then nodded and floated the can to her. She sat on the bed and braced it between her knees, her remaining claws ripping the lid off the square can as easily as tearing tinfoil. She wasted no time bringing it to her lips and chowing down as quickly as she could. I feared she might choke, but she finally ate the last bit of salty pink meat and licked the inside clean. She still looked wary. "Are you going to make us leave?"

Was I? An hour ago, sure. Why not? Help Riverside out by clearing out raiders and sand dogs. Now? "No. No I'm not." For some reason, that made her shake as she backed away from me on the bed with a whimper.

"Please don't kill me," she whimpered softly.

"What? I'm..." And that was as far as I got as a powerful hydraulic limb closed around my throat and lifted me from my hooves. I looked around at noth-- the magical cloak hiding him crackled away before my eyes. I stared at another... canine, though this pale gray creature seemed more machine than flesh. The green eyes were quite sharp, though, as they glared at me like a balefire blast.

"Go away, pony. This is our home now! You leave or die." From the malice in his eyes, it was fairly clear he definitely preferred the latter. Metal teeth gleamed from within old graying gums as an acrid reek made my eyes roll. He wore a faded and frayed collar studded with pale rhinestones and there was a weathered dog tag that read 'Rover'.

My first instinct was to try and blow his face off with magic bullets, but I took in how much metal he had on his skull. My magic had lousy armor penetration, and I could tell he could pop my head like a can of Cram if I didn't kill him. "I don't want to fight you."

For some reason, the statement just seemed to piss him off more. "Oh, then you want us to leave? Or you wish us to dig? Or fight? Or experiment on us? Or you just wish to whine at us?" he snarled as I dangled from his grip. "Why not ponies just leave us alone?"

"I will! I didn't know. I'll take my friends and go. I don't want to kill you," I replied, and I really didn't want to die. Somehow, he looked sour about that, but given how hungry he looked, I was glad he wasn't adding pony to the menu.

He carried me out into the subway platform where more dogs were appearing from holes in the tracks, ceiling, and, for some, thin air. A few clearly had some sort of cloaking talisman built into their cybernetics. P-21 and Rampage were both pinned down physically, and Glory, who'd flown up to a vent in the ceiling, was kept pinned by small arms fire. Lacunae remained standing calmly behind her magic barrier with the minigun focused on the three largest and most heavily augmented dogs, driving them back with bursts of fire that sparked and rattled off their metal limbs.

"Fight's over! We're leaving!" I shouted.

"Not yet! I almost got them exactly where I want them," Rampage yelled as she squirmed beneath one who sat firmly upon her.

"Fight's done, Rampage," I said as I glanced back at Rover. He looked decidedly sour, but set me down. Slowly the combatants released each other and I got a better look at these sand dogs.

This was just like Riverside. There might have only been two or three dozen at the most, and, even if these people were far stranger, there was no missing the signs of hunger, the flat sides and thin limbs. Even their augments didn't seem to be working with as much power as they could. I saw one sand dog take the ruby flakes from the table and brush them into a little port on their limb; instantly, the lights on the arm glowed brighter.

I glanced over at P-21 as he was released, then looked up at Rover. "You know, there was a raider camp we took out an hour ago not far from here. They had food," I commented lightly, and instantly saw the excited looks and heard the sniffing. Rover glanced down at me with a disgruntled little snort, but then the old dog gave a wave of his augmented hand. About half the camp went running the way we'd come down, sniffing our trail. "Can we talk?"

"Always talking. Why can't ponies just leave?" he grumbled as he started back towards the maintenance room.

"Because I want to help you," I replied. I heard P-21's groan from all the way from across the platform. "What happened to you?"

"What happened?" He froze and straightened, turning and looking down at me. His eyes seemed to glow. "What happened?" he growled softly and then turned with a snarl, flinging his arms wide. "Pony happened! Pony take home! Pony take gems! Pony take lives! Pony take world! Pony take everything! Pony tell us do this! Pony tell us go there! Pony tell dogs shut up! And always pony is whining about stupid pony war!" he said as he slammed his mechanical claws into the platform. "Why is pony always whining about pony? Piggy not whine. Cow not whine. Chicken and dogs not whine. Only pony is always whining about pony!"

Okay. Somebody had issues with whining ponies. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you mad. Please... I just want to know how I can help you."

"Please... hrmph..." he said with a little snort as he looked at me with narrowed eyes. "Only one pony say please and mean it, but he just use dogs too."

"You mean Goldenblood?"

He gave a hiss. "He comes to us in desert... dry sandy ground. No gems; only rocks. Tunnels cave in all the time. Not home. He ask us to come to city. Dig tunnels. Pay in gems. Say city home to all that help build. We come. We dig for ponies and he pay in gems. Digging is hard and dangerous. Dogs get hurt, and pony magic not work well on dogs. Pony use dogs to make machine parts for dog and pony. But city tunnels not home either. Dogs want dogs' home. Gold Pony say he try and help."

"And did he?"

"He talk to Pretty Pony Princess. He try to tell us not go home. Home not home anymore. Gems gone. Nothing left. But it is home, do ponies not understand? Home! And we wish to return. So Gold say maybe if dogs fight zebras, we go home. And we fight, but there are many many zebra. Then, one day, not many dogs left. We ask, can we go home now?"

He made the strangest little snuffling noise. "Golden take me home. Valley... gone. Big Pony building instead. Tunnels full of poison! Ponies poisoned our home! Our home! Dogs not poison pony home! Dogs not make pony kill for dogs. I go back, try to tell, but others return home anyway. Poison home is still home. Ponies call them stupid. Ponies try and make us leave." The snuffling noise increased, and I realized the old dog was trying to cry, but had lost the ability.

"Dogs know, okay pony? It is our home! Dogs know we die there, but it is dogs' home! Let dogs die in our home. But Gold ask we come back to Hoofington. He say please. He say sorry. He means both. Some come in tunnels dogs dug. And we stay. Bombs fall, many pony die, many dogs die too." He let out a growl. "But even after bombs, pony is always telling dogs to go. Always. Always always always."

And I had too, I had to admit, feeling sick to my stomach. The moment Perch told me there were things in these tunnels with something that could help Riverside I'd taken a tangent away from saving 99, like an idiot. They'd been right to fill the entrance with mines. They'd mined aid containers and soda machines and things ponies would go after first. Even the baby basket had had a pony doll inside it.

"Pony now knows. Pony should leave," Rover said as he took the young dog's hand and returned to the maintenance room. I sat down hard and looked over at my friends and the dogs who had remained to watch us.

Slowly, I stood and trotted back towards the still-open door. As I knocked, I heard Rampage say to P-21, "Told ya. Five bits... pay up."

"May I come in?" I asked as I saw Rover trying to wire together a child-sized mechanical hand. He growled faintly as he glared at the metal. Well, it wasn't a no... so I stepped inside and watched as he worked the tools with familiar skill. He opened up a tiny port and shook in a few crushed emeralds. The lights on the hand immediately lit up, the claws twitching.

"I'm sorry," I replied. "I didn't understand."

He took the hand and attached it to a brace; the young dog took it and attached the device to her stump. She gave a yelp, and then the hand twitched as magic animated the metal. She stretched up and

gave the old dog's scarred cheek a lick before backing away.

I fished out another can of Cram for her; Rampage didn't need all of it. Her mechanical claws tore open the can as easily as her natural ones did. She looked up at me warily. "Thank you, pony," she said, drawing another sharp look from Rover. Then as an afterthought she added, "I'm Fifi."

I gave her a smile. Kids were kids, after all. Unless they were Zodiac colts, but still. My kindness didn't seem to sit well with Rover, who looked at me like he wasn't sure if he should thank me or not. "What do you want, pony? You tell us where find food. We let you go. Why you stay, pony?"

"I want to help you," I said with a smile. "It's sort of my thing."

"We do not want pony help," he said, pointing a finger at me. "Pony help always hurt dogs. Always."

"Please... you need food and you need gemstones, don't you?" I thought back to Bottlecap. "You can trade! Trade for food with Riverside... and I know a pony who runs a gem mine."

