

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 22: Damned

"You've got to get into the spirit of things! After all, this is your new home!"
"Not anymore."

Death.

I've seen a lot of it. I've seen old death in fields of bones where soldiers were left to decay, or dried-up bodies stuffed in closets for centuries to mummify or rot. New death in the ponies I've shot, cut, smashed, or crushed. Casual death, as casual as blowing the head off a raider because she's a raider. Merciful death in a mare killing herself to escape the agony of dying in a wall. Sudden death in a door crushing a stablemate. Slow death in scavengers dying around Flank. Meaningless death in a mother getting run through for being mistaken for a long-dead mare. And cruel death in a comforting hug that transformed into a deadly embrace.

Through it all, I've tried to find a line. I've worked to keep to a standard. Struggled up the slippery slope. I'd only kill the bad ponies. I wouldn't kill the helpless ones. I'd do better. I'd be kind. Be strong. I'd hang in beside my friends. I wouldn't allow myself to become an executioner.

Now I'd returned home. It wasn't a perfect home. In fact, it was a pretty monstrous one. We'd done horrible things here. All of us. Everypony was complicit. But I took solace in the hope that all it would take was an outsider's view, a fresh perspective, and the mares of Stable 99 would realize their mistake. They would go out and become a part of the world again. They'd work to make it better.

Instead, they'd made it lunch.

The disease Glory had discovered, that the Enclave were developing, that I'd encountered face to face in Tumbleweed and those farmers, had found its way to Stable 99. The Overmare, who I'd assumed dead and gone, had clearly become one of its first victims. Her laughing cackle rose higher and higher over the intercom as she pranced in front of the armored window, her pale legs covered in bites and sores as her bloody red lips curled in glee.

My home had become a nightmare. Stable 99 had a population of five hundred ponies. With one germ, a third of the known population of Hoofington had transformed into a mass of psychopathic killers. Worse, these were physically healthy, armed, organized, and relatively trained psychopaths. And they'd been hitting caravans and villages, no doubt bolstering the stable's armory with whatever they could take.

Since I'd stepped out into the Wasteland, I'd struggled to find my virtue. Was it justice? Courage? Perseverance? Idiocy? I'd struggled against the Wasteland so hard that it had become personified in a hallucination that seemed determined to test me and push me towards misery. Perhaps the Dealer wasn't trying to break me, though. Perhaps he'd been spending all this time trying to get me to accept the truth:

My virtue is death.

And right now? If the Wasteland needed an executioner... then I'd be a fucking executioner.

* * *

There were no words I could say. No songs I could sing. No refuge from the sight of my mother's decapitated head spiked in the middle of the atrium as giggling, laughing ponies I'd known my whole life spilled from the hallways leading to the large vaulted chamber. They wore security barding stained black and rust brown from coagulated blood, decorated with spikes and spurs of scrap metal, chopped off hooves, hooks, chains, and other vicious implements and trophies. No escape was offered from the metallic stench and sweet reek of slowly drying blood and putrefying flesh.

I had two ten millimeter submachineguns, each holding thirty rounds of twelve gram ammunition per clip with a firing speed of ten rounds per second. Both came out of my saddlebags as the raiders charged towards me, shrieking in delight. The first I saw was Dewdrop. Morning shift, nice and calm and professional pony. Her lips were now smeared with blood as a strip of pony meat dangled out the corner of her mouth. In three seconds, I sent sixty rounds at her and the deluge of ponies behind her.

Not one dropped.

Of course not one dropped. My aim was shit, and these weren't ponies that had been emaciated and weakened by exposure to the Wasteland. These were healthy and robust ponies wearing body armor. They had access to Med-X, Buck, and other controlled substances kept in reserve for an Incident. I ejected the clips and slammed fresh ones home, then slipped into the calm of S.A.T.S. I could see every inch of Dewdrop's face, those purple irises and pinprick pupils surrounded by sick, piss-yellow sclera. And in that magical, decelerated sight, I could watch in perfect detail.

Six rounds coated her faceplate in webs of cracks and chips.

Six more shattered the plate into jagged and broken polymer chunks.

Six more transformed the face of a mare who could balance three stacked food wafers on her nose into strawberry jelly.

Six more, and I watched as the pulverized remains tumbled from her neck and bounced across my hooves, her body crumpling like a broken toy.

Goodbye, Dewdrop.

"Blackjack, come back," Lacunae's voice whispered urgently in my mind as time returned and I focused the remaining rounds on Shuffle and Primer. Their shotgun blasts slammed into my armor as I raced to the side, flinging away the smoking clips as two more lifted from my bags and slammed home. More shots beat my plating, shoving me around. I ignored the pain, ignored my friends, and let the rage sweep me along with its own terrible poetry.

*Pony, Pony, rage resound
In the stable underground,
What immortal horn or hoof*

Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

Primer staggered as the stream of bullets crushed and snapped her forelimbs, but still she came on. Shuffle raced around behind me, blasting at my combat armor. I felt my bones groan in protest as I rose on my hindhooves to meet Primer. Then we met, and I grappled with the mare who'd taught me firearms, her head turning to bring her automatic pistol in line with my face, blue and yellow eyes wide with glee and thrill as the hot, reeking barrel pressed against my cheek.

Two SMGs pressed their smoking hot barrels against her ribcage, and without blinking I sent the remainder of the clips into her chest cavity. She folded against me, her jaw trying to work the automatic to take me with her. I dropped the exhausted SMGs and seized her weapon as life left the pony who taught me to never waste ammunition.

*In what fallen city or land
Did your spirit break so grand?
How much pain did you endure
To protect and life secure?*

I whirled as Shuffle reloaded her shotgun, the yellow unicorn mare fumbling with her ammo; madness hadn't robbed her of that. She was always better on the dance floor than on the firing range. Her screaming laughter speckled the inside of her visor with pink globs as I charged in. She ratcheted a round as my magic scooped up Dewdrop's helmet and flung the bloody-maroon contents across her visor. She shrieked, firing wildly and blindly as she scrabbled to lift her helmet's face shield with her hooves. She managed to get it up.

She stared down the barrel of my gun as I stamped it against her eye and sent the bullet to obliterate a lifetime of amazing dance moves. Primer would have been so proud.

*And what friends and what love
Could lift your heart up above?
And when your tears began to fall,
What dread sorrow held you in thrall?*

My friends were fighting behind me, screaming and shouting my name like distant ghosts beckoning me. More ponies were coming. Friends. Acquaintances. Rivals. Ponies I barely knew or recognized save that we'd once shared a meal at the cafeteria or passed one another in the hallways from time to time. S.A.T.S. recharged, and I slipped into it to put three automatic rounds into the mare that worked the cafeteria on evening shift and always managed to slip in a little more sugar than rations allowed. She staggered and twitched, her eyes widening in an expression of lucid wonder before I blew out her throat in an arterial spray.

More ponies were coming now. They came with mad giggles and jeering cries, their familiar faces stretched into caricatures of the ponies I'd known. They tittered madly through bloody grimaces as they advanced on me from both sides. I felt the distant wet sensation of blood on the inside of my armor; I ignored it. Like I ignored the screams of my friends, the frantic whispering in my mind, or the shuffle of

cards within my soul. There were five hundred ponies that needed killing.

*What the shotgun? What the flame?
In what torment birth your shame?
That the rifle? What dread eye
Guides your bullets as they fly?*

My friends fought in a knot behind me. Rampage was a one pony stampede, a spiked wrecking ball even in armor a size too large. She was as strong as ten ponies, but she had ten blasting her and ten more shoving back against her armored sides. Lacunae swept the minigun like a magic wand, its tip sending out a line of sparkling death that made the pack surge back and forth in a sick unison while her shimmering shield deflected their shots. Only the occasional explosion announced P-21's presence as blasts and bursts sent knots of them reeling. But they had potions protected from Enervation by the stable's shielding, and I watched bloody holes close as they drank and rallied.

Glory flew from balcony to balcony, trying to draw fire up into the air of the atrium as she circled and darted from one side to the other and blasted magical light at everypony who tried to use the higher platforms to fire down at us. I wondered if it was easier for her, not knowing that she'd just killed Textbook, the worst teacher in Equestria and the only one that I'd ever known. The one who'd who tried to teach a little filly about a war, ministries, and the mares who ran them.

I felt a stab in my rear left leg and looked down at a filly just old enough to have her cutie mark. She was jabbing a carving knife through a gap in the plates. I looked into her wild diseased eyes, wondering what her name was. What was her job in 99? Who was her mother; was she on evening shift? What did she like? What did she dream of?

Then I realized that none of that mattered; I brought the dragon claw across her unarmored throat like it was water. She looked down in confusion at her own blood spattering across her forelegs, then she looked at me as her gaze unfocused, the knife slipping from her slack mouth. Yes. That's your blood, sweetie. And then her eyes half closed as she curled up for an endless nap.

*When your guns and pistols roar
And promise doom and death in store
Do you smile, your work to see?
Do you kill, to be set free?*

I was failing. Falling. There were too many in the room, all armed... all armored... all family. They rolled in front of me in a wave, their own S.A.T.S.-guided shots cutting into me like knives as I struggled onwards. My shotgun roared, the barrel now glowing a cherry red. Angles, one of the structural engineers, slammed into me wearing cobbled-together armor from her workshop. The spikes plucked at the holes in my armor as she bit at my throat. I'd cheated off her math homework for years; she'd known. She never hid it. Shoving her back, I plunged my dragon claw into her eye and kept pushing till the back of the socket gave way and the curved tip pushed deep inside her skull.

Thanks for the answers, Angles... With each mare I killed, I killed a little more of myself.

*Pony, Pony, rage resound
In the stable underground,
What immortal horn or hoof*

Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

P-21 slammed into me. I wished I'd made him get some barding too. His sides gleamed with blood from bites, cuts, and kicks, yet he was still on his hooves. Goddesses, he was tough. He'd endured a lifetime of this. He fired Persuasion low, the grenade skipping between my hooves to bounce between the ponies in front of me. The blast knocked a near perfect circle up and out. Some died. Many screamed. But far far more laughed hysterically at the slaughter.

He pulled out a purple bottle and held it up to me. I stared at it dumbly before I realized it was a healing potion taken off one of the fallen. 'Is there a plan?' his eyes begged me. Even with all his hate, even with all his pain, he hadn't wanted this. Not this.

But there wasn't a plan. There was nothing at all but blood and death and giggling madness and the mindless fire we returned to it. Simply shoot, and shoot, and shoot...

And then he was grabbed, his tail yanked as his hooves skittered on the bloody floor, and he was pulled into that mass of raiders, of mares who had used him in the worst possible way. Rampage struggled on three limbs as more and more raiders piled onto her. Lacunae's shield disappeared in a flash, her minigun turning briefly from firearm to bludgeon before she teleported away.

And then I was falling as half the stable disappeared in red, my legs folding beneath me as an odd numbness spread through my left side and the world sounded like I'd dunked my head under the water in the tub. I wanted to keep shooting. I did. But my magic didn't seem to know what to do with triggers or the like.

Glory descended, screaming through her tears as she landed atop me, her gray wings spread wide as if to shield me from the world as her beam guns flickered weakly, failing from overuse. I could only lie there, the stable spinning around me as blood poured down my neck. Fly away, Glory... Fly away... Go back to Chapel... please...

And then Rivets and Midnight came out of the crowd, and they were screaming and firing and dragging me away to join Mom. I was so tired. The Wasteland wanted to know when it'd broken me?

Consider me broken.

* * *

"So. Is this it?" Watcher asked me as I lay on a filthy mattress, listening to the rain patter on the roof as I sat in a heap of my own excrement, vomit, blood, and worthlessness. A terminal flickered on the desk with a simple message: >Terminate Power: Y/N? The Dealer calmly, quietly, looked on with tears in his eyes as he slowly shuffled the cards between his hooves. "Are you done?" asked the little bug robot.

"What else is there?" I asked as I lay alone in that room. "I've failed."

"You think you're the first?" asked the robot. "You think you're the worst?"

"No," I muttered softly. "It's not a fucking contest, Watcher. I'm tired. I'm tired of evil, fucked-up shit. I'm tired of a world of evil, fucked-up shit where no matter how hard I push there's something worse to push back. I kill Deus and get a new Project Chimera monster. I try and help the sand dogs and wipe out Riverside. Every step forward I take comes with three steps back."

"You don't live for the evil, fucked-up shit, Blackjack. You live for the good parts. You live for the

parts that matter,” Watcher told me as he hovered overhead. “Only an idiot lives for the misery.”

I closed my eyes, feeling the cold, reeking vomit under my cheek as I curled up a little tighter. “And what if there aren’t any more good parts, Watcher?” I whispered.

“Then... you fight like hell to make some,” Watcher replied. “You fight till you’re out of bullets. You fight till your limbs are broken. You fight for your friends. You push and bite and you don’t give up till things are right again. Are things right, Blackjack? Are you happy with how things are right now? Is this it?”

I couldn’t answer him. I couldn’t tell him. I couldn’t do anything but look at the Dealer as sad tears ran down his cheek and he slowly rose, his worn cards fluttering around his hooves. “I’ll be outside when you’re ready,” he rasped quietly as he walked to the door and stepped out into the rain.

“Damn it, Blackjack!” Watcher shouted at me as I slowly lifted myself to my hooves. “We need you! P-21 needs you! Rampage needs you! I need you, damn it!” His tinny voice crackled as he fluttered in my face. I felt the chunks of foulness oozing southward. “Fight! We can’t do this without you!”

“I can’t fight anymore. All I do is get ponies killed. The list just gets longer and longer,” I said quietly as I walked towards the door. “Time to pay the price...” A pain grew, sharper and sharper as if something were being bored into my skull.

“Damn it, Blackjack! I won’t let you die!” Watcher screamed with Glory’s voice. “I’ll save you... somehow... just like you saved me. I can’t lose you, Blackjack. You’re all I have left.” I clenched my eyes shut as the pain grew and grew until it was all I knew. My whole world was pain.

* * *

“Got it!” I heard Midnight’s shaky, triumphant cry as something was pulled from the side of my head. There was a ping as a glowing, bloody bullet was tossed into an empty tin can next to my writhing body.

“Give her another dose of Med-X,” Glory instructed. “I’d even use Hydra if we had some...” she said as I squirmed against the ponies holding me down. “And get those healing potions inside her!”

“Hurry up,” Rivets rasped as she pinned me down. I didn’t feel the prick, but I did feel the numbing relief as the pain was taken away. A metal funnel was lifted to my lips and forced between my clenched teeth. The slightly bitter tang of healing potion dripped down my throat. I swallowed reflexively. More of the pain went as I drank along, injuries going away as the healing magic spread through my body.

Finally, I relaxed. The whole side of my head hurt, but it felt like my body was coming back together again. “What...” I muttered weakly, looking up at the gray earth pony, the black unicorn, and Glory. “What happened... why’s my head hurt?”

“Are you asking about charging into a stable of raiders, or the part where you got shot in the head?” Glory asked with a mixture of new relief and old irritation. “Didn’t you hear P-21 warning us to slow down? That something wasn’t right?”

“I think... vaguely... but I wanted to make sure the stable was closed. Then everything went sort of... fuzzy on me.” I blinked as I sat up, wincing as I touched the side of my head. “I got shot? But I was wearing a helmet!”

"Which is why you still have a head," Midnight said as she floated my helmet to me. Actually, I'd gotten shot in the head multiple times, judging by the dings and scrapes. One round, however, had punched through the armor and straight into my head. I glanced at the bloody round in the can. .308 armor piercing round. What I'd use, if I hadn't been in over my horn killing... killing...

Oh Goddesses... My heart started to pound faster and faster as I realized what I'd done. Dewdrop. Shuffle. That filly with the knife. I'd killed them... I started to fall apart in front of everypony. No! I couldn't do that now. They couldn't take it now! I needed to hold it together, as tightly as Glory hugged my hoof in her own.

Her question saved me from a complete meltdown. "What happened here?"

Rivets looked at Midnight and then at me, and then the repair mare spoke slowly. "Well, you had us evacuate down here to the maintenance levels, and for a while there were shots and bangs. Some of the invaders tried to get downstairs, but we used pipes, horns, and hooves to fight them off. Then everything got real quiet, and we waited for somepony to come and get us." Because mares in Stable 99 did what they were told. I'd told them to hide.

Midnight looked at me with a solemn little smile. "There was shouting and fighting, and soon there was shooting. The Overmare had been... attacked... and she said that you and your mother were traitors. That you had let the raiders inside. But I'd heard the transmission on your PipBuck. I knew she'd been sending and receiving transmissions from outside. She called me a traitor too and said I was going to be arrested."

Rivets nodded gravely. "So, I figured we'd just sit tight till we figured out what to do. Some ponies went topside, but most of us were trying to figure out how to get answers from the Overmare."

"Why didn't you just arrest her?" Glory asked with a little frown.

"There's no system in place for it. No precedent," I explained, then realized that that wasn't completely true.

"Well..." she said softly, but I knew her well enough to know she was thinking 'that was stupid.'

"The last time somepony tried overthrowing the Overmare, the stable was almost lost," I added, glad for the mental distraction. "It's a really big deal here." That mollified her a little. "So what happened?"

"Well, at first the Overmare just sent snippy little messages that we were all traitors and in rebellion and stuff... but then she started to get creepy. She spent one whole day just giggling into the intercom. At first, we were sure that somepony up there would realize she'd cracked a seal and lock her up... only they were getting creepy too. She said that if we didn't want to starve, we'd have to go up and be punished. We'd have to... eat... dead ponies. At that point, we improvised what weapons we could," Rivets said, gesturing to a nozzle attached to a steam cleaning pack used to scrub the reactor.

I thought about that. I could see an infected Overmare demanding we eat the dead. Worse, I could see ponies doing it, too. She was the Overmare, and some ponies would probably slit their own throats if she asked them to. Or slit others'.

"Poor Marmalade... she'd come down here, too. She told us that the Overmare had ordered a 'victory meal of the dead'. It was disgusting... but it was an order. Anypony who didn't eat the meat... became the meat." And Stable 99 mares were used to following orders... "Then she got sick. She kept giggling and biting herself. She tried to eat her own legs." Rivets shuddered as she drew in an uncertain, halting breath. "I had to put her down... never imagined doing something like that."

Glory could sympathize.

The gray pegasus rubbed her nose with a wing; something that both my old friends found fascinating. "It looks like the disease causes increased aggression and an insatiable urge to eat protein. Like likes like, so anypony who doesn't eat becomes part of the menu. Thus the disease gets spread. Once the cannibalism occurs once, there's an urge to expand the infected. Pretty fascinating social vector," she muttered. I tried not to scowl. She was the only thing holding me together right now. I didn't want to think about P-21 being up there...

Assuming he was still alive at all, which I was, because I'd lose my mind otherwise. "So, what have you been doing?" I asked.

"We've been living off all the old stored food that was shoved down here after the Incident, trying to figure out what to do next." Midnight looked at Rivets with uncertainty. "We were so glad to hear shooting; they'll sometimes bring ponies in from the outside, torture them, or let them join. I think the Overmare just likes having us down here, slowly starving. She keeps trying to bait us with food, but we're not desperate enough to come out yet."

"How many ponies are down here?" I asked as I sat up and finally took stock of our surroundings. We were in Atmospheric Maintenance Three, the processors humming their unending purr as they moved and purified the air of the stable around us. I looked at the table I lay on, now smeared with my blood, and at the precious playing cards now scattered across the floor. I looked out with my strange mutant sight and saw, through the flickering lights, dozens of scared eyes staring back at me. Slowly, I rolled off the table, trying not to step on the fallen cards.

The hall beyond was filled with ponies. Dozens and dozens.

"Three hundred and fifty... Three hundred eighty?" Midnight asked as she looked at Rivets for confirmation.

More than half the stable? Much more than half! I felt struck by lightning... okay, actually I felt shot in the head, but I pretended it was lightning! Maybe that lead would do my brains some good! Unfortunately, healing potions hadn't magically made the hole in my head completely heal, and I found myself staggering to the side, fighting for balance. "I need a plan. Right now. Something that doesn't involve the two of us fighting off fifty raiders apiece."

"We have one... sort of," Rivets said as she walked over to a big, inactive arcane machine and popped it open. "You remember the Incident, Blackjack?"

"I have brain damage, so you'll probably have to be specific," I said as I stepped next to her and looked at a talisman shaped like a pinwheel around a gemstone. Ugh... why'd my head hurt so damn much... oh yeah... brain damage.

"I've known that for a while," Rivets said with a smirk. "Most folks don't know that, when the Incident occurred, the stallions sabotaged one of the air purification systems. My great grandfather was involved in it. He left notes, just in case." She reached her head into a saddlebag and pulled out a very old book stuffed with added pages, then dropped it on the floor and hoofed it open. "Normally, the talisman converts carbon dioxide and any contaminants into oxygen." She reached out and tapped the book with a hoof. "According to this, this talisman... doesn't."

"So what does it convert it into?" I asked, leaning in towards the sickly green gemstone.

"Chlorine," she said simply, and I heard Glory gasp. I looked at it more closely.

"Chlorine, huh? And what's that do?" I asked as I reached out to tap the glyph with my hoof.

"Blackjack! It's a very poisonous gas!" Glory blurted. My hoof froze inches from the green stone. Of course it is. Slowly, I pulled my head away from it. Glory gaped at Rivets. "How did he even do that? I've never heard of sabotaging an air purification talisman to do that."

"He doesn't go into detail, but apparently, you go far enough back, and my family worked for one of the ministries doing all kinds of sneaky, hush-hush stuff. I've got recipes for napalm, homemade explosives, thermite..." At my 'remember-Blackjack-isn't-a-smart-pony' look, she amended, "Stuff that burns good, stuff that goes boom, and stuff that burns through just about anything." Rivets chuckled as I flipped through the book. Lots of arcane sciency formula things that were way over my head.

"Unfortunately," she said with a sigh, "chlorine is a heavy gas, so we'd have to close off all lower return venting feeds while the talisman is active. That requires a command from the Overmare's terminal and confirmation from the head of security and a maintenance supervisor." She patted her hoof against the brass machinery as if consoling it that this wasn't its fault. "So that's where that plan hits a snag. Right now, if I turned it on, we'd just gas ourselves first and they'd have plenty of time to clear the upper levels.

"The alternative is somepony sneaking through to the armory. They've got so many weapons up there that, if we could capture some and blow the rest, maybe we might have a shot. That'd probably be suicidal, though. They're watching every inch of security."

"Not if we found Lacunae," I said, looking at Glory with a wide grin. "Listen, Lacunae can read memories, right?"

"She can?" Glory's eyes went wide. Crap, I hadn't filled her in on that.

"She told me she can," I amended quickly. "If we find her, then she can read my mind and whisk us straight into the armory! Then she can teleport the guns back down here. If we're really lucky, we could have all their weapon stores down here before they know it. We can take back the stable without gassing anypony!"

"But where is she?"

"She teleported away, but I bet she's somewhere close. I don't think she'd leave unless she knew we were dead. The Goddess still wants me for something. Maybe in the tunnel, or right outside, where she could watch but still get away if attacked," I said thoughtfully. "Then we just need to find P-21 and Rampage." With any luck, Rampage would have taken over the raiders through sheer personality. I always wondered how exactly Deus cowed the others into obeying him. Maybe they'd been infected but not completely gone.

"Blackjack... P-21..." Glory began softly.

"He's alive. All right?" I said sharply, frowning at her. "I can't believe he's dead. He's too clever and tenacious to die. So until I see his corpse, he's alive." He had to be alive. I owed him the Overmare's head for all he'd done. Then I blinked. "What about the males?"

Rivets looked at me in confusion and said in scorn, "What about 'em?" My eyes must have flared like the pits of the damned, because she instantly balked, raising her hooves as she stammered, "They're... I think they're okay! Maybe! When everything was going crazy I heard Gauze telling Crutches that they'd barricaded the door with their bunks. They're still using water in medical, so I suppose they're drinking out of the toilets or something." Midnight at least had the decency to look a little upset at that.

"Right," I said, feeling better. "Okay. So the plan is... find Lacunae... get guns... take back stable... let P-21 turn the Overmare into a piñata for the males... and then have a party before getting to

work making 99 a part of the Wasteland. In a good way.”

Glory raised a wing. “Um... yeah. Question... how are you going to get out of here to find Lacunae?”

Yeah... this part. This was going to be messy. “We’re going to need Marmalade.”

* * *

Raiders are not stupid. They might be brain damaged, over-aggressive monsters, but then so am I. The sight of a yellow mare in filthy security barding, her mane coated in gore and grease, trotting out from the hatch with unsteady steps and incessant giggling, gave them all pause. A unicorn horn dangled from around her neck, a contrast to the orange jars on her flank. The welding goggles she wore were odd, but then most raiders seemed to have a sensitivity to light. She laughed, looked at them and their guns, and laughed some more before shuddering and biting her foreleg hard enough to draw blood. “Hey...” she giggled... “Got anything to eat?”

As Glory said, like likes like, and the raiders stepped out from around their barricade to approach with their own eager and enthusiastic grins. “Are they fucking dead in there, Marm? Finally fucking dead?” the closer one asked as she looked at the cutie mark of a mare she knew. She was Angelheart, one of the meekest mares I’d ever known... actually, she’d been a little annoying before. Now she had decided to screw bits of pointy metal into her forehoof.