"Pony does not listen," he growled as he rose and faced me. "Pony help always hurt dogs. We try trade. Ponies cheat us. Ponies steal from us. Ponies attack us. Dog can not trust pony!" he said as he looked down at me with a strange look. "Who is pony who come here and think she make everything all right?"

"I'm... Security. I just want to make everypony... everyone safer," I said lamely. Who was I to think I could just trot down here and overcome two centuries of pain and mistrust? I was such an idiot. 'My friend has a gem mine.' Oh, really? Ever heard the phrase 'too good to be true'? And I had no idea if Dusty Trails would help, or if Perch would be willing to play fair.

He just looked at me with a scowl, his green eyes hard and suspicious. Then Fifi tapped the half empty Cram can against his metal arm. "Eat."

"Dog not eat pony food," he replied sourly.

She beat the can against his arm again. "Go play, Fifi." She frowned, narrowing her eyes and banged the can against his arm several more times. Finally, he gave a resigned sigh, lifted the can, and let the slimy pink mass remaining plop into his mouth. He chewed, looking at me thoughtfully. "Pony thinks she can get other pony to listen?"

"I... I can try." That was the most I could promise.

Rover scratched his white, tattered ear in a little cloud of dander. "I did not think pony help Fifi. I not think Security on radio real pony. Or she help dogs." He pointed his mechanical claw at me. "We will bring... things... to trade. If village ponies are good and fair, we will trade for food. If not..." And he just sighed. If not, then they'd slowly run out of food and gems to power their limbs. And then they'd die.

"I'll try and convince them. I will." I'll do better. I couldn't change the past, but I could at least try and do better now and in the future.

\* \* \*

I had to admit, we were spoiled by the Miramare teleport. I'd thought that Lacunae could simply teleport us all across Hoofington at will. She firmly corrected that notion. She could teleport herself across Hoofington if she had to, with potentially one passenger. Without soaking up gobs of radiation, however, she'd only be able to teleport the five of us a few hundred feet. That was enough for us to get

outside, but it left my head spinning and feeling as though I'd just gotten struck by lightning again.

Lacunae donned her black lace dress before we returned; a large purple unicorn caused far less commotion than an alicorn. She wrapped her minigun in a burlap sack as she floated it casually beside her; the weight seemed easily within her range of handling. If I tried carrying that weapon, my horn would burn out after five minutes!

Back in Riverside, I approached the dozen or so ponies about the sand dogs coming to trade. The tone was immensely skeptical. Perch outright suggested ambushing them just to thin out their numbers.

"Listen to yourself!" Glory suddenly shouted, the half-healed cuts on her face giving her a somewhat ghastly expression. "Aren't you supposed to be ponies? Because all I'm hearing is a lot of bandit talk! Kill first! Take now! How is anything supposed to get better if ponies just kill and steal and take? It's got to stop!"

I had to admit, I was pretty impressed, and it shut up Perch enough that the villagers seemed open enough to give it a try. The only thing they had to lose was everything.

\* \* \*

I tried giving Thrush a hand with repairs. However, there are certain ponies who should never be given anything like a hammer or nails, and I am just such a pony. After nearly braining Oilcan with the hammer and spilling my nails into the bilge water that'd collected from the leaks, it was generally agreed by everypony that I should go wait in town for them to finish. Glory and P-21 proved far more capable at heating up the clumps of tar that were being used to plug the gaps. I almost burned the boat down!

I think I've mentioned a few times that I hate waiting. Especially in a small town where there was literally almost nothing to do. I walked the perimeter of the food court four times, the Dealer just standing there watching me. He wasn't talking to me. I wasn't talking to him. In fact, if I could, I'd ignore him for the rest of my life. He'd almost made me shoot Glory. I still hadn't answered for that.

Something that bugged me, though, was the door he stood next to; it was just a simple metal door set between a Fantastic Hoofware and Radio Stable. The symbol on it was small and seemed faded even before two centuries of exposure. Glaring at him once, I took a closer look. It was seven familiar symbols; a moon, a starburst, three apples, three balloons, three diamonds, three butterflies, and a cloud and lightning bolt. The moon sat in the center, surrounded by a ring. The six other symbols were arranged around it, and two more gray lines weaved in and out of them, seeming to tie them all together.

At the bottom, written in small letters: 'Office of Interministry Affairs, Riverside Branch'.

This was the O.I.A.? It looked like a janitor's access! I tried the door and grimaced as I found it locked. Well... time to see if I'd learned anything from P-21's lessons. Carefully, I knelt down and started to tease the lock with a bobby pin. Two snaps later, I was wondering if I was doing this right, when suddenly there was a faint click. I glanced up at the Dealer, who simply shrugged.

Inside were stairs going down, lit by flickering emergency lighting. I tried the light switch, but there was nothing. Instead, I picked my way down into a workspace that was rather tight even to a pony who'd worked in a stable. Papers were piled high on standard issue desks amidst a few dead, dust-covered terminals. A few apathetic posters hung on the wall. 'O.I.A.: We bridge the gaps.' and 'How can we help today?' The only one that caught my attention at all was one that read 'Do better.' There weren't any pictures of the Ministry Mares; in fact, the pony who did decorate the walls was Princess Luna. Her expressions varied from stern to mischievous to knowing.

I flipped through some of the papers at random. A memo from the M.W.T. to the M.o.M. about spritebot interference with radio reception in Riverside. An M.o.I. letter asking if a particular brand of magic insecticide talismans were being accredited to the M.A.S. or the M.W.T. Was the M.o.P. inspecting all Stable-Tec stables to make sure they were accessible to handicapped ponies? Clarification from the M.o.M. asking if the Macintosh Memorial was going to be set up in Ponyville or Canterlot. A petition for the immediate inspection of the Yellow River Detainment Facility for health violations. Damn, if only it said where that was!

As I read on, I got two impressions... one, the O.I.A. was really boring. Really, really boring. In fact, my vision started to blur trying to keep interested in all this pointless paperwork. Really, why would anypony care about whether Mr. Horse was a Hoofington native or if the M.o.I. preserved any zebra artifacts excavated during the reconstruction or why Twilight Sparkle had missed an appointment in Hoofington's M.A.S. hub? Who cared? But, apparently, that was the O.I.A.'s job. And that led me to another thought...

The O.I.A. was everywhere. They were connected to everything in Equestria. Even outside Equestria. There were memos from Little Wing Imports asking about delayed permits for zebra wares, contract agreements being negotiated with griffins to supplement pegasus forces during Winter Wrap Up, buffalo mineral access requests... was there anything the O.I.A. didn't get stuck in the middle of? And yet, while all the focus was on the ministries, there was barely anything on the O.I.A. itself. No pony seemed to be asking questions about its offices or practices. In fact I saw one letter that read, 'How does one join the O.I.A.?' It had been circled and a note written, 'M.o.M.?'

I didn't understand how a bunch of egghead pencil pushers could be doing so much unnoticed. How could Project Chimera be legal without the M.o.I. exposing it or the M.o.M. arresting Dr. Creepypony? Or had it been as Applebot claimed; that the ministries themselves were behind the project and the O.I.A. facilitated? Maybe that was why they'd been shut down so abruptly; they knew too much.

I moseyed into a small hallway, past two bathrooms (the yellow aid boxes within held healing potions that had melted through their bottles) and saw a smaller office with something interesting: a dead pony. In the dry air, she'd mummified almost as much as Vanity had. The black flakes clinging to the wall next to her desk and the small 9mm pistol in her lap told me this was probably a suicide.

Her terminal still hummed softly. I tapped the keys, and after a few flickers the screen came to life.

'O.I.A. EMERGENCY CODE EC-1101 ACTIVE! PLEASE AWAIT FURTHER CONTACT FROM EC-1101 FOR SUCCESSION PROTOCOLS!'

The terminal was stuck on that message. On a note beside it the cherry red mare had written 'Luna is dead. Equestria is dead. Sorry, Director.' I thought of the pictures out in the main work room. Apparently, having no Ministry Mare, the O.I.A. had latched onto the Princess herself for inspiration. Looking down, I noticed something by the dead unicorn's horn: a memory orb. However, instead of being clear, this one was a definite warm yellow gold. There was a letter half-stained with blood.