“Nooooo...” the yellow mare giggled. “They’re finally pissing themselves in the deepest holes since their hero is dead in the head...” She rocked back and forth. “I think they’re just about ready to join us...” A look of relief passed between the two.

“About time. Once you eat... it all gets so much easier... it’s not sick... not sick at all!” She laughed in glee.

“Yeah. It is.” And out came my dragon claw across her throat. Her eyes went wide, enough of the ghost of the kind mare I’d known left to look shocked before she fell limp. The other scrambled for her shotgun, but my horn flicked on the safety as she pointed it at my head. Her mouth worked the trigger frantically, but Pastels was an artist, and for all her desire to kill me, she had no clue about the little button she had to press to disable the safety. My hooves snapped up and spun the gun in her mouth, breaking loose two of her teeth as it was knocked free. She fell back, giggling louder and louder as I raised my goggles and stared into her eyes. It seemed to draw some sanity back into her.

“Is... is... is... it over...?” she asked me between hysterical little hiccups, her yellowed eyes looking into my glowing ones in desperation. “It... it doesn’t get... easy... say it’s over...”

“Yeah. It is,” I said softly as I lifted the dragon claw to her throat. “It’s over, Pastels.”

“Good...” she stammered. “Good... good...” And her words transformed into a gurgle of red flowing down her chest before she went still.

Being an executioner was easy...

I lowered Pastels to the floor, looking in the direction of the stairs to the living quarters. Surely she’d have more than two guards... but really, what was the point? The raiders knew there was nowhere for the rest of the stable to go, and time was on their side. As ponies got hungry and desperate, they’d start coming out. And then the raiders would get to start having fun.

I carefully applied more blood to my disguise, trying to obscure the dried strips of hide Wonderglued over my cards. I painted a bit more on Marmalade's PipBuck too; the black delta model had been far too conspicuous, so Midnight had put Marmalade's on me and copied over all the files except EC-1101. The dye at least looked right. I was careful to keep the blood away from my mouth, of course. Finally, I lowered the goggles back into place and made my way towards the stairs.

Moving up, I quickly saw why they hadn't bothered with more guards. They'd trapped the living quarters with landmines and rigged tripwires to single shot shotguns. They actually had plates of food left out like bait for animals. I pocketed the green food chips as I stepped neatly over the tripwires and disarmed the mines. It'd make the eventual attack easier. I made my way up towards the cafeteria... and the screaming. The screaming, rising and falling, growing muddled, then clearer, then muddled again.

When I came across the second barricade, I had the dubious comfort of seeing the two guards looking back at me with expressions of overfed gluttony. They started to stir at my approach, then Carrot Sticks just belched and sank back down with a groan. "Hey..." She looked at me with her pinprick gaze. "Hurry up and get some..." Her horn glowed as she waved a bloody bone at me.

"Oh... yeah. Looks tasty!" I said with as much enthusiasm as I could fake.

"She is! Real tender!" the orange mare said in delight, belching again before she peeled away a few more strips with a delighted groan. A fresh scream echoed from the cafeteria. "Course it'd be nice if the entrée would shut up..."

I swallowed as I walked around the corner and felt my legs wobble at the sight of a foal trotting out with a dark hunk of organ in her mouth, dripping blood down her face as she chewed in delight. "Her liver's back!" squealed a voice from inside.

No... sweet Celestia and Luna no...

Rampage lay on her back, chains holding her to a table as Mince and Chopper cut away regenerating hunks of flesh almost as fast as they reappeared. The chains holding her to the table were being grown around, trapping her in this nightmare. Suddenly, as terrible as it was, P-21's worst fate was nothing compared to Rampage's. They could eat her forever... hauled around wherever the raiders roamed as an eternal source of meat.

Goddesses, I almost wanted to use Folly on her then and there.

"Marmalade? Is that you?" asked a deep, low voice from behind me. Slowly, I peeked back over my shoulder and up. Way up. Most of my life, Daisy had terrified me because she was always half a hair from beating somepony within an inch of her life. Now, Daisy terrified me because she looked half a hair from eating somepony. Her yellowed eyes watered, the pupils contracted to near points as she glared at me. "Where have you been and what's with the goggles?"

I worked my mouth once, and her scowl appeared. Not fair; normally I got five seconds before she scowled and beat somepony to a pulp. "I was hiding... sorry," I muttered lamely, my usually witty replies lost in the sight of her discolored skin. She didn't have any bites; I suspected that that was because she always had somepony else on hand to bite. "And the light hurts my eyes."

She just looked at me for the longest moment, as if trying to peer into my soul, and then shrugged. "Yeah. Me too," she said before she stepped past me and everypony got out of her way. Her barding had been augmented by battered and hammered plates sharpened into spikes. She slammed aside anypony too slow to get out of her way. "Lunch time." She grinned maliciously.

Rampage lifted her head, looking at Daisy with mad pink eyes. "I'm going to kill you. I'm going to

kill all of you," she vowed in agony. Daisy put one hoof on Rampage's head, lowered her mouth to her throat, and bit a hole right through her windpipe. As the hole started to close, she grabbed something purple and pinkish red and pulled hard. There was a rip and a wheezing scream as Daisy's head jerked back and forth till Rampage's tongue flopped free.

If I'd actually had Folly with me, I *would* have used it then and there.

Daisy chewed indolently as she looked down at me with that familiar, contemptuous smirk. "Aww. Hungry, Marm?" She looked over at Mince. "Give her the heart. Should be nice and tasty."

The... fuck...

Suddenly, all eyes were on me as Mince's horn glowed and she cut and tugged the beating organ free. Like likes like, and I knew without a doubt that any hesitation or excuse would have them tearing me apart. Mince tossed the pumping organ at me, and I caught it in my hooves. It was still beating slightly. I grimaced, praying that I could somehow do this horrific deed. Heartless, tongueless, and with her chest splayed open, Rampage just stared at me as her body regenerated the mortal wounds.

Goddesses...

I bit down as hard as I could, trying to imagine it like some sort of giant grotesque tomato. My first impression: disgust. Not at the taste, actually; it just tasted like blood, and I'd tasted plenty of my own during numerous fights. Disgust at the act. The impression that immediately followed? Hearts were tough to eat! I swallowed the first leathery bite and immediately had to follow it with a second to keep from gagging. I tried to chew through the strong cardiac muscle. A third bite. Fourth. Fifth. By the sixth, the heart was half gone, and I feared that no matter how tough my stomach might be, I was going to puke from disgust.

"Full..." I muttered, half playing the role and half in shock myself. At least it'd stopped beating... if what I'd eaten wasn't convincing enough, so be it.

"You're such a wuss..." the huge mare snorted, sounding exactly like the pony I'd known all my life. "Just like that blue buck the Overmare was so keen on getting in her office. Just trotted after her like a good little fuckstick." Daisy scooped the remains of the tough organ meat into her mouth, chewing it like bubblegum as her attention left me and returned to Rampage. Like that, the spell broke and everypony went back to waiting for the next course to regenerate.

P-21... I had to help him... I had to... I... was gonna throw up.

I staggered from the cafeteria, passed into the stable door chamber, and was glad to see it was empty. I stepped into the little monitoring alcove and promptly puked like my life and soul depended on it. Funny, but it seemed harder to bring up than it had been to choke down, and I had tears pooling inside the goggles. My throat burned, shame coiled up inside me. The first time I'd used a raider disguise in 99, I'd only pretended to be one. Now I was getting my first taste.

I had to stop this. Even if it killed me, I couldn't let this continue. The Overmare had everything she needed to make an unstoppable psychotic army. She could force feed infected flesh to prisoners, and with Rampage they'd always have a source of fresh meat. Maybe they'd eat themselves to death, like that one raider in the Miramare pens, but I doubted it. I couldn't chance it. If the Overmare infected the entire stable, even Megamart's turrets and Gun wouldn't stop them. And with all the weapons in Megamart...

Sweet Luna defend my stupid ass, this had to stop!

Then I heard a soft hiss behind me. I turned, my mouth still dripping bile and chunks of cardiac

muscle. Lacunae stepped out of the secret passage connecting the stable door room to the Overmare's desk. She must have plucked it out of my head from when I'd escaped 99; at this point I really didn't mind. Glowing arrows hovered around her. I grinned, wiping my bloody mouth.

Then she shot me.

Why do all my friends shoot me?

"Lac!" I croaked as two of the magic projectiles punched deep into my chest. Ugh, first shot in the head and then in the chest? Could this day get any worse? "Lacunae..." I gasped as I slumped next to my regurgitated meal.

Instantly her remaining arrows disappeared as her purple eyes widened in shock. "What... you... ah... oh my... this is awkward," she said with a flustered tone to her mentally projected words as she levitated me to my hooves and pulled me inside the passage. The bodies of four more raiders were piled there. She stared in shock at my flanks. "How did you change your cutie mark? And... what were you doing...?" She looked though the open door at the pile of regurgitated heart.

"I skinned Marmalade's cutie mark and glued it over my own, and I had to eat Rampage's heart to prove I was one of them," I groaned. "Do you have a healing potion?" I said as I touched the bleeding holes her magic had left in me. Looks like I wasn't the only pony in the Wasteland who could make magic projectiles appear.

"You... what?" I'd never seen an alicorn look sick before. "How... could you?"

"To find you," I groaned. "Healing potion... yes? No? Lacunae?"

But she seemed to be arguing with herself, the mutterings inside my skull increasing. "No, we did NOT see this coming... ugh... yes... fine..." She sighed softly and floated a healing potion to my mouth. "The Goddess wants you to understand that she was simply testing you. You passed." She paused, then added, "And... she'd just like to note... this is not typical heroic behavior."

"Welcome to the Wasteland," I muttered as the magic soothed the really nasty pain in my chest. I'd almost preferred the mini... nevermind. Unfortunately, the four raiders she'd taken had been armed only with simple melee implements. Hopefully that meant that the Overmare lacked the weapons to arm all her raiders well. That or she didn't trust them enough to let them go around armed all the time. "Look... you said you can teleport yourself a couple times, right?" Lacunae blinked and then nodded. I told her the plan.

"The Goddess is not a... a courier service!" she blurted in that indignant voice within my mind. Then there was the sound of a long sigh. "If it is what must be done, I will do it..."

Suddenly, she jerked her head upright. "Certainly not! Clearly this mare is incapable of..."

"Look at what she's accomplished!" the Goddess said to... herself? Was that Lacunae? It felt... off.

"She's mad! We're wasting our time with her and her stable..."

I had no time for this.

I rose to my hind legs, ripped off the goggles, and stared right into her purple eyes. "Goddess, right?" I hissed, blood and bile bubbling on my lips as I grinned. "Look... you want something in Hoofington, right? Well, right now I want to save my friends and my home. You help me do THAT, and I will get whatever it is you want. Because right now, I really do not need this shit. I have to save my friends. I have to save my family." One wasn't going to be enough this time.

She stared back, and I heard countless whispered mutters and pleas. Vaguely, I could make out a mare saying, "Please... Trixie..."

Then there was an overwhelming sigh that silenced all the other voices.

Finally Lacunae shuddered. "Fine. The Goddess will allow you to help your friends, but the Goddess will hold you to your promise. Tell this one what you need done." I was so relieved that I slumped down, shaking. If I'd made a deal with the devil, it'd be worth it if it meant that I'd save 99 from the Overmare.

She touched her horn to mine and I closed my eyes, doing all I could to remember the armory, the Overmare's office, and Atmospheric Maintenance Three. Then I dug up every memory I could of the males' quarters off medical. I'd only seen it once, and that had been long ago. I prayed it would be enough for her to get in and check on the males. Get them out. I wasn't sure how many trips she could handle. I could hear that vast whispering inside her head; it felt like we were being watched by ghosts.

Finally, she pulled away. "I think I have enough to make it. I dearly hope they have some appropriate ammunition," she said as she lifted her minigun with a sigh. "What will you do now?"

"Get P-21 back. Once he's safe... I'll see if we can use the gas." Rivets had downloaded her supervisor's code into Marmalade's PipBuck, and Midnight had transferred the Overmare's code in from my delta model. All that left was for me to free P-21 and have him get the security code. Locks I could handle now; terminals I'd still leave to him. "If we can end this without any uninfected ponies getting killed, then we should." Funny, the Dealer was missing a doozy of a chance to make me feel like a murderer. Then again, maybe I didn't need him to; I was already feeling like a monster today.

"I'll get started, then," she told me. "Where will I find you and P-21?" I was so thankful that she didn't ask 'what if he's dead?' or 'what if he's had a full three-course infected meal?'

"Here, or outside the stable door," I said as I looked at my PipBuck's chronometer. "Please, get the males out if they're alive. I really... really... don't want to gas them," I begged her, knowing there'd be no forgiveness for that.

"I will. I'll get them first, then the guns," Lacunae promised.

"And thank the Goddess for me... for letting you do this," I added. Lacunae looked surprised, then oddly amused before she shook her head with a smile and disappeared with a flash.

I sighed and pulled my dragon claw from the stained barding. Did the raider disease kill a pony's sense of smell? Slowly, I made my way up the stairs to the Overmare's office. I struggled to hear through the flooring overhead. I knew the sound of slapping flanks. She was damn loud. I hit the switch and winced at the hiss of pistons lifting the floor up. I hit the switch again after a few feet and wiggled through, trying not to grunt any louder than she was.

"Ride the pony!" she giggled in juvenile glee from the bedroom adjacent to her office. I mouthed the words, blushing horribly. Okay; yes, she was a psychotic little brat that had sold out my stable, abused my friend, and killed my mother... but really? Ride the pony? I checked my E.F.S.... Three red bars... and only one of them moving around and making the noises. Either she was really into voyeurism, or... Slowly, I trotted to the door and opened it a crack.

You know, when she said 'ride the pony', I'd assumed that she was the one getting ridden...

Maybe it was the sight of my friend, gagged with a bridle, chained to a bed, and being sodomized by the current greatest incarnation of evil I'd ever encountered in the Wasteland, but something about the scene brought out my inner Deus. I kicked open the door, snapped out the dragon claw, screamed

"Cuuuunt!" and charged the bed.

Then I saw the glowing horn, and then the straight razor pressed against his throat as he whimpered and she didn't even stop thrusting. "I knew you'd be back. He told me you'd be back. And he was right, and here you are." She gave an extra hard shove, and he cried out into the gag as blood and tears flowed in equal measure. Overhead, two turrets dropped down, their guns swiveling towards me. "I should thank you for bringing my favorite buck back to me. He's always been my favorite trick pony."

I felt a pit open up inside me. This was my fault. I'd been in such a reckless hurry that he'd gotten taken. "You're sick..." I hissed, wondering if three S.A.T.S.-assisted bullets could take her head off before she could slit his throat. From the lines she'd carved in his neck already, I could tell she'd been playing at it. Target her horn? Maybe, but if I missed...

"I am the Overmare. It is my duty to maintain the security and stability of this stable. Anything I have to do to blow off steam is perfectly acceptable! I can do anything I want. Anything!" she hissed, eyes narrowing as the razor drew another line of red in his throat. "And then you had to make everything difficult. You brought them here. Betrayed me. Just like your mother. Yes..."

She was mad... just plain stark crazy. Whether it had been the disease or not, I had no idea. "You stupid little brat... do you have the slightest clue what the world outside is like? I've seen ponies fused with machinery and monsters, faced two-century-old ghouls who can't get over their crushes, still have a serious hankering for some drugs, and had a boat dropped on me."

"You don't get it. I can do anything. No pony will ever hurt me again," she said with certainty.

"You mean Deus..." I muttered, looking at her. "I killed him."

She hissed back, "I mean my mother!" And she shoved so hard he screamed.

"Your mother..." But then that made it clear... where she'd gotten a 'toy' like the one she now wore? "Your own mother..."

"Every night," she hissed at me. "Every night. Because she was Overmare. She could do whatever she wanted. But not to any pony. Just me." She giggled brokenly as she shuddered. "I tried telling your mother. I did... but she said there was nothing she could do. Nothing! Nothing!" she yelled, her eyes wide and mad. "So I did it myself. I waited till she was drunk... I stole the razor from the dresser... one cut... and then I was Overmare." She gave a sickly affectionate look at the bound buck. "You brought back the only buck who listened. My favorite trick pony. I can ride him like she rode me..."

I sighed as I looked at her. "I'm sorry... I'm sorry my mother couldn't save you. That's what Security is supposed to do. She should have done something." Damn it, Mom, why didn't you? "But none of that makes what you did all right."

"The stable's dying. I saw the reports. A year at the most. But now we're strong, the door is open, and we got guns. We've found the strength of meat and the strength of pain. We'll take over the surface. Everything will be mine. And nothing will ever hurt me again." She giggled as she thrust with wild vigor. "Now I get everything!"

"Right. Including this." Enough was enough. I entered S.A.T.S.: horn, head, horn, head.

In an accelerated flash, the four bolts of concentrated magic struck her like a barrage of stars, and she shrieked as she fell one way and her horn spiraled away the other. P-21 gave one last scream as she was forced out of him, immediately curling up on the bed. I raced for the bed as the turrets began to pepper me with bullets. I tossed the filthy sheet up and over one turret, blinding it, and targeted the second as my horn sliced into the cable of the blinded one. With a shower of sparks, the cables parted

and the turret lost power just as the sheet shredded.

"P-21, are you o..." No. He was not okay. He was so far from okay that I doubted he could find it on a map. His blank eyes stared off into space as he tried to curl into a ball as much as the chains would let him. First Rampage, now this. My shame redoubled on itself as I focused upward and fired three more shots. My magic was notoriously poor with armor, but I must have hit something vital; the second turret sparked and went dead. I fished out a bobby pin and wiggled it into the lock. "Hold on. I'm going to get you out of here... just hold on..."

Then I was rolling away as the Overmare tackled me, knocking me off the bed and sending us both rolling across the floor. Half her horn was missing, and it sparkled as she tried to work magic with the stub. One bloody socket dripped down in my face as she sat on top of me and slammed her hooves into my face and throat in a frenzy of kicks. Between getting shot in the head once, shot in the chest twice, and shot in the back multiple times, this was starting to look like a bad day.

"I'll fuck all of you... every one of you! I'm the Overmare! It's my right!" she screeched as her voice rose higher and higher with wilder laughter. "You'll never fuck me again! Never!"

Then a chain flipped over her head and pulled tight against her throat as two blue hooves yanked it taut. The chain dug in tight, the hoofcuffs keeping it from slipping free as her mottled skin went from dirty white to a horrible blue. Then purple. Her dark tongue rolled out as her horn sparked desperately for something to shoot him with. Finally, she gave one last shudder and went limp.

He collapsed, shaking, sobbing, still entangled with her body. I sat up and carefully undid the bridle as he stared with eyes empty of everything except pain and humiliation. "I'm not your trick pony... I'm not... I'm not..." he whispered.

"P-21..." I said softly as I crawled to my hooves.

"I'm not... I'm not a trick pony..." He just shook more.

"She's dead now," I murmured. "She's dead... let her go..."

He sniffed as he looked at me like a lost colt, the shaking increasing more and more. He'd pulled so tight the chain had creased her throat, and I carefully pulled it off and unlocked it from his hooves. He looked at the raw, bloody marks and shook even more before he hugged himself to a stop. I hugged him, desperately praying it was what he needed right now and not something that would make things even worse. He pressed his face against my chest, bawling brokenly as I held him, crying like he'd never wept before.

I looked at the Overmare. Pain... passed down from one generation on to the next. I might hate what she'd done, but I hadn't worn her shoes. If my mother had been an overbearing monster, would I have killed her to escape, only to become a monster myself? Like Daisy passing on the pain she endured for her mother's sadistic amusement? How far back did it go? Where had the sin been bestowed that would be passed to the daughter? Daisy. The Overmare. Had I just gotten lucky that my mother was affectionate? Was that the exception rather than the rule?

No. I couldn't believe that. There were hundreds in the stable; I couldn't believe that abuse was somehow normal and right while being loving and caring was aberrant. If pain were the norm, it wouldn't be hidden and shameful. It wouldn't drive a pony mad with power and the need to control and humiliate others before others did so to her. She'd betrayed the stable, but I wondered if perhaps she'd simply seen it as hurting us before we turned upon her, or the stable itself broke down and slew her.

How was it that the Wasteland could hurt ponies, even in the stable? Was it something in the land, or in us?

Finally, he croaked in a raw voice, "I need a shower. I need to get her off me..."

"I'm sorry," I whispered in his ear.

His unfocused eyes found mine, and for a moment I was afraid I'd see disgust and scorn in them. Instead, there was only confusion. "For what?"

"I... didn't listen. I ran in... this is my fault."

To my horror, he smiled, like I'd made a joke or something. "No. It's my fault. I let her use me as her trick pony again. I should have blown us both up... but... I... I couldn't... I couldn't fight her." He gave a hard gasp, as if fighting to keep something down inside him. "I had a grenade, and I... she told me to put it down... and I did! I couldn't do anything but let her... I let her..." He was falling apart again, and I held him tight.

"No!" I kicked myself as he flinched.

I quickly softened my tone. "Blame me, P-21. Blame her for doing it, or me for being stupid, or her mother, or anypony... but not yourself. Understand?" I said sharply. I could handle him hating me. I couldn't handle him hating himself.

"I need to wash... please... tell me we can get out of here. I want to go back to Chapel. Or Megamart. Flank. Anywhere. Just not here," he said with a shaky breath.

"Not yet. Not yet. I've got a plan." He blinked at me in confusion and I faked my best grin. "It's a good plan. One of my best."

He looked at me for a long minute, then hiccuped, then gave a crooked smile. "Oh... so... we're doomed, then?" He might have been sarcastic, but there was a terrible hope in his voice too.

I felt a little relief. "Smartass..." I said as I trotted to the Overmare's terminal. "Can you get into the system and download the head security mare's password into this PipBuck?" I asked as he limped after me, moving much more slowly and tenderly than before. He nodded, and with a few taps he was in.

"She didn't change her old password," P-21 said in an eerily detached voice. He wasn't out of the woods yet. "Gin Rummy's primary security password is... Blackjack," he said with a glance at me. I sniffed... great. Couldn't have guessed that, could I?

I raised the Overmare's desk in time to see a purple flash. Lacunae staggered, looking quite mortal. Her black lace dress was spotted with sweat. I didn't know alicorns did 'sweaty', but Lacunae certainly appeared to have exerted herself quite a bit. "The males are safe. The weapons are moved. Is the gas ready?"

"Almost. Will you be able to take both of us?" I asked Lacunae as I poked around some of the other files.

"Perhaps one at a time," she said as she looked at P-21. "I'll take him to the other males. He needs medical attention." From the look in her eyes, it was clear she wanted to do far more for him than that. "Unity would give him peace."

I suddenly felt prickles run up my mane. "Would it take away the pain?"

"No. But we would help him bear it," she said softly in my mind, "as we help bear mine." And with that, she and P-21 flashed away. Maybe it was just me, but it seemed like alicorns had a real love for melodrama.

Then the Overmare's door hissed open, and Daisy walked calmly in with her bloody lips wide. "So, she dead yet?" Given her black-faced corpse lay at my hooves, it might have proven a silly question,

except that the two raiders behind her started to giggle in glee and ran back into the stable crying out the news. "Good job, Blackjack," Daisy said as she narrowed her yellow eyes.

I felt a cold shiver run down my spine. "You knew I was going after her..."

"Knew? I watched." She nodded to the large round window set in the wall of the office.

"How'd you know it was me?" I replied.

"Um, yeah. Marmalade wouldn't have lasted two weeks alone. If she were alive, she'd have come back or died trying," she said as she trotted towards me. "But you... Blackjack... the second I saw you there in the café, I knew you'd be the only one able to glue a dead mare's cutie mark over your own and eat a heart to save your friend from the Overmare. You'll move heaven and earth if you have to. You always have."

"So you wanted the Overmare dead," I replied.

"I wanted her dead years ago," she replied with a glare at the corpse that was oddly tinged with regret. "I thought, a few years back, that we understood each other. We could be something. But she was already too pissed off... too hurt and crazy. I saw her offing her mom coming for months. I'd have killed her sooner if I'd thought your mom would actually take over the stable."

"Then why not do it yourself?" I asked, wondering if Lacunae was going to be coming back. I really didn't want to fight Daisy with just my claw.

"It's funny. Once we started eating the meat, everything crystallized. I mean, we followed orders before, but once we ate it was almost instinctive. If I killed her, they'd have turned on me before I could get them under control. But *you* killed her. I'm in charge now." She grinned widely. "I have plans for this place. We've been rotting under here. The Overmare just took whatever she saw. Me, I actually talked to the merchants before we ate them. We're going to force the meat into everypony's throat down there, and when they take the flesh, they'll be with us. Then we'll take Megamart. Then the Reapers. We beat them, we'll have fear and respect... and, hell, maybe we'll feed them the flesh too. With that delicious little striped pony, we might have food for dozens, even hundreds of us. And I bet other villages will be glad to pay us in meat to not to eat them."