'I know you're depressed, Cherry Soda. I know these are tough times. The O.I.A. has a mission to fulfill and duties to perform. Have faith in the Princess. Cooperate with Horse however you can. Hopefully, this will show you even I err. The password is--' And of course the rest of the letter was blackened in blood! I screamed with frustration and stomped my hooves, lifting the letter with a scowl.

Then I paused, looking at it. I walked to the bathroom and turned on the sink, listening to the rads slowly add up as I carefully wetted the bloodstained section and rinsed away some of the blackened fluid. I squinted, but I could barely make out the rest of the sentence. '...what your buckfriend refused to give you.'

Okay, now I was cursing and stomping my hooves again. I lifted the orb and squinted, thinking. Anal sex? Muffins? Diamonds? Head? Damn it! An answer? A foal? What?

I took a deep breath. Okay. Think about bucks and mares as something outside Stable 99. What was something a buck gave a mare? Semen! Damn it, Blackjack! I tried to concentrate. Bucks and mares were different back then. They didn't just schedule a time to do it; they certainly weren't forced to do it. They had relationships. And those relationships eventually became like... like Mr. and Mrs. Cake. And to do that you had a wedding. But before you had a wedding you had to receive a proposal--

oooOOOooo

Oh boy, somepony put this poor bastard out of his misery! The buck I was in lay on his side, and from the pain and lethargy in his body he couldn't be long for this world. His insides bubbled with every breath, and he ached from horn to hoof. There was something that felt like a numb horn pointing in his side.

"You've looked better, Goldenblood," a familiar, wonderful, intelligent voice said calmly from the doorway. My host looked slowly over at the majestic sight of Princess Luna standing in the doorway, and his lips curled in a reactive smile.

"Your Majesty. My apologies for not rising but I'm afraid I'm a bit indisposed," he said with soft, wry humor.

"That's alright. I've only been ruler for three days and I've had enough bowing, scraping, and 'Your Majesties' to last me a lifetime," she said as she trotted before him and levitated a pillow, sitting neatly upon it. "I was told you gave quite a speech. 'Hoofington Rises'? Very catchy, particularly when you kept giving it even when you were bleeding out of half your orifices." She reached over and brushed his mane from his eyes. "Does it hurt?"

"Not at all. I suspect the zebras' poisons burned away all the nerve endings. Painkillers take care of the rest," he lied boldly, and from the sympathy in her eyes it was clear she didn't believe him. But they could both pretend and not think about it. "So, to what do I owe the honor?"

"I wanted to talk about... Littlehorn."

I felt Goldenblood deflate a little, collapsing against the mattress. "Forgive me, Your Majesty. It's not something I can discuss."

"You were the only survivor, Goldenblood. What happened? What really happened, besides what was in your report? I know you left something out. I can feel it,"

"It's all there in my memory, Your Majesty. Every bit of horror. Every monstrous moment." He took a breath like a bubbling kettle before he hocked up a wad of pink and spat it in the basin. It smoked.

"I know." But there was still something left out. Something unsaid.

"So, what's really bothering you, Your Majesty?"

She took a deep breath and rubbed her eyes. "I'm in charge of the country and a war that is consuming half the world, and everything is a mess. A complete mess."

"So why tell me?"

"You were right, ten years ago. You were right about what we should have done. Had we just done things differently..." She shook her head and then looked at him with a firm gaze. "I know the mistakes Celestia made, but what I'm not sure about is how to fix them. We're drowning in disorganization and chaos. The entire government was utterly formed around Celestia, and everypony around me seems torn between treating me like my sister with a coat dye job or flinging their hooves into the air and crying doom."

He closed his eyes, and I could just barely hear him humming something softly under his breath. Then he looked at her. "You aren't Celestia." She gave him a wry smile. "Celestia was such an effective monarch because for a thousand years the government formed around her. Everypony could anticipate her wishes, tell her what she needed to hear, do what she needed done. You are not Celestia. The moment the bureaucrats, nobles and people realize that, this country is lost."

"You seem to know a lot about politics, Goldenblood," she observed. "Most of the books I've read about the subject start and end with Celestia. And the so-called experts just seem to want me to grant them better favors than Celestia did!"

"I spent a great deal of time in Roam, growing up, and I read far more than is healthy. The zebras have a far more robust political system for selecting their Caesar," he said with a groan as he paused and coughed that wet, retching noise.

She looked down at him and then asked softly, "What do you think I should do, Goldenblood?"

He paused and coughed up another burning gob. What was inside him? "What you need is to remake Equestria."

She just looked at him with a dry smile. "Oh? Is that all?"

"Equestria is still in shock. Between Littlehorn and Hoofington, the entire country is in paralysis. When it wears off it will be too late to act. If you announce a reformation... reorganization... restructuring... something, it will give ponies hope in change. Confidence in audacity. Refuge in the knowledge that you are going to act. And the more different it is in appearance from Celestia's government, the better."

"I see. So anarchy it is then."

"Of course not. And if you wanted anarchy, you wouldn't have accepted the job." He stared at her, and I felt the urge to blink, even though they weren't my eyes. Luna closed her own with a small frown.

"I will rule. Celestia gave Equestria more than a thousand years of peace and prosperity. I will do no less."

"Not good enough," he replied, closing his eyes and tugging the blanket over him. He peeked out at Luna's slapped expression.

"What?" she stammered.

"If you're trying to run Equestria to soothe your ego and prove you're another Celestia, then you're going to fail, and fail miserably." Luna's eyes fell as her confidence melted. "And you know it too. No pony wants their lives hanging on a Princess trying to one up a legacy that's impossible to copy." He broke into another fit of coughing.

"No one's ever said that to me before," Luna muttered, still looking a little shocked.

"Well, I'm dying, so I have certain liberties," he replied, spitting up another noxious, bloody gob. He took a slow and deep breath. "For the right ruler, ponies will give anything and everything they can. They will fight to the death, sacrifice their lives, and walk into fire. We're ponies. It's our nature. So here is my proposal: beg an armistice and prepare to pay out the nose for peace, and abdicate as well. See what government the ponies come up with, and wash your hooves of it. Otherwise, decide why anypony should bow to a Princess who doesn't even know why she should rule save that she's a Princess."

Luna glared at him coldly, but I could see the uncertainty in her eyes. "Our people have suffered for ten years in this war. Now it's my chance to make things better. To make those ten years count for something! To make it all mean something. And I will do so even if it means my life! 'Princess' may be my title, but I am not going to forfeit my responsibilities and obligations to my people. And I will make things better! I will give the ponies of Equestria the future they deserve, at any cost!"

At any cost? Could she imagine the cost? Could he? He closed his eyes and then gave a resigned sigh. "What you need is a reorganization of form more than substance. You want to stay in charge, but you need a break in Celestia's status quo. You'll have to do something she never did before. You'll have to share power, or at least make the appearance of sharing."

"Share power? But how? Celestia..."

"The roles and obligations of government remain the same. Under Celestia, they were executed almost automatically. A thousand years of political stagnation will do that. Instead, you're organizing them into bureaucracies or groups; a different form with the same function." He paused as he closed his eyes again, and for a moment I wondered if he'd just died or something with how still he lay there. "You're going to need help. Ponies you can respect and who respect you. Ponies with skill."

"Well I respect you," she said, and he looked at her and I felt his heart beat faster. "But why? Aren't I supposed to rule directly?"

"Not even Celestia ruled directly. She ruled through inference and tradition. If she'd had to make every decision like you're trying to do, she'd have been crushed. The government that she formed was largely automatic. What you need are bureaus or ministries who can act while you rule. They'll screen a lot of the day to day activity. But you'll need a figurehead for them to solidify around. Somepony that can rally the people's faith and deflect their criticisms. A pony with enough ability to be effective, but selfless enough to lack ambition. And that will not be easy to find."

But Luna was smiling as she stared at the door. "Oh, I don't know, Golden." He turned his head to look at a familiar yellow pegasus with sweeping pink hair. "Hello, Fluttershy," Luna said with a calm smile as Fluttershy gaped in stunned silence.