My nightmare realized. "Right. So I suppose this is where you tell me to eat the meat for real and join you or die?"

Daisy snorted and shook her head. "What, do I look stupid? No, you're just going to die."

She drew a gun, one that definitely hadn't been on the armory inventory. The silver-plated IF-33 Applebuck had belonged to Mom, as it had to every head of security in the stable going back to the door being sealed. Their names had been scratched on the handle. The damn gun even had its own name: Vigilance. The irony that I was about to be shot by Mom's own pistol was not lost on me.

The gun came up as we both entered S.A.T.S. together. With eerie smoothness, we acted almost as one. But while she was trying to blow my head off, I had a different thought in mind. My magic reached out and neatly depressed the clip eject as she fired the round still in the chamber. It nearly took my head off; I could see it passing by me in the slowed down time. The bullet buzzed softly past my ear. I took the hefty clip and promptly smacked her across the face with it twice.

Do it, Daisy... do it.

She drew a second clip with her hooves, and I jammed the first clip back into gun. She dropped the second clip to rack the slide, and I ejected it and hit her with two floating clips. Her yellow eyes blazed with familiar fury as she drew a third clip to load into the gun, but I jammed one back in. Then she

screamed in rage and threw the weapon aside. My smile grew as I floated the gun to me and racked a round into the chamber with my magic. S.A.T.S. ran out.

"I fucking *hate* unicorns..." she spat, then snapped out her baton with a jerk of her head and charged me, keeping her head low. There were rules to fighting. Earth ponies had to get in close and dirty, break a unicorn's concentration so she couldn't use her magic. Unicorns had to stay away or risk getting crunched.

The Overmare's office was NOT conducive to the latter. I popped back into S.A.T.S. with enough charge for one shot. I lined it up, executed the spell, and sent a bullet straight into her leg. I wasn't going to risk a headshot that might not do more than piss her off, but at least I could slow her down a little. She still slammed into me like a train, but I'd been hit by boats before and kept my concentration on the gun.

Rule two: to disable a unicorn, take out her horn. I brought Marmalade's PipBuck up over my glowing horn as the baton fell with the creepy certainty of S.A.T.S. and cracked loudly against the casing. She swung again and again, smashing my forelegs and beating against the PipBuck casing as my horn pressed Vigilance right up against her gut. Rule three: a unicorn doesn't have to move to hit you with a levitated weapon. She threw herself aside and off me just in the nick of time as the gun fired into the ceiling. I rocked forward onto my hooves as Daisy came back around for another charge, and I took another shot at her legs. Then she was on me, all swinging and biting and kicking as she tried to take me out before I could pistol stamp her again.

Instead, I cheated, dropped into S.A.T.S., and blew two more magic bullets into her face. The helmet she wore deflected some of the force, but the energy nearly flayed her features, sending blood pouring into her eyes. I curled up and rolled out from under her, bringing Vigilance around and putting two more solid rounds in her left flank. I heard sounds of more shooting from below. Either Lacunae hadn't been able to come back for me or else the raiders had made a push now that the Overmare was dead.

I was battered and bruised, but I had the gun. And she had... a rejuvenation potion, Hydra, Buck, and Stampede? Not fair! She chowed down, and I watched my hard work healing away before my eyes. Next time she came at me, I'd be unicorn paste, and we both knew it.

So I ran. I jumped down into the passageway beneath the Overmare's desk even as she slammed her hooves down where I'd just been. I ran, flinging what weapons I had left behind me as I shot out the two flickering lights illuminating the hallway. "Blackjack!" she yelled as she raced after me.

"No! It's 'Cunnnnnntttt!'" I screamed back as I fired down the hallway at the charging mare, aiming for her legs, doing all I could to slow her down even as she regenerated the damage.

Then the mines I'd tossed started beeping. She screamed as three tremendous bangs filled the tunnel and she went down hard. Carefully, I approached as she trembled from drugs, madness, and injuries. "I'm glad you came back, Blackjack," she wheezed as she slowly pushed herself to her legs again. "I'm glad. If there's anypony that could end this, it was you." I could hear the grind of bone as her limbs knit together. Her lower body looked flayed as the magic potions kept her alive, and I hesitated.

What the hell would it take to finish her? "I want to help you, Daisy..." I stammered.

"You don't know how to help me. You didn't then," she gasped as she looked at me with her crazed raider eyes. I met her gaze with my mutated stare. I wondered which of us was more the monster after all this time. "I mean... telling on my mom? Do you know what she did to me? I disappeared for a week and you didn't wonder why?"

"I thought you were avoiding me," I muttered lamely.

"I was in medical, you jackass!" she yelled as she started to advance again. "She beat me senseless, had them heal me, and beat me again! Because you had to try and arrest my mom. What did you think would happen?"

"I wanted to save you!" I countered, raising the gun but struggling to shoot. "I still do." I just didn't know how.

"That makes two of us," she replied as she gained enough fury to charge once more, despite the two rounds I put in her chest. She ducked and whirled, hitting me with a double rear kick that sent me flying back into the railing of the stable door. The impact sent a disturbing tingle through my rear legs and knocked the wind out of me. As I lifted my head, I caught sight of two hooves, and then my head was snapped back so hard I was certain she'd busted my neck. I collapsed underneath the railing, struggling to keep my wits as I backed into the atrium.

I'd happily trade my horn for some Med-X, an ice pack, and a bottle of whiskey. "How... how was I supposed to save you?"

"Kill Mom. Kill me. Either way, it'd end. But you couldn't, and your mother wouldn't, so you didn't," she replied. "It's as simple as that, Blackjack." She kicked me clear across the atrium floor, and my journey was stopped only by hitting the stake in the center of the room. She stood over me, looking disappointed. "Sometimes, the only way to save a pony is to kill the pony."

And Daisy was about to save me.

Then a white and red striped cannonball flew across the atrium and slammed into Daisy. The mare rocked but didn't fall. Rampage, though, had her hooves around Daisy's throat. "Eat my fucking liver, will you? Eat some floor!" She flipped over backwards and slammed Daisy's face into the ground. I stared as I saw dangling lengths of chain sticking out of her body, wondering if we were going to have to disintegrate her again to get them out.

Daisy rolled to her hooves as the shooting and shouting increased and Rivets and Midnight pressed into the atrium along with dozens of other ponies. They might not know how to use guns, but they had the basics of point, shoot, reload. Rivets dumped a tin can of scrap metal into the nozzle of her steam cleaning pack, and with a great whoosh and clattering bang she blasted a chunk of raiders with shrapnel and scalding vapor. Their weapons sparked off her welding helmet and thick protective barding.

"Hey, meat wagon, get out of the way!" she yelled. Rampage stepped away from Daisy with a sharp grin.

"You don't fucking get it, do you?" Rampage sneered up at the larger pony. An emerald beam of light flashed from the balcony, the energy burning away Daisy's barding and cooking the meat beneath it.

"We're her friends," Glory said. The small gray pegasus had been forced to mount Leo's old gun to fire over her shoulder to accommodate its size and weight.

There was a purple flash behind Daisy, and Lacunae appeared inside her sphere, the minigun motor already purring at speed above her. "That means..."

P-21 knelt beside me, forcing a stable rejuvenation potion to my lips as he glared at Daisy. "She doesn't have to fight alone!" He gave me a shaky little smile as he looked down at me. "Right?"

"Right..." I slowly crawled back to my hooves as the rest of the raiders rallied around Daisy. The giggling mass was armed, armored, drugged, and crazed. Even with them outnumbered by me and my friends, it was a daunting task. But for the survival of the stable, it'd be finished.

The final battle for Stable 99 was on.

The atrium roared and thundered as both sides tore into the other with reckless abandon. The raiders, with their diseased aggression, fearlessly took hit after hit for the pleasure of hearing the screams of the stable dwellers. But three weeks of fear and deprivation had eaten away at the stable ponies' fear and doubt, and there wasn't a single pony here who wasn't ready to fight and die for their home.

The close quarters and deadly weaponry swiftly took their toll, but when one of the stable ponies fell, their fellow ponies would drag them to safety and administer healing while the others fought on. If one ran out of bullets, another would spare a clip. The raiders fought as individuals. Brutally, but alone. Even Daisy, snatching weapons from whatever raider she came across, might as well have been by herself for all the help she gave to the rest.

Ponies, decent and civilized ponies, would win the day for once. For once, the Wasteland would lose.

Perhaps she saw the inevitable, but, her disfigured barding covered in gore and her lips foaming from the drugs pumping through her system, Daisy leapt forward in a final charge. She had the strength and frenzy to kill plenty of ponies before she was finally dropped.

We weren't going to give her that chance. From the balcony above, a stream of emerald light flashed down across her frame. Lacunae's finger of flaming metal washed across Daisy and every raider that joined her in that final charge. With a deft toss, P-21's fragmentation grenade bounced under her and exploded directly behind her, shredding her legs. But just as momentum threatened to carry her into our lines, Rampage charged forward into the fire and reared up, shoving with every bit of strength in her frame. Daisy reared on bloody legs as gunfire bit and cut into her before finally they crashed to the side.

The giggling rose to hysterical levels as something broke within the raiders, and they milled, fighting each other more than us. I slumped as the adrenaline receded, leaving me weak and shaky. I approached where Daisy had fallen, her body broken and riddled with holes and her blood pooling beneath her. "So... is it... over?" she gasped softly, sucking in short, shallow breaths as she looked up with her jaundiced eyes.

I lay down next to her, pushing off the goggles and nodding.

"G...good..." she panted softly with a smile. "You... saved... me... Black..." Her eyes twitched as she took one last hiccupping breath and then slowly relaxed, her pupils expanding in some final semblance of sanity. Of peace.

"Take care, Daisy," I murmured softly, my magic closing her eyes. "Goodbye." Sometimes, to save a pony...

* * *

We'd won. Victory was supposed to bring certain feelings. Joy. Elation. Celebration. Certainly, everypony in the stable felt this to some degree, but a third of the stable was dead. There was no celebration for that, and I was so exhausted that it was all I could do to shrug out of the rancid security barding, take another healing potion, tell Rivets and Midnight to dump the bodies outside, and crawl to my room... my room.

It was just as messy as I'd left it, with coveralls all over the floor, stale food chips lying in bowls on the bed, crumbs everywhere. There was a definite stale pong in the air I'd never noticed before. Slowly, I crawled onto the mattress with a groan. There was so much to do. I needed to check on P-21.

Rampage. Glory. Even make sure Lacunae was all right. I had to find out who'd lived and died. I had to talk to Rivets and Midnight about the males and how they couldn't be used that way anymore. Contact Megamart.

Instead, I fell flat on my face asleep.

* * *

Somepony was touching me. It wasn't a painful touch, but it was decidedly unusual. There was a very faint chemical smell, too. "If you're planning on gassing me, could you please do it quickly?" I mumbled. "I'm way too tired and sore to draw this out."

There was a familiar 'eep', and I glanced back at a blushing Glory as she pinched a rag between her hooves. A small metal flask of turpentine rested beside her. "... I was... ah... Just... uncovering your cutie mark," she said as she pointed at the exposed cards on my left flank.

"Oh..." I replied lightly. "Well... carry on..." I said, closing my eyes with a wry smile.

"Blackjack?" Glory asked me in her soft, timid voice.

"Mhmmm?" I asked as she teased Marmalade's hide off my rump.

"I'm sorry about your friend," she said quietly.

"Me too... though Daisy wasn't a friend, exactly." I sighed. "She was the first pony I'd failed to save. Her mom was beating her. I tried to get her arrested. It didn't work; I'm pretty sure I'm to blame for making her so... hurt."

"Why?" Glory asked softly. "You're not to blame for everything that goes wrong in the Wasteland, or even your own stable. You tried to help. That has to count for something."

"Good intentions don't excuse bad results," I said with a sigh. "Do you think we could have helped them? The infected?"

Glory started to say something as she nudged the glued flap of hide aside, then sighed. "No. It's not like you can just wave a magic wand and have a cure. There was once magic that might have been able to help, but today... no. A cure would take months, maybe years of research."

"But Lighthooves created that damn thing..." I winced as she pulled the flap free and tossed it into the trash.

"No. I seriously doubt he did. I don't know where he found this disease, but even the Enclave can't create something like this from scratch. So even if he altered the contagion, he might not have a cure himself. I'm guessing they increased its rate of progression... it sounds like most raiders take months to break down, but this does it in less than a week."

I sighed as the turpentine evaporated off my butt, feeling a niggling sensation. "You know... the flesh eating parts aside... I wonder if Lighthooves was after something else. The infected ponies were all loyal to the Overmare and Daisy. What if Lighthooves wants the disease to create unconditional loyalty? It would explain why he would want to accelerate the infection rate and find a strain that would work on pegasi."

"Maybe... but why? Most of us are already loyal," she said a touch defensively.

"But would you kill... say... helpless surface ponies? Or other pegasi if given the order to?" She

looked particularly troubled by that. "Maybe the Enclave is after a disease that ensures loyalty. The aggression is just a bonus."

"That's... a terrifying thought. It would mean that Lighthooves plans on asking pegasi to do things that are grossly illegal or immoral. That's treasonous," she said nervously, then shook herself. "This is all speculation, though. We don't actually know why he's developing it."

I groaned. "Why can't a smart pony think about this?"

"Smart ponies are," she assured me with a pat on the shoulder. Then there was a moment's hesitation. "Blackjack... on the boat... why'd you point that gun at me?"

I sighed, "Cause I'm crazy..."

"Blackjack."

"No, really. I'm crazy, Glory." I sat up with a groan, looking back at her. "For the last week or two I've been seeing a pony. This pale buck. He comes and goes, but he's always talking to me... taunting me. He builds me up when I'm falling apart and tears me down when things are going good." I looked around the room, half expecting him to be there. "I can't understand it, other than me being crazy."

"A hallucination you have conversations with?" she said with a frown. "When did they start?"

"Mmm... Brimstone's Fall?" Then I frowned. "Well, actually, I didn't start having conversations with him until Miramare." Oh, great. Now all my paranoia alarms were going off! "You don't think Lighthooves did something to me, do you? Put the Dealer into my head to drive me crazy?" I had an Enclave mind control device in my brain, I was sure of it! "Glory! I need you to do brain surgery on me, quick!" I said, seizing her shoulders in my hooves.

She looked at me flatly and smacked my face with her hoof. "You do not need any more holes in your head, Blackjack." Okay, maybe she had a point there. The gray pegasus sighed softly and rubbed my cheek. "So, this Dealer didn't make you try and shoot me?"

"No. I... I don't know. I mean... if it's not some Enclave plot..." Now I was feeling confused and anxious.

"It could also be the taint," Glory said softly. "Maybe that's how it's getting to you." Oh, yeah... that. I'd kinda locked that fact up in the back of my head. Glory stroked my filthy mane. "I just wanted to know... if I'd done something... anything..." She chewed on her lower lip in worry, her lavender eyes looking up at me.

I blinked and flushed. "No. Glory, you've been... wonderful. You saved my life in that fight. You save me more than I deserve..." And I knew that look in her cute little face. That was a kissing look. She was giving me a kissing look. My knees felt weak, my tummy fluttery, and my nethers were giving me some definite signs of approval. I liked her kissing look...

And why did I suddenly not mind nearly as much as I had in Chapel?

I had to admit, she might not be very good at kissing, but she felt very... very... nice. It was different from just a kiss, though; I'd kissed plenty of mares and a couple of bucks, and only once did I do it beyond foreplay. Only once did it mean something special. As our lips met, I couldn't stop myself from smiling.

"Blackjack," Glory purred softly once our lips parted, her eyes closed.

"Yeah?" I murmured, my head spinning. I'd never kissed like that before.

"You need a shower," Glory said softly. "And clean your room."

* * *

When she'd told me I needed a shower, I hadn't anticipated company. The showers weren't exactly the sort of place two mares could get frisky; you never knew when a filly might stroll in. Somehow, though, we had the entire bathroom to ourselves for once. Hot water, glorious and wondrous hot water, cascaded down on both of us as Glory calmly washed the grease and gunk from my mane and scrubbed the yellow stain out of my hide. Soap, simple soap, was a luxury I'd never appreciated before as she scrubbed every inch. I'd never been washed like this before. I doubted that Glory had, either.

And then, when her washings went to my back quarter... suddenly, I couldn't care less about hot water or soap or anything else at all. After everything I'd been through, this simple contact and bliss sent my hooves tingling and my eyes rolling in absolute joy. It was as if I were finally getting a reward for doing something good.

The only thing better was getting to return the favor...

* * *

"So... where'd you learn that?" I asked with a grin. I couldn't stop grinning. If I were faced with Deus, Blueblood, Manticore Pony, Sanguine, and the entirety of the Zodiacs, I'd have laughed at the lot of them. I'd just... I don't know. It wasn't just sex, but something a thousand times better.

Glory flushed as she helped me clean my room, as she'd insisted. It was a little surreal. There were a thousand things I should be doing, first and foremost checking on P-21. But he was still helping the males recover and dealing with his own pain. He needed time and space; I could at least give him that. Rampage had told me she'd deal with the chains stuck in her body... that was all she'd comment on. So now I was cleaning my room, and I couldn't help but giggle every third step. Had I ever been this happy?

Probably not.

"Around," Glory said evasively as she blushed, looking at me from under her purple bangs. At my arched brow, she went more rosy. "Honestly... P-21 and Rampage."

That surprised me. "Really?"

"Well, P-21 was a little more clinical about what mares do together." I watched her squirm delightfully. "Rampage... well... she's really been around. I thought my coat would turn pink when she tried demonstrating zebra tantric sex positions." That made my brow arch, and she starting going from pink to red. "Well, she did!"

I decided teasing was not called for just now as I heaped up all my dirty clothes in a canvas sack while Glory made the bed. "So... have you always been interested in mares, or am I just really lucky?"

"Both?" Glory offered as she tapped her hooves together. "Dusk is... very much... and I didn't want to be like her, so I just didn't have intimate relationships. I just figured I had too much studying and other work to do to worry about it. You finally got me to act on it."

"You have terrible taste. I'm probably the last mare you should have done that with. I can introduce you to Midnight, though," I said with a crooked little smile.

"Don't do that," she told me softly. Huh? I'd done something? "Don't tear yourself down like that... even if you're joking. I'm glad I was finally able to do that with you. I don't want to do it with anypony else." Great, now I was pretty sure I was blushing.

I tossed the bags full of dirty laundry by the door, looking at the shockingly clean room. "Wow... if Mom knew it'd take three weeks in the Wasteland to get me to clean my room, she'd have thrown me out of the stable years ago." Mom... Suddenly, all the happy feelings started to slide away as I sat on the floor beside the bed.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Glory asked as she reached out to stroke my cheek. I couldn't help it; I closed my eyes and leaned into her caress even as I felt tears run down my face.

"I don't know. I just... I don't know how to feel right now. I'm sad she's gone, I'm mad she was killed... I don't feel much satisfaction from killing the Overmare or Daisy. It's just... I don't know," I finished lamely. "I was so excited to think I'd finally get to see her again. Tell her everything I've learned. Show her that... that I really was the security mare she wanted me to be. But I can't. There's so much that we'll never get to talk about now." I sighed as I sat up a little more and hugged Glory closer to me. "I don't know if she knew that I loved her before I left. Now I never will."

"She knew," Glory replied with a smile. "You're not exactly the best at hiding your emotions."

I feigned indignance. "I'll have you know I'm one sneaky, lying pony when I want to be."

Her wing stroked my horn... oh, sweet Celestia, she could do that all night and day if she wanted to! "But when you don't want to be, you're pretty obvious, Blackjack."

* * *

I have to admit, things were looking up. I had an honest-to-goodness marefriend and an inkling of why Midnight never said yes to me. The males were free... well, sort of. Breeding rotations were suspended, and as soon as Rivets and I could get something concrete down, they'd be abolished. The males, starved to the point they could barely walk, were being treated by the very medical staff that'd tormented them their whole lives. They flinched when I tried talking to them, and for the most part just ate their algae slushies and tried to recover as well as they could.

That left P-21.

"Hey," I said as I found him in medical, calming three colts who were still not convinced the mares weren't going to kill them all. He flinched at my voice and looked back at me with wary eyes. He was trying to coax them into eating real food, but they weren't convinced his apples and carrots weren't some bizarre poisons from outside.

"Hey," he replied. "You look good," he said with a ghost of a smile. "So, did Glory finally pounce you?" I flushed but smiled back.

"Yeah. She told me you helped with that?" I asked, glaring at the medical ponies with my shooty look. At least, I hoped it was my shooty look; I really needed to remember to try it out in a mirror. It worked, though, and they found something important to do away from us.

"I just gave her a nudge in the right direction. Rampage gave her the mare on mare dissertation," he replied calmly.

"And how are you doing?"

"I'm fine. Sore... but... fine," he said matter-of-factly, looking at me with that stoic little smile. I reached out a hoof to brush his mane out of his eyes and he jerked away. Our eyes met and he looked away. "Maybe not one hundred percent fine..."

"You'll talk to me if you need it?" I asked, and he nodded. That was the best I could hope for. I looked at the apple core. "Introducing them to Wasteland cuisine?"

"Just trying to get them off recycled food," he said with a sigh. "I know we grew up on the stuff, but eating food recycled from waste is just... gross. I don't care what kind of magical filtration you're using." I stuck my tongue out as well. I would never again stray from my two-century-old delicacies. Then his voice dropped as he spoke the question we were all dreading. "Also, what if... what if some infected bodies got in there?"

I shivered at the thought. "I told Rivets and Midnight they had to be dragged outside. She assured me the system can handle a body put into it, but I don't know." I sighed, rubbing my temples with my hooves. Reality was pissing on my good day; at least that was a sign that this wasn't all a great dream. "If they don't have the recycled food, then what are we supposed to feed three hundred ponies? They've eaten all the stores already."

"I know," P-21 said with a sigh. He looked around medical. "I just... I don't think the threat is real to them. Raiders... diseases... all everypony can think about is not thinking about it. Going back to the status quo." He sat down beside me. "P-4 and U-9 were asking me when they were supposed to go back to their breeding queue. They just... can't understand they don't have to do it anymore." The frustration showed clear on his face. "And U-13 is trying to convince the other colts that a breeding queue is preferable. He actually *liked* it." He looked so upset that I thought he might cry... or blow somepony up.

"He's been conditioned to. It's not his fault." But I knew there were mares who had been cheated of their reproductive chance and were not happy about it. I looked at the medical ponies on the far side of the room watching us with poorly concealed resentment. "I don't know... they're glad the killing's stopped, but it's almost like they hate us for staying here."

He frowned at them. "I'd be happy to introduce them to Persuasion."

"Don't do that..." Because a lot of the mares had guns now, guns out of security and guns from the raiders' stores. And they weren't giving them up.

"It isn't how it's supposed to be, is it, Blackjack?" he asked me softly as he looked at the colts walking back into their dingy quarters. "We won. It's supposed to be better. Right?"

"It just feels wrong," I admitted.

"It feels like Flank."

* * *

"So, program routing log for EC-1101?" Midnight asked as she handled the Delta PipBuck with some admiration. She'd marveled as the broadcaster made contact with the maneframe without needing a single connection. "This is amazing." She scrolled through the options as she looked at the cool blue screen. "You can actually access terminals at range with this. Fully StealthBuck compatible. Huge radio sensitivity. A major step over the 3000 model."

I sat back, fiddling with Marmalade's PipBuck as Midnight worked. Clearly, the last few weeks had been tough on her, but now it really showed in her puffy eyes and ragged look. "Fully what compatible?"

She looked at me with an annoyed frown. "StealthBuck. One-shot invisibility spells you can trigger with your PipBuck," she explained as she searched for the routing data, then noticed my stunned look. "What? It's in the PipBuck maintenance guide, page 141. I mean, I've never seen one before, but they were supposed to make you undetectable."

Invisibility spells? I thought of Brimstone's Fall, Flank, Blueblood Manor, even the sand dogs' lair. Fuck you, Hoofington. Why couldn't you send a couple of those my way, huh?! I scrolled through my inventory system, looking at the myriad of different kinds of ammo, the guns I'd salvaged, the brass casings I hauled around, and dozens of pieces of associated crap I hoped to turn into bottle caps in the future. And there, right near the bottom of the list... *StealthBuck x2*. I gritted my teeth to suppress a scream.

Have I mentioned I am not a smart pony? Not... at... all. I wondered if I had some kind of magic 'you win' device hidden somewhere in my bags that I just didn't know about yet.

I heard the shuffling of cards in my mind as she accessed the data.

"So. Where was this program trying to go, Midnight?"

"Shut up a second and I'll tell you," she snapped, then frowned. "Sorry. Tired..." She looked at the terminal. "I can tell you where it's been... every ministry hub in Canterlot, Stable-Tec HQ in Fillydelphia, someplace called Maripony, the M.A.S. and M.O.M. hubs in Manehattan, Helpinghoof Clinic, half of the MASEBS network, Stables 1 through 7, 9, 14 and 15, 18, 24, 29, 45, 60, 73, 78, and 99. And its next destination was... MASEBS broadcast tower 14."

My navigation tool brought up an icon almost due southeast.

I looked at a list on the terminal.