"H- h- h- h-" And she finished in a squeak, her one visible blue eye peeking adorably from a gap in her pink mane.

"Fluttershy's been nursing me along," Goldenblood said with a fond smile at Fluttershy; one she returned as she drew up her forehooves, hiding her mouth behind them as she hovered. Her eyes darted from one to the other as she blushed terribly.

"Y...yes... I volunteer at the hospital whenever I have time," she said with a shy smile, "I... I know I can't do much, but I want to help out however I can."

Luna just gazed at her with a glowing smile. "Do you think ponies would rally behind that, Golden?" Fluttershy blinked as she looked from one to the other in confusion.

I had to agree, it did seem perfect. So why wasn't Goldenblood smiling? He spoke softly, in a near dead rasp, "I suppose they would, Your Majesty."

"Thank you, Goldenblood. You've given me a lot to think about. In fact, you may have saved Equestria," she said and she reached down and touched his side. A wash of magic poured through him and he gave a spasm. It felt as if a cooling wave passed through his wet, poisoned lungs. Suddenly he was able to take a deeper breath with only the barest hint of that wet rattle. When the light faded, even Luna looked like that spell had taken quite a bit out of her. "And get well soon, Goldenblood. I'm going to need you more than ever with this reformation."

She walked to the door and Fluttershy hovered to the side. Luna gave her that clever, intelligent gaze. "Fluttershy, is Twilight Sparkle still in Ponyville? I need to speak with her about an important matter."

"I... I think so. We were meeting there this weekend," the yellow pegasus said as she rubbed the back of her head with a hoof.

"Thank you, Fluttershy. I'll see you soon. I think that we'll be seeing much more of each other in the near future. It's time for the Elements of Harmony to save Equestria once again." And with one last passing look back at Goldenblood, she walked from the hospital room.

"What was that about?" Fluttershy said in confusion before she smiled down at Goldenblood. She landed and brushed his gold mane from his face and then started. "Why... why are you crying?"

"Nothing. She simply said I was useful," he rasped softly as he sat up in the bed.

"Well, let me get you cleaned up and check your burns," Fluttershy said brightly.

"Fluttershy?" He closed his eyes but I could feel the few slow tears inching over his face.

"Yes, Golden?"

"I'm so sorry..."

oooOOOooo

Coming out of that, I felt as though I were flying through the air, a hiss filling my ears. Still, I couldn't help but remember something Watcher told me: *'I know ponies whose fuck ups killed millions.'*

I'd just seen such a fuck up. Goldenblood had given advice to Luna that she then took and applied to form the ministries. And Goldenblood had been horn deep in it, apparently. And...

I blinked as I stared out at the river before me, the water flashing past my dangling hooves as I hung off the bow of the *Seahorse*, my back hooves tied to the rail. I screamed, waving my hooves wildly as we flashed across the storm gray waters.

"Okay! She's awake now!" Glory yelled back, waving her hooves.

"Get me off this thing!" I begged.

\* \* \*

"I will never ever ever ever go into a memory orb alone where my friends don't know where I am.

Ever. Okay?" I muttered for the tenth time as Glory and Rampage lay atop me, pinning me to the rear deck above the captain's wheel. Rampage was definitely getting heavy.

Glory thumped her hooves on my head. "You better not. We were ready to go five minutes after you left, but suddenly we couldn't find you anywhere. Lacunae finally magicked up a spell to find you. Then you were out when we really could have used you clearing out Hoofington Bridge. So... what do you say again?"

"I will never ever ever go into a memory orb alone where my friends don't know where I am. Ever," I replied with a grumble. Apparently, while I had been in la-la land, the *Seahorse* had had to pass under a bridge that a slew of Reaper washouts had managed to take over since the boat passed upriver; unfortunately, they'd had a missile launcher. I'd missed out on the fun of teleporting up and wiping most of them out. On the plus side, though, we'd added to my store of ammunition and odd weapons for resale.

Glory finally decided that enough was enough and climbed off me. I shoved Rampage off as I looked around with bruised pride. Actually... what pride? I'd been an idiot trying to get into the orb alone in the first place! I knew it; this was just my friends letting me know how much I'd scared them.

"Still, I wish you could have seen it. Luna and Goldenblood coming up with the idea for changing the government and Luna laying the foundations of the ministries. I mean, I didn't get a lot of the political gobbledygook... but it was still amazing to see."

"Well, I figured the ministries just... happened," Rampage said as she scratched herself. "Like one day Luna asked Twilight Sparkle and her friends 'Hey, wanna help me run Equestria and blow up the world? It'll be great fun!'"

Lacunae looked over with an unfathomable expression.

"Well, things have to get started somewhere, don't they?" I said with a sigh as I looked at the golden orb. "Luna needed to rule, and Goldenblood told her what she needed to do to get everypony to follow her. And it worked... until the war and everything got out of hand." So why had he told Fluttershy he was sorry? Why had he seemed more keen on getting Luna to surrender and abdicate than to actually follow his ideas? And why had he given her advice at all only to seem to regret it later?

"I think all those ponies were just crazy," I said with a little nod as I put the orb in my saddlebags. Maybe it'd come in useful later, or maybe Lacunae would want to see it. She hadn't said a word when I offered it to her.

I hopped up into the wheelhouse and sat next to Thrush, who was staring ahead intently. "So, where are we, Captain?"

"We're coming up on the Fork," she said as she slowed the boat. "Dangerous spot here. We'll let the current take us in for now."

"What makes it dangerous?"

She gave me a sardonic look. "Oh, lots of things. Hoppers. Leeches. Snags. Ever see a river serpent?"

"Captain, I grew up in a stable. I hadn't even seen clouds till three weeks ago," I reminded her as I looked ahead. We were off the northern tip of the Core, and the river had widened to the point that it more resembled a big lake to me. There were buildings rising out of the water; streetlamps, signs, and countless smashed boats littered the water like so many toys in a bathtub. We passed by a large barge

bleeding rusty rainbows from a mountain of barrels stacked on its deck. Past that, a large skywagon made a bridge between two apartment buildings standing like tall, lonely islands.

"What caused this?" P-21 asked, covering his nose with a hoof. The water reeked of iron and worse. "Balefire bombs?"

"Landslide," the captain said simply, pointing a hoof between the buildings to the north. "Used to be a bluff overlooking the river. In the attacks, the entire slope gave way. Blocked half the river. There used to be a lot of water traffic, too; all those boats and barges just floated about and got snagged up in the flooded ruins. There's a community, Flotsam, out here, but I think we'll avoid it tonight unless we have to." She looked at the scummy buildings rising around us.

"Why's that?" I asked curiously.

"One, because I really don't want my boat stolen in the night. Two, because I don't want a security pony to ride out and try to save the poor fishers. And three, because they have explosives in the water and I don't want to get blown up if you get a shooty look." Again with the shooty look. I needed to see this look.

"Fair enough," I admitted, curious about Flotsam and also curious about what had happened in Riverside.

Thrush separated watches, putting one of my friends with one of her crew.

We found a building with an intact roof and carefully pulled through a fallen wall. Oilcan got out a bucket and put in a few pieces of wood, and Thrush ignited it with a spell. It must be so nice to not be a one trick unicorn. In the fire she stuck a length of metal that she propped up against the bulkhead near the middle of the boat. "What's that for?"

"Leeches. Don't shoot if you see one. Just give it a few stabs till it goes back in the water. If you see something that looks like a big frog, shoot that if you have to, and if you see two really big eyes and a mouth the size of the boat, do everypony a favor and keep quiet so we can die peacefully in our sleep," she said with a wink. "You watch the front of the boat. I'll watch the back."

She levitated an egg timer, cranked it for two hours, and settled back against the frame as the rest went below and closed the hatches. Thrush and I wrapped ourselves in blankets as a veritable cloud of insects seemed to rise from the water and seek out every uncovered inch of pony flesh. The smoke from the fire in the bucket seemed to help keep them away a little bit, but I was smacking my hide raw with magic trying to swat them all. Thrush didn't seem that bothered with them.