Twilight Sparkle> Location unknown. Search timeout. Denied.
Applejack> Stable 2. Blocked by Stable 2 Special Protocols. Denied.
Rainbow Dash> Location unknown. Search timeout. Denied.
Fluttershy> Location unknown. Search timeout. Denied.
Rarity> MoP Hub, Canterlot. Deceased. Denied.
Pinkie Pie> MoM Hub, Manehattan. Deceased. Denied.
General Stonehide> Canterlot Command Center. Deceased. Denied.
General Borealis> Location unknown. Search timeout. Pending.
General Shimmerstar> (Hoofington Command Center). Primary check in progress. Pending.
Chief Justice Fairheart> (Fluttershy Medical Center). Primary check uninitiated. Pending.
Director of O.I.A. Horse> (Robronco HQ, Hoofington). Primary check uninitiated. Pending.
Descendant protocol> N/A. Error. Error.

Now I frowned. It had found Applejack's location, so why had it moved on? What were 'Stable 2 Special Protocols'? And why was General Borealis's 'Search timeout' marked 'Pending' while the others were 'Denied'? ...I really didn't know anything about programs, did I?

She smiled a crooked, tired little smile. "So, now that you have the data... when are you leaving?"

I simply looked at her in shock. We'd saved them from a mad Overmare just yesterday, and today they were trying to shove us right out the door? Disappointment welled up inside me as a shiver went up my mane. "Why? Do you want us to go?"

The black unicorn signed and rubbed her temples. "I don't know..." she said as she looked tiredly at me. "I just want things back to normal where all I had to worry about was PipBucks."

"Join the club," I said with a little grin, but she didn't return it. "I'm sure with a little time you'll get used to the Wasteland. I know you and Rivets will love all the scrap and parts in Megamart. And there's a church dedicated to the Goddesses in Chapel. Even Flank wouldn't be a bad place to visit as long as--"

"Blackjack, don't you get it?" she cried out as she whirled on me. "I don't want to see Megamart, Chapel, Flank, or whatever. I want to shut the door and get back to fixing PipBucks. If you want to go... go. But I don't want to know that that world exists! I want to close the door and never let it open again." She looked at me a moment before her ears drooped and she collapsed, sniffing. "I'm sorry. I just... So many friends are gone. I think I'm going to see Pirouette in the cafeteria, but she's gone. And I think about Sparkler...eating... and... I just want to forget. I don't want to think about it, Blackjack. None of us do."

I stared at her, feeling numb. The Dealer shuffled his cards as he looked at me gravely. I said quietly, "Midnight, this is my home."

She looked back at me and faked a smile. "Yeah, Blackjack. But... I'm not sure you belong here anymore... I'm sorry." And she dropped my PipBuck and rushed out before she could even remove Marmalade's.

"Don't start," I said sharply to the Dealer. "They just need time. A few weeks and they'll be able to deal with the Wasteland. And you. That's all."

The Dealer just looked at me like my mother, the cards sliding past each other. He just looked at me with that patient, sad expression. "Just let me know when you're ready..."

* * *

P-21 was right: it was turning into Flank all over again. My friends all found themselves increasingly isolated. Lacunae walked like a purple ghost through the halls, scattering the stable ponies in her path. Even with wings hidden and minigun put away, they avoided her like death itself. Rampage found herself consumed by boredom as she tried to engage stable ponies and found them shying away. Even Glory was forced to spend more time with me than with the ponies she wanted to heal; was a pegasus really so aberrant? Most tragic of all, P-21 found himself shunned by the males he'd hoped to save. He was P-21, and so he was dead to them.

It wasn't that the ponies were entirely ungrateful. There were dozens of small parties and impromptu celebrations between surviving friends. The slain were mourned and the Overmare cursed... but we weren't a part of it. I'd hear the laughter and the talk, but it all died the second I walked through the door. Then everypony would look awkward until we left again. They didn't know how to deal with us; it was like they were waiting for the moment when we'd turn on them. Even Midnight was avoiding me.

Rivets became the de facto Overmare. I tried to spend every minute I could convincing her to send ponies to Megamart, trade for things the stable needed. I even echoed Bottlecap's little 'trade will save the Wasteland' speech, but the gray earth mare just muttered and gave a halfhearted 'we'll see.'

I looked at my friend, sitting there behind her desk, looking drawn and spent. “Rivets? You can’t keep Stable 99 bottled up anymore. The systems are falling apart.”

She rubbed her bloodshot eyes. “Ugh, you sound just like the Overmare.” She slapped her hooves down on the desk. “Do you think I don’t know this stable, Blackjack? I know every pipe! Every wire! Every talisman! Everything!! I don’t care what the data says; we can keep this stable going for two more centuries if we have to!”

“But the--” I began, but then she laughed. It made my mane crawl to hear that coming from the cool-headed mare. She rocked back and grinned at me.

“The stable. Is. Fine! Sure, things have been breaking down since the Incident--the first one--but we’ve been fixing them. Every Overmare since then has been sure that tomorrow we’d all die,” she said, her eyes narrowing and her teeth grinding, “but I know what this stable can do, what we can do. So don’t you come in here telling me my job. I’ll fix Stable 99 without having to set hoof out in that... that great... open... hrrrugh!” She shuddered violently. Apparently, I wasn’t the only pony who went all oogly from that wide... empty... urrrg...

I took a deep breath, trying to get her to understand. “Rivets. It doesn’t have to be this way. I know you don’t like the outside, but--”

“No. We’ve lived this way for over a century, safe and secure!” she shouted. Then she took a deep breath and settled back in her chair. “Sorry,” she began, her voice softer. “I guess you’re still just trying to help, but you’ve got to understand that you’ve already done everything we need. The ponies here don’t want things to change, and neither do I. We don’t want to trade, we don’t want to explore, we don’t want to set hoof outside at all. We want to shut the door and go back to the way things are supposed to run. You were a good security mare, and you *have* done a lot for us... but if you keep trying to cause trouble, I’m going to have to ask you and your... friends to leave. Understand?”

I tried to think of some new argument to try, but my mind came up blank. After a few moments of thought, I just gave a resigned nod.

“Good,” she said, rising. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to meet with some other maintenance ponies about keeping the stable running.”

* * *

I found myself alone in the atrium. Alone in the largest community gathering space in the stable. Ponies entering would take one look at me and then promptly continue to someplace else. I found myself reading Rivets’s book: ‘Duck and Cover: an Equestrian Patriot’s Guide to Survival’. Really, it was more a guide to blowing stuff up. The copy had been highly annotated. ‘Napalm: add a cup of cinnamon oil per five gallons to the mix. Zebras can’t stand the smell.’ ‘See if you can mix a little magnesium with the C-4. Boom and flash trumps boom.’

A photograph showed a unicorn mare and an earth pony buck sitting in front of a crater, grinning at the camera. There were remains of what appeared to be dragons littering the rim. A little note was written at the bottom. ‘What else did you expect from the Ministry of Awesome?’

I smiled as I flipped through, looking for other little notes. There was a drawing of a building with arrows pointed at the base. ‘Set charges here.’ Another of a bridge over a river, and the comment, ‘They’ll never see us coming.’ There were diagrams of zebra factories, towns, water works, and bases,

all with notes of what to sabotage or blow up.

A little photo in the back displayed a dozen mares and three bucks posing together. 'Ministry of Awesome, Ground Pounders. We bring awesome to earth.' I blinked at the picture and the one lone pegasus in it. Jetstream sat with a sad half smile surrounded by grinning unicorns and earth ponies.

'Saw Rainbow Dash talking with the director today. Didn't seem happy. Too much peace talk. Too much ending the war rather than winning it. Goldenblood seems certain we're going to win, but I can't tell if he was blowing smoke up Dash's butt or really believes it. Sometimes it feels like the war is going to go on forever.'

One picture showed what I thought was a distant sunrise, but the spherical shape was wrong... and it was in front of the mountains rather than behind them. 'Trottenheimer's megaspell goes boom. We're out of a job.'

The last black and white picture in the back showed the mare and buck sitting outside the entrance to Stable 99. A young, crying unicorn foal was cradled in the unicorn mare's hooves. The note on the back read, 'End of the world time. We'll be back. Card Trick's playing security now, and I'm fixing machines instead of breaking them. Card Trick took the kid when her mom's pass was denied. Said she couldn't reach Stable 90 in time. No one says no to Trick.'

I smiled as I pulled out Vigilance. Card Trick. Tarot. Little Poker. Full House. 52 Pick-up. Straight Flush. Aces. Royal Flush. Bridge. Hearts. Gin Rummy. Go Fish.

Go Fish. I felt an odd little chill run through me. I hugged the pistol to my chest, feeling a connection to a mare I'd never imagined and a mother I'd never appreciated till it was too late.

* * *

Only two days later, the only ponies who wanted to spend any time with me at all were my friends. Every eye looked at us with fear and suspicion. Sometimes, I'd see a knot of ponies and wonder if maybe they were going to try and force us to leave. We were reminders of the outside world, alien and dangerous.

I was healed up. Glory had gotten her AER-14 to work. Rampage had extracted the chains with the assist of a winch; the less I knew about the details, the better. And Lacunae kept looking at me expectantly... I just knew the Goddess was waiting to call a favor due. P-21 didn't even try and talk to the males anymore. He was sleeping on my couch. Eventually, Lacunae excused herself; she'd wait on the surface. I suspected she needed a good dose of Enervation to put some distance between herself and the Goddess.

The third day after the attack, I woke to find a petition taped to my door. 'Request for Blackjack and company to depart the stable'. I counted a hundred names before I gave up. Midnight was right there on the first page.

I curled up with Glory on my bed, the papers tossed aside as I nuzzled her neck. "We'll go tomorrow."

"I'm sorry, Blackjack. I know what it's like to want a home," Glory said softly. She knew far better than I did. I held her a little more snugly now, knowing what she'd lost.

Mom was dead. My old friends were dead or had decided I reminded them of things they wanted to forget. My new friends were unwelcome. It was time to go.

* * *

My mother and I were one of the few mother/daughter pairs given the luxury of our own rooms. I rarely went into her quarters; it simply felt wrong. But in the morning, we'd be going to MASEBS #14, and I'd never have this chance again. Someday, the stable would replace both of us; how, I didn't know... honestly, I didn't really care anymore. They'd made their feelings clear. All I could do was respect their wishes. Given how everypony was acting, when I told my friends that we'd need to go to the tower to find out more about EC-1101, they were all more or less glad to be leaving. It was a destination in the direction of 'away from 99'.

Even after weeks, the room still smelled like her: a curious mix of powder, gun oil, and lavender soap. There wasn't much special; everything in the stable was mass produced. You'd try and put a unique stamp on things, though; in its own way, my mess was my attempt to personalize the impersonal. At least, that was a good enough excuse for me to not clean my room. Mom had decorated hers with pictures and drawings. I knew Mom sketched, but I never realized how well she could draw. I wondered if her baton and cuff cutie mark was like mine, a talent she'd defaulted to because she wasn't allowed to be the artist she wished to be.

I wished she could have heard me play...

I saw a drawing of herself and Petunia as fillies; Daisy's mother had a hard and aggressive look about her, just like Daisy at that age. Another self portrait of her in her security barding with a strange mare I could only assume was my grandmother. More older mares. Some dignified. Some lonely. A few with smartass expressions. So that was where I got it. The oldest showed the mare from the Ministry of Awesome pictures, her hooves holding the young unicorn filly. 'Never had a kid of my own. Mother wandered off north. Hope she finds what she needs there.' Then I saw a picture of me as a foal with a Joker card stuck on my horn. I smiled as I turned it over. 'My Lucky Girl'.

I felt tears running down my cheek as I folded the pictures. I was lucky... luckier than I deserved. I just wish I'd appreciated it when it could have meant something.

* * *

It was late, and my friends were sleeping. My internal clock told me I needed to be doing a patrol just now, and odds were that I was the only security mare left in the stable. I knew I wasn't going to be sleeping, and, odd as it was, I wanted to do one last sweep of the place. Tomorrow, I'd have Midnight swap Marmalade's PipBuck for my own, and we'd be off, this time forever. We'd saved Stable 99 as much as it wanted to be saved.

Just like Flank.

I trotted through the dim halls, hearing a few late celebrations in distant living quarters I knew better than to try and attend. The laughter and giggles tugged at me, though, and I still wished I could share in the festivities.

I made my way down to the humming halls of the maintenance and utility levels instead. My hooves were so familiar with the path that I could let my mind wander as I walked along. I passed the storeroom where I'd found P-21 stealing supplies. I found the nook under the generators where I'd hid

him so long ago. I went all the way down to Atmospheric Maintenance Three. It hadn't been cleaned up; my blood was still dried on the table, and cards were still scattered about.