"So, Thrush. Why'd you say you killed your dad?" I asked as I looked at the dark walls of our shelter, glad my eyes could peer through the shadows.

"Boy. You sure know how to slide into a conversation topic, don't you?" Thrush said after a moment. "We were in the Cervine Isles trying to find a new water jet talisman for the *Seahorse*. We snuck into a pirate camp."

"Pirates?" I glanced at her hat with a little smirk.

"Raiders on water, only not as nice. Pirates like to keep mares around for proper raping. Draw it out over a few weeks before killing you. Anywho, we got the talisman, but there were a whole slew of slaves as well. I wanted to free them. But twelve ponies sneaking through the jungle makes a lot more noise than two, and they came after us. Dad got injured and told me to take it, get the hell out of there, and make sure everypony knew he died a big damned hero. I took the talisman and abandoned him.

Heard the shots, and then him screaming. Got back to the *Seahorse*. Sailed away.” She pulled out my bottle of whiskey... hey! I checked my saddlebags, and sure enough, it was gone! I gave her a sharp look, but from the distant stare on her face I couldn’t exactly blame her.

“So, some regrets, I take it?”

“Every damn day,” she replied with a mirthless smile. “What gets me most, though, is that I play it over and over, and no matter how I try and look at it, it was my choice that killed him. If we’d just left them locked up he’d still be drinking and wenching all across the ocean.” She passed me the bottle and I took a pull, smacking at the biting bugs with a hoof.

“How about you?” she asked as she stoked the fire in the bucket. “Regrets?”

“A few. One big one. Broke into a sealed off section in the Fluttershy Medical Center. There were a bunch of colts and fillies kept in some kind of stasis. They’d been trapped like that for centuries, dying of diseases and injuries that couldn’t be treated. They’d gotten control of the maintenance robots and killed the nurses. Skinned them. Killed whoever entered that part of the hospital. We severed their connection to the robots. Then I had to choose whether to pull the plug or leave them locked up and trapped like that.”

“You pulled the plug, didn’t you?” she said with a smile. I nodded and she sighed. “Yeah. That’s what I figured. Because that’s the hard choice. Leave ‘em locked up, tell yourself somepony else will take care of it; maybe they do but maybe they don’t. The fact is, sometimes there is no right choice. You’re damned either way. The whole world is like that. Damned if you do, damned if you don’t.”

I listened to rain falling on the gurgling water outside. “So what do you do?”

She gave a dry laugh. “Say ‘fuck it’ and go on living either way. ‘Cause part of living is being damned, and the only way to get out of it is to stop living.”

I thought about Priest and the Crusaders, Bottlecap and Dusty Trails, and even Caprice in her sick way. Yeah, each of them had screwed up somehow, but they kept going on. Was goodness just a illusion? Virtue just the best we could muddle through?

Virtue. What was my virtue? Why did a not-smart pony like myself have to think about these things? I just wanted to be better than the Wasteland around me. I wanted to leave ponies better for my helping them. I seemed to just leave them dead.

No. I’d helped in Riverside, hadn’t I? And Chapel, though by accident. I’d keep helping if I could. I’d find out where EC-1101 was supposed to go and turn Hoofington around in the process. I could do it. I had to.

If I couldn’t, then I’d be really and truly damned.

\* \* \*

I was staring out at the front of the boat when I noticed it: a strange black mark in my mutant night vision, like a blob of night creeping along the edge of the boat toward me. Somehow, I couldn’t move or think as that shapeless mass undulated closer and closer to my hooves. It was like a black, shiny, pony-sized thing crawling towards me for succor. The mass of darkness was a thing from my nightmares, and I stared as the pointed, tapered end of it lifted and opened. Dozens, perhaps hundreds of hooked teeth glistened as it oozed its saliva from the tip. I stared, wondering if my brain had truly snapped for good.

Then the glowing tip of the iron floated past my head and pressed into that maw with a sizzle and a iron reek. The blob hissed and writhed as it fell back into the river with a soft splash.

"Huh. Usually leeches are bigger than that," she said in my ear before returning her iron bar to the fire bucket.

Leeches. It went on my mental list of things to hate about Hoofington. Then it was underlined, circled, and had stars put around it.

~ ~ ~

The atrium of 99 was the heart of social life in the stable. Ponies came into the open space to discuss their jobs and the few recreational activities various ponies organized. The stable picnic allowed a few dozen mares to gather, spread out blankets on the metal floor, eat some recycled chips, and pretend that we were all on the surface rather than think about our current situation.

I didn't like Daisy's mom. No pony did. She was by far the largest mare in the stable and in charge of the second shift, which put her right behind Mom on the pecking order. She could be nice, but without warning she could shift straight into vicious little comments that could become painful beatings or kickings with the slightest provocation.

So, it helped a great deal that I am such an idiot when I trotted right up to her and told the biggest, meanest, mare in the stable, "Petunia, I'm placing you under arrest for beating up Daisy. Please come with me to security for processing." Mom, sitting right beside her, went very still.

"What the fuck is this, Gin Rummy? You put your brat up to this as a joke?" Petunia said as she chewed slowly on a gray fungal chip. A chip named 'Go Fish', no doubt.

"Go Fish, what are you doing?" she muttered in horror.

"Being security," I said firmly, pointing a hoof at Petunia. "She beats up Daisy! She cuts her, too!"

"Fish, go back to our quarters please," Mom said firmly as she rose and escorted me from the atrium. When we were out of sight she whirled on me. "Go Fish! How could you say such things?"

"Cause she does, Momma!" I insisted, stomping my hoof as I looked up at her. "Daisy comes to school all bruised and cut up! Petunia's the only one who can be doing it. Daisy can't cut up her own flanks, can she?"

Mom looked at me steadily, closed her eyes, and sighed as she shook her head. Without another word she led me up to Daisy's apartment and opened the door. Daisy looked up in shock, wiping tears from her eyes. Mom looked at her. "Daisy, Go Fish made a very important accusation just now..." Daisy stared at me in horror as Mother asked slowly, "Does your mother hurt you in any way? Kick you? Cut you?"

And Daisy just bowed her head. "No ma'am. I get in accidents a lot. And fights."

"I see," my mother said in resignation. "And you know to report it if she does?" A slow lethargic nod.

"Daisy! Tell her! Tell her what she does to you!" But Daisy just gave me a chilling look. I'd gone from her friend to something else entirely. Something past what Duct Tape was... this was all going very horribly wrong. "Let me save you. That's what security ponies do."

"That's enough, Go Fish. Let's go. You'll have to write an apology to Petunia..."

~ ~ ~

I woke to the creaking rock of the boat and the sound of P-21 breathing nearby... and somepony else. I glanced up at the sight of Lacunae with her horn touching mine, my eyes going wide. "You have interesting dreams, Blackjack..."

"You can read my mind?" I thought at her, trying not to think of a slew of expletives to add to that.

"Like this, yes."

"And why are you reading my mind?"

"You have interesting dreams," she repeated with a tone of amusement. "And this way we will not wake the others."

I am not okay with this... I thought back at her, "Have you done this with the others?"

"Wouldn't you? I desired to see if you meant me any harm." And what about the other way around? She followed up with a simple, "I'm sorry you can't trust me yet..."

Considering what she'd just done, that statement was more than a little ironic. "Yeah, well, the telepathy thing is... freaky." And sneaky. "But you know we don't want to hurt you, right?"

"Your blue friend does. He wants to hurt all of us. And he wants to help all of us. I cannot imagine a more conflicted male." I sighed. P-21 still wasn't over everything that I'd done to him. When I hurt a pony, I left scars. Deep ones. Just like Daisy. "What happened to your friend in the stable?"

"There is this one door with a faulty electric motor. She led her mom in there... brought the door down on her head. Said it was an accident. I never went near that door again; I never knew if she was inside, waiting to crush my head like a grape." She took her mom's position and that was that.

"Do me a favor... all of us a favor... stay out of our heads," I thought as I looked up at her.

"Of course. Good night," she said as she pulled her horn away from mine with a parting, "Sleep tight."

Yeah... sleep... that wasn't happening...

\* \* \*

In the morning, I found Glory shaking, holding one of the cold metal rods as if it were a magic wand to protect her. P-21 was as far from the water as he could get, and Rampage was roasting a chunk of leech over the coals in the fire before laying in. "What? It's good!" she protested as she chowed down on the rubbery flesh. Another day and she'd be at her adult weight.

The *Seahorse* crept out into the flow, the morning glow barely starting to illuminate the clouds to the east. Everything was coated in a sickly sheen of black mold and rotten fungus; not true growth, but the only slime that could spread in Hoofington's Enervation fields and tainted waters.

Now that we were moving, I turned on the radio, hoping to hear more of the Stable Dweller and

things around Hoofington. About an hour after I turned it on, the familiar voice of DJ Pon3 addressed the Hoofington region. "And to all my listeners out east, I'm afraid there are some ugly times. A veritable army of raiders has popped up in the north. They've hit every caravan and village from Toll to Megamart. These raiders aren't the normal, half-starved psychopaths you're used to, either. They're healthy. They're organized. And they're eating everypony they can get their hooves on.

"So, who is responding to this menace? Well, not the Reapers. No, they got their hooves full trying to harass river traffic and seeing who is the most badass pony in Equestria. And it's not the Steel Rangers, oh no. They don't interfere with locals, and they're busy stockpiling every bullet and missile they can get their hooves on. Aaaand it's not the Volunteer Corps, either; come on, Enclave, if you really want to help, do you have to be so incompetent? I'm not saying you're not trying, but is this the best you can do?

"Unless one of these three powers wants to pony up, things are going to get pretty brutal pretty fast. Otherwise, we'll just have to cross our hooves and hope that Security can do something about it. Because once they strip Hoofington, it's just a hop, skip and jump to Manehattan. So move your little rump if you can, Security. Folks need you more than ever."

Thrush looked at me with a curious smile. "Well... you've got an interesting time ahead of you."

My mane itched like mad from all the humidity off the river, and I scowled as I looked out at the slimy buildings and bobbing ruined boats and barges. "Where the heck are they all coming from? I cleared out Withers and Pony Joe's."

"West side's always been lousy with raiders. East side of the river, there's too many ponies with really big guns for them to build up past small groups, but on the western half ponies are exposed and fair game. The Reapers don't keep their numbers down unless they get annoying; heck, half the bandits and raiders in the Hoof seem to want to join up with the Reapers." Thrush slowed and gave a barge covered in giant frogs a wide berth. "My guess is an entire village ran out of food and went raider. Not sure who it could be, though. There's a lot of little squatter villages between here and there."

"In other news, more tragedy in the Hoof as I've confirmed that the village of Riverside has gone silent. There's no activity in the community at all. No bodies, either. Whether the raiders got that far south or something else happened is unclear, but the entire town's been hit. Hopefully survivors make it to safety and are able to tell us what the heck happened.

"And I really wish I could end there, Hoofites, but if you're in the south, keep your eyes open for stripes. There's been reports of zebra sniper teams working all along the Luna Space Center and Black Pony Mountain targeting ghouls, Society farms, and even taking a few shots at the Skyport. Please note this seems to be only a small group or tribe, and don't take it as an excuse to butcher every zebra from Glyphmark to Roam, people!

"And while normally I would nip down for some cheese and wine at the news of Paradise getting its just rewards, I'm afraid I can't. Looks like Red Eye's put his hooves down and has taken control of the slave market directly. So expect your local slavers to be really interested in grabbing you, your loved ones, and anypony else they can, because Red Eye wants them all. No word on what happened to Usury, but it's to my (grudging) regret to report that Redbeard was impaled on his own radio tower. Red Eye: it's called 'temperance'; look it up. I'd tell you to look up 'restraint', too, but then you'd get all hung up on the collars and chains...

"And that's the news from around Hoofington. I know things are always tough, but you always hang in there. If ponies don't help each other, who will?"

I sat down hard. Riverside gone? What had happened? Had Rover decided that ponies couldn't

be traded with and murdered the survivors? Had Riverside gone and invaded en masse after we'd cleared out the traps, before Rover could replace them? Or were there other raiders we'd missed that'd wiped them both out? I thought of Fifi and Granny Fishy. What had become of them? Damn it, why did this keep happening?!

Still, Paradise taken over by Red Eye? I doubted that the bounty on my head still existed. I really would be glad to stop running across Zodiacs and desperate ponies.

\* \* \*

"We need to put in at Flotsam for an hour," Thrush announced with a sigh, more to her crew than to us. "Anchors owes me a barrel of tar and at least a case of spark batteries." She looked at us. "I'm invoking rule one. You go wandering around Flotsam and I'm leaving you there. This isn't like Riverside. Half the ponies here will shoot you in the back and claim they found you in the river. The other half will shoot *them* in the back. So just wait here. Tarboots and I will be back straight away."

I blinked. Why was everypony looking at me? "What?"

Skimming along the water, we approached what looked like just another logjam of wrecked barges and ships, except that these looked even more mangled and twisted. It wasn't until we got closer that it became clear that these weren't an accidental mashing. Two barges had been welded together into one immense platform, and dozens of cargo containers had been converted into rusty shacks. Four large cranes trailed in the river, and there were countless nets and smaller cables dangling in the water as well.

As we pulled close, one of the nearest cranes lifted a massive metal claw, spraying water and mud, and dumped the entire mass onto an open deck. The claw moved away, and a half dozen ponies began to pick through the sludge for anything of value. It sure didn't seem like a very good deal, but I saw them going immediately for yellow medical boxes, ammo crates, and any remotely valuable pieces of scrap.

What a life.

We pulled up, and immediately a dozen ponies looked at us with blatant speculation and sharp calculating stares. I just stood on the roof of the wheelhouse and looked back with Taurus's rifle beside me, giving them my own baleful stare in return. Eventually, the group mostly dispersed, but there were always eyes on the boat.

"Five minutes. No exploring," Thrush warned me as she and Tarboots hopped off and trotted towards the largest crane.

"Everypony acts like I can't control myself," I muttered as I walked along the rail, looking out at the filthy, muddy ponies. Not just filthy. Half the ponies I looked at were deformed; a bent horn here or a twisted hoof there. Some had grotesque tumors sprouting from their hides.

"What happened to all of them?" Glory asked softly.

"Taint," Oilcan replied simply. "It's in the water. There's nothing to eat but things that live in the water. They absorb the taint, and it gets transferred to anypony that eats them."

All of us glanced at Rampage. She blinked. "What? I just got *disintegrated*. If taint can still mess with me after *that*, then find me a great big barrel of the stuff and we'll see if I can die from it."

She had a point. I supposed if she got too mutated, she'd just walk towards the Core and come

back fine.

Then there was a sound of yelling and screaming. A colt had apparently found a sealed gun case and had pulled it free of the mass. A larger scraggy mare was taking issue with his find, and lifted her hooves to beat on him as he hugged it for dear life. "Okay... not exploring..." I started to say as I rose. "Just going to kick some ass!"

"You can't!" Seabiscuit said as she grabbed my hoof.

Oilcan added gravely, "You'd just make yourself free game, and us too." I gritted my teeth in frustration.

Then there was a jerk that made the whole boat rock and I blinked as I looked around for the source.

Rampage was gone.

She landed like a candy-cane-striped meteor on the back of the mare, knocking her flat on the deck beside the terrified colt. "Aggravated assault on a minor!" she yelled as she cupped the back of the mare's head in her hooves and slammed her face into the neck. "Premeditated foal abuse!" She slammed again. "Resisting arrest!" And a third smash that finally made the mare spasm, her face covered in blood as Rampage stood and snarled at the crowd, "Who feels like being an accessory?!"

Apparently they all did. Rusty spars of steel, hooked poles, jagged blades, and baseball bats materialized in the crowd around her. I stared as I watched her cutie mark swirl into that strange zebra glyph as she rose on her back hooves. They surged en masse, but with a hop she jumped clear over the leading edge. Then she was a one pony wrecking machine, her hooves seeking the joints, ribs, and necks of her enemies. I'd seen this kind of fighting before, in static pictures of fighting techniques.