My magic gathered them all up, one after another, stacking them in my hooves with practiced ease. Then I slipped them into the worn cardboard box with the familiar scribble on it. It was something often done by young in the stable to claim some trinket or toy. 'Property of Tarot'.

Tarot?

Then there came a muffled crump and a resounding pop and hiss from somewhere else in the labyrinthine maintenance level. No alarms though. No alerts on the radio channels. I slipped the cards into my pack and quickly rushed in the direction of the hiss. A foul reek of decay filled my nostrils as black water crept along the floor. 'Biowaste Recycling Tanks #2' was on the door.

Inside, there were two enormous metal tanks as high as me, four times as wide, and almost as long as the room. Numerous pipes marked with faded labels ran to and from each tank. From a burst seal sprayed the noxious gray water. I gagged from the stench.

"I knew that seal wouldn't hold!" a young mare shouted from around a monkey wrench clenched in her jaws as she entered from behind me. She raced past and climbed a stair to reach the spray. Her brown utility barding quickly took on a dark stain from the water. "Close the number four valve!" she yelled as she tried to tighten the bolts around the spraying connector.

I looked around cluelessly till I saw her waving a hoof in the direction of some big wheels on the wall. One had a number 4 on the pipe above it. The wheel glowed as my magic turned it. The spray increased and the filly shrieked, "Close the valve, not open it!" I yelled my apologies and reversed direction. What, it wasn't like the damn thing was labeled!

With the valve closed, the spray slowed to a trickle. "I knew the system was overpressurized. I knew there was too much methane, but do they listen to me? Noooo..." she said as she wiped the gunk from her face.

"What happened?" I asked, my body adjusting to the sweet and sour reek enough to avoid gagging.

"What usually happens when somepony tries to eat ten times more than they should. It ran out of space to put stuff. Damn thing built up too much methane and burst a seal. Just like I told them it would," she said as she tugged and yanked on the wrench. "Of course, it's not like the morning crew can deal with it? Oh no, best leave it to the new girl. That way, when the system's fucked in the ass, everypony will know who to blame!"

I couldn't help myself. "What's your name?"

She shook her head firmly, flinging away some of the muck. "Scotch Tape."

I blinked and then grinned. "You're Duct Tape's kid?" Now that I looked at her with that in mind, I could see that she was indeed the filly from back before... everything. It hadn't actually been that long, but she looked older now and much more confident; it seemed like she really had gotten the hang of it.

"You knew my mom?" She seemed both impressed and a little nervous about that.

I rubbed my nose and regretted it. Fortunately, the stench seemed to have paralyzed my sense of smell... mostly. "Yeah. I can kind of say that; if it wasn't for her, I'd have never gotten the chance to leave."

She gave me a crooked sort of smile. Underneath the filthy overalls she was... a lot like her mom. Not beautiful or pretty, but cute with her light blue mane. "Yeah. I can only imagine how awesome

that would be.” Oddly, I was both touched and inspired by her attitude. She was the first I’d come across that didn’t treat the outside with suspicion.

“What can I do to help?” I asked as I looked at the maze of pipes and arcane machinery.

“Going to have to vent the excess pressure,” she said as she looked at the massive metal tank and wiped the foul film off her mouth. “Okay... you want to explode, or do you want to puke?”

“What the hell kind of choice is that?” I asked, wondering if I should run and get Rivets. “Not explode.”

“Open the valve marked ‘purge’ and say goodbye to your lunch,” she said grimly as she pointed at a large, open-ended pipe at the base of the tank. She hopped down to one side, and I stood on the other. Together, we struggled, and then there was a pop and a hiss and black foamy water began to spray out. The reek was so intense that I doubled over and gagged, puking into the sludge spraying out around our hooves.

“Yeah! Nothing like biowaste and digestion talismans!” she said as the flow continued for several minutes. Then she rapidly wrenched shut the valve. The flow cut off, the knee-deep fluid dropping as it spread out in a nasty tide of goo.

The filly slogged through and turned on the vents to full blast. “Okay. Now we probably won’t blow up. Probably. Lots of methane coming from these digestion vats, though, and best not stand in it too long.” She gave me an insolent grin. “Though when this smell hits the living quarters, you know morning shift will finally be down here to do their damned jobs and not leave it up to the new girl.”

“You got a hell of a way to get help,” I said, spitting out a chunk. She gave me a friendly grin back. The first I’d received in days.

“Serves ‘em right for dumping me down here while they have fun upstairs, and being bottom of the pile means they can’t bust me any lower!”

Dark lumps appeared on the floor. The sludge slowly receded and my mane began to itch. Badly. “What is that?” I asked as I lifted one lump with my hooves... and stared at a broken half of a skull.

Oh no... no no no... Rivets... what have you done?

The lumps were the bones of ponies. Dozens and dozens of recently killed ponies.

The mare looked at what I held with a shiver of disgust. “Yeah, I guess they thought the recyclers would be up to it. I guess the old gray mare was a little pissed with that Security what’s her name told her to dump them outside. It’s been blowing seals and filters for days though. Sending one body through is no big deal, but dozens? Forget about it.”

For the last three days, Stable 99 had been gorging themselves on disease-infested food. My legs went weak as I slumped against the wall of the tank. “Have you been eating the food above?”

“Me? No time. Rivets dumped evening and night shift on me. I haven’t even seen my bed since the liberation happened,” she said sourly. “Been eating old boxed shit. Why?” She saw my face, and concern bloomed in her eyes.

It made sense. Like likes like. None of my friends or I fit in. This filly wasn’t infected. We were being driven off and isolated. I gave her a tired smile. “Listen. You want to do the stable a favor? My friends and I are going to be heading out soon. Really soon. There’s a place called Megamart that’s got tons of stuff the stable needs, and Rivets will need a maintenance mare to get it. Want to come along? It’ll get you out of clean up?”

She looked at me skeptically. "Are you serious? Outside? Like, Outside outside?"

"I'm serious," I said with complete sincerity. "Get anything you need and meet me at the stable door. You have ten minutes. Don't eat anything. Nothing. Do you hear me?" She stared in shock, then nodded.

One hundred raiders had devastated a corner of Hoofington. What would almost four times their number do?

* * *

I'd almost reached the stairs up to the next level when a gray blur slammed into me. My muck-slicked hide sent me sliding several feet to hit the wall, fortunately not very hard. I looked up to see Rivets glaring down at me in the dim light. The other maintenance ponies behind her gripped wrenches and hammers... and they were looking at me like I was the leak.

"So... you not only think you know this stable better than me, now you think you can do my fucking job?" she hissed softly. "Or maybe... you're down here trying to make work for me. Is that it? Trying to force us all outside?"

I struggled to my hooves, the muck making standing a disgusting challenge. "Rivets! You... you put the raiders in the recycling! I said--"

"I'm sorry? When did you become the Overmare, again?" I stared at her in shock as she snarled. "We've put ponies in there for years. Nothing happens."

My eyes widened with horror. "Rivets. You've exposed everypony here to the disease."

"There is no disease!" she shouted. "This is just you trying to drag us out of our home and into the Wasteland! To starve. To die!" She spat in my face. "That's what I think of your disease. I've made sure everypony's well fed and safe, and none of us are sick. We're fine."

No. You aren't. You aren't, and you're getting worse by the minute... "Rivets, I've seen the raiders outside... you need..." What? At this point, what could I do? What could anypony do?

"Need... what?" She suddenly broke into peals of giggles. "Trade? You think we want to fucking trade? We have everything we want right here. We don't need to trade with the outside. We don't need anything from them. And we don't need you."

I felt a chill wash through me from horn to hoof. "Rivets..." But what could I say? She'd placed her faith completely and utterly in her work and the stable's systems.

"Get out. You've broken enough things here. Now get out before you kill us all," she snarled as she walked past, laughing that mad giggle that rose higher and higher.

* * *

I stopped only long enough to shower the majority of the gunk off myself before I returned to my quarters. "Everypony get your stuff together. We need to get going, now," I said softly. P-21 met my eyes. "That thing we were afraid of? It happened."

Horror blossomed on his face. "It's infected?"

"The whole food supply. They've been exposed to it for days. Three square meals a day." Anguish bloomed on his face as he pressed it to the floor as he grit his teeth in pain.

"We failed..." he muttered. "We failed... we failed..."

"That doesn't matter anymore." In a few more days the rest of the stable would turn on us. "We're leaving. I met a filly who probably isn't infected. The only one who acts... normal."

"But... we can't just leave them like this," Glory said in shock. "They'll leave the stable and..."

"I know, Glory." They might not be as deadly without the Overmare or Daisy leading them, but they'd learn, and fast. I'd been talking about guns at Megamart; I knew Rivets would eventually get the same idea. "We're going to sabotage the stable door. The Overmare once disabled it. We can disable it for good."

The others stared at me in horror. Glory said in a near whisper, "Blackjack... it'll be like Stable 90." Eventually, they'd stop eating the chips and start eating meat... each other.

"It's the only way to protect the Wasteland from the stable," I said softly, appreciating the irony. Here I'd thought we'd have to do the opposite. "Get your things. We're going... I doubt they'll stop us."

We got our things and made our way up to the door. I was glad to see Scotch Tape had taken my warning so seriously she hadn't changed out of her stained coveralls. "Something's wrong, isn't it? Rivets isn't even answering her intercom."

Yeah, something. "Everyone through. I'll disable the controls and jump through before it closes." I turned to P-21. "Grenade?" What, how else did they expect me to disable something? I opened the door, and together they stepped through. They'd meet Lacunae somewhere outside, I hoped. Then I hit it a second time and ran to the entrance as the door once again started to close.

The Dealer stood beside me with sadness in his eyes. "You don't have to do this, Blackjack."

Yes. I did.

My glowing eyes met Glory's. I smiled. Her eyes went wide as I levitated the Delta PipBuck and threw it through the closing door along with my bags. The rest looked on in shock as Glory screamed my name. Then the door closed in my face, the Dealer fading away with a sad sigh. I set the grenade and blew the controls.

It wasn't enough.

I wasn't sure if Rivets would be able to repair the damaged controls or not. I didn't know if, centuries from now, somepony might open the stable and be infected with the raider disease. And I knew there were dozens of foals who didn't deserve the slow and painful death of the murder, starvation, and horror that was to come. No pony here deserved what they were about to get.

Except me.

There was only one way to save Stable 99. That way came with a price I had to pay. I made my way up the secret passage to the Overmare's quarters and carefully locked the door. Then I accessed her terminal, still logged in from days before.

Ventilation Control.

>Activate All Air Talismans

Warning: Compromised Air Purification Talisman Detected!!! Do you wish to proceed? Y/N

>Y

Security head concur with password:

>Blackjack.

Maintenance head concur with password:

>Endurance.

All Air Talismans Activated.

The vents began to blow, and within seconds I smelled it. It was a strange scent... like pineapple and pepper... and at once my eyes started to water. I heard yelling from the atrium below as I stepped in front of the window and looked out at the greenish yellow haze that started to fill the room. Ponies started racing about. Their screams built higher and higher as they realized the very air of the stable was becoming toxic. The office being the highest room, I supposed I would be the last one to die.

Fitting. I knew exactly what Buttercup had felt as she stood there watching her stable die over a hoofful of weeks. This would be over in minutes.

I saw two foals and a filly stagger and fall prone as tears ran down my face. Males who'd experienced just a few brief gasps of freedom now lay where they fell, scratching and clawing at their eyes as they gasped at the poisoned air. Rivets staggered out of the cafeteria and looked up at me, the betrayal etched in her rugged face... fresh bite marks on her forelegs. There was no forgiveness for this. No atonement. Midnight staggered out onto the atrium balcony, her eyes already starting to yellow as they stared at me in rage, even as she slumped against the metal rail, fighting to breathe as the poison gas built. No pony would ever set foot in Stable 99 again.

A minute more, and it'd be over. My eyes watered and my lungs burned...

Suddenly, there was a purple flash behind me, and I heard the Goddess's voice as clear as day. "We had a deal, Blackjack."

"No... no no no NO!" I screamed as she wrapped her hooves around me. I blasted her purple hide with magic bullets.

"Blackjack! You murderer!" Midnight screamed as I was stolen away in a purple flash. The word echoed endlessly in my mind.

The only death I couldn't give was to the only pony who deserved it.

Myself.

Footnote: Level Up.

Perk added: Intensive Training - Your recent experiences have granted you a +1 to your endurance.

Quest Perk added: The Power of Friendship - When fighting alongside your companions, you receive an additional +5 DT and +10% damage inflicted.

(Huge thanks (and hugs) to Kkatman for creating FoE, huge thanks to Hinds and Bronode for making this decent to read, and huge thanks to readers who leave tons of feedback for me to nom on.)