These moves were the light side of Fallen Caesar technique, fighting with restraint rather than to kill. And she could kill with a tilt of her hooves from flat to point. Just that, and her hooves would be going through her enemies rather than bruising ribs or spraining joints... Her red stripes seemed particularly brilliant as she moved through them like an avalanche. Ponies on the cranes were rushing out now with high powered rifles. But any fight that was left found itself sprawled out across the deck.

Just like that, anypony who had a problem with Rampage left rather than face her glare. The colt had released the fallen gun case and now shook the fallen mare. "Momma! Momma!"

I saw the skull forming like it was rising from the depths... Saw that smile on her lips...

Fuck. No.

One shot fired, passing under her ear; the hollowpoint tearing off half her face as it exited. Floating the rifle, I advanced as she fell, keeping the barrel on her. When she regenerated, I fired again. And again. And again. The entire village stared in shock as I repeatedly blew her brains out.

"Will somepony get this kid and his mom out of here?" I shouted, and then fired as she started to rise. I did not want her to make me deal with a murderous pony using Fallen Caesar style on me!

Some ponies got their wits together enough to drag both kid and mother out of sight. Some other scumbag snagged the gun case. I hoped it was loaded with armed grenades. Finally, we were alone in the center of a large area of nopony wanting to look at the crazy mares. Rampage just lay there, and I watched as the skull seemed to dissolve into a swirl.

"Thanks," she muttered as she sat up and looked at the red and gray smears across the rusty deck. "Whoa... what'd I do?"

"Rampaged." And thank goodness without her armor. "Do you remember?"

"I... some cunt hit a kid and... I think I was going to... ah... arrest her?" She blinked at me owlishly before nodding. "Yeah, I think that was it. Then it all got fuzzier and fuzzier."

"Freeze! Don't fucking move!" two unicorns shouted as they pointed rifles at both of us. "No pony disrupts salvage operations in Flotsam."

Rampage just took one look at them and then leaned forward to press her forehead against the barrel of the gun. "What, you think your gun can drop me when hers couldn't? Go on. Try. And then, when you run out of bullets, I'll fuck you with the butt of your own rifle."

Okay, that was a little more disturbing than I'd anticipated. I put on my best cocky as fuck grin. "Look. Fight's done. See to your injured, be glad they're not corpses, and let's forget all about this little disruption?"

The two looked at Rampage and then at each other. The striped earth pony kissed at the one pressing her rifle to her head. Finally, the pair backed away. "Just... get the fuck out of Flotsam," they finished lamely as they backed away.

Gladly. We trotted back towards the *Seahorse*. I'd seen all I wanted to of this place. Then I paused as I saw a pony sorting junk. My eyes were drawn to a slim black case the length of my fetlock next to a heap of bent sporks, cracked Ministry of Awesome coffee mugs, and battered plates. The buck pretended I was invisible as I pulled it out with my magic. "Where'd you get this?"

He looked at me finally, then at the case. He lifted a hoof, and I stared at the tentacles that wiggled at the end of his limb. "Ministry of Awesome sky carriage last year. Good salvage. You like it?" he asked with a hungry grin.

"Ten caps," I said, trying not to shudder as his tongue slipped out. It looked like a gray pipe.

He seemed to struggle for something to haggle over. Charity would have owned him. "Is very... ah... black. And shiny. Fifty caps."

I looked at him flatly. "Ten and I'll throw in two cans of Cram."

His eyes lit up. "Done."

We got back on the boat and I touched the sleek black case. There was a soft click and it opened in my hooves. Inside gleamed the massive magical shell and a folded up note. *'Rainbow Dash, you seen anything like this before? That nutjob Trottenheimer whipped it up. Does it have anything to do with the work he did for you?'* I carefully slipped the silver bullet into my packs.

Ten minutes later, Thrush returned. She looked at Oilcan. "So, did she?"

"Leave the boat? Sure," Oilcan said with a smile. Tarboots started to grin. "But not to explore or help anypony. Her friend decided to administer a little law enforcement and she jumped out to haul her back in..." Then Oilcan looked at me with a disturbed little smile. "After shooting her in the head... repeatedly."

"It takes a lot to get my attention," Rampage replied.

The pair looked at each other. "Huh. Well, I bet she'd leave to help somepony. You bet she'd explore. Oilcan said she'd wander off being bored. Damn... I guess none of us win."

"Wait! You bet I'd leave the boat anyway after telling me not to?" I said sharply, feeling slightly hurt.

"Course we did," she said as Tarboots passed the box to Oilcan. Her lips split in a grin. "You don't think I'd stay put if somepony told me not to, do you?" I wanted to cry; I'd tried to be good and stay put. I had! Was I really that predictable?"

From the smirks, yes. Yes I was.

\* \* \*

We were leaving Flotsam and the Fork behind, heading north. I admit, I was glad to be putting some distance between me and the Core. The east side of the city was full of industrial ruins rather than residential. A number of huge rusting tanks and containers rose from the crumbling buildings like fungus. Like the west side, most of the factories bore black char marks from the intense flames. 'BOOM Inc.' rose over the largest container, spelled out on smokestacks that looked like sticks of dynamite.

I could only imagine THAT fire when the city went up.

The river was carrying us north towards a gap between two hills connected by a concrete arch. "Okay, if we can make it past Zenith Bridge, we should be okay," Thrush said as she looked up at the structure.

"And there's a problem with that, isn't there?" I asked as I looked through the binoculars. Both sides of the bridge had been fortified with trailers, slabs of concrete, and sandbags. On one side was a black pony skull on a red flag; on the other side's flag was a half-apple with an inlay of three magical sparks ringed by gears, held by crescent-shaped wings, and overlaid by a sword of war with a mouth-brace hilt.

"The Reapers and the Steel Rangers both contest the bridge, and neither side is so short on ammo that they won't take shots as us down here. It can get kinda hairy at times, since both sides have missiles." She sighed. "Usually we pass by at night, but that's eight hours from now."

"So..." I rubbed my chin. "Just speaking hypothetically here... if something exploded on the Reaper side... they'd be more inclined to shoot at Rangers than us, right?"

Thrush nodded with a smile. "Yeah, we've done that before... but we don't have any missiles." She looked again and scowled. "Shit. They've spotted us. Probably waiting for us to get in range now."

They were looking at us and each other. Maybe that meant they wouldn't be looking up.

I looked at Glory. Thrush looked at Glory. She gave a nervous little smile. "What? Why are you both smiling at me like that?"

\* \* \*

Five minutes later the *Seahorse* barreled past the bridge as gatling guns hummed, missiles exploded, and grenades popped in rapid fire succession. And to think, all of that was due to one grenade dropped by one pegasus. Only one missile streaked down at us, but we powered past it as it blasted a pillar of foamy water behind us. Two minutes later, we were clear and the Reapers and Rangers were

still busying themselves with pounding away at each other.

Glory fluttered to the deck, looking back. "Oh, I hope nopony gets hurt." Given that they were both using missiles, I wasn't counting on it.

"Look at it this way: they can stop firing any time they like," Thrush said with a grin as we powered down the river to the north. From the rattling of guns and the boom of missiles, that wasn't going to be any time soon.

\* \* \*

Toll was the last bridge crossing the river. Much lower than the Zenith span, it had a section that rotated in the middle to allow ships to pass on either side. That center span held the village nestled right on top of the powerful drives that moved the bridge. Fortunately it was open, and the *Seahorse* just powered past with a wave at the scowling ponies whom I was sure did not like getting cheated out of a payment. The bridge past the turnstile to the west showed recent battle, though, and some of the craters were still smoking.

With the last obstacle out of our way, we powered down the last mile of river and into...

The sea...

I'd never seen the sea before. Never imagined it. Never could imagine it, not even from the little gray pictures in books I was too bored to pay attention to. A great leaden sheet of rolling water stretching as far as the eye could see. Half of it was obscured by a port to the east, but my eyes stared out further and further till my gaze reached the horizon. Far off, I could see strips of blue.

Suddenly, I didn't want to stop. I wanted to ask Thrush to continue on out into that great open emptiness and get away from the nightmare that was Hoofington. I wanted to leave it all behind, for good.

Cards shuffled in my mind, and I let out a long sigh as I looked to the west at the large hills over the sea. I couldn't go, no matter how much I wanted it. And it didn't matter if I wanted to go somewhere else. Thrush's father had been lost to pirates. The Wasteland was more than just Equestria. It was the entire world. There was no getting away from it.

"What's that?" P-21 asked as he pointed to the east towards the largest damn ship I could have ever imagined. It was tied up to a pier but listed to the side somewhat. It had turrets mounting the biggest damn guns I could ever imagine. They looked longer than the *Seahorse*!

"Her Majesty's Ship *Celestia*. They called it a battleship; guess what it was for?" Thrush said with a snort.

"It's enormous!" P-21 gushed.

"The HMS *Luna* was bigger," Thrush said as she pointed at a darker patch in the middle of the harbor above a rusting tower of metal. "Took a direct hit from a balefire bomb and still took almost a century to completely sink. The *Celestia*'s now the local headquarters of the Steel Rangers."

"What's their story? I get that they have power armor, but why are they in Hoofington?" I asked with a small frown.

"Well, back in the last years of the war, Applejack designed magic power armor. Soldiers that were trained in its use became an elite group. When Equestria went boom, they buried themselves in bunkers and stables and waited it out. About thirty or forty years ago, they crawled out of their base in

Manhattan and started to spread. They've got some sort of edict to collect and protect the M.W.T. technology, and since ponies aren't M.W.T. tech, we can go fuck ourselves.

"Twenty years or so ago, they came down to Hoofington. I guess Elder Crunchy Carrots took one look at the *Celestia* and orgasmed. If they could get the guns to work, they could take over the city. If they could get the damn thing seaworthy... hell... I don't think any place within twenty miles of the sea would be beyond their control."

"Could they?" I couldn't imagine those enormous guns firing. How big were the actual shells? If it could fire for miles, even the Hoofington defenses might not be enough. They could batter down the wall and the city would be theirs. Except for the Enervation... but what if their suits blocked it? Oooooohh... my mane didn't like that idea at all!

"No idea. I think Crunchy Carrots just wants it working to make it work. Steel Rain, though... he's definitely of the opinion that technology's meant to be used." She sighed and shrugged. "They're mostly bottled up in the Ironmare base. I don't have much dealings with them, since the *Seahorse's* engine's probably pretty high on their list of 'Tech to Confiscate'. I don't plan on finding out just how high anytime soon."

The *Seahorse* turned away from the *Celestia* towards the west side of the bay, where the land rose in high gray and brown hills. I looked back at the gray waves and the crashed and piled boats that had been jumbled together or half sunk in the harbor. From the depths of the sunken HMS *Luna*, I could see the telltale rainbow glow of magical radiation. Even the sea, as vast and wide as it appeared, hadn't escaped the war. Nothing had.

"I'll drop you off at the boardwalk. Unless you've had a sudden outbreak of sanity and want to come with us to Friendship City?" Thrush grinned widely. "Oh, it's a great place. There's this bar run by the fattest mare you could imagine, but her swill will get you messed up faster than you can spit. Pretty sure she cuts it with antifreeze."

I knew she didn't want us to split up. We were a lot alike, but she had her boat and her crew. I had my... whatever it was. Quest? Mission? Brain damage? "Ooooh, tempting. I normally never pass up liquor that makes me blind, but I've got a long overdue appointment back home." Ahead, we were approaching something like a carnival set on some long wooden piers. A huge ferris wheel bearing the rusted face of Pinkie Pie grinned out at the harbor with an impudent little wink while a wooden roller coaster leaned perilously out over the water.

Thrush carefully maneuvered the *Seahorse* to a rotten stair at the end of pier. It was rickety, but we were able to climb up to the top. My PipBuck pinged softly. 'Boardwalk' appeared in my vision.

"Take care of yourself, Security. I look forward to having another adventure with you in the future," she said with a grin and a little wave.

"You too, Captain Thrush. Don't get sunk," I replied then frowned. "Or shot. Strangled. Raped. Disemboweled..."

"I'll stay safe," she replied with a laugh. The talisman at the rear of the boat hummed and hissed, and on twin jets of water the *Seahorse* pulled away and set out towards the open sea.

I sighed softly, watching her go.

"You wanted to stay?" Lacunae said softly.

"Of course. I mean, she has a life that's exciting and not filled with one messed up nightmare

after the next.” I checked my rifle and swept it across the Boardwalk. Nothing in view, nothing on my E.F.S. Had I actually gotten lucky twice in two days?

Carefully, we made our way down the pier and into the amusement park. The massive wheel creaked softly in the wind as we passed beneath it. There was an army of raiders operating somewhere around here. Maybe some of them were around Boardwalk?

They were. Only they were dead. Really really dead. Somepony had tied three of them to a rail and then eaten them... alive, apparently, from all the blood spatter and how the wire used to tie them had nearly cut their hooves off in their struggles. Congratulations. There were ponies in the Wasteland more fucked up than even raiders. I just hoped we didn't run into them between here and 99.

\* \* \*

The path home had an interesting sense of déjà vu behind it. Despite the fact we'd run in an entirely different direction, I still kept looking for the farm with flooded fields or the ruin where we first met Watcher. I was also keeping an eye on my E.F.S. for raiders. We kept coming across signs of them. A bloody brahmin skull hammered into a tree. A pony stretched over a stump before being eaten. I didn't check that closely, but I couldn't imagine that had been the only thing done to her. The broken soda bottles near her hindquarters were evidence of that.

In once clearing, we encountered two bucks completely torn to pieces, the remains thrown like garland over the dead trees and thorny bushes. Even their skulls had been pulverized. The only thing not destroyed were their genitals. The specificity of that carnage made my mane crawl. I didn't like it. These psychopaths were way too close to my home, but I needed to check and make sure it was safe before hunting these fuckers down.

Then I spotted it. The mine door was still intact; even Deus hadn't blown it off its hinges, apparently. I picked my way towards it, looking down. The remains of raiders lay in heaps outside the... No. Not raiders. Brahmin. I looked towards the door, a dread settling upon me.

I couldn't hear the voices of my friends as I stepped through. The short dark tunnel downwards was filled with a sweet stench of carrion. Down and down I moved, faster and faster, ignoring the shouts of my friends as I raced to the bottom. If the door was open, if the raiders had gotten inside... but no. I gave a sigh of relief as I saw that door was closed and secure. Perhaps the raiders had tried but failed. I smiled as I rested my head against the metal surface.

Lifting my PipBuck, I activated the Overmare's override for the door. There was a mechanical groan, then a hum. Finally, I could see Mom... Midnight... sleep in my own bed... play a game with Rivets.

I was home.

A blast of hot, dank air hit me... I'd been outside for so long that the darkness made me gag. I heard shouts from behind me, but I didn't care. I toggled in my mom's tag and was astonished to see that she was in the atrium. Right through those doors... I walked to them and squeezed through the gap before the door finished opening.

“Hey everypony! Guess who's...” I stared at the severed head of a mare... rotting lavender hide hanging in slats, striped purple and red mane spattered with dark bits of gore. It was speared on a shorn-off pipe with her PipBuck locked around it and the sign ‘Traitor’ written beneath it. Splayed torsos were nailed to the wall, guts and entrails dangled from the overhead rails like streamers. The black-brown stain of blood covered every wall, and from the halls off the stable came a low mad giggling.

A hiss crackled over the speaker, and I heard the Overmare's voice. "Welcome home, Blackjack. We missed you." Her mocking giggle rose higher and higher as I began to scream.

The raider army was Stable 99.

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Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk added: Light Trot -- You are agile, lucky, and always careful; or maybe you just mastered the art of self-levitation. Either way, you never set off landmines or floor based traps.

(Great admiration, joy, and respect to Kkat for creating FoE, Hinds and Bronode for spending nine hours making it decent, and for everypony happy to read it!